

**BLACK JOHN INVOKES THE  
GODS—James B. Hendryx**

**ASSINIBOINE AT BATAAN  
. . . Walt Coburn**

# Short Stories

Twice A Month

July 25<sup>th</sup>

25c

*The Road comes first; it is more  
important than Life, than War,  
than Death . . .*

**THE WAKE OF  
THE WILLIWAW**

**Kenneth Perkins**



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**ACTION, ADVENTURE, MYSTERY**



# Short

Every author's finest and

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**BIGGEST AND BEST—TWICE A MONTH**

# Stories



latest stories—no reprints

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*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.*

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### *Uncle Sam's Gallant Indians*

**A**BOUT the characters in his grand and moving story of the last days of Bataan, and those who fought there, Walt Coburn has something to say.

The author of "Assiniboine at Bataan" tells us:

"Because we knew Joe Longknife when he was a boy and knew his father and his grandfather, Old Old Longknife . . . I changed the name from Joe Longknife to Mark Old Thunder. Just to be safe from any arguments with the War Department records, etc.

"There was no Mark Old Thunder, though the real Old Old Thunder had sons. And grandsons, I reckon. The real Old Old Thunder made his name at the Fort Belknap Reservation in Montana as an Indian Policeman.

"Concerning Joe Longknife (Mark Old Thunder in Assiniboine at Bataan), I want to say this. I knew him when he was born. Our Circle C ranch bordered along the Fort Belknap Reservation. And since I can remember we ran cattle on the reserve on special permit. So I grew up with the Assiniboines and Gros Ventres there. We swam in Beaver Creek as tadpole kids together. Was taken into their tribe and given a name. Raced ponies with the kids my age. When I grew older I smoked with the Old Men in their lodges and have stripped to breech clout and moccasins for the three days and nights when they danced at the Lodge Pole sub-agency. And at round up time I repped with the ID (Indian Department) wagon to gather our cattle. The last time, in 1915. I was the only full blooded white man to work all the way through with the ID wagon that year. So I have

punched cows with the father of Mark Old Thunder whose real name would be Joe Longknife. Or I would rather figure Mark Old Thunder as the composite character of all those Assiniboine and Gros Ventres boys now wearing the uniform of their Uncle Sam who calls them his wards. The Injun boys who were my friends.

"There was a real Jesse Iron Horn. Jesse would be in his early fifties now if he were alive. Jesse was for several years Interpreter at the Fort Belknap Agency. Jesse died before I left Montana in '15. I thought it all right to use his real name.

"So this yarn is just a fiction tale sort of dedicated to the fighting descendants of such proud and splendid warriors as Old Thunder, Iron Horn, Black Dog (who gave me my name Ohksheebie which means just Boy in, I think, the Crow or Blackfoot language. I'm not sure right now). Blue Horse, White Horse, Eyes in the Water (Medicine Man), Takes the Shield and Watch His Walking and many more old men who smoked the pipe with General Miles.

"I've camped with the round up at Four Buttes where Chief Joseph surrendered to Miles. There are the graves of Miles' cavalrymen who died there. And the graves of Chief Joseph's warriors who fell.

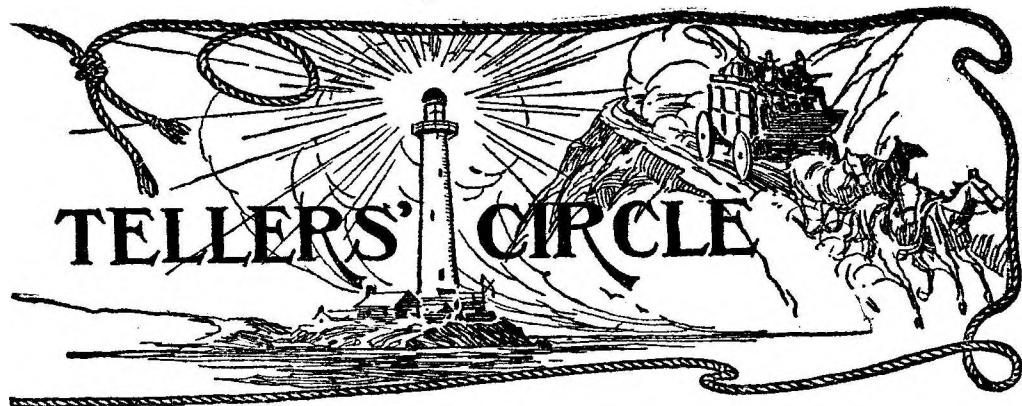
"And now on Bataan there are the graves of Indians and whitemen who wore the same uniform of Uncle Sam when they died bravely."  
*Walt Coburn.*

P.S. I'd like my readers to forgive me any errors I made in describing the fighting at Bataan. I'm sorry to say, I was not there.

### *Raised on a Typewriter*

**H**ERE are some words from North Hollywood, California, from Gene Van





whose "Short Cut to Trouble," is in this issue.

Writes Gene:

"Born in Spokane, Washington, I moved with my family to California at the ripe old age of four. Long before that famous song, 'San Fernando Valley,' was written we discovered the valley's beauty and settled down in Encino. I now live in Studio City, but still in the valley. As for my education, most of it was gained at the Hollywood Military Academy.

"After graduation, I went into the poultry business for a while, then I took a fling at professional baseball, playing with San Diego in the Pacific Coast League, but the urge to write was too great, so I flung myself at my old battered typewriter and out popped Red Harris and Little Pardner. That was eight years ago. I also dabbled in picture writing, doing originals and screenplays for Columbia, Republic, Monogram, and Independents. The war changed things for everyone—made me a 4F, then defense work.

"I'm now employed at Aircraft Accessories Corporation where I am editor of the company paper, *The Blow*. Between issues of my paper, I ran across two strange punchers who bucked their way across the keyboard—Smoky Smith and Dug Evans.

"Why did you take up writing? Every author gets that shot at him aplenty. Well, mebbe I was 'Born in the Saddle' so to speak. Yuh see, W. C. Tuttle is my father, and I was weaned on a typewriter, six-shooter, and carbon paper. Hashknife and Sleepy were my pals as far back as I can remember. Gene Van is my pen name. I'm really Gene 'Bud' Tuttle. I'm married to a grand girl and we have a charming ten-

months-old daughter. Could any man ask for anything more?"

Gene Van.

### *Cush'll Blow the Road Yet*

PERHAPS it's just a coincidence that Kenneth Perkins' novelette of the Alaska Highway, "The Wake of the Williaw," finds its way into our pages at the same time we receive a letter from Cush, forwarded on by Jim Hendryx. You'll notice that in the beginning of the Perkins story all the characters are headed for Road Survey Station Twenty-four—and for all we know Station Twenty-four may be right on Halfaday Creek, intrudin', so to speak, on Cushing's Fort!

Anyway, Cush says:

"Dear Sir:

"It ain't nothin' like the old days this here Hendryx writes about, here on Halfaday Crick. What with the new Gov'mint road runnin' right past my door, betwixt it an' the graveyard, the saloon business is better'n what it was, on account that truck drivers an' solgers is good customers, an' there's plenty of 'em, an' they mind their own business an' don't raise no hell. Us old-timers that still lives on the crick watches them trucks go past day an' night haulin' stuff fer the war, an' bulldozers, an' jeeps, an' the Lord knows what-not, an' we wonder where the hell it's all comin' from—an' if they're usin' all this here stuff to fight the Japs, is there any of it left to fight the Germans with?

"In the old days when the war was goin' on down to Cuby an' over in the Philly-pines, we was lucky if we heer'd about a

(Concluded on page 94)



# THE WAKE OF THE WILLIWAW

## CHAPTER I

**T**HE skies west of the Alcan Highway filled first with wind-swept powder from the surfaces of old snow, then with a scud of sleet, then with pellets of flying ice. The williwaw blowing storm clouds up against Mt. Hubbard and Mt. Walsh warned mushers and trappers that the new snow was coming. And when it came it would be dry and deep, bogging down dog-sledge or snowshoes or skis alike.

The few wanderers in that trackless wilderness west of Kluane Lake made for the nearest cover. This was Survey Station 24, a beaverboard cabin and lean-to which had

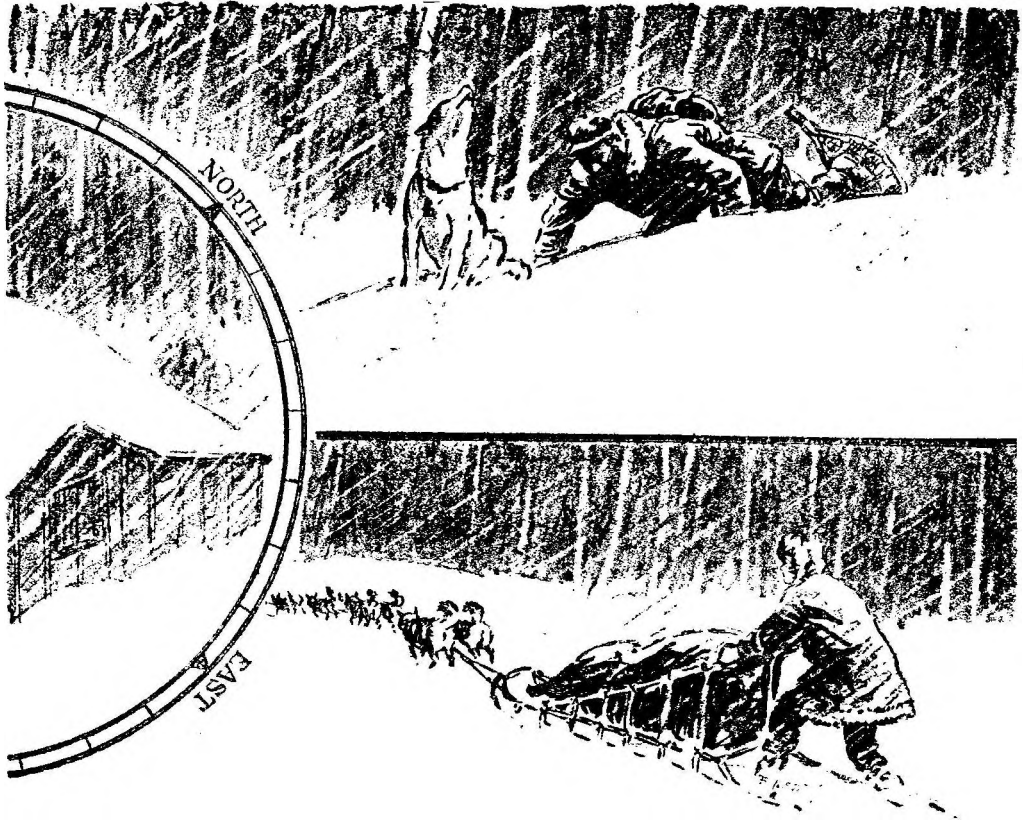
once been stocked with Army ration boxes, flour, dried salmon and jerky. To this haven—black specks in the infinite white—refugees came from the four main points of the compass.

From the north came two American surveyors working for the new Highway.

Dave Barton looked up at the snow twisters staggering across the sky, then yelled to his rodman to finish his job in a hurry. The rodman tamped chunks of frozen earth around the five-foot spruce pole, stuck an empty gas can on top as a survey marker and trudged back to the sledges.

"We're packing out," Barton said. He held his leather gauntlets against his temples which had begun to ache with the maul of





## By KENNETH PERKINS

*Author of "Yukon Road Song," etc.*

the wind. "You go on back to the Highway, Wink, and stay in Kluane till this storm's over. I'll hole up at Station Twenty-four. It won't be wasting time."

Barton was thinking of the warmth of the stove, the light of the gasoline mantle lamp, his reference books, his journal and the data they had left at the survey station when they first extended the base line. "I'll put in a few days alone, computing the survey."

"Maybe you'll put in a few weeks, or months," Wink said shivering. "That woolly whipper smells like the North Pole."

"It can't stop me from finishing this job. We're building the Road, Wink. We're saving Alaska from the Japs." Dave Barton had already divided the foodpack and was strapping his own duffel bag on one of the sledges. He packed the theodolite in its

aluminum case and strapped the tripod on its packboard.

"You're the boss, Dave. But there's something I want to tell you. Remember Sergeant Ashby's sister? She's going to the dance Saturday night."

"What are you talking about? She's only a kid."

"She was, a year ago. But she's grown up."

Dave stopped packing and looked over his shoulder, his raw-boned face stinging with cold, his eyes gray and sharp under the iced lashes. "If she's grown up, she's got ten thousand soldiers and civilian workers to dance with Saturday night. She wouldn't remember me. And I'm not remembering her. The Road's more important."

He divided the corn meal and beef tallow

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### *Trouble Along the Great North Road*

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for his huskies, packed half in his sledge. He was grim and Wink was jubilant. "With you out of the picture," Wink said, "maybe ten thousand other fellows will have a chance. Me being one." He packed his own sledge, hitched his dogs to the gang line. When he said good-by he was thinking of Kluane, of its bars, of the uproaring life of the old Klondike which had come back again. And he was thinking primarily of Sergeant Ashby's sister.

Dave Barton was thinking of her, too. But the Road came first. It was more important than the war, than his life, than death. It was a religion. He packed out, heading for Survey Station 24.

**F**ROM another point of the compass, the South, a mounty was heading for the same refuge.

This was Sergeant Ashby, driven by the same storm and by the same motive—duty and an almost religious zeal for the Road. The Sergeant had picked up the tracks of some salmon fishermen who had crossed the Alaskan Boundary into the Yukon and he was anxious to know why they had left Yakutat Bay and come so far inland. They seemed to be heading as far inland as the Highway itself.

For weeks, equipped with ice ax, rope and crampons for the glacier country, Sergeant Ashby had read sign, finding only the ashes of campfires. He could tell the age of the ashes which were powdery when fresh, lumpy when old. He could tell there were about twenty men and that they were fugitives, for they avoided the crusted snow which left clear tracks, sticking instead to the glazed rimrock or the brash ice of the riverbeds.

In these riverbeds tracks were as hard to read as in pebble washes. Most of them indicated moccasins, which made tracking still harder. When he did pick up sign in the snow patches he could tell that the men were running out of provisions, for as their packs grew lighter their footprints were not so deep or spraddled.

The first blow of the williwaw scuffed the surface snow clean so that all tracks vanished. Sergeant Ashby could smell the blizzard coming as well as feel it in his marrow. And in another mile he could see it. It reminded him of a certain possibility

which gave him the biggest scare of his life.

Before he left Kluane and the Highway on this man-hunt he had told his sister something of his plans. In case of a bad storm he would head for the new Survey Station 24 which the Public Roads Administration had stocked for the surveyors mapping the unknown country west of Kluane. But Ashby's sister might have heard, as he had heard, how some wolverines had broken into the cabin and cleaned out the whole cache. It would be just like Bette to get one of the Cree packers who supplied the P. R. A. construction camps and send him out to the Station with food. It would be still more like her to accompany the Cree Indian herself and make sure the job was done despite the storm.

In his fear for what might happen to the girl, the mounty let his imagination go the whole way. What if this gang of renegades he was tracking headed for the same refuge?

Sergeant Ashby turned in his trail and packed out for Station 24.

**F**ROM the third point of the compass—the East—a girl and an old Cree musher were trying to reach the Station with a load of provisions.

The williwaw, just as announced by the Meteorological Bureau, was whipping up a blizzard in the glacier country between Kluane Lake and the Alaskan boundary. It whipped the breath out of the girl's lungs and iced the old Cree Indian's whiskers.

"How can we get to twenty-four, mam'selle?" the Cree gasped. "Your brother is all right. He will not starve. Juz now I cut the tracks of caribou."

"Maybe I'll get a shot at a caribou myself," Bette Ashby said. "I'm not going back home, if that's what you mean."

"Not back to Kluane maybe. There is Cree camp two-t'ree miles—" He pointed up a side gulch. "You will be safe till woolly whipper stops blow so bad."

Bette Ashby looked up to the gulch and then down the main riverbed. She squinted into the whirling air, holding her forehead. Although a tall girl, she looked like a tiny child against the giant rocks of ice. After studying the maelstrom of snow downriver, she said, "I'll tell you what you do, Batiste. I don't need a musher from here on. I know every inch of the way. You go on up to



the Cree camp and hole up till this blow's over. I'm taking these provisions to twenty-four and I'll hole up there."

"But if you are alone, mam'selle—"

"My brother will be there. He could see the storm coming long ago. I'm just asking one favor, Batiste. Give me that calling horn. I might get a shot at something." She pointed at the curled birchbark that hung from Batiste's belt.

"But this is for love-call of moose, not caribou, mam'selle. You blow on this horn and the caribou say to himself, 'It is cow moose calling, not for me.'" He started pleading again, "Come with me to the camp before the snow is too deep for the sledge, mam'selle. You are young like little child alone—" He checked himself, seeing Bette's eyes. Her eyes could be called "baby blue" or hard steel blue according to her mood. In fact her child-like appearance was a snare and delusion, for old Batiste knew that her brother had made a sharpshooter out of her, one who was good enough to win a trophy at the Calgary stampede.

"Here is the horn, mam'selle. Bymebye when the ice melts in spring maybe you fill horn with water and pour out to sound like moose wading. But no good for caribou." He shrugged. "Maybe you shoot somebody else."

The girl smiled at that prophecy as Batiste headed up the gulch to his tribe's settlement. Thus, alone, Bette Ashby packed out for Survey Station 24.

**F**ROM the fourth point of the compass, the West, came a stragglng line of fugitives from Yakutat Bay.

These salmon fishermen had been wanted for many years by the U. S. Coast Guard for their crimes. Off Yakutat Bay and up and down the Alaskan coast they would lay impassable nets in the fish migration lanes and set gill nets in V traps seaward from the barrier. They would "cork" the mouth of streams and catch the whole year's run of salmon against all laws of conservation.

The Coast Guard had rounded up some of the gangsters, boarding and confiscating their boats, gear and catch, imprisoning the owners. But this handful had escaped to the glaciers of the Yukon. Glaciers and the williwaw had no fury like the Coast Guard.

They looked like Eskimos because of their

flat cheekbones and tight eyes. But their skin was not smooth and fat. Their faces seemed all bone and muscle. A ragged, shivering, sickly crew, they dragged themselves into a side draw when the blizzard broke. One of them, a half-breed Chilkat Indian and French-Canadian left the group, and scouted up the draw in the direction of the Alaska Highway in search of game.

The air turned black, smothered with flying ice. Drifts heaped up into a mass of old snow and new snow, sixty feet deep. The starving crew waited all night, digging cave-like shelters, barricading themselves against the gale with river debris and chunks of ice. They built fires. There was no danger of fire smoke betraying them for the whole draw was a cauldron of boiling snow by now.

When the scout came back in the morning the leader of the crew was awakened and helped to an ice rock where he sat like a chimpanzee, his eyes blinking in the firelight. He seemed as old as a mummy but he was also stocky, thick-necked and chunk-limbed. His eyes were not as tight, his cheekbones not as flat as the others for he seemed of a higher caste. He might have been mistaken for a very old Indian. But he did not speak Chilkat or Cree or Eskimo. Nor was his own language understandable to the guide. Their middle ground of speech was English.

The half-breed French-Canadian, a slope-shouldered black-browed grizzly of a man, gave his report. "My frands, maybe I think we eat. I find li'l cabin way up and way down divide. But so close to the Highway is dangereux."

The old chimpanzee, beating his chest, ordered one of his men to unroll a map. They had lots of maps, with symbols and notations in their own language, collected for many years.

The big half-breed and the little monkey got their heads together, tilting the paper towards the firelight. Others had awakened, some gathering about the fire, some staying where they were, shivering and feverishly huddled in fur and moosehide.

"I regard the cabin at sunset," the half-breed went on. "I regard sledge and dogs, and big food pack and I regard a mam'selle. All alone. Juz like little chile in the storm. And I regard caribou on the sledge which the mam'selle is shoot."

They all started jabbering hysterically,

spitting, hissing, sucking their breath. The old monkey on the ice rock asked why if this mam'selle were alone the scout did not shoot her? "Explain please."

"I ask myself, maybe someone else is inside. I answer, nobody else, but I find out too late—after she is lock herself up in cabin. Is difficile for one man to attack. But twenty men—"

The fugitives folded their maps, put on their snowshoes, shouldered their Japanese garrison rifles and packed out for Survey Station 24.

## CHAPTER II

THE P. R. A. surveyor, Dave Barton, cut his last piece of jerky in half, kept one piece for himself. This he nibbled sparingly, imagining that each swallow, flavored with salty venison, was soup. The other half he gave to the one husky that had stayed with him after the rest of the team had fled.

This husky had a funny trick of stretching his nose and lifting his brows so that his face was actually longer when he was sad. He was saddest when he was hungry. He liked food and also fire; he worshipped his master and he loved the harness and the gang line. In fact when left behind in camp he would howl like a wolf and bawl like a baby. It happened often that he was not chosen for the team, for he was one-eyed, scrawny and old. He was named "Four-F."

Dividing that last bit of jerky with a dog was rank sentimentality, Barton said to himself when he realized, very slowly, that he might actually starve to death. He had not realized it at the time. He had seen caribou tracks which were not ten minutes old. If they had been older this storm would have erased the sign completely.

Anyway, dividing those last few bites was rank, chechako sentimentality. Although he had been surveying for the Highway for over a year, he could still be considered a chechako, new to the traditions of the Yukon. The corn meal and beef tallow were for the huskies, the jerky was for the man. "I broke a tradition. I broke a law," he said talking back to the howl of the wind. "You can't be sentimental in the Yukon!"

He tried to forget that jerky now, but he could only forget it by thinking of grouse fried in moose grease with "beefsteak"

onions. Because of his empty stomach his senses played tricks on him. He could smell silver salmon broiling!

He was also hearing things. He could hear the rumble of tractors drawing harrows over the new highway by Kluane Lake. He heard the angledozers crashing down saplings, the seventeen-ton caterpillars cracking frozen muskeg. He thought he could hear all four Engineer Corps regiments working far away like thousands of beavers.

But it was the wind perhaps bringing the sound down the ice-bound funnel of Slims River from Kluane. More possibly it was a mirage of sound, like those visual mirages sourdoughs tell of which transport a whole city into the Yukon sky from far over the horizon. Still more likely, Dave Barton said to himself, it was an after-image, the pounding sound having stimulated his nerves for many days so that now, almost fifty miles away, he could still hear the maddening rhythm.

Then he remembered that he first started hearing the angledozers and tractors eight days ago after he had lost his sledge and dogs. That accident had done something to his nerves. It was at the height of the storm and he had tried taking a short cut. The sledge had slid half over the brim of a crevasse so that it was necessary to cut the huskies free of the gang-line. The dogs, knowing their master was no longer a provider of food and fire, had fled. They sensed, as horses can, sense, an unpractised hand. They discovered that their master was not an old-timer; but a chechako, new to the country and unworthy of worship.

BUT there was one dog who did not forsake him. The old husky was not a three-quarter like the others, but half Samoyede. It was the latter strain—a reindeer herd dog—that gave him the profuse biscuit cream coat and plumed tail. But whatever the wolf blood was, far back in the Siberian tundra, it made him bigger than most Samoyedes, even bigger than a Malemute. Out of one hunger-red eye he watched his master gazing over the rim of the crevasse into the blue depths where his sledge had crashed.

If he had harnessed the team in a fan hitch, Barton was thinking, he might have saved the dogs one at a time. But with this gang hitch the sledge was freed all at once.



Its loss, however, did not matter now since there was no dog team to pull it. But the loss of the theodolite gave him a feeling of panic. He could no longer read the angles of mountains—those jagged white peaks that surrounded him at every point of the compass. He had his barometer to tell how high he was and he had his compass, but as sourdoughs say, a man who is lost needs two compasses, for he will not believe one.

Similarly a lost man needs another man for company so he can check up when he hears things. Barton was sorry now that he had let his rodman go back to the Highway. Wink would have told him, "You aren't hearing tractors pounding through the forest. It's only the blood pounding in your head because you're starving." Wink had sense. He would not have let Barton divide his jerky with a dog.

But it was that very dog now who took the place of a man—another compass! A tornado of snow, whirling in great twisters toward the sky, turned Barton off his course. The peaks and landmarks which he could remember, had long since been rubbed out by the storm. But he knew he was following a river trail straight to Survey Station 24. He had measured a two-thousand-foot base line from here and extended it with his theodolite a month ago. He remembered that in this very gulch he had stuck his spruce survey markers with Wink Harvey, but these poles had been blown away by the storm or else buried in drifts. The fact that there was no sign of a single marker anywhere on the whole trail increased his panic. He might be trailing down the wrong gulch!

That, he knew, could happen easily enough in this country of ice-rimmed divides and snow-filled draws. Even old-timers make the disastrous mistake. Barton wished again for the company of his rodman. But then he was glad that Wink was safe and snug in a road camp and not out here like himself alone and lost.

**P**ERHAPS Barton was not completely alone, perhaps not even lost. For here was Four-F dragging along in the snow, limping weakly like a dog that has been in a bad fight. Four-F turned and looked over his shoulder at his master as a bird will look, one-eyed. He knew his master was helpless. He could see it. They had trailed only a

mile since sunrise and now Barton sank exhausted to his hands and knees.

He was not like a man any more but like another husky, flaming eyed, starved, doddering. They were like two dogs staring at each other, sizing each other up—not for fighting, but for playing. Four-F gave a feeble wag of the tail. It was a faint echo in his mind of the fun they had when his master used to romp with him, cuff him, hurl him bodily into a snow bank from which the dog would come again to the attack. But it was preposterous to think of playing now. The wag of the tail was a grim jest—the kind the soldiers on Attu might make to each other when facing certain death from the Japs. Nevertheless the wag gave Barton a faint spurt of courage. He got up and staggered on for another mile.

The williwaw had banked the clouds up against the St. Elias Range, cutting out a clearing in the sky. The snow in the air came not from the sky now but from the scoured canyons and benches. Perhaps Four-F sensed the change in the storm, feeling it in his bones, smelling the clearer cold. Sunlight had hit the spruce forests far away so that the williwaw brought the tang of them instead of the tang of glaciers.

Dog and man ploughed down the long reach until the gully turned west where Mt. Lucania should have poked up through the ripped clouds. Barton remembered the turn which he had recently mapped, but the draw should have turned east!

He looked at his compass, wondering if he were going south instead of north. That would have made the gulch turn just right. But the compass would not tell him what he wanted it to tell him. It was not a true compass. There must be too much iron behind these great drifts.

Completely twisted, he took out his road map. Because of his glassy eyes and the gray light he could barely make out the contour lines of the gulch which he had drawn. A tiny square, marking Survey Station 24, bobbed around on the map like a will-o'-the-wisp which his eyes tried frantically to catch. He simply had to catch it and pin it down! For the square was a surveyor's symbol of salvation and moosemeat and bannock and dried salmon!

He tried to match the ice cascades and glazed granite walls of the gulch with the

contour lines on the map, and then made a judgment. It was the wrong gulch!

"We're twenty miles from the Survey Station, the same as we were last week!" he said aloud.

But he did not give up. He did not intend to die. He merely wanted to lie down and rest. He could not start out on another twenty miles, another week of trailing unless he rested a long time. He might rest forever if he went to sleep, he thought grimly, for without his sleeping bag there was a good chance of freezing to death.

That sleeping bag was at the bottom of a crevasse with the sledge, but he had a fairly good substitute—the stiff fur of his Samoyede husky. He called to him, hoping he would curl up at his side, which was Four-F's habit when these woolly whippers blew.

But Four-F did not lie down. He stood groggy and weak and spraddle-legged like a newly dropped lamb trying to balance itself for the first time on earth. His messed fur was like a lamb too and so was the way he stretched his head, nose in the air, reaching for milk.

It was not ewe's milk which this doddering, starved creature smelled in the wind. Because of his one eye, Four-F could not see as well as other huskies, but his sense of smell had become more acute in compensation. Barton knew he had the scent of something by the quiver of the dog's nose, the sudden palpitant life in the limp muscles. When Four-F whisked around and barked at his master, nudging him, pirouetting off the trail, Barton wondered what it was the dog had discovered in that wind. A moose perhaps!

Barton struggled to his feet. He had no rifle, but he might get a chance to use his pistol, provided the moose was bogged in a snowdrift somewhere. Slim as this chance was, he staggered along at Four-F's heels. The dog was leading him, surely enough, up a zigzag trail of the gulch wall—a trail for wild goats not for man or dog. Reaching the top, Dave Barton discovered stupidly that the gulch rim was merely the divide across which lay another gulch no different than the one he had left.

**WHAT** happened as they plunged on down the other side was something of a miracle—the sort recorded in the ancient

days of saints and martyrs. Barton had faced death. He knew that if he had gone to sleep with the dog curled up next to him both would have died. Perhaps they had died and he was just wandering along aimlessly now in a Purgatory of ice. But blood began to course through his veins, his nerves tingled as if with a new miraculous sap, his breath puffed wearily, then ecstatically, his nostrils dilated like a wild beast's. A spirit streamed through him lifting him. He was one with the spirit of his dog, quivering wildly at that same scent.

For up here the man could smell what the dog had smelled long ago. The gale, thick with cutting snow and flying ice, brought the same heaven-sent whiff—venison frying!

Survey Station 24 was not miles away as he had thought in his panic. It was right here in this next gulch! He saw a shack and a lean-to half buried except where the wind had gouged out the drifts at the door. The smoke from a pipe chimney, whipped flat in the wind, was like the incense of the gods. It was as if Dave Barton had actually died, just as he had expected, and the gates of Paradise had opened admitting him! It did not even bother him when he stumbled over the body of a dog in a snowdrift. He saw another dog lying partly revealed where the wind had blown the snow mound away. Nearer the cabin another mound looked like a grave where snow heaped up over the body. Behind the cabin there were several more mounds!

Possibly these were huskies belonging to the cook in there who was frying that moose meat. They might have been left outside to starve to death, which would mean that there was no meat or tallow to spare! It was an awful possibility, for Barton himself might be denied food!

But this was not the explanation of those dead dogs, for there were more dogs, vociferously alive, inside the lean-to. They had already set up a wild yelping as Barton and Four-F staggered to the door of the main cabin.

Before reaching it, Barton noticed that one of those bodies—the one which the wind had denuded of its snow mantle—was not a dog at all. It was a black little crumpled body with the face of an ape.

The high cheekbones and horse-mane hair suggested an Eskimo, or perhaps a

Chilkat Indian. The skin, however, was not red brown but the yellow brown of a Jap.

## CHAPTER III

**C**URIOSITY was less urgent than the smell of bannock biscuits frying in the pan. Barton was too hungry to even be surprised about that dead Jap. The Coast off there beyond Seward Glacier had been crawling with Japs before the War. Some were still left and these, doubtless, found good hunting and good hide-outs in this wilderness west of Kluane Lake. For the whole region was practically tractless and until recently, unmapped.

Far more astonishing than the frozen body of the Jap was something that Barton saw at the door of the cabin. He simply could not believe it! It must be another mirage like that imaginary sound of air compressors and rooters grinding the Alaskan Highway through forest and tundra.

It was the wind-tanned face of a girl in the shadow of the door.

Barton did not recognize her until she drew him into the cabin. Seeing him reeling, she had put out both arms to help him and thus her face lifted up to his, was close enough so that he saw it as a man sees the last object before he faints—a ring of pulsating light in the mass of jet clouds.

But he did not faint. He flopped to a box and gulped the hot coffee this girl was holding to his mouth. He remembered her distinctly now—except that the memory was out of focus, one image blurring to two. He remembered the girl who was still in her teens, adolescent, almost gangling, but with eyes that made her seem older and wiser even though they were sky-blue. That was over a year ago when the Army was building the tote road which the civilian contractors were to widen and surface. In the construction camps and motor pools along the Highway she was still known as Sergeant Ashby's kid sister, but in that year she had grown into a woman.

It might have been the dark rings under her eyes, the hollow under her cheekbones that added ten, or rather twenty years to her age. Something had happened to her—something connected with that dead Jap and those dead huskies.

Barton made no attempt to solve the mys-

tery. The girl would tell him soon enough. But right now she was too busy bringing him out of what looked like a collapse. The heat in the cramped cabin had started his cheeks and nose and fingers aching, but the rest of his bones responded to the delightful warmth and to the scald of the coffee in his throat. In the sudden relief from the deafening wind his ears buzzed and hummed. It was a merry tune—no longer that frightful pound of bulldozers crashing down spruce forests. Here was perfect peace.

But when the girl held a bannock biscuit to his lips he remembered something instantly, something as urgent as hunger. He mumbled, his mouth full, "My dog—you got something for him? My dog's out there. He's starving, too."

By the sudden knife thrust of the wind on his back he knew that she had opened the door a moment. Then he heard the thwack of a tail, the clack of teeth and the gasps of a dog "laughing." He was glad she had let Four-F into the main cabin instead of the lean-to with the other huskies. And he was glad of that soul-satisfying music of a dog gobbling a hunk of venison! The cabin seemed suddenly crowded and happy.

Now that he had got his eyes after the dazzle of snow, Barton discovered that the cabin was more crowded than he had guessed. A man lay on a bunk just beyond the pile of sugar boxes and tinned Army rations. Barton thought, from the gray, drawn face that the man might be dead, except that his eyes were open. He had been awakened of course by the barking of the huskies. He had known Sergeant Ashby ever since they first met when the Fourth Engineer Corps established headquarters in the Mounted Police barracks at White Horse.

**T**HEY did not speak to each other for a few moments. The mounty seemed too busy sizing up this newcomer, and the newcomer was too busy eating. It was the girl who did the talking. She was at the stove now, frying more bannock in the pan, cutting another slab of meat. Her talk was rather incoherent, Barton thought, although this might have been his own fault. Dazed by hunger, he found everything incoherent—those snow-covered dogs, that frozen body of a Jap, the gray-faced mounty lying in

a bunk. He did not try to think it out. His head lolled back pillowed on the girl's arm as she fed him. She fed him little bites at a time, cautioning him not to wolf the whole meal.

Her talk seemed to be about the Jap navy, about spies mapping the Highway, about saboteurs waiting their chance at the trestles and tunnels and about salmon fishermen at Yakutat Bay.

She stopped talking repeatedly and went to the door to peek through a knothole. Then she removed the rag stuffing from a chunk in one of the walls, peered out, came back to the stove. She had a pot boiling now with caribou meat and onions. She brought this to Barton and spoon-fed him. It was nectar, thick as a son-of-a-gun stew, burning his throat, soothing his senses, his nerves, his bones like a drug.

"Feeling a bit better?" a voice said from the bunk. The mounty was wide awake now and grinning. "You're a P. R. A. surveyor, aren't you? Saw you at White Horse, then Kluane, but you went on to Tanana Crossing in Alaska and I lost track of you. Let's see now, your name—"

"It's Dave Barton," the girl said simply.

Dave gasped, "So you remember me!"

The mounty stuck to the point. "But how did you get *here*?"

"My dog brought me. How about you?"

"My sister brought me. That is, I came because I knew she'd be here—the young brat, ought to be spanked!"

"Even though you'd have starved otherwise," Bette shot back.

"Righto, I'd have starved! But she had the place all stocked up just before I turned up." He pointed to a corner of the cabin where a caribou hung, its head cut off, its venison drawn, its legs crossed and tied.

"Pretty good, bagging a caribou in this kind of snow," Barton said.

"Not such a miracle," the mounty objected. "Caribou's feet are big enough for snowshoes. And hard enough to cut ice like skates. The joke was, Bette had a calling horn for a moose."

Bette started slamming the pots and pans. Barton changed the subject. "Who shot the Jap out there?"

"Which Jap?"

"I saw a dead Jap on ice and a lot of dogs covered with snow."

The sergeant gave a grim smile. Evidently Barton had no idea of the terrible fight that had taken place right here around the cabin. He had missed something and it must have been glorious—the mounty and his "kid sister" holding off a pack of half-human wolves.

"Only one of those snow heaps is a dog," Sergeant Ashby said. "The rest are dead Japs."

"A lot of them got away—fifteen or twenty," the girl said. "But they'll be back."

#### CHAPTER IV

THE mounty was worried. "The storm got too wild after we fought them off. That's why they didn't come back right away. They had to hole up somewhere, I expect, and doctor their wounded. But with the storm cleared now they should be coming. Or else they decided they've had enough."

"But they're starving wolves," Bette said. "Killing and wounding half a wolf pack won't stop the rest!"

"Unless they've struck caribou tracks," the Sergeant said. "In that case I've lost them!"

Bette laughed. "A minute ago he was afraid they could come back and now he's afraid they won't."

"With you here," the mounty explained, "it's changed everything. Bette wouldn't have to fight 'em off alone. You're a good shot, I expect?"

"Not in your class," Dave said, looking at both of them, "but there'll be three of us to hold 'em off." He added, looking around the walls, the empty ration boxes, the stove, "Pretty snug in here. And pretty safe, I'd say. Let 'em come!"

"But if they don't come," Ashby said, tossing restlessly in his bunk. "Dash it, I'm not going to let 'em slip out of my fingers like this!"

"Take this bowl of soup and then get back to sleep," his sister said.

When she helped him to sit up in the bunk, the policeman held the bowl with his left hand and swigged at the soup as if eager for its strength. "I'll be strong enough to get on a sledge soon!"

"He thinks he's going to track those Japs," the girl chuckled. "He's badly hurt



with that gun wound in his shoulder. What he needs is a doctor—and a nurse.”

“Those Japs are out to map the bridges on the Highway and do wholesale sabotage,” Ashby snapped. “They’re salmon fishermen, yes—been sailing the Coast for a generation. It’s a good guess some are in the Japanese navy, perhaps even officers. If we could just find out which trail they’re taking—”

Dave caught the girl’s eyes. She did not have to tell what she was thinking. He was thinking the same thing, and so was the mounty. The new Highway to Alaska was a religion to them all. They must all fight for it!

The stew broth and bannock and coffee had brought Barton to life. It also made him sleepy, every nerve and muscle relaxing to the blissful comfort. The cabin was warm, the company perfect. He was in heaven. But he said, “And what’s wrong with my tracking them alone?”

“I shan’t consider that! I couldn’t send you,” the policeman said. “You’re new up here in the Yukon.”

Barton flushed. Yes, he was still a chechako. He was glad they did not know about that bit of jerky he had given his dog! “I have a pretty good idea of the lay of the land,” he said hotly. “In fact, not counting a few Army engineers and P. R. A. surveyors, I have a better idea of it than any man living. I know it like a book—my recording book right here in my pocket. It’s over a year since I worked on the survey for the main Highway, now I’ve finished another for access roads.”

“You need some sleep, too,” Bette Ashby said. “You almost passed out when I was feeding you.”

Barton got up. “When these Japs lined out, did they go up the gulch or down?”

“Hold on a minute. Bette’s right. You’re in no condition for trailing yet. And there’s too much new snow for sledging.”

“I’ve got snowshoes. I’ll backpack what I need. Wherever the Japs could trail on foot, I can trail. Fix me up a food pack. We’re wasting time.”

“I’m not ordering you to stay here,” Ashby said. “But I’m giving you some advice. Ever try picking up tracks in silt? Well, this new snow is as bad as the silt of sand dunes. Or else the trail’s in brash ice which

leaves no more sign than a pebble wash. I strongly advise you—”

Dave noticed that the girl was already putting up the food pack. He sat down, filled his pipe from a can of tobacco. “Any more advice, Sergeant? I’ll remember every word.”

“I’ve been tracking those rats for weeks and they’re wise or else they have a guide who’s wise. They stick to the ice flats which leave no more sign than gypsum beds or lava—unless they’re wearing crampons, which they aren’t.”

Barton inhaled the strong Canadian tobacco and felt as if he were floating. “What else, Sergeant?”

“If you find caribou sign and the sign looks as if the Japs were tracking it, you can lay for ’em.”

Barton puffed deep. It would be delightful, he thought, to just float away into clouds of happy coma, into a hibernation. “How will I know the Japs are tracking it?”

“When a deer is fleeing you’ll see long streaks behind the tracks. But it’s my opinion these rats won’t do much hunting in this gale. Like as not you’ll find them holed up somewhere, too weak to go on. In that case, lay off and wait, but under no condition try a shoot-out.”

Bette had the pack ready now—flapjack flour, coffee, jerky, a slab of fresh meat. The sergeant finished his instructions hurriedly. “But if they’ve found game, enough to last them so they’re packing it, you’ll have to keep tracking. When the sky’s clear you’ll have a chance to signal a plane for help. Our Inspector at Dawson will send out reconnaissance planes after this storm. You might even spot a C-47 taking crated onions and celery up to Fairbanks—”

“He’s asleep,” Bette laughed.

SOME hours later Barton was still sitting on the barrel slumped against the wall. He jerked his head up with a start as if he had been nodding. “Any more advice, Sergeant?”

“That sleep will help you more than my advice.”

Barton got up slowly, rubbed his head. He was completely awake until he strapped on his food pack.

“You better take your dog with you in case you fall asleep again,” the mounty said.

## CHAPTER V

"A watchdog is better than scattering twigs when you make Indian camp." He held out his hand. "Good luck to you, my man, but—" he added tensely, "I wish I could have finished this job myself."

"You've done your share, Rob," the girl said. "Give someone else a chance."

When she followed Dave out her brother called, "You aren't going with him, Bette!"

"How can I?" she called over her shoulder. "They might come back and find you laid up in that bunk." She added when she was alone with Dave. "Rob gave you some good advice. Don't try a shoot-out."

"I can't try anything till I find their trail."

"You'll find it downriver. That's where they headed." She pointed to the long reach of the canyon. "But don't forget the side-draws." She held his arm. "I only wish you weren't going alone."

"I only wish you were going with me—not to fight Japs, but to the dance at Kluane next Saturday."

"It's a good wish—if it'll make you stop and think before you start any gun-fighting with them."

A freezing gale had whipped clouds down Kaskawulsh Glacier. Snow whorls mounted against the peaks, swaying like white cyclones. This left a blue sector in the sky. Barton had one more look at those mounds from which the gale had uncovered more of the frozen Japs. They all seemed to have been shot in the roof of the mouth and from behind, so that their teeth were smashed outward.

The game he hunted was this kind of game, he thought with a shudder—yellow-faced, half human. They were all of the same mold and image. The live ones who had escaped were like the dead ones, of the same body—a snake which had only its tail cut off. The snake itself still crawled off there in the dark iron-glazed gulches.

Four-F had followed his master out into the cold without being called, prowling with bristling back through those snow mounds and up close to Barton's heels. The dog knew what was under the snow and it gave him the shakes. He shook all over his scrawn body except for the tucked tail.

"If you get in trouble," Bette Ashby called, "send your dog back."

"He's not a sheep dog," Dave said. "He doesn't know how to come back!"

THE Japs had camped five miles downriver in a side draw. Barton almost passed them for the tracking was as tricky as the sergeant had warned. The wind had scoured the canyon bed of its newly fallen snow which still filled the air so that the gulch seemed to steam. The river trail was swept clean, but in the side cuts and at the foot of the cliffs the snow had heaped up in drifts a hundred feet deep. And these spots the fugitives had avoided.

Except that the girl had pointed out the direction the fugitives had taken—downriver—Barton might not have stumbled on their tracks at all. Where he did finally strike them the snow of previous storms had crusted enough to take a print. Some of the tracks pressed deep, the prints staggering. Noticing a blood smirch on the immaculate white, he made a reasonable guess that the Japs were carrying their wounded.

This might mean that they were not trailing far. For if they were, they would have left their wounded to die as they did in Attu.

They must be camped somewhere along this riverbed. From then on he watched every dark side draw for sign.

He was about to pass one of these when the dog's hair bristled like a fur ruff on his neck, a growl rumbling deep in his throat. Ancient snow had piled up almost like a glacier at the draw's mouth and the surface gave good record of what had happened.

There were no footprints, but wide swath, showed where branches—probably of spruce—had been dragged back and forth. This attempt to erase the tracks had merely made their absence conspicuous. The crust of the old snow, broken and swept away, had left a denuded patch that stood out dead white and unglazed. If the Japs had camped up there in that draw they would have a sentinel hiding near the mouth. If they had not camped, then they must have found a trail cutting up through those sheer cliffs. The answer was in Barton's pocket. He took out his road map.

He remembered this draw vaguely. When he extended his survey from the base line at Station 24, he had sketched some rough contour lines, jotting down the elevation and a note:

*"Deep cut through cliffs leads to Kaskawulsh Glacier."*

He felt elated. He was not such a chechako when he had a fact at his fingertips that was unrecorded on any other map in the world! This country between Alaska and the new Highway was an unmapped, trackless wilderness—Hubbard Glacier, the Seward, Lowell, Kaskawulsh Glaciers—and here was a tiny draw in the cliffs which he knew "like a book."

But the Japs knew it too! He had to admit that much. Those fishermen laying out-law nets in the migration lanes off the Coast knew everything—not only about the Coast but about the glaciers and rivers inland.

Knowing that they might have chosen this draw not as a camping place but as a route of escape, Barton prowled up to the granite gateway. Here the cliffs closed in on him, the air was darkening with only a ribbon of sky above. "A hell of a place for an ambush," he said half aloud, wishing he could talk this over with his dog.

Four-F had skulked up close to his heels, looking up when Dave turned, clinging to him with that one-eyed, anxious stare, as if to say, "Do you know what you're doing?"

"Maybe I guessed wrong," Barton said when he saw Four-F lift his head like a wolf about to howl. But he did not howl. He was reaching into the dim air for a scent.

**B**ARTON could almost smell the change in the clear icy draft. It was the smell of damp wood smoking.

Reaching the top of an ice cascade, he flattened to his stomach and peered through the cleft in an ice boulder at the up-sloping bed of the gulch beyond.

A Jap sentry stood on a shelf of ice stamping his feet and beating his breast. Because of the clouds of driven snow he had not seen Barton crawling up over that ice cascade even though that was the very spot he was supposed to watch. Up there on that shelf, exposed to the freezing draft that sliced through the draw, the Jap could be concerned with little more than keeping alive.

It was because of those churning puffs of snow, swept up from the ground, that the gang of fugitives had risked building a fire. Dave could see them through the mists, huddled about a burning log between two

pillar rocks. He counted ten of them, squat black shadows, some prone, some digging for more firewood, some building a lean-to against a snow hut. He could not be sure how many more were in the huts, but he was definitely sure of one thing: The whole crew was going to camp there for some time.

Remembering the mounty's advice about a shoot-out, Barton turned back and climbed down in search of a safe place to rest. With Four-F on guard he could make Indian camp. He could even go to sleep.

Retracing his footsteps, it occurred to him that those tracks he had made here fifteen minutes ago might reveal his camping place. They were clear prints, obviously new, for the wind had not yet blown snow over them. The prints of his dog were also clear, splay-footed and light. But there was something else which he could not understand. He stopped dead and stared. There was another set of footprints marching in the snow right along with his own! They were fresh too!

In climbing the steep bed of this draw he had taken off his snowshoes so that his own tracks like these others, were clearly marked footprints. It was as if another man had walked along by his side! He felt a dull slugging fear in his chest. Trying to read a whole chain of events by the record in the snow had become an obsession. "I came up the draw alone," he said half aloud. "But I'm only one man. I left fresh tracks. These other tracks walking along with mine—they aren't my tracks. I haven't got four legs. Somebody was walking along with me—somebody invisible. But that's nonsense. I'm plumb crazy talking like this."

It took him a moment to understand that those prints, although as fresh as his own, might have been made a few moments later. Hence it was not an invisible devil or ghost, but something just as bad—a Jap.

## CHAPTER VI

**D**IVING to the nearest cover, Barton landed in a small ice crevasse under a granite cliff. At the same moment a slug chipped the ice above his head, the draw echoing with the high-pitched scream of a Jap garrison rifle.

Obviously the man who had been tracking him had hidden somewhere when he saw Dave climbing back down the gulch. Just

where he was hiding, it was impossible to tell, for the echoes of that shot came from every ice-sheathed cliff.

Crouched in the miniature crevasse which was as good as a trench, Dave Barton felt safe for the moment, but he wanted to see just what was going on out there in the streambed. He knew that his husky was out there questing among the maze of bowlders, barking hysterically. Getting up from his hands and knees to have a better look, he was conscious of a queer weight holding him down as if that slug had cut him in the calf, numbing his leg. But this was of no importance at the moment. He stared out across the glazed rim of his trench studying every break in the cliffs across the gulch, eager for a sign of the snipeshooter. The dog told him what he wanted to know.

Four-F was circling in the streambed, barking at a definite bowlder at the base of the cliff. Another shot whined, echoing in a prolonged rat-tat-tat like a tommy gun. Despite the sound, it was caused by one shot only, a shot that was intended for the dog.

And Four-F knew it was meant for him. Probably any dog would have known. Even the coyotes back home, Barton remembered, know what a gun is for and stay out of range of an armed man before a shot is fired. Four-F skulked behind a bowlder, snooped on toward another, circling the Jap's hide-out.

The Jap seemed more concerned with the dog than with the man. Barton saw his head poke up for a second over the rim of a bowlder, then duck again. It ducked precisely like a raccoon frisking for a hole in a log, for the Jap wore a coonskin cap.

Dave waited for him to show his head again. But the Jap played his own game. He called in a sharp taunting yowl, "How about it, Yank? You damned. Plenty more of us come when hear gun-bang shot." He punctuated this dire threat—a very reasonable threat—with another shot which whined and screamed in the empty air.

"You'll be on ice long before they get here!" Barton shouted back. He measured the distance to the next bowlder, some twenty feet nearer the Jap. With only a pistol against that garrison rifle he wanted a closer range for the shoot-out. He straightened up, intending to vault over the side

of his ice trench, but that pesky numbness in his foot seemed to anchor him where he stood. It was not a wound, he discovered somewhat to his relief. His foot was merely wedged in an ice crack where he had made that first leap for cover. He would chip the ice away when he had a few moments to spare. But he could not spare them now.

The Jap had had time enough to study the lay-out. A man was on one side of him, a dog on the other—a scrawny white wolf of a dog, frothing as he barked. "I make a dicker with you, Yank. Fair bargain. You got food in duffel bag?"

"Sure. You want some?" Dave yelled back.

"Throw out food. I go away. I play fair."

"Sounds reasonable," the white man shouted. "You're a Jap and play bushido?"

"I am not Jap. I am Eskimo."

Barton laughed, but checked himself. He was losing precious times. "Throw out your rifle and I'll throw out a hunk of moose meat."

Four-F skulked around to another bowlder. This might have had something to do with the Jap's process of thinking. At any rate, to Barton's astonishment, a rifle came spinning out into the open snow!

"I keep my word. I starving very much. You give poor Eskimo food, priz, Eskimo be your friend. I let you go before plenty more come to kill you. Throw out meat, priz, thank-you-very-much!"

One point in this offer had a ring of truth to it. The man was starving. But that stunt with the rifle was preposterous. The man must have an automatic or else he knew his gang was coming.

"Okay, it's a dicker! I'm throwing you a slab of meat!" Barton yelled, peering cautiously over the rim of the trench.

As he expected, the Jap started slamming with a pistol. But he hit nothing but ice. When the wild fusillade was finished, Barton peeked over his trench, but the Jap had ducked, or else he had rushed to another hideout while he was emptying his gun.

In an attempt to get a better view, Barton struggled to free his trapped leg. He would have to chip out a good-sized chunk of ice, he discovered. But this would not take long. Just a few moments of fast work. "It'll be dark soon," he thought as he hacked



away. "And when it's dark, I'll be safe, right here in this—" He broke off with an oath. "I'm talking as if I'm stuck here for the night!" An outlandish thought! It was incredible. It was damnable!

He looked over his trench again, hoping to see some sign of that prowling Jap. But the light was fading and the prowler had faded with it, vanishing as miraculously and completely as a dream!

Returning to his work of hacking, Barton discovered that he was merely filling up the hole with chipped ice. Besides that, he must have sunk deeper for he discovered to his consternation that he was now in the crack up to his knee! The walls of the crevasse must have settled down as loose slabs of ice dislodged from his frantic struggling.

He began to scoop out the chipped ice with his hands in an attempt to discover what it was that had pinned him. A block of ice had slid down, wedging against the wall of the trench, clamping his leg above the ankle. It was the bulge of his ankle that prevented his pulling his leg upward and free.

He rested, blandly surprised that he could sit down. Puffing heavily to get back his spent breath, he sat there staring in helpless rage at the block of ice that was the key of the trap. It was a ridiculously small block, but when he tried to lift it, it was like lifting up the ground. It budged a little but it seemed to budge the whole wall with it. Evidently the warmth of his own body from his violent struggling had melted the ice enough so that the jaws of the trap had frozen together. The moisture reminded him of a sucking mouth pulling him deeper into a horrid void beneath which was a throat.

## CHAPTER VII

**D**AVE BARTON swore. He swore aloud when he saw Four-F watching, perplexed. The dog's brows were lifted, giving him that long-faced, clownish look, his head tilted a little to focus his one eye on the puzzle. The one closed eye gave him an expression of deep, canny thought. His master was in trouble, any dog could have told that. But not very serious trouble. He was merely sitting down with one leg half buried in what might have been a snow bank. He

had seen his master do that before when his feet were on the verge of freezing.

"If you had any sense behind those cocked ears you'd go for help," Barton yelled at him. He waved his arms down the gulch, a gesture which any sheep dog would understand. But to Four-F it meant nothing except a command to jump higher. And words meant nothing either for the husky did not understand English. He knew that "Yake!" meant mush and that "Geel!" meant a right turn. But he even mixed that up at times with "Haw!" which meant a turn to the left. And that was his entire vocabulary.

But Dave was still yelling at him. "You know where Station 24 is! You know the mounty and the girl are there. You even know there's caribou meat there—all you can eat and gulp for days!"

He stopped yelling suddenly. He had said something wise, shouting it wildly, and it came back echoed from the cliffs as if some other voice had shouted it. "*Caribou meat there—*"

He unpacked his food pack, taking out a hunk of the fresh-killed meat. Four-F's ears went up higher, his mouth stretched, drooling. He actually grinned.

"This isn't for you, Four-F. You can watch me eat and then figure it out for yourself. If you're hungry you know where you can go."

The dog got up from his haunches and pranced on all four paws. He yapped. He watched with his one eye as his master chewed loudly. Barton cut off a hunk and pretended to relent. And he came near relenting. It was bad enough to see a dog beg with two eyes instead of focusing all the hunger and pleading into one.

Four-F whimpered, begged in suppressed talking whoofs. He could not understand this. They had both starved together and fought the storm together. And they had fought Japs together, too, each in his own way. They would not be alive to fight at all if Four-F had not led the way to that cabin and its food. So what was this all about? What was wrong?

The animal watched dismayed as his master packed away the rest of that meat in the duffel bag and tied the strings shut. Then he saw him take out a leaf from his notebook. This might be something to eat, he thought, but his master shoved him away

with a cuff on the ear—not as hard a cuff as he would give in play.

Barton wrote, beginning his note several times, before he had it phrased just right.

"Japs camped in draw 5 miles below Station 24. I'm holding 'em off till help gets here. Don't let Bette come." (Signed) "DAVE."

He rolled the paper and tied it in the middle with a ribbon of canvas from his duffel bag. Four-F jumped up eagerly, almost nuzzling the paper out of his hand, thinking it was a surprise bit of meat—a peace offering. But Barton tied the note to his collar, then took him in both his arms and hurled him bodily over the ice trench.

"Go on home! Yake! Mush! Get the hell out of here!"

The words meant nothing, but the dog began to get a glimmer of the truth. His master did not want him near him. Or else he was just playing. That was it! Four-F's tail did not even droop when he picked himself up from the iron-crusting ground. He ran off a few lengths then whirled eagerly—the usual procedure of play. But as he jumped on his master's chest, his collar was twisted again and he went hurtling head over heels. He landed on his nose and then yelped when a chunk of ice smacked him hard on the rump.

This was pretty rough play, but play it must be. The dog could believe nothing else for his master had half lifted and whirled him into a snow bank in just that way many times before. A rule of the game was to growl and then attack. But Four-F's growl was flat—and anxious. He was too cold and hungry, and there was too much death in the air. He was badly tuckered out after those days of starvation. And that meal he had had up at the cabin was not a real meal. The girl had purposely given him but a few nibbles of meat.

Thrown violently to his back for the third time, he struggled up slowly and sat on his haunches, his mouth half open and shaking. His one eye said clearly, "Feed me and then we'll play. Can't you understand? You had your food. Why can't I have mine?"

His master tried to answer that pleading look with an oath, but there was pleading in his own voice. "If you hang around here you'll be shot! There's plenty to eat up at

the cabin. You'll have your own life as well as mine!"

It was no use. The dog just laughed. Barton reached for his collar, cuffed him hard and hurled him on the trail. It was a bad throw this time. And the dog knew that his last cuff was not play. It was a blow! He untangled his legs and got to his haunches slowly, while another chunk of ice hit him, and another, and another.

Four-F ducked, his eyes—the good and the bad one—blinking in utter astonishment. This time he got the point. He slunk off, his tail tucked under. He went downstream, stopped, looked over his shoulder. He kept going until he got to the lee of a rock and there he lay down, protected from the wind, to think it over. His feelings were badly hurt. Some puzzling thing had happened, but he could not keep his mind on it. He came back humbly, wagging his tail a little to ask forgiveness for whatever it was he had done.

Dave Barton was wild. He wanted to get back to digging himself free of that cramping ice, but here he was trying to talk sense into a half-wit dog. Four-F just would not forsake him, that was clear. And the worst of all, those dog-eating Japs would come out any minute now. And they would pick off the big husky, first shot.

Barton put an end to the farce. He drew his gun and fired pointblank at the dog's face. The slug whined as he had aimed it—a few inches above the skull.

Four-F made no mistake about it this time. His own master wanted to kill him. He whisked around half on his belly, then loped off. He did not go very fast. He even looked over his shoulder once—and then kept going.

Dave felt that he had lost his best friend in the world.

## CHAPTER VIII

**A** SPRUCE log stuck out of a drift a little distance from Barton's shoulder. He could have used it as a lever to pry that key block of ice loose. He tried to reach it. He tried over and over again until the sun set and he sat exhausted, relaxed except for the growing cold.

He knew that he could not last out the night. Already he was nodding, just sit-

ing there, staring red-eyed in a dumb rage up and down the gulch.

Like counting sheep, he kept himself awake counting the hours it would take for that dog to summon help. Five miles to the Survey Cabin, then a day's trip by sledge to Kluane. He added that day's trip because he knew Sergeant Ashby would not let his sister come alone. She would have to go to Kluane for help. A day's trip back, another five miles down river, and meanwhile he must sit there half frozen, his foot and ankle and calf packed in an ice jam. His leg must be frozen already, or else numb with the crushing weight, for he felt no pain. Pain might have kept him awake.

The stars came out, blazing in a part of the sky which was cleared of the storm clouds. Because of the white ground and the glaze on the boulders and cliffs, the gloaming merged into a light almost as bright as the day's low sun. He could see the Japs, if they came. And if they came he was certain they would be wary. They did not know he was trapped. It was a secret which he must guard with his very life. He had even avoided mentioning it in that note—for fear the girl would blunder into this mess and be killed. He was glad now that Sergeant Ashby and his sister and the whole world were ignorant of the measly truth.

**W**HATEVER happened, he must stay awake. But in that monotonous wail of the wind he found himself lulled, nodding. He wished now that he had kept his dog to give the alarm of approaching footsteps. He chewed at some jerky, hoping that that would stop the pounding in his ears. The pounding had come back, and it started that devilish rhythm again—the Deisel tractors and scrapers surfacing the distant Highway to Alaska.

He could hear and almost see the supply trucks piling up ration boxes and flour bags in the open air depots. More distinctly he heard the cat-drivers shoving mired trucks out of the muskeg. But the muskeg was frozen now so he knew he was imagining it all. He imagined that that wind was the groaning of many men at a pontoon portage. He heard the voice of a foreman in the distance calling out to a swamper or sloper or mucker. He even thought the foreman

was calling his own name. "Hurry up, Dave! We got to finish this Road and save Alaska from the Japs!"

His name was so distinct in that wind that he jerked his head around and peered into the bright starlight up-river. He saw a big black figure waddling down the river trail like a bear on its hind legs. It looked much more like a bear than a Jap. In fact Dave was certain this was no Jap. His head was held too high. A Jap's head always seems to grow out of his shoulders where there is a chunk of extra muscle on the back of the neck. The difference between a Jap and a white man was vividly marked right at that moment, for a Jap—a chunky little blob of a creature—was trailing the big man a hundred paces or so behind.

Barton knew the Jap was tracking the man because when the big one stopped to rest a moment the Jap ducked in a crevasse, poking his head up and watching, then prowling out when the man he was tracking started again.

Once more Dave heard his own name as if a construction foreman was calling him to ask for some data from his recording book. But it was not an American foreman. It was a Canuck.

"Hi, m'sieu Dave!" the Canuck cupped his mittened hands and haloo'd.

Barton was astounded and then in a flash he realized there was nothing astounding about this at all! Here was a Canuck trapper who had probably headed for the Survey station during the storm, just as everyone else headed for it. The mounty and his sister had probably told him about Dave Barton. What could be simpler?

Jumping up and standing on one leg, Dave waved to him. "Come here, friend! Help me!"

The man paused and stiffened, for a moment on guard. "You are M'sieu Dave?" he called from his distance. "Par foi, of course! It is Dave! I am Jules Arpoon. Your dog she is bring me your note."

As he started to trudge toward Barton's rock, that prowling Jap a hundred yards upriver popped up from his crevasse.

Dave yelled hoarsely, "Watch out! That Jap behind you!"

The big fellow lurched around awkwardly, unslung his rifle. The Jap had quartered across the riverbed to another refuge

behind a snow mound. He was close enough now for a rifle shot and he threw it.

The Canuck lumbered off to a boulder so deliberately and sluggishly that Dave thought he might have been hit in the head and was walking by reflex action alone. It gave the Jap time to scurry on all fours to a nearer rock from which he started some more wild shooting.

The Canuck was good. At least, since it was likely that he was not half starved and shaky and glassy-eyed like the Jap, he was good enough to stop that crazy fusillade. His rifle barked, scuffing snow in a rather wide pattern all around the target, but then a shot must have gone home good and clean. When the Jap rolled, the grizzly went over to him just as deliberately and slowly, shoved the body with the flat of his snowshoes and then stood over him precisely as a bear will stand and sniff and examine a motionless body. Then he came up, trudging, toward Dave's rock.

"Merci bien, m'sieu. Moch thanks. You have save' my life!"

"And you can save mine," Barton answered jubilantly. He looked up at the man and could see from this closer look that he was not French-Canadian, but a half-breed with a lot of Indian blood—probably Chilkat. But he was as good as a long lost brother. Barton knew his kind well—the big-boned, leathery, ageless breed who work their traplines in winter, their fish nets in summer all along the Yukon rivers. His dumb, boney face was the face of an angel come down from heaven!

Dave reached for him, grabbed his shoulder and pulled him close as if to hug him. It was a one-armed hug, however, for he kept his pistol in his other hand lest more Jap snipers were prowling.

And there was one other point that lurked in back of his mind. "Where's my dog?"

"Your dog, m'sieu? But yes, a dog is pass by my camp fire. Ver' hongry dog. But I 'ave no meat to spare. I see the note tied up. Quick I know, someone in trouble." He freed himself from Barton's grip and took a good look at him. "But you, my frand, your leg is froze' maybe that you stick it in the snow that way?"

Barton told him the trouble. "Get that log over there and see if you can pry up this block of ice."

"It is dangereux to trap yourself this way, m'sieu," Jules Arpoon said, going for the log. "For, regard-you, there are plenty Japs everywhere all over partout! You hold them off with a rifle, m'sieu?"

"With a pistol."

"You are besiege' here, and no rifle? Tsk, tsk! But you 'ave the food?"

"Lots of food. We'll eat when you get me out of this jam."

"But no, I won't take your food. I already eat plenty at my camp." He started to work with the log.

"And my husky, you say you didn't feed him?"

"He beg with one eye and brak my heart. But no, I feed myself and the dog is run off up-river. Par foi, this ice she is stick bad!" He worked and puffed. "There is no hole to put in the log. It is necessaire to build the fire maybe. Then by'mbye the ice is melt' and I pry at him to make loose."

"No, no fire! Not yet. It would light me up too much. Hell, man! There was one Jap snooping around here before sunset and there are lots more camped in a gulch just beyond that ice cascade."

JULES ARPOON worked and grunted and swore. Swinging the log like a battering ram he succeeded only in wedging the ice block tighter. "'Cre tonnerre! This one damn' bad trap!" Suddenly he dropped the log and stiffened, his head cocked, listening. "Hell-dam! They come! The Japonais!" He flopped to his knees. "Quick, m'sieu Dave! Your pistol! I take heem and hide là-bas behind the rock. I shoot when the Japs are pass by."

"What's wrong shooting with your rifle?"

"Is difficile to fight with rifle when they surround. Quick, I beg, m'sieu! I am expose' here."

"I'm keeping my own gun."

"Bien! Is dangereux to waste time." He jumped up and lumbered off to the nearest boulder. Evidently he found this was too small to shield him for he got up again and skulked to the next. Again, because of his snowshoes and his trundling gait he was like a bear—starved and skulking out of his hibernation. When his form merged into the darkness below a black cliff, Dave lost sight of him. He could not even hear him.



He heard nothing, for that sound of the "Japonais" coming was a false alarm, a figment of Jules Arpoon's imagination.

"Jules! Arpoon!" Barton's voice shook, coming back to him from the sounding board of cliffs like the voices of many frantic men. "Jules! Where are you!"

The echoes were the only answer for a moment, and then from halfway up the bank, Jules called back. "Is all right, m'sieu. Me, I go tak wan look where those Japs are hide!" He climbed to the top of the bank and stood there revealing his hulking body on this miniature horizon. It might have been mock courage, or else he could see the gulch beyond and was certain now that he had been mistaken: there were no Japs coming.

Barton squinted hard into the starlight, wondering why it was that he saw Jules one minute and saw nothing the next. The cocky half-breed had just vanished!

Someone had cracked him on the head probably. Or else he was prowling around up there making a careful survey of the tracks in the snow. Jules and all his breed were past masters at tracking.

The wind had swept the whole sky clean now. The stars blazing like planets, filled the draw with a strange phosphorescent light. So much time passed, and it passed so slowly, that Dave caught himself dozing. Jerking awake, he thought every ice sheathed rock twinkling in the star glow was a Jap. Every cadence in the wind was a Jap yowling.

The illusion of prowling shapes was terrifying. "I must be going crazy. At least my eyes are crazy." Presently he distinguished one black shadow, more corporeal than the others.

It was the big half-breed shuffling over the black line of the divide, swinging down the bank toward him. "Jules! Is that you?"

The breed halloed back. "And who else am I if not myself, m'sieu?"

But Barton held his gun level until Jules reached the ice trench and knelt down by the food pack. "The Japonais are escape," he said jubilantly. "They trail off to Saskatchewan Glacier. And now maybe I accept your invite to eat something. My hunger is back again!"

He was speaking the truth, Dave reflected. It was hunger that had brought him

back. He wanted to get that food pack before the Japs got it!

He looked up, as he untied the strings of the duffel bag. "What is wrong, m'sieu? Do not hold your gun at me!"

The gun was lowered, but kept leveled in the dark. Jules prattled on. "Me, I will stay on watch. You can sleep, m'sieu. Do not worry some more."

Barton lay back pretending to relax but he kept his eyes on the big breed. Yes, Jules was hungry. For when he drew out a hunk of meat he trembled like old Four-F. He gobbled the hunk, chewing like an animal, his tight Chilkat eyes watching Barton askance. And the gleam in the eyes sent a cold chill down Dave's back.

"You are starving, aren't you, Jules?"

The breed stopped chewing, his lips stiffened. "No, m'sieu. I told you I eat at my camp—"

And that was what had fooled Barton completely when this rat first crawled into his trench! The breed had no camp. He had been scouting upriver in the direction of Station 24 when the dog crossed trails with him. It was easy to guess the rest. He had got the note and he had got the name "Dave" from the note!

"You were afraid to take a rifle shot at me, weren't you, Jules? You thought I might have a rifle, or maybe a machine gun. You didn't know I was trapped here. So you just jumped into the trench as a friend! And now you want me to go to sleep!"

Jules dwindled in size slowly, for he was bending his knees preparatory to jumping from the trench. But his hunger had brought him too close to that duffel bag. It brought him just within Barton's reach.

"You pretended to be my friend and I believed it," Dave said, hooking an arm around the breed's neck. "But when you pretended you could read—a Chilkat half-breed—it got me thinking!" His arm tightened and his other hand shoved the breed's chin upward. "You told those Japs I'm trapped and that I have food. You told 'em I've only got a pistol against their rifles! You told 'em it was safe to surround me—"

"Hell-dam!" the breed gasped, choking. "You are craze!"

No, Barton was not as crazy as he himself had thought. When he yanked Jules, face downward to the ground and got his

rifle, he remembered they were not alone in this riverbed. There was that "dead" Jap, the one who had pretended to track Jules and duel with him. It was a fake duel of course, Barton knew as he glanced up river. For the "dead" Jap was no longer there!

Probably he was one of those gray little ghosts Dave had imagined he saw prowling. It was not imagination. He was not crazy. They were not ghosts. They were real men, crawling to the safety of bowlders all around him.

He knew this for a certainty when shots screamed in long echoes from every side of the gulch.

### CHAPTER IX

IT HAD taken a long time to even suspect the truth. The Japs had a guide—as Sergeant Ashby had guessed. "It makes sense now," Barton was thinking. "They knew this draw cut through the range, that it was not a blind gulch, but a good shortcut to Kaskawulsh Glacier."

Jules found himself strapped with his own belt. Rifle shots whined over his head and the head of his captor, nicking the glazed rocks with a splash of powdered ice. Dave ducked low, dragging his prisoner into the same refuge.

"Do not kill me, m'sieu. I believe-me they are Eskimos who pay me for provisions."

Barton changed the subject, jumping to a point that seemed grotesquely unimportant. "What did you do with my dog?"

"Your dog is all right, I swear to you *par dieu!*" I shoot at beem because I think-me she is the big wolf. How do I know she is your dog?" He pleaded hysterically, fervently, and it was quite possible, Barton thought, that he was telling the truth. "I hit him juz a little bit at the back, like tick biting him. So he roll in the snow to scratch the wound. The note is scratch off and I pick up the note but the dog is escape."

"And that Jap you pretended to kill read the note for you."

"A Jap—to read, m'sieu. Is imposseable."

"Some of those louse-ridden fishermen are in the Jap navy. They can make maps. A lot of 'em read English for military translation. But *you*—you hung yourself, Jules, pretending you read that note!"

The garrison rifles started popping from nearer rocks. A slug cut Barton in the peak of his hat and the Japs saw it jerk. It looked as if his head had been knocked backwards by the impact of the slug.

For that reason there was a long silence except for the crunch of snow, the crack of ice and incessant moan of the wind.

"Look, m'sieu! There is no hope! You will be kill' from every side and from the cliff yonder where wan man is climb up. But me, I will save you, m'sieu! Let me go at these pigs of Japs. I will say, they must not try this fight. You will kill two, three, four. But if they tak the duffel bag, *bien!* It is a bargain. They will be satisfy' and go from here."

THERE was something to be said for this plan for it was bona fide. Actually it made sense. If they had his food, the Japs had no reason to sacrifice any more of their men. They knew that Barton was trapped and that he would most certainly freeze to death before morning. It was a fair bargain all around!

But Barton remembered how Sergeant Ashby and his sister had held off the whole gang rather than feed them. "Anyone who trusts a Jap's bargain needs his head examined, Jules."

It was a good guess that they were within range of his automatic now—if he dared show his head over the trench. He took the chance.

The rifles screamed. And so did the Japs.

Lead smashed against ice-sheathed granite, ricocheted, singing past the trapped man's head. He felt and heard the whistle of two more slugs cutting his hat.

In that moment he had a good view of the creek bed out there in front of his trench; the glazed rimrock shining bright under the stars, the runts flattened on their bellies crawling closer, the way wolves might crawl toward a fire where meat is sizzling.

Barton emptied his gun, crouched low, pulled off his gauntlet and reloaded. He could see no one now—except that monkey climbing the cliff.

With a shot smashing the back of his skull, the sniper tumbled sideways in a clatter of dislodged ice. Barton chuckled at the picture; the Jap and that landslide of

broken ice was exactly like a clay duck shattered to bits!

But something shattered inside Barton's brains before he stopped chuckling. Lights like a Borealis exploded and went out, leaving jet blackness. He could not understand what had happened until he felt a murderous throb in his head where something had smashed it. It was hard to believe that a lead slug had merely cut his scalp. It felt more as if an axe had split his skull in two parts!

"Anyway, I'm lying down, staring up at the stars. They're all twin stars, blinking hot. They aren't stars. They're eyes—and teeth."

**A** DOZEN leathery faces were looking down over his trench. As a faint undertone to the throbbing pound in his ears he could hear the Japanese lingo, then the Canuck patois of Jules.

Jules Arpoon was not huddled up on the ground any more. He was on his feet, standing up there in that same ring, free of his bonds. His jaws were working fast, munching and gobbling like all the others. And just behind him half a dozen little men were fighting over what was left of Barton's food pack.

"Look, m'sieu Commodore," Jules said. "This man is not wan mounty like we think. I believe-me he is from the States."

"You mean Yank?" the "Commodore" said. This was the oldest face peering over the rim of the trench—like the face of an ape-man scowling into a prehistoric cave. "Must be mounty. He fight like mounty, not like Yank, I think so."

"But yes, m'sieu, he is one of these Yanks have survey' the new Highway, is posseable."

"But he fight to finish—not like Yank. Yank too yellow."

Without knowing it, Dave must have let out a groan, for all the faces stiffened suddenly in silence. The only one who spoke was Jules. "He is not die yet."

"Put bayonet in stomach." The wrinkled old Commodore repeated this in Japanese and one of his men jumped into the trench. The garrison rifle and its bayonet were poised above the prisoner when the Commodore barked another order. Two more Japs jumped into the trench and tried to pull Barton to his feet.

"Like I explain, before, m'sieu," Jules said, "the leg she is trap."

The Commodore nodded without smiling, for like any Jap, he only smiled when he was embarrassed, not when he saw something funny. His mouth puckered in a straight line as he watched them tugging at the prisoner until they had him half kneeling on his one free leg. This was very much the helpless position of a jui jitsu victim ready for the final stroke. The old Jap jumped into the trench with astonishing nimbleness, stepped up to the prisoner and gave him a vicious kick in the stomach.

The breath came from Barton in a great gasp. His head swam in a sickening agony as they pulled him to his knees again, and held him in the same position for a second kick.

He was too groggy to care what they did next, even though it was much more serious than those brutal blows below the belt. He was vaguely aware that they had pulled off his parka and one of the Japs was snuggling into it, pulling it over his own smelly rags. The Commodore and several others with the light of matches, then a firebrand, were huddled over the papers and road maps they had found in the prisoner's pockets. The recording book with all the data of the last survey seemed to puzzle them—like a group of monkeys puzzled by a coconut they cannot crack.

**T**HE oldest monkey looked down at his prisoner. "What is book with code figures?"

Barton did not answer. He could not. His brains and his tongue were not working together. It was as if a connection were loose in the tangled wires inside his skull. Curiously enough, a blow on his face seemed to make that connection work again!

A chunky shapeless body that looked like a Jap wrestler stepped up to him. This solid mass of bone and muscle must have been tottering from hunger for the blow did not hurt Barton at all even though it landed smack on his teeth. It shook him a little but it had the effect of awakening him from his stupor, as if someone had given him a good shake by the scruff of his neck.

"The figures are for a map," he muttered.

"Map for where? Open mouth and speak loud. You whimper like whip dog."

This digression gave Dave an extra moment to think. He tried to form his cut lips into coherent speech. "A map for tote roads to the Highway," he said.

"Tote roads? Explain."

"They're access roads feeding into the Highway."

The old ape was impressed, his brows lowering the way an ape faces firelight or danger. "If you make maps for roads to Alaska Highway—then why you tell me? Is a lie, I think so."

"No, m'sieu—it is not lic," Jules spoke up. "He is P.R.A. surveyor, juz what I think long-time."

"But figures no good without map. Where is map?"

"I have to compute the survey from the figures," Barton said, trying to think. His words seemed to come not from his own mouth but from someone else. He seemed to be two men, one talking to the Japs, the other talking silently to himself. "If my brains would stop whirling—I might find a way out." That was what he was saying to himself. But his mouth was saying aloud, "The base line runs from that survey station where you Japs got smoked up. The line runs to another station just like it."

"Where?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?"

Dave doubled up, expecting another kick, but to his surprise it did not come. The old Jap, instead of flying into a tantrum, was doing some hard-headed thinking. "You have food cache in other station? Answer fast, I command."

"What do you think a station's for? It's stocked with books and mapping equipment and Army ration boxes—packed with food. But you'll never find it."

"We find it, I think so very much." The Commodore pointed to the prisoner's trapped leg and gave an order to his men. Two of them unsheathed the bayonets they wore on their thighs and started hacking at the ice. Two more got the spruce log.

With the log shoved in the right spot for leverage, and with three or four of the runts working, the ice boulder began to budge. It budged only an inch but that was enough,

for Barton's ankle bone was no longer locked. He pulled his leg up, groaning as the numbness gave way to the fire of coursing blood. It was because of the two men holding his arms that he did not tumble headlong.

The Commodore, who seemed much smaller now that Dave was standing, looked up, his monkey eyes bright slits in the starlight. "You are very much exception for Yank. One Yank never fight many Japanese all alone. Especially if prisoner in leg-trap."

Yank fighters yellow, no guts to fight more. Give up self for prisoner instead of die like Japanese warrior. All Yank very cowards, is known. But you are different exception. I make peace bargain." For the first time the old face wrinkled horribly, smiling.

And for the first time Barton was able to speak steadily. "Want me to make you a map before you torture me to death, don't you?"

That deathlike smile stretched. "No hurry for map. You tell us where is food cabin. Is good peace bargain."

Anything was good—even a Jap's "peace bargain" if it meant a few more hours of life. "It's at the other end of the base line," Barton said. "But it's not a cabin. It's a cache we surveyors fixed so wolverines can't get it, and Stick Indians can't steal the equipment."

"How we find same?"

"If I told you, what's to stop you from killing me?"

"Word of Samurai. I keep word for honor."

"Give me a reason that isn't a joke. I can think of a better one myself. If you kill me you may find I've sent you on a goose chase."

The leather-faced runt had thought of this point before Dave mentioned it. "You will be guide."

"It's a bargain" Barton said, trying not to show his triumph. He had won just what he had hoped—at least a few hours reprieve from death.

## CHAPTER X

IT WAS a contest of wits now between one man and a bunch of starved, scurvy-ridden ape-men who belonged back in the Gla-



cial Age. "I can't lose." That was what Barton kept thinking.

But even with this gift of a few more hours of life, he had no definite plan in mind. His only purpose now was to prolong those hours. But how to escape was something beyond his imagination. He could not even make a guess.

As for the contest of wits, the odds were not all on his side. He was still dazed from those vicious kicks in the stomach. His brains were cloudy with pain. When they ordered him to march up to their camp every step was a torture. They gave him a spruce log to use as a crutch but when he tripped, the Jap at his side picked up the log and flayed him without mercy until the log cracked in half.

Struggling up, he tried to trudge on, using the same log, but now he had to put part of his weight on the bad foot. Falling again, he lay face down, hoping for just a moment's surcease from that torture in his ankle. This time when they kicked and yanked him to his feet one of them twisted his arms behind his back while another swung a rifle butt with a terrific blow on the side of his face.

He felt as if every tooth in his mouth had been smashed out, his cheekbone seemed to crunch open, blood oozing outward from the split skin, and inward into his throat. He choked on blood and stood deathly sick in a merry-go-round of rocks and gulch walls and spitting faces. It was while he was in that condition that he had to use his brains to stay cool and calm, to outwit his captors! But his thoughts came only in lurid flashes like the thinking of a lunatic. "I got to take 'em to a cache. I told 'em there's another survey station besides 24 and I got to take 'em there. It's thirty miles away and I can't make it. They're beating me to death. But I got to keep going—I got to keep thinking."

At the camp they made him draw a route on one of his road maps. He saw on a rock near the firelight, brown faces peering over his shoulder, breathing on his neck, watching his pencil. On the other side of the fire he saw a littered, nasty space like the den of some unclean beast after hibernation. There was a stench, even in this icy cold which was like many dead rats. This foulness seemed to issue from the comparative

warmth of the snow huts where dwarf figures were packing what outfits they had—a few skis, snowshoes, bags of ammunition, skins of caribou. What blankets they had were already tied on like capes over their shoulders and bodies.

"You follow route you draw on map," the high pitched voice of the Commodore snapped. "You get off route once, is too bad for you. You need feet to walk on trail, but not hands. If no food where you take us we chop 'em off one hand. You take us somewhere else, we do same again."

This was a simple statement, in plain enough English, but Barton had to repeat it, mumbling to himself, "They'll cut off my hands if there's no food. But it's thirty miles away. I can't walk there. Every step's killing me."

But he had to walk. They gave him two stick crutches so that he could hop along on one leg while a Jap followed behind with another stick—a spruce log as heavy as the crutches. This he brought down with a bone-cracking blow every time the prisoner stumbled.

It was because of their ravenous hunger, as well as their sadism, that they beat him. Every moment lost by his stumbling threw them into a frenzy—which was the shaking frenzy of hunger. They must have known that they might lose this one slim hope for food if they beat him to death. And yet no one—even the wisest or the hungriest—stopped the blows. He was a Yank, that was enough motive for the beating. If they did not keep him groggy he might think up some way of double-crossing them. He might plot some complicated scheme to lead them into an ambush of Cree packers supplying the Highway construction camps or even into a construction camp itself!

It was with that possibility in mind that the Commodore sent out patrols of two or three men on every side as they trailed. Those who went ahead followed the route marked on the map, Barton and his two guards followed with the old Commodore; then came the straggling line of fur-bundled runts like hungry wolves snooping over the boulders. It was their hunger that kept them going.

And it was their hunger that saved Barton. Because of their patrols and the stragglers who were sick or wounded they were

widely scattered. They were not a body of troops under command; they were a herd of animals, each responsive to his own impulse, ridden by his own pain—the pain of hunger. When a cow moose gave a low bleating call somewhere up the river trail every man stood a moment spellbound. And then almost every man unslung his rifle and started running!

Dave Barton heard the moose but did not believe it. It was an illusion of sound like those tractors of the Alaskan Highway drumming in his ears. But it came again, not from very far, but from the base of the granite fault which threw the echoes back clearly.

Most of the gang had run upriver where they were questing — chunky black dots against the white background of snow. They jabbered and cat-called to each other. One after another they started crawling on hands and knees, got up, hobbled off to some new draw or cut where they thought they had heard the call.

But the cow moose was silent.

When there were only two Japs left to guard him, Barton knew what they were thinking. Real moose meat here and now was better than a legendary cache to which their prisoner was supposed to take them. They watched the hunt, red-eyed and trembling. When the prisoner sank to his knees they did not even take the trouble to kick him. One of them actually forgot him entirely and walked a few paces ahead, scanning the starlit canyon, eagerly waiting for the first shot—the shot that would mean broiled venison!

The second Jap, however, was reminded of this unimportant matter—the prisoner who had stopped trudging. Following his usual habit, the guard turned his rifle, grasping the barrel instead of the butt, then swinging it against the prisoner's face. It was a murderous blow—if it had landed. But this time Barton was waiting for it. He had noticed that these Japs repeated their surprise attacks in precisely the same routine of movement. Even the ones who kicked him balanced themselves in a definite pose and aimed at the same spot—his groin. And this rifle was swung in the same arc, from the same measured distance, the same pattern of calculated cruelty. Barton knew the exact moment and direction to duck.

The gun butt glanced across the bloody pulp which was his cheek and the Jap lurched, off balance. He tried to swing again but the butt was in the prisoner's hand.

The Jap opened his mouth in a horse-like neigh, partly of terror, partly of rage. His mouth was wide open when Dave's finger slid under the trigger guard and squeezed the shot off.

Although the Jap stood their stiff for only a fraction of a second, the picture of him seemed perpetual in time. Barton could see him forever—the same brown bony mask he had seen on all those other Japs lying in the snow heaps around Station 24!

When the stiffened body collapsed, landing in a heap on Barton's chest, the second guard—the thick-necked Jap wrestler—screached a warning to his scattered companions. At the same moment he emptied his clip at the two figures huddled together in the snow. Most of the slugs hit the man on top. Perhaps that was where they all hit. Barton could not tell, for his own body was a throbbing mass of pain in which the burn of a slug would add little.

But of one thing he was certain. His own shots went home—both boring the Jap wrestler where he had repeatedly kicked the prisoner—in the entrails.

Upriver and down, those chunky little dots roaming over the snow, stood still for just a moment. Those who were farthest away might have thought that someone had spotted the moose and fired. Perhaps those who were nearest had seen this fight and made a plausible guess that the prisoner had tried to make a break. They might have seen him get a gun and kill one of his guards before the other guard started firing. The prisoner, doubtless, was killed by this second guard but the outcome was of no great importance. It was a measly bit of sideplay to the one vital drama—a moose somewhere in this canyon ready to be bagged and broiled and eaten!

Dave kicked himself free of the loathsome body, peeled off the parka, took what ammunition he could find. He felt better. He even felt the thrill of being once more a free man—except that he could not walk! Crawling behind a bowlder, he pulled on his parka and in the sudden relief from the knifing wind his whole body relaxed. He was so exhausted that he lay there as if knocked out.

HE WAS not conscious that time had passed. He knew that he was stretched out comfortably on his back pillowed in something warm and soft. He squirmed, feeling a hot trickle in the roof of his mouth. But his mouth had stopped bleeding and this hot stuff he tasted was something else—something as stinging and raw as whiskey!

Starlight reflected from many patches of snow and glittering ice, lighted the face like footlights—the face of a girl.

"How did *you* get here!" He gaped, completely bewitched.

"Your dog got back to the cabin and we found him out there rolling on his back to scratch it. I called him in and found where a shot had cut his fur."

"So Jules told the truth!" Dave almost whooped. "Four-F is not dead!"

"We knew you were in trouble, with that dog wandering back wounded."

"But you've walked right into a gunfight! The Japs are everywhere!"

"I know they're everywhere, hunting moose all over the canyon bed. Take another drink of this. The fight isn't over." She held the nozzle to his lips.

He swigged and shook himself, trying to shake the fog from his brains. "Kind of punch drunk," he mumbled, rubbing his forehead. "They kept hitting my head."

"I saw you kill two of them when I was crawling up through that windfall."

It was from that windfall, Barton remembered, that the cow-moose had given that blatting call. He stared at the girl, his eyes fixed on a particular spot at her waist. When he saw the birchbark calling horn at her belt he scowled hard, trying to think. He thought aloud. "Why would a cow moose be calling to her mate when the whole canyon has the smell of Japs?"

"There is no moose," she answered, "and when the Japs find it out they'll be back." She got up and let Barton's head rest against the boulder. Laying the garrison rifle across his lap, she said, "Can you see enough to do some snipeshooting?"

He blinked the ice from his eyes and squinted down toward the open canyon. He saw little black bugs crawling—Japs still hunting for the spoor of that imaginary moose. "If you're taking me down there to those Japs, it's all right with me. But

I'm not starting any gunplay with you around."

"I'll stay under cover," she said, "and so will you when we ambush them." She helped Dave to his feet. "Can you walk?"

"With my arm over your shoulder. But where are we going?"

"Just to those needle rocks yonder, where my brother's hiding."

"Your—what! I thought your brother was laid up in bed!"

"We had the sledge and dogs until the last mile. From there all I had to do was guide the sledge down-river. Rob's still sitting on the sledge, waiting—and ready."

With her shoulder tucked under his arm, she helped him limp through the maze of boulders and snow mounds. "We saw the Japs beating you and kicking you," she said, "but we couldn't sledge any closer without their seeing us. That's when I blew the horn. We knew they'd go off hunting moose. It would give you your chance."

Barton saw the rest of the plan before she told him. Her brother was hiding, holding back his fire until Barton could help him spring the trap. The trap was going to be a simple ambush.

"I'm going to leave you on this side of the streambed right across from Rob's hide-out," she said as she helped him limp to the base of the cliffs. She left him here in a nest of rocks where he could snipe the Japs from one side of the gulch while the sergeant raked them from the other. The ambush was perfect—provided those moose hunters walked into it!

The girl attended to that. It took her some moments to creep through the snow-drifts to her own hiding place. Since they were eagerly scanning every cut and hollow and draw, the Japs might have seen her, but in that confusing starlight and in the mass of river débris and ice chunks her small dark body might easily be mistaken for just another Jap questing for spoor. Even Dave, who had watched tensely, lost sight of her completely.

Once more the birch-bark horn blasted its call, decoying not a bull moose, but men.

Every Jap, facing the granite gate, then ran. There was a long strung-out line of the half-human werewolves scrambling over snow-mantled logs and boulders.

When Sergeant Ashby picked off the first

two who blundered into the comparative darkness of the ambush, the echoing rifle shots did not warn the others. It might have been one of their own garrison rifles. One of their own men, so they believed, had got the first shots at the thing they hunted. The rest came all the faster! There would be moose meat and moose fat, sizzling and luscious, for their first feast in days! They kept coming.

It was not until one of their number sprawled headlong, holding his chest, that they suspected the truth. When another rifle blazed smack in the face of a Jap who had tried to escape into a side draw, they knew they were trapped.

And then it was too late.

\* \* \* \* \*

"HOW many did we curl up?" Barton asked as the girl came toward him.

"We'll count them in the morning," she said, helping him to his feet. "Right now you and Rob need some doctoring—and a good supper."

"The way I counted, I got six, you got one and the sergeant got all the rest except three that crawled up into that draw."

"They didn't crawl very far," Bette Ashby said, her eyes glittering and smart.

She helped Dave across the streambed to that nest of needle rocks at the cliff's base. Sergeant Ashby sat there on his sledge, his rifle across his knees, a grin across his mouth. "Good hunting!"

He took a drink from the flask Bette handed him, then held it up to Barton. But Dave was looking at the scrawny white ghost of a dog crouched behind the mounty against the sledge.

"We didn't use your dog on the gang-line," the mounty said, "but he followed us anyway. Friendly old fellow as three-quarters go."

"He's not a three-quarter," Dave objected hotly. "He's mostly plain, honest-to-God dog!"

Four-F's eye was fixed on him, anxious, wondering. When his one-time master put out his hand the dog ducked to the side as if fearing another blow.

"It's all right, you old duffer! I only want to ruffle your ears. Forget what happened."

Barton turned to Rob Ashby. "Got something I can feed him?"

The mounty did not understand this little undercurrent of tragedy. "We brought grub for all of us," he said. "We'll camp here. In the morning this gale will blow itself out, I expect." He looked up at the blazing stars.

The weary thumping of Dave's heart brought that rhythm again—the tractors and bulldozers which had tortured him for days. But this time it was not in his imagination. He really heard something that thrilled him to the marrow. It was the distant roar of those C-47's in the sky taking freight to Fairbanks.

"We'll signal in the morning to one of those planes," the mounty said. "My sister wants to get home by Saturday. A dance, you know. That's all she's been worried about."

"I'm worried about it too," Dave said. "With this game foot I can't ask her to any dance for a long time."

"I'll wait," she said. "I don't care how long."

The sergeant changed the subject. "I say, you asked for food for the old husky—as a reward of course! He came back and got us, you know. By the way, I thought you said he didn't understand how to take a message."

"I taught him to understand, the hard way."

The mounty had unpacked a strip of jerky, but Barton reached for it. "Let me give it to him." He held the strip toward Four-F but the dog studied it suspiciously with his nose. With his eye he still studied his master. Then suddenly he went down on his forepaws, his hindquarters high up, like a dog inviting another to come and chase him.

He did not take the meat. In his joy, that strip of jerky was of no importance, except perhaps that it reminded him of how his master had given him half his last strip not so long ago!

More important than the meat, was this statement he was trying to make in his dog language "I understand everything!" Four-F was trying to say. "You wanted to play all along. You cuffed my ears and threw me into the snow, and I got you wrong. Sure I'll play! Come on!"

**"Saying That Your Name Is John Smith Is an Error  
That Can Be Rectified"**



# BLACK JOHN INVOKES THE GODS

By **JAMES B. HENDRYX**

*Author of the Halfaday Creek Stories*

I

**O**LD CUSH folded the month-old newspaper and laid it on the back-bar, as Black John Smith crossed the floor and elevated his foot to the battered brass before the bar of Cushing's Fort, the combined trading post and saloon that served the little band of outlawed men that had grown up on Halfaday Creek, close against the Yukon-Alaska border. "It beats hell," he said, "how Siwashes gits pushed around."

"What do you mean—pushed around?" the big man asked, picking up the leather dice box and rolling three aces onto the bar.

Cush picked up the dice, returned them to the box, and shook three treys. "Horse on me," he admitted, and after casting the dice three times and only getting three deuces, put the box on the back bar, and set out a bottle and two glasses. "I'll buy the drinks. Makin' a man beat three deuces in three, would be jest a waste of time."

Black John grinned. "What use are you goin' to put this here time to that we've

saved?" he asked, as he filled his glass and shoved the bottle toward the other.

"Well, hell—a man had ort to save time whenever he kin," Cush said. "Cripes, that's what all these things were invented fer—steamboats, an' railroads, an' the like of that."

"It shore as hell ain't what dice was invented fer," the big man replied. "But what was yer observation anent the mobility of Siwashes referrin' to?"

"If you'd saved all the time you've wasted sayin' big words instead of little ones, you wouldn't be no more'n ten-year-old, right now," Cush replied sourly. "But take it like this here piece in the paper tells about—they are openin' up some reservation fer settlement in Dakoty er Montana, er one of them states, an' movin' the Siwashes to some other reservation further on. How the hell kin they do that? Don't them Siwashes own them reservations, er somethin'?"

"Oh shore, they own 'em. It says so, right in the treaty. This land is theirs to have an' to hold in fee simple till the mind of man runneth not to the contrary, er till water runneth up hill, er till hell freezeth over—er some sech legal wordin'!"

"Well, then how the hell kin they move 'em off'n there?"

"It's accomplished by the simple device of tearin' up the treaty."

"But—take it like this here saloon. I've got a Gov'mint grant fer the land it sets on—an' if anyone come along an' tried to move me off'n it, I'd clout him over the head with a bung starter quicker'n a cat could lick her whiskers."

"But you've got to remember, Cush, damn few Siwashes carries bung starters."

"They've got guns."

"The Government's got more guns. The Siwashes found that out a hell of a while ago. It's a lesson they started learnin' damn near three hundred years ago, when them old Puritans an' Pilgrims come across the ocean to get shet of religious oppression."

"What's that?"

"Well, I never give the matter no more'n what you'd call passin' notice when I read it in the hist'ry books, so there might be some abstruse theological p'int I missed. But as I rec'lect it there was several schools of thought back there in England an' on the continent regardin' the proper road to sal-

vation—one faction holdin' out fer sprinclin', an' another fer dunkin', an' a third fer purgatory, an' a fourth fer instant damnation. All designed primarily to prevent folks from enjoyin' the primrose path to hell. Sech was the fervor of the adherents to these momentous propositions that they backed up their idees with jailin's, beheadin's, burnin's an' torturin's. Well, after standin' about so much of it, these here Pilgrims an' Puritans decided it wasn't no place fer underprivileged minorities, so they sailed across the ocean an' landed there in New England where they could be free to worship God in their own way, accordin' to the dictates of their conscience—an' which they done by shootin' all the Siwashes they seen, stealin' their land, an' buildin' churches on it in which to praise God for their deliverance."

"Was these folks s'posed to be Christians?"

"Hell—yes!"

"Huh."

"Yeah—that's the way I figger it. An' ever sence them days the Siwashes has be'n gittin' either killed off, er shoved on as the Government deemed it needed their land."

"Kinda seems like it ain't right, somehow. But hell, John, you got to remember them Siwashes had a hell of a lot more land than they could ever use."

**B**LACK JOHN grinned. "Yeah, that's the theory the Government goes on. But it's a damn good thing fer some folks that the theory applies only Siwashes."

A shadow darkened the doorway, and a man stepped into the room, ranged himself beside Black John at the bar, and swung a heavy pack-sack to the floor. "Is this here Cushing's Fort on Halfaday Crick?" he asked.

"That's right," Cush admitted, sliding a glass across the bar. "Fill up. The house is buyin' one."

The stranger filled his glass, and as he returned the bottle to the bar, his eyes swept the room. "I'm glad I got here," he said. "It's a hell of a ways, ain't it?"

"Well, that's accordin' to where a man started from," Black John replied.

"I come from Link Crick."

"Never heard of it."

"Lot's of folks ain't, I guess. But it's



there, all right. Old man Mason named it on account, when he first prospected it, he seen a link there. My name's John Smith. I got—"

"You've got to think up a better name than that—er at least a different one," the big man interrupted.

"What d'you mean?"

"Meanin' that the one you mentioned has become hackneyed hereabouts. Every damn miscreant that hits the crick claims his name is John Smith. It was all right till there got to be too damn many of us fer the parts we've got. Then me an' Cush invented the name can."

The man's brow drew into a puzzled frown. "What do you mean—fer the parts you've got? An' what the hell's a name can?"

"Well, a man ain't got only so many distinguishin' characteristics—like bein' one-armed, or pot-gutted, er long-nosed, er one-eyed, er long, er short, or red-headed, er black-whiskered. So when we'd used up all them idiosyncrasies we hauled out an old hist'ry book that Cush had, an' scrambled us up a batch of synthetic names which we placed in that there molasses can on the end of the bar. So now when someone comes along an' taxes our credulity with the name, John Smith, we invite him to draw another one out of the can—the name he draws becomin' his own personal property until sech time as we retrieve it from the corpse, an' toss it back in the can fer the next lucky pseudo argonot."

"Wow!" exclaimed the man. "I don't know what half them words mean but—"

"Neither does John," Cush interrupted.

"He jest says 'em."

"But," continued the stranger, "I figger you mean that you don't want no more John Smiths on the crick. It took me quite a while to figger out that name—but I guess it ain't no use. So I'll draw me some other one." Reaching into the can, the man withdrew a slip and held it to the light. "Stonewall Grant," he pronounced. "Okay—then I'm him."

"It's got a good solid sound to it," the big man observed. "An' now, Stonewall, as a matter of introduction, I'll tell you that I'm known hereabouts as Black John Smith, an' the party behind the bar is Lyme Cushing, better known as Cush."

The man raised his glass. "Here's how," he said. When the empty glasses had been returned to the bar, he motioned toward the bottle. "Fill up, boys. I'm buyin' one. I've heard about you fellas up here—an' how the police don't dast to show up on the crick. That's why I come."

"Quite a few others has wafted themselves hither, as a poet would say, on the same misinformation. But most of 'em didn't have no luck at it."

"Talkin' about luck," Stonewall said, "it seems like there ain't no jestice. Accordin' to what the Good Book claims, all men is born free an' equal. An' if that's the case, it looks like everyone ort to have the same amount of luck. But that ain't the way it works out." He paused and eyed the others for an expression of corroboration.

"There's ondoubtless certain factors that enters into a man's cosmos, other than the accident of birth," Black John opined, "an' sech factors might have a bearin' on his luck."

"Yeah," the man agreed, a bit vaguely. "That's prob'ly the way of it. But take me, now. I ain't never worked in no factory, but neither I ain't never had no luck. It runs clean back to my gran'pa."

"Sort of a family trait, eh?"

"Yeah, an' my pa was jest like him. Gran'pa, he went out to Californy in forty-nine. He wouldn't fool around no cricks—claimed the gold was in the mountains, an' if a man found the mother lode, he'd be rich. So he stuck to the rocks, an' pecked an' blasted at 'em fer goin' on thirty year."

"Did he find the mother lode?" Cush asked.

"No. That's what I'm tellin' you—he didn't have no luck. So then pa, he moved over to Montany, an' done the same way fer twenty year more. But he didn't have none, neither. An' when I heard tell of this here Klondike, I come up here last year, an' I be'n workin' a rock claim up on the head of a crick I named Rock Crick, on account they was rocks there."

"Sort of carryin' on the family tradition, eh?"

"No, I didn't fetch nothin' along but jest what I needed. But I rec'lected what gran'pa says to pa the night he died. 'Don't be a damn fool an' rut around in the sand an' gravel like a hog,' he says. 'Stick to the

PRO-

rocks, like I done.' An' when I started fer here, pa, he tells me about the same thing. 'To hell with the cricks,' he says. 'Go after the gold in the rocks—right where she starts! So that's what I done.'

"Make good at it?" Black John asked, with a glance toward the pack-sack at the man's feet.

"No. That's what I be'n tellin' you. I ain't had no luck. The gold's there—right in them rocks on my claim—but I ain't got to it yet. I would of be'n into it 'fore snow flies, if it hadn't be'n for old man Mason."

"Thought you said Mason was on Lynx Crick—an' that you come from there? Now you claim it's Rock Crick."

"Yeah, Rock Crick runs into Link Crick—jest a kind of a feeder."

"An' old man Mason run you off?"

"No. He got murdered. Yup, he got shot, an' his cache got robbed of seventeen hundred ounces. An' the hell of it is, I was claimed to have be'n saw right clost to his cabin the day before they found his corpse. An' on top of that it was further claimed that a couple of shots was heard up there that day."

"An' I s'pose you wasn't even on this Lynx Crick, that day, eh?"

"Oh, shore. I was on the crick, all right."

"Anywheres near Mason's cabin?"

"Yeah, pretty clost to there. But they lied like hell when they claimed I fired two shots. It was only one."

"Got him the first time, eh?"

"No, I missed him. An' that was some more bad luck. He was standin' there on the back of the crick lookin' around kinda oneasy like—like he heard somethin' an' was tryin' to locate it. I draw'd down on him an' bein' as I wasn't no more'n thirty yard away, standin' behind a spruce, I figgered on ketchin' him right behind the ear. It was as pretty a shot as a man would want. But, by God, I missed. An' before I could throw another shell in my gun he was gone."

"How come he was murdered, then—if you missed him?"

"Who?"

"Why, old man Mason, of course!"

"Cripes, I never shot at Mason! It was a moose! He jest happened to be in there clost to Mason's cabin. But what with that fella seein' me up there that day with my rifle, an' him bein' a friend of old man Mason's, an' the rest of 'em on the crick

not likin' me on account I kinda looked down on 'em fer wallerin' around in the mud an' gravel, instead of workin' in rock, I figgered I wouldn't git no break when the police got there. So I skipped out."

"Ondoubtless a wise precaution," Black John observed dryly. "An' now you've got here, what do you aim to do?"

"Why—damn if I know. I ain't figgered that fer ahead. What do you folks do?"

"We work. Cush here, he runs the saloon, an' tradin' post, an' the rest of us works our claims. Nights an' holidays, we sort of foregather here fer a little recreation—sort of a surcease from our long hours of toil. We play stud, er poker, h'ist a few drinks, an' indulge in an occasional hangin'."

"Hangin'? What do you mean—hangin'?"

"It's a term we've got fer jerkin' a man with a rope, one end of which has be'n throwed over a limb, er a rafter, accordin' to the weather."

"But—what do you hang 'em fer?"

"Murder, larceny, claim-jumpin'—most any kind of skullduggery will do. We keep Halfaday moral."

"Sounds like you boys is kinda rough, up here. But it's okay by me. I don't aim to pull off nothin'. Nor neither I don't aim to rut around in no gravel. Ain't there no hard-rock minin' along the crick?"

"No, we're all placer men. But there's an onlimited supply of assorted rocks in the contiguous mountains. There ain't no reason a man couldn't blast into 'em, if he was so minded."

THE other turned to Cush. "You got powder?" he asked.

"Yeah, there's a few cases of giant in the storeroom—fuse an' caps, too."

"Okay, I'll hunt around an' locate me a claim. I seen an empty cabin, four five mile down the crick. Could a man move in there?"

Black John nodded. "He could. But he'd be sort of wavin' a red rag in the face of the devil. That's Olson's old cabin, an' it's deemed to be onlucky."

"By cripes, I don't want nothin' to do with it, then!" the man exclaimed. "My luck's runnin' porely enough as it is. Ain't they no other shack? One that sets mebber a little further back from the crick, so every-one that comes along can't see it."

"Was you expectin' someone would be follerin' you?"

"Well, old man Mason had a lot of friends. A man can't never tell—a lot of 'em figger I done it."

"There's One Eyed John's cabin. It's only a little ways down. You can move in there. He ain't needed it sense we hung him a while back."

"What did you hang him fer?"

"Oh, damn if I rec'lect now. Somethin' he done—like spittin' on the floor, er pickin' his nose, er blowin' in his saucer, er some sim'lar atrocity. It don't make no difference. He's dead. Come on, I'll show you where it's at." Reaching down, Black John raised the man's pack-sack from the floor, but before he could start out with it, the man jerked it out of his hand.

"I'll tote that!" he exclaimed, and followed the big man out the door.

When Black John reentered the saloon a few minutes later, old Cush thrust a pencil behind his ear and glanced down at a slip of paper on the bar. "Seventeen hundred ounces figgers a hundred an' six an' a quarter pounds. How does that check up?"

"What?"

"Don't 'what' me! I know why you h'isted that pack-sack! How does she check?"

The big man grinned. "It won't miss a hundred pounds v'ry far. Cush, I fear you have a suspicious nature."

"Well who the hell wouldn't have—the kind of pilgrims that trickles in on us?"

"So, you figure Stonewall's guilty of knockin' old man Mason off, eh?"

"Oh, hell, no! He couldn't be," Cush replied, with ponderous sarcasm. "If it wasn't him done it, how the hell would he know jest how many ounces was in Mason's cache? Besides bein' saw up there on the day of the murder. An' on top of that, fetchin' the dust along with him. Besides bein' a damn cache-robbin' murderer, he's dumb as hell. Did you leave One Eye's cache so he kind find it—jest in case we might want to locate them ounces, if any-thing should happen to this here Stonewall?"

## II

**T**HE following morning the man shouldered a light pack and struck out into the hills with the avowed intention of pros-

pecting for a vein of quartz. A few hours later another man stepped into the saloon, interrupting a game of cribbage between Cush and Black John. He was an unprepossessing looking man, with humped shoulders, and long, ape-like arms. "This here's Cushing's Fort, ain't it?" he demanded, pausing behind Cush's chair.

Black John nodded, and pegged his hand. Cush scanned the cards. "Hey, git back there!" he cried. "You pegged two holes too many. Six, seven, eight, an' two deuces is eleven—not thirteen, like you pegged up."

The big man glanced at the cards with a grin. "Guess yer right, at that," he admitted. "It takes two aces with a six, seven, an' eight to make thirteen. My mistake."

"Hub. Beats hell them mistakes of yourn is allus in yore favor."

The newcomer butted in. "The hell with that game! Which one of you birds is runnin' this dump? I run outa licker a week back, an' I ain't had a drink sence!"

Black John grinned. "The enforced abstinence was ondoubtless a boon to yer guts," he said, shuffling the cards. "An' a couple more minutes won't hurt you none. I can deal out from here. An' then we'll all have a little snort. I ain't had a drink in quite a while, myself." A few moments later he pegged out, and glanced across at Cush. "I beat you twelve p'int," he said. "That'll cost you a dollar-twenty, besides the drinks."

"Snort—hell!" the stranger exclaimed. "I figger on havin' a lot of snorts. I've had a long dry spell."

"Okay," the big man agreed. "Jest slip off yer pack an' pull up a chair an' Cush'll fetch the bottle an' glasses over here. If we're in fer a prolonged orgy, we might's well be comfortable."

**T**HE man swung his pack to the floor and seated himself. When the glasses were filled, Cush ignored the well-filled sack the man tossed onto the table. "This un's on the house," he said. "Drink hearty."

The stranger picked up his glass. "Here's lookin' at you. My name's Smith—er—John Smith."

The big man nodded. "We can rectify that error later," he said, with a glance at the name can. "This here's Cush, an' I'm

more or less widely known as Black John."

The man nodded. "Yeah, I've heard tell about you fellas, up here. That's why I come. Never figgered I'd be throwin' with a bunch of outlaws. But by God, here I be!"

He downed his liquor, and refilled his glass. "Drink up, an' have one on me. It jest goes to show a man can't never tell what's goin' to happen to him."

Black John nodded. "Brother," he said, "you've spoke a true word."

"Yeah, a fortune teller told me one time down to Frisco about how I was goin' on a long journey an' have bad luck. I was kinda drunk, an' didn't give no heed to her, 'cause how the hell could a woman look in a glass ball an' tell what was goin' to happen to someone she never even seen before? An' besides, I never figgered on takin' no long trip.

A little while after I heard about this here Klondike so I come up here.

"An' one night down to Dawson me an' another guy got a little soused an' went an' had our fortune told by some woman name of Mrs. Lowe, an' she told me about another trip I was goin' to take, except she claimed I'd have good luck. She done it by lookin' at some tea leaves in the bottom of of a cup. Well—there it was again—another trip.

"Then I heard tell about a guy name of Swami, which everyone claimed he was the real thing. So I went an' had me a seance. An' by God—up pops that trip again! I ask him if there was good luck er bad luck at the end of it. But he claimed he couldn't tell right then, on account his asteerial waves had got crossed up, er somethin', an' I'd have to come back next day. But I seen through his game, all right. These here wimmin only charged a dollar a throw. But this here Swami, he soaked me five bucks—an' him tellin' me about these here waves gittin' crossed was jest a come-on game, to git me back there with another five."

The man paused, downed his drink, and refilled his glass. "You keep count of 'em," he said to Cush, "an' take it outa there," he pointed to the sack on the table. "I'll prob'ly h'ist four, five, to you boys one, on account I ain't had no lickin' fer a week—got to kinda ketch up."

Cush nodded. "I'm countin' 'em," he

said, "peggin' every drink right here on the cribbage board. What was it you done that you figgered you had to skip to Halfaday?"

THE liquor was beginning to take hold, and the man blinked owlishly. "I never done nothin'. That's the hell of it. I never done a damn thing. That's why I come away." He poured two more drinks and downed them, filling the glass to the brim. "Thash what I shay—a man can't never tell whash goin' to happen to him." He turned to the big man. "Ain't that sho, Bill?"

"John is the name."

"Oh, sure. S'all the shame—John, er Bill, er Pete. Shome fellas ish name Henry, too."

"But," persisted Cush, "if you didn't do nothin', why did you come away from where you was at?"

The man downed another drink and pondered the question. "Shome one done it," he announced. "Yup—shomeone on the crick murdered the ol' man an' robbed his cache—sheventeen hundred ounces. My claim wash nex' to his, an' a lot of the boysh on the crick figgers I done it. Fella told me they goin' to call a miners' meetin' an' string me up—so I come away. I ain't no damn fool. I ain't goin' to stay aroun' an' git hung."

Black John leaned back in his chair, folded his arms across his chest, and rolled his eyes upward till only the whites showed. Then his voice boomed out in sepulchral tones. "I see a crick—ah yes—Lynx Crick is the name. A man is murdered. He is shot. And his cache is robbed. Seventeen hundred ounces in dust is stolen. The man's name is—it is—ah—yes—it is old man Mason."

"Hey there! What the hell! Who the hell be you? How'd you know about what crick it was on? An' how'd you know his name was old man Mason?"

Black John stirred, and met the other's wide-eyed stare, blinking in a bewildered manner. He passed a hand across his eyes as though to rid them of some obstruction. "Did I speak?" he asked. "It is nothing. I—I must have dropped into a trance."

"Yeah—that's jest what the Swami done! Cripes sake—be you a Swami?"

"Ah, yes, my friend. I have attained Yoga—the union of the individual with the divinc. I can peer into the future, and I

have knowledge of the dim an' distant past."

The man downed another drink. "By God, I'm lucky. When I come through Dawson I figgered on stoppin' in an' seein' if the Swani could tell me who done it—but he ain' there no more. Kin you fin' out who done it? I'll give you five bucks."

"Ah, yes, my friend. Old man Mason is in Nirvana. I shall have my control contact him there. He will tell all."

"But—s'pose he'd lie, an' claim I done it? He don' like me on account of them ten ounces."

"The spirits of the departed never lie to the earth-bound."

"Well, git hold of him, then, an' see what he says. But he's a damn liar if he claims I done it."

Black John frowned. "Not so fast, my friend. The spirits abhor onseemly haste. Besides that, my control is a beautiful princess that's be'n dead four billion years—an' she don't git around as lively as she used to. On top of which old man Mason is a newcomer in Nirvana an' there wouldn't many folks know him. An' bein' as everyone that's ever died is there, my control might have to do considerable inquiren' around before she located him. But Bessie'll find him."

"Whosh Beshie?"

"My control—Bessie Abdul Ameer. The Abduls didn't like it when she married up with an Ameer, but they made the best of it, an' when he died, couple of billion years later, Bessie never married again. She was lookin' around fer somethin' to do, an' that's when I got holt of her an' broke her in fer a control. She's doin' all right, too—now she's got the hang of it. Like I said—she'll git holt of Mason, an' then we'll know who knocked him off. We'll pull off a seance, an' he'll either tell us, er write it on a slate."

"Ain't you got no idee who done it?" Cush asked, pegging up another drink against the man.

"Sure. It musta be'n shome guy name Quintel. Usta be a shailor, er shumsin'. Ain' be'n on the crick very long. Which he had a three-corner scar missin' over his right eye."

"I don't quite git you—about this here scar," Black John said.

"Yeah. Three-corner one—like a triangle, if it was upshide down. I sheen thish guy

up by ol' man Mashon's place the day they claim he wash murdered."

"Then you was up there that day, too?"

"Sure I wash. Er elsh how come I sheen thish guy up there with hish rifle? An' on top of thish scar, Quintel don't be'n tattooed wish a nekid lady on hish forearm above the elbow. An' beshides which, a man can't be saw no place he wasn't there."

"Listen," said Black John. "Let's git this straight. In the first place, a man's forearm ain't above his elbow. It's below it."

"Yeah, them tattooers ish l'ible to make a mishtake. Anyway Quintel might of be'n drunk when he got it done."

"But you said 'he don't be'n tattooed with a naked lady.' What do you mean by that?"

"Why—jes' like you claimed—he couldn't be, if that ain' where hish elbow's at." The man downed another drink. "Shometimes when I git li'l tight, my head gits in kinda confusal, sho what I talk 'bout ain't that, but it might be someshin' elsh, er mebbe it mightn't, too."

"Yer shore it wasn't you that knocked him off? You mentioned somethin' about ten ounces."

"Yeah, I sheen Mashon down to Briggs's shack 'bout a week before, an' I tried to collect ten ounces he win off'n me on a bet, but he wouldn't pay me, sho I hit him couple licks, an' when I come to, he wash gone. I claimed I'd shoot him, an' shome fellas wash there an' heard me—but I never."

"But you admit bein' up to his shack the day he was murdered?"

"Sure. I went up 'bout them ounces. But if he wash dead, how the hell could I pay him? Anyhow, they claimed I done it, sho I shkipped out."

"Well, now yer here, where do you figger on stayin'?"

"Oh, I got a tent. I'll camp shomewheres' clost, sho I kin git a drink when I need one."

**T**HE big man pointed to the pack-sack at the man's feet. "If you've got any dust in there, you better deposit it in Cush's safe. Tent campin', that way, someone might sneak up an' rob you, an' we don't want no crime on Halfaday. Cush'll weigh it in fer you an' give you a receipt."

"Good idee," the man agreed. "Packs kinda heavy, an' I don' wan' loshe my dust."

Cush carried the sack to the bar, and returned a few minutes later to lay a slip of paper on the table. "There was jest seventeen hundred an' four ounces," he announced, eyeing the man frostily.

"An' that's jest about what was s'posed to have be'n lifted out of old man Mason's cache," Black John said.

"Shash right, ain't it?" the man said, pocketing the slip. "Looksh like me an' ol' man Mashon done 'bout the shame, don't it? But hey—I owe him ten ounces! Take ten ounces outa there an' gimme credik fer 'em. Damn him—I'll show him he can't beat me outa no ten ounces!"

The man leaned over the table, buried his face in his folded arms, and promptly went to sleep.

Black John followed Cush to the bar. "It looks," he grinned, "like things is gittin' a bit complicated."

Cush scowled. "Of all the damn screw-balls I ever seen—he takes the cake! Why—the on'ery coon—comin' up here with them seventeen hundred ounces, an' claimin' he never done it!"

Black John grinned. "But how about Stonewall Grant?"

"Hell, we was wrong about him! Couldn't only one of 'em kilt Mason—an' this one's got the dust."

"How about that hundred-pound pack Stonewall had?"

"By cripes—I'd fergot about that!"

"An' it might be," Black John continued, "that both these birds is packin' their own dust."

"Huh—did you ever hear of three men havin' seventeen hundred ounces? That there's an odd number to have. T'ain't reasonable."

### III

**T**HE man woke up later in the day, paddled up the creek, and pitched his tent on a flat a few bends above the Fort.

Several days later another stranger showed up on the creek. One Armed John reported that a newcomer had moved into Olson's old shack. And that same afternoon the man strode into the saloon where Cush and Black John were shaking dice for the drinks. Both noted that a triangular scar showed above his right eye, and as he rested his bared fore-arms on the bar, both pairs of eyes focused

on the nude figure tattooed upon the bronzed skin.

"Hello, mates!" he greeted. "Well, I got here, an' a long pull it was. Damned if I ever thought I'd be shippin' on a craft I could pick up an' carry!"

Cush slid a glass toward him. "Fill up," he invited. "The house is buyin' one."

When the bottle had passed, the man raised his glass. "Down the hatch, my hearties! My name's John Smith. I—"

"Jest a minute," Black John interrupted. "Let's revise that moniker before it becomes habitual. There's twenty-five, thirty John Smiths on the crick a'ready. Reach in the name can there an' draw out a slip. The name on it will serve as a stop-gap whilst you're amongst us."

The man grinned. "Pretty smart, at that," he admitted. "Come to think of it, John Smith is a kind of common name, ain't it? Well, here goes." Reaching into the can he drew out a slip. "Jubal Hancock, it says."

The big man nodded. "Okay, Jube. That there's Cush, an' I'm John Smith—sometimes referred to as Black John."

"Yeah, I heard about you-all, up here on Halfaday where the damn police don't dast to show up. That's why I come. Found a cabin down the crick a piece that didn't look like it was used, so I moved in. It's all right, ain't it?"

"That's Olson's old shack," Cush replied. "It's claimed to be unlucky."

"To hell with that. Long's the deck's all right, an' the bulkheads is solid it'd be good enough fer me. My luck's runnin' good—never seen a damn police all the way up here." He tossed a sack onto the bar. "Have one on me," he invited. "There's plenty more where that come from. Yes, sir—seventeen hundred ounces—all stowed away in as nice a little locker as a man would want. Found it right in the rocks where no one would ever think it would be. Nice flat rock layin' there—fits snug as a hatch cover."

"Hum," Black John said, with a glance at Cush. "Seventeen hundred ounces. Kind of an odd amount, ain't it? An' amount that represents a good many days of honest toil, eh?"

"Yeah, you bet. I worked like hell fer that gold."

"Sluice it out? Er pan it?"



"How?"

"I asked did you pan it, er sluice it out of a dump?"

"Oh, both ways. It don't make no difference to me. Sometimes one way, an' sometimes another. Jest so I git it, that's all I care."

"Looks like you had a pretty good thing where you was," the big man said. "It's funny you'd come away."

"Well, I kinda had to. It's like this—an old cuss gits shot, an' his dust stole. Some fellas claimed they seen me up near this man's diggin's that day, an' bein' as I'm a newcomer on the crick, they figger I done it."

"Newcomer, eh? How long was you on the crick?"

"Who, me? Oh, 'bout a month."

"Looks like you done pretty good—takin' out seventeen hundred ounces in a month," Cush observed.

"Oh, I had a good claim. But if a man figgers he's goin' to git hung, by God he'll pull his freight no matter how good a thing he's got. Ain't that so, mate?" The man appealed to Black John who, instead of answering, stood leaning against the bar with his eyes rolled upward.

FROM the depths of the black beard his voice came in a deep sepulchral tone. "I see a crick. The name is—ah yes—it is—Lynx Crick. An old man lies dead in his shack. His name is—it is—ah, names are hard to get—the names of people. He was an old man—my control is laboring to tell me his name. Sometimes she cannot get the name. Ah, yes—it is—Mason—old man Mason. And in his cache was seventeen hundred ounces of dust—"

"Hey—what the hell comes off here?" cried the man, staring wide-eyed at the speaker. "Snap out of it! You talk like a damn Swami—an' by God, you look like one, too! Except you ain't no nigger."

The big man's eyes slowly returned to a normal position and took on a faraway expression. "My astral body has visited a far place—Nirvana, where I talked with Krishna, an' with Siva, the destroyer."

"By God, you be a Swami! I've had seances—in Calcutta, an' Bombay, an' Madras. That's jest the way they talk!"

"Ah, yes—we live in the time of Kali

Yuga, the last an' the darkest of the four ages of the world."

"The hell with that! Listen, Swami—kin you tell the name of the one that done it?"

Slowly Black John's eyes met the other's gaze. "The one that done it?" he asked.

"The one that done what?"

"Why the one that knocked off old man Mason! Kin you tell who done it?"

Black John shook his head. "No, not now. The one that done it is still among the earth-bound. His astral body has not yet be'n wafted to Nirvana. All things reveal themselves in time—but the time is not yet."

"When kin you tell?"

"Ah—who knows? There is no limit to space, nor is there an end to time. Time enters not into the cosmos of the disassociated spirit dwellers in Nirvana—one minute—or a billion years—what matters it?"

"Then you can't tell, eh?"

"No. 'Tis a secret that lies with the gods—with the gods, and with Yama, the judge of the dead. It may be that at some future time, at a regular seance, the gods will name the man—but it is not likely.

"An' mebbe you can't never tell, eh?"

"Maybe not. The all-wise gods reveal only what they will."

The man seemed vastly relieved. "I'll buy a drink," he said, shoving his sack toward Cush. "It's too damn bad you couldn't find out who done it. Then I could go back to my claim." Sweat had gathered on the man's brow, and he wiped it on his sleeve. "Kind of hot in here," he said. "Well, drink up, mates. I'll be gettin' back. Seen a one-armed man down the crick. He claimed you run a stud game, up here."

"Oh, shore," Black John said. "Some of the boys is in most every night."

"Guess I'll have to come up an' try my luck tonight. Got to go back an' fetch up more dust than what I've got on me. This one little sack wouldn't last no time in a stud game, if my luck run bad."

When the man had gone Cush eyed Black John across the bar. "Damned if I ever seen the beat!" he exclaimed. "Some old cuss gits murdered, an' every damn man on that crick comes pilin' in on us, one by one, an' every damn one of 'em guiltyer'n the ones that's already got here—an' the hell of it is, every damn one of 'em's got the dust!"

The big man grinned. "It don't make sense."

"Shore it don't make sense! But that's the way it is. At that," he added, with a scowl, "it makes jest as much sense as you wallin' yer eyes back an' claimin' yer a Swami. This ain't no time to be pullin' off no jokes—what with every damn murderer on a crick pilin' in on us!"

"There ain't only one of 'em that's a murderer."

"Yeah, but how the hell do we know which one it is? They all talk guilty, an' act guilty—claimin' their name is John Smith, like every other damn crook—an' then every one of 'em havin' the dust to prove it. We don't want no one on the crick which he would sneak in an' shoot an old man an' rob his cache."

"Yeah, it would seem an undesirable symptom fer a reg'lar residerter," Black John admitted. "As you p'inted out, the situation seems more or less muddled. That's why I figgered on layin' the matter in the laps of the gods—of Siva, the destroyer, an' Vishnu, the sun god, an' Brahma, the creator."

"Listen—don't try to pull none of that damn fool stuff on me!" That there Swami wasn't nothin' but a damn fake—an' you know it!"

**T**HE big man shook his head in resignation. "To you benighted earth-bound souls will never be revealed the mysteries that are vouchsafed to those of us who have attained Yoga, the union of the individual with the divine—the occult knowledge of the past and of the future, as imparted to us by Ramachandra, the seventh incarnation of Vishnu, an' to me personally by my control, the beautiful Bessie Abdul Ameer. I have be'n reincarnated after wandering in happiness for a billion years through the aspodal fields with Bessie."

"I'd ort to wham you right between the eyes with a bung starter! You never was nothin' but John Smith—er whatever yer name usta be—an' you ain't nothin' but him now! An' all this about Bessie Veneer, an' all the mother heathen gods ain't nothin' but a lot of crap."

Black John raised an arm and pointed toward the door. "Ah, my friend—look yonder—lo, here cometh Downey, the avenger!"

The young officer strode into the room and crossed to the bar. "What—no dice box! Seems like you fellas are kind of shirkin' yer work, ain't you?"

Cush scowled as he spun a glass across the bar. "No. John's jest be'n actin' the damn fool—claimin' like he's one of these here Swamis."

"What's on yer mind?" the big man asked, when the glasses were filled.

"A murder on a crick way up the Klondike. An old man got knocked off, an' his cache robbed. Three men skipped out—any one of 'em might have done it."

Again the big man's eyes rolled upward, and against the sepulchral tones reverberated through the room. "Ah—Lynx Creek, eh? And the name of the murdered man is Mason—and seventeen hundred ounces were taken from his cache."

Downey grinned. "So one of 'em be'n up here, eh?"

"One of 'em—hell! They're all here."

"Have you figured out which one's guilty?"

"I haven't even tried."

Old Cush peered over the top of his steel framed spectacles. "The first one that come, we figgered he was guilty, an' then the next one come, an' he was guiltier the other one, an' by God this here last one is guilty as both them others put together."

Downey laughed. "Which one's got the dust?"

"They've all got it!"

"You mean—they're together?"

"No. They don't none of 'em know the other ones is here. But each one of 'em's got them seventeen hundred ounces. John, there, he got a heft at the first one's pack 'fore he snatched it away, an' she'll go right around a hundred pound, which don't miss seventeen hundred ounces very far, one way er another. The next one cached his dust in the safe. I weighed it in—seventeen hundred an' four ounces. An' the third one bragged of havin' seventeen hundred ounces cached in the rocks."

"That's right," Black John agreed. "Any one of the three could be guilty. Did you go up on this here Lynx Crick an' investigate?"

Downey nodded. "Yes, I went up there, but I haven't got a damn thing to go on. Mason was shot through the heart in front

of his empty cache an' the bullet went on through his body. He was prob'ly shot with a rifle—but everyone on the crick's got a rifle.

"All I found out is that he'd made his brag a couple of days before he was shot that he had seventeen hundred ounces in his cache—an' a couple of days after he was shot, three different men had disappeared off the crick. I swung up this way on the chance that at least one of 'em had hit for here. But if each one of 'em's got seventeen hundred ounces of dust, I don't know how the hell I'm ever goin' to find out which one is guilty."

"Hum—you ain't got nothin' to go on, eh? Not a damn thing, Downey?"

"Nope—not a damn thing. Old man Mason laid there right in front of a rock crack in the rimwall that was undoubtedly his cache. The bullet that got him went on through an' no chance of findin' it, an' I couldn't find any empty shell, neither. Unless I get a break of some kind it looks like here's one murderer that's goin' scot free."

"If I was you I'd haul in both of them three pilgrims an' hang every damn one of 'em," Cush said. "Then you'd be shore of gittin' the right one. We kin shore as hell git along without 'em on Halfaday."

Black John grinned. "There's considerable merit in the suggestion. But you've got to remember, Cush, that it's the onalienable right of every citizen to be hung fer the murder he committed—an' no other. Manifestly, only one of these three men is guilty of this particular crime, an' handicapped as Downey is by the fact that the law demands evidence, it looks to me like we'll have to invoke the supernatural."

"Some day," Cush interrupted sourly, "yer goin' to git tangled up in them big words an' hang yerself."

"As I was goin' on to say, before our friend here with the single track an' narrow gauge mind butted in, the only course open to us is to get in touch with old man Mason an' ask him right out who done it."

"What the hell are you talkin' about?" Downey asked. "Mason's dead."

"We'll arrange a seance. I'll have my control contact the old man in Nirvana an' tell him to give us the low-down on who shot him. To those of us who have attained

Yoga, the problem presents no difficulties whatever."

The officer grinned. "I'd look pretty, wouldn't I, haulin' a prisoner up in court without nothin' agin him except what was told to us by a dead man!"

"The evidence might appear a trifle inadequate," the big man admitted. "But in the course of the proceedin's other evidence might turn up, that would convince even a judge an' a jury. Anyways, unless you've got a better idee, I'm fer pullin' off a seance—I've wanted to try out them gadgets I fell heir to when the Swami attained complete freedom from all physical laws there in front of Cush's bar."

Downey shrugged. "I'm stumped. I suppose you might as well go ahead with it. But I'm warnin' you that I ain't making any arrests without concrete an' convincin' evidence to back up my charge."

"It is my hope to secure a confession. I assume that even the law will regard that as evidence."

Old Cush heaved a sigh of resignation and shoved the bottle toward Downey. "Might's well have another drink," he said. "Onct John gits an idee in his head, he'll go through with it spite of hell an' high water. But I never figgered he'd be damn fool enough to take up with the pranks of a rag-headed nigger, which he wasn't nothin' but a damn fake, to boot. An' what's more," he added, turning to Black John, "you ain't goin' to pull off no long-winded seance in this saloon tonight! The boys comes here to drink an' play stud."

"The seance," Black John interrupted in a voice of bored tolerance, "will be held in my cabin. Do you think for a moment that I would insult the gods, or even the most humble dweller in Nirvana, by summoning them to a saloon? Why, my good man, it's unthinkable! And my control, the beautiful and wonderous princess Bessie Abdul Ameer—imagine her chagrin an' mortification when her spirit found itself amid the surroundings of a common barroom! Suppose, fer instance, she'd step up to the bar here an' order a snort of nepenthe, an' you'd shove the whiskey bottle at her!"

"Huh," Cush grunted, "if she's as smart as what you claim she'd know damn well a saloon way out on a crick like this wouldn't be servin' no mixed drinks. An' besides,

don't try to pull off none of this here Swami stuff on me. Cripes, the kind of wimmin you've throw'd in with, now an' agin on Halfaday—an' the kind I've saw you trottin' around with in Dawson—any one of 'em would think this here saloon was a church—the places *they* hang out at!"

Black John grinned broadly. "But you've got to remember, Cush, there ain't none of them characters has attained Yoga. Their individual egos ain't yet merged with the divine."

"I'll say they ain't," Cush retorted. "What I've saw of their carryin's-on, if any one of 'em could git to hell when they died they'd be lucky."

"I fear, Cush, that your concept of the hereafter is rather hazy. At some future time I shall undertake to explain certain principles of theism, and deism—"

"I got rheumatism. An' by God, that's bad enough already."

"Time fleeteth," as a poet would say. I have work to do. I will depart hence. Our three suspects will ondoubtless show up here anon. Downey better slip over to my shack an' lay low. They might pull out on us, if they seen him here. An', Cush, you let One Armed John tend bar fer a while this evenin'. You're in on the seance, too. It will teach you not to scoff at matters beyond the ken of your minuscule intellect. When darkness falls you bring Stonewall Grant, an' Jube Hancock, an' our drunken friend to my cabin. Their fate is in the lap of the gods. The wind riseth. I must be on my way."

"What's the wind got to do with it?" Cush asked sourly.

"Always, my friend, the wind whistleth weirdly among the far-flung stars of the illimitable astral void. Adieu."

#### IV

**M**AKING his way swiftly down the creek by the footpath, Black John visited the obviously convenient cache at Olson's old shack. Returning up the creek, he picked up Red John, by far the most intelligent of the residents of Halfaday, and as they proceeded to his own cabin the big man explained the set-up. Red John enthusiastically fell in with the plan, and they reached the cabin to find Corporal Downey waiting.

"First off, we'll take the stove down an'

get it out of here," Black John said. "We need the hole in the roof where the stove-pipe goes out, an' we need the room. This shack ain't none too big when you figger there'll be six of us in here—the three suspects, an' Cush, an' Downey, an' me."

"How about Red John?" Downey asked. "He makes seven."

"Red John ain't goin' to be inside. He'll be on the roof. He's Vishnu, er Siva, er Brahma, or Santa Claus—er whichever one of them old gods manipulates the manifestations that prove to the earthbound, like our three suspects, an' to the hidebound, like Cush, that there ain't no hocus-pocus to this here seance."

When the stove and pipe had been removed, Black John groped under his bunk and drew forth a trumpet, a dinner bell, and a violin, together with a tiny blue lamp, an' incense pot, a turban, a long blue robe, several blue pillows, and a dark blue tapestry which he draped over his bunk. "I'll lay there on the bunk, rared back on them pillows, an' through my control, I'll summon the spirit of old man Mason from its abode in Nirvana. We'll seat the three suspects on the bench in the middle of the floor, right under the hole in the roof, an' Downey an' Cush'll sit on the spare bunk, there. It's clouded up so it's goin' to be dark as hell, an' they can't see no stars through the stovepipe hole. We'll rig a couple of empty bottles on the roof, right at the edge of the hole, so the wind will blow in their necks an' make a weird whistlin' sound, an' Red John'll lay there an' work the manifestations, as called fer. He'll give a poop on the horn, an' then drop it through the hole, an' he'll ring the bell, an' drop that through, too. That damn fiddle is too big to git through the hole, so he'll fiddle a few bars on the roof, an' drop the bow through. An' I'm bettin' that by the time we git through with 'em the one that's guilty will be ready to come acrost with a confession."

Corporal Downey grinned. "Okay—but I'm remindin' you, John, this has got to be a bona fide confession—not a frame-up."

"Why, damn you, Downey did you ever know me to frame anyone—onless he was guilty? Of course not. This here seance is strictly on the level—not a trace of charlatanism about it from first to last. We'll wait

till dark—an' then pull it off." He turned to Red John: "An', by God, you lay up there on the roof so you don't have to move around none. These folks might suspect somethin' if they heard trompin' around above 'em, an' some of the dirt got to droppin' down their neck. You git a toe-holt in that sod, an' lay still."

"It's too bad I didn't fetch along that little green god we found in the Swami's effects," Downey grinned. "The one I'm usin' fer a paperweight. It would add a sort of touch to the set-up."

Black John agreed. "Yeah, it would, at that—but cripes, I'll whittle one out of a potato, an' cover it with some of that there guilt paint Leonidas Dykes' wife had to shine up her slippers with. There won't none of these here suspects know whether a god ort to be green er gold color—an' Cush shore as hell won't. It's beginnin' to git dark, so we'll hustle an' git the stage set. John'll carry them manifestations up onto the roof, an' I'll light the incense an' get into this blue robe, an' put on my turban, an' light this little blue lamp. Downey, you set back in the corner, on the spare bunk there. I'll turn the blue light down so low they can't see nothin'. They'll be settin' facin' me, so their backs'll be toward you. They won't know there's anyone here."

## V

NIGHT settled with a heavy intense blackness that rendered the hole in the roof invisible in the dimly lit room. Presently footsteps sounded on the trail, and in a deep sepulchral tone, Black John answered the knock on the door. "Enter into the realm of the gods!" The door opened and four men stepped into the room. The booming voice continued: "The three men from Lynx Crick will be seated on the bench in the middle of the room facing me. The other will seat himself on the spare bunk."

"Cripes! What stinks in here?" Cush explained, sniffing audibly.

"Silence!" thundered the voice of the blue-clad, white-turbaned figure that reclined among the pillows of the blue-draped couch. "The aroma that greets your nostrils is the exquisite attar wafted directly from the garden of the gods, in the far-flung fields of Nirvana."

"Huh," grunted Cush, seating himself on the spare bunk. "Why the hell don't you turn up the light? We didn't think you was to home. That there little lamp don't give no more light than one of these here worms you kick out of a rotten stump."

"Silence! The harsh rays of a bright light counteract the delicate vibrations that emanate from the souls of the departed. Only the dim blue rays blend with the emanations from Nirvana." The turbaned figure fixed his eyes upon the three who faced him from the bench. "Now, my good men, the time has arrived when the innocent among you shall be vindicated—and the guilty condemned. My control, the beauteous Bessie Abdul Ameer, has notified me that she finally located old man Mason, the victim of a foul murder. His soul has arrived in Nirvana in good shape, an' he's ready to talk."

"By God, if he claims I done it, he's a damned liar!" cried Stonewall Grant.

"Me neither!" exclaimed the drunken character. "I was up there that day—but I never shot him!"

"He's a damn liar if he claims I done it!" Jubal Hancock added.

"Silence!" roared the turbaned figure. "Know, ye earthbound fools, that the dead never lie! The words of the departed are true words. No falsehood may be uttered in the presence of the all-knowing gods. The words of the departed are words of truth. I shall now summon my control." Rolling back his eyeballs till only the whites showed, he called loudly. "Bessie!" After a full minute of silence, he called again. "Hey, Bessie! Ah, here you are. Now, Bessie, you skitter around an' get holt of old man Mason—him I was speakin' to you about last night—the guy that got shot on Lynx Crick. An' shake a leg, Bessie—we don't want to hang around here all night. An', by the way, Bessie—tell him to fetch along some manifestations so we'll know it's him—a bell, an' a horn, an' a fiddle—in that order." The turbaned figure eyed the three. "We shall soon know who shot old man Mason," the deep voice announced solemnly.

Jubal Hancock fidgeted uneasily on his seat. "Cripes—that wind! I never heard wind whistle so damn spooky-like."

"Wind? You are now in the presence of the gods. What you mistake for wind is

the shriekin' an' wailin' of lost souls—the voice of the damned—the ones that was kicked out of Nirvana fer somethin' they done before they got there. Fer evermore they're doomed to whistle an' wail amongst the far-flung stars of the illimitable outer void, huntin' fer a place to light. But they won't find none. That's why them sharp p'int is on all the stars—to keep the damned from roostin' on 'em. Yer sin-blistered soul is right now stripped to its naked hide. In a matter of moments the gods will be probin' deep within' its festered cosmos, an' should they find that it was you that knocked off old man Mason, there'll be a new soul addin' it's wailin' to the celestial din."

The sailor half rose from the bench. "I'm gittin' the hell outa here," he croaked. "I was a damn fool to come in the first place!"

"Silence! Bessie is approaching, accompanyin' her I see a dim shape—the shape of an old man. Bessie is speakin'." For a few seconds the turbaned one lay with his eyes rolled back. His lips moved. "That's him, eh? Okay, Bessie. You can trot along, now. I'll talk to old man Mason. What's yer name? Mason, eh? How long you be'n dead? Okay. Died of some disease, I s'pose? Oh—got shot, eh? On Lynx Crick, you say? Shot in the back, I s'pose—so you can't tell who done it? No? In front, eh? An' you did see the one that shot you? Did, eh? He was robbin' yer cache, an' you ketched him at it—an' he let you have it with a rifle, eh? Do you know his name? Don't, eh? But you'd know him if you seen him? Well now, Mason—jest so we'll know that everything's on the up-an'-up, I'm goin' to ask you how much dust you had in yer cache, an' if there's any way of identifyin' this here dust? Seventeen hundred ounces, eh? In twenty-two sacks? Oh—in one of the sacks is a nugget that looks like a bear. Okay, Mason—that's fine. That had ort to clinch the case, all right. But there's one other thing. This here's a damn serious business fer the one found guilty. He'll get strung up, shore as hell. So to make doubly shore I'm askin' you to show three different manifestations—jest so these parties'll know it's you that's givin' the information—an' no one else. So come acrost with 'em, Mason, an' they'd better be in the right order—er Bessie'll go

straight to Siva, the destroyer, an' tell him yer a fake."

Out in the night a bell rang loudly, and the next instant it dropped into the room with a raucous jangle.

"Ouch, my toe!" cried Stonewall Grant. "Silence!"

From the outer dark came three loud blasts of a trumpet, and the next instant Jubal Hancock cried out sharply as the trumpet thumped to the floor. "The damn thing ketched me square on the head—I'm gittin' the hell outa here!"

"Silence!" roared the voice. "Anyone leaving his seat will be struck dead before he can reach the door. "'Tis onseemly—these rude interruptions in the presence of the gods!"

From somewhere above came strains from a violin, and a moment later a bow dropped to the floor. Once again the voice boomed from the couch. "So you see, men, it was old man Mason, an' no one else who spoke. I called off them manifestations before Bessie got holt of him—so you can all see there's no hokus-pokus about this seance. All that remains is to find a small nugget in the shape of a bear. And the man in whose possession it is found is the man who murdered old man Mason an' robbed his cache."

"By God, you kin search my stuff!" cried Stonewall Grant. "I ain't got no dust—only about a hundred pound of hardrock samples. I'll take you to my cache an' you kin see fer yerself!"

"An' you kin search my dust," the drunken hombre added. "It's right there in Cush's safe—every damn ounce of it!"

**JUBAL HANCOCK** rose to his feet. "I don't give a damn what old man Mason says—I never done it!"

"He never claimed you did," came the voice from the couch. "All he says is that in one of them sacks of his there's a nugget that looks like a bear. If there ain't no sech nugget amongst yer dust, yer clear."

"It's all damn nonsense! I ain't goin' to let no one search my dust. I've got it cached—where no one but me kin find it. An' by God—that's where it stays!"

"You refuse to submit to a search of yer dust?"

"Yer damn right I do!"



"An' you won't tell us where yer cache is?"

"No, I won't! I'll never tell!"

"Okay. In sech case we'll put it up to the gods."

**A** GAIN Black John rolled back his eyes and the deep voice bellowed loudly in the little room. "Bessie! Hey, Bessie! Where the hell are you?" After several moments of silence the voice spoke again. "Oh, there you are! Well, after this, don't go kihootin' all over Nirvana when there's a seance goin' on. I never can tell when I'll need you. Skip over to the inner sanctum and get holt of Siva, the destroyer, an' Brahma, the creator, an' India, the golden god wielder of thunderbolts, pronto. I want to find out about a cache. Oh, they don't, eh? Ramachandra, the Seventh Incarnation of Vishnu, handles the cache cases, eh? Okay, git holt of him, then—an' tell him I'm in a hutry." After a full minute of silence the voice spoke again: "Hello, Rama! How they comin'? Yeah—a fella here won't tell where his cache is at. Yeah, he knocked off old man Mason—you've prob'ly seen Mason—he's a chechako in Nirvana. Yeah, that's him, all right—from Lynx Crick. Mason's cache was robbed, an' this guy's got his dust an' we want to run through it an' find a certain nugget that'll convict him beyond doubt. Yeah—the guy's a sailor, an' his name is alias Jubal Hancock. Oh—at the foot of the rim-wall, about eighty yards due west of Olson's old cabin on Halfaday Crick, eh? There's a flat stone over the top—fits clost, eh? Good work, Rama, old boy. Yeah, we'll find it, all right. So long."

The figure rose from the couch. "Okay, Cush, light the lamp there in the bracket. An', Downey, you better slip the cuffs on Jube, there. He seems to be the most likely candidate fer the hangin'. Cush an' I'll look after the other two. It won't take long to run through their stuff. Then we'll go down the creek to Olson's old shack where Jube's got his cache. An', believe me—if there's a nugget the shape of a bear in one of them sacks, you've got an iron-clad case."

The men proceeded to the saloon, where they sifted the dust in all of the drunkard's sacks and, finding no nugget of any

size, they proceeded to One-Eyed John's shack where Stonewall Grant produced his pack from the cache in the wall, and proved that it contained nothing but hard rock samples. Jubal Hancock was lowered for safekeeping into the hole, a cell-like aperture beneath the storeroom, and a barrel of pork rolled onto the trap door.

Early the following morning, Cush, Black John and Downey conducted the prisoner to Olson's old shack, and straight to the rim-wall. Twenty-one sacks were removed from the well-known cache, and from the third one Black John extracted the nugget that looked like a bear.

Hancock wilted. "All right—all right! I done it. I'll admit it. I heard him make his brag that he had seventeen hundred ounces in his cache, an' I went to git it. He ketched me at it, an' I let him have it. An' that's all there is to it. I killed him—go ahead an' hang me, an' be damned!"

**A** HALF-HOUR later, with a written confession in his pocket, signed by the three witnesses, Downey headed down the creek with his prisoner.

Returning to the saloon Cush set out bottle and glasses and eyed the big man across the bar. "How'd you know which one of them damn skunks done it?" he demanded.

Black John grinned. "Why, old man Mason told me the nugget was in one of his sacks, an' Ramachandra told me where the dust was cached—so it couldn't of be'n no one else."

"To hell with this here Raymond Chandler business! You've know'd where that cache of Olson's is at fer years. You can't fool me! That's the nugget old Solomon Albert got off'n Koogler, that time. What I mean, how did you know whose dust to plant it in?"

"Why, when I told Jube I was a Swami, he sweated like hell till I told him I couldn't name the murderer—then all to onct, he showed vast relief. The other two really wanted the seance. They had nothin' to fear—an' they knew it. An' now, mebbe next time you'll have faith in a seance."

"Well, I'll say it was damn spooky. But they was one thing that somehow didn't seem right. Where the hell would them old Hindu gods learn to play 'Turkey in the Straw'?"

# ASSINIBOINE AT BATAAN

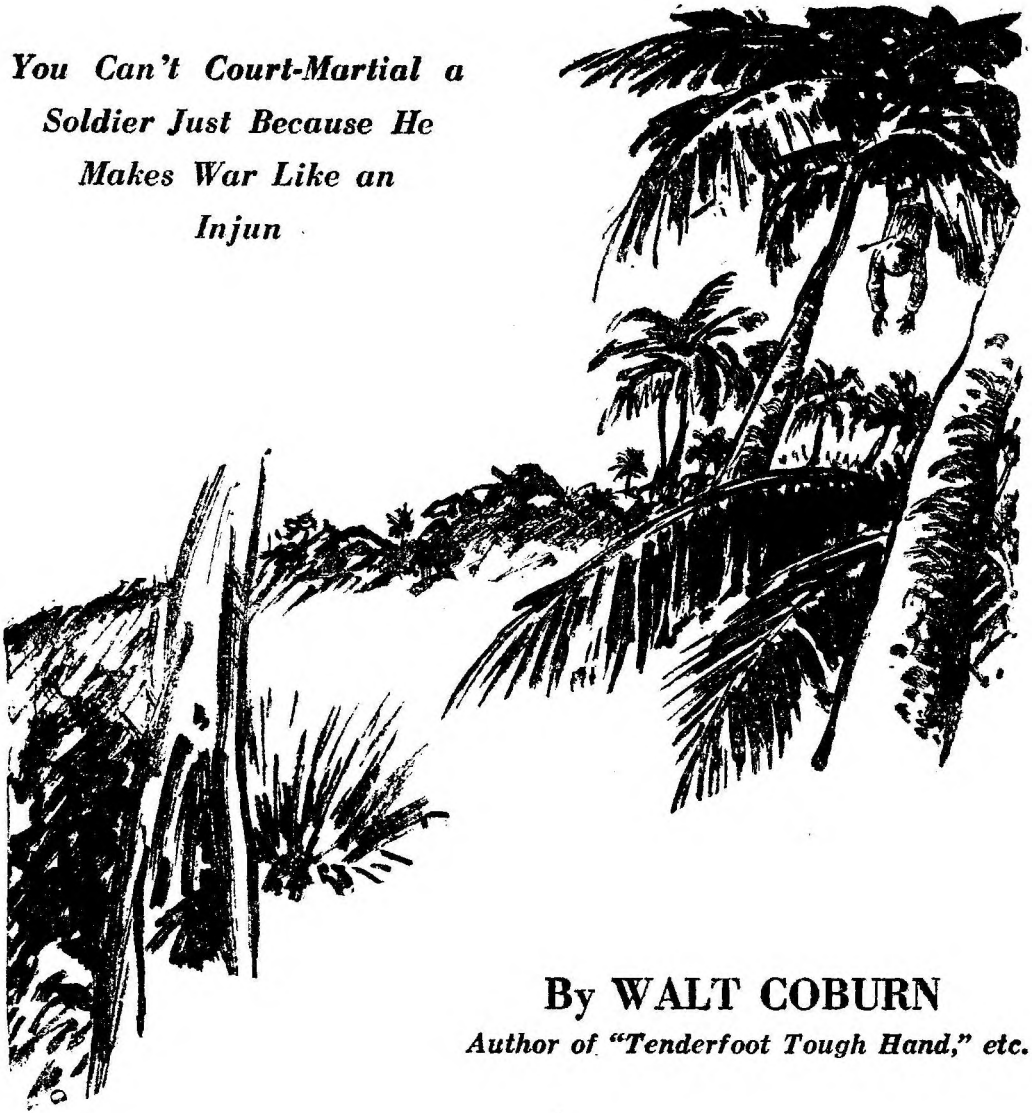


**T**HE siege of Bataan was dragging along into its second torturous month and the Philippine Scouts had borrowed the G. I. verses to the ribald song "Oh, How Long Must I Wait." And so they sang:

"We got no mama, no papa, no Uncle Sam,  
We're the fighting Bastards of Bataan!"

And the empty-bellied, malaria racked, jungle-sored and battle-weary doughboys of

*You Can't Court-Martial a  
Soldier Just Because He  
Makes War Like an  
Injun*



By **WALT COBURN**

*Author of "Tenderfoot Tough Hand," etc.*

General Douglas MacArthur's Fighting Thirty-first croaked the chorus from fever-dry lips and grins spread across unshaved gaunt faces while fighting glitter in their bloodshot eyes never softened. And they added the chorus:

"Oh, tell us how long, oh, how long  
must we wait. . . .  
Shall I kill that Skivvy now, or must I  
hesitate?"

"Skivvy" was a dirty fighting name for Hirohito's Japs. It was a bawdy soldier song and uncomplimentary.

Private First Class Mark Old Thunder, full-blood Assiniboine from Montana, had a song. An Assiniboine Death Song.

Mark Old Thunder's song was deep inside his Assiniboine heart and it was a recital of brave deeds and began with his grandfather, Old Old Thunder who had fought in the wars against Custer and Crook and Miles and smoked the peace pipe and put his mark on the treaty the white men broke. And the song went on to the brave life of Mark's father, who was Old Thunder, Indian policeman on the Fort Belknap Reservation, and how Old Thunder had killed men of his own tribe, and of his own

blood kin, when they broke the Law Old Thunder represented when he wore the threadbare blue coat and polished brass buttons of an Indian policeman. And then Mark Old Thunder chanted his own lesser deeds of bravery and made a prayer to fill his heart with courage and hate for the enemy. And so the song of Mark Old Thunder was a war chant, a hymn of hate. And his blood pulsed strong and hard like the thump of war drums. And because he knew that his chances of returning alive to camp were next to nothing, and he would die fighting, Mark Old Thunder's song was an Assiniboine death chant. It swelled in his heart and pounded through his veins and tingled his nerves and he was filled with its strong medicine. But no sound of his warrior's song left his lips. Because he was alone and on scout detail in a jungle that was filled with hidden Japs.

Alone. On his own. That was as it should be. That was the way Mark Old Thunder wanted it to be. So that it would be his great coup, and his alone. To tell about when he returned to the lodge of Old Thunder, his father, if his medicine was strong and the great Manitou sent him back alive when this white man's war was done. Or if he was killed, it was still his great lone coup and Uncle Sam would send a letter to Old Thunder to tell how Mark Old Thunder had died. Private First Class Mark Old Thunder, scout.

It was an extremely dangerous and tricky detail and Mark Old Thunder and Jesse Iron Horn had volunteered eagerly for it. Jesse Iron Horn was another Assiniboine. Mark and Jesse had been raised in the same village on Lodge Pole Creek. Their fathers and grandfathers had smoked together, danced together, swapped presents at the Giveaway Dance, shared the free buffalo days and fought the U. S. Cavalry with the same war parties, and later had shared the leaner, sadder days within the barbed wire fence of the Fort Belknap Reservation.

**O**UTWARDLY Mark Old Thunder and Jesse Iron Horn were as alike as if cast from the same mold. Lean, lithe moving, tough muscled, sinewy. With the same hairless bronzed skin and opaque black eyes. Two young bucks from the Reservation.

But their hearts were different. Mark Old Thunder had returned from Haskell Indian

School to the lodge of his father and shed white man's ways to return to the ways of the Assiniboine. His heart was all Indian.

But Jesse Iron Horn had taken more readily to white man's customs. He learned his school books eagerly and asked for more. Where Mark Old Thunder had been rebellious and stubborn, Jesse Iron Horn had sought to learn all he could of the white man's ways. And instead of returning to the prairie dog stew and kinni-kinnik tobacco of Old Iron Horn, his father, Jesse Iron Horn had remained at the Agency as interpreter.

Mark Old Thunder and Jesse Iron Horn, seasoned scouts now on Bataan, made an ideal team for carrying out this dangerous detail. Their job was to locate a well-hidden Jap telephone line. First find the nearby jungle-hidden listening post. Then follow the thin wire line of communication back through the jungle to its other end. Put out of commission the Japs at each end of the line. And with Jesse Iron Horn at this end, Mark Old Thunder would wipe out the Japs at the far end. Mark Old Thunder would then use the field phone to report back to Jesse Iron Horn the location of Jap troops and all other essential information of military value. The two Indian scouts would hold and maintain their dangerous posts until relieved from duty. Japs might tap the line and listen in to their black heart's content and till the sweaty tropical jungle got colder than Iceland and the smartest decoder in the whole Jap army intelligence would never be able to savvy a word spoken in the Assiniboine language Mark Old Thunder and Jesse Iron Horn would be using.

Until relieved from duty. Only death would take Mark Old Thunder's position there at the far end of that line where it would be located deep in the center of the Jap-held jungle and not too far from Jap headquarters.

Mark Old Thunder and Jesse Iron Horn had shed their G. I. clothes and were stripped to dirty O. D. shorts daubed with camouflage paint. Their lean bronzed bodies were streaked with green camouflage daubing. Jesse Iron Horn wore rubber-soled tennis shoes. But Mark Old Thunder was wearing the elkhide moccasins his squaw mother had made for him. Hunting moccasins without too much beadwork. And in addi-

tion to the regular G. I. arms of rifle and bayonet and hand grenades, Mark Old Thunder carried a hunting knife that had belonged in turn to Old Thunder and to Old Old Thunder. Old Old Thunder had used its whetted blade for a scalping knife. Old Thunder had carried it along with a Colt six-shooter, when he was Indian policeman. Now it had been given to Mark Old Thunder to pack in the great white man's war.

In a plain buckskin sheath Mark Old Thunder carried a short bow about four feet long.

And six steel-tipped arrows. It was a stout bow with a heavy pull and the arrows were perfectly balanced and feathered. In skilled hands this bow and arrow was a deadly short-distance weapon. Silent as the strike of a deadly snake. Bow and arrows were a gift from Old Old Thunder who was over a hundred years old.

And once out of sight of camp Mark Old Thunder paused long enough to open a little round tin box that he took from the small buckskin medicine pouch he had carried since the Old Men of his tribe had sent him to the great white man's war. The little box held powdered red paint. He streaked his face with it and the result of the red, streaked with the camouflage green, was startling.

"You sure look like an Injun," said Jesse Iron Horn.

"I am Assiniboine." Mark Old Thunder spoke in his father's tongue. Fierce pride in the guttural tone of his voice.

And Jesse Iron Horn stared at the ugly scars that disfigured both Mark Old Thunder's breast muscles. A strange conflict of superior contempt and secret envy and admiration in Jesse's eyes.

Because those scars marked the big difference between the two full-blood Assiniboine warriors. And Jesse Iron Horn knew how Mark Old Thunder had gotten those scars.

The tortures of the Indian Sundance had been condemned as unlawful by the white man's law after the Indians had smoked the peace pipe and put their marks on the treaties. But when the Old Men learned that their young men were being called into the white man's army to fight, they had held a council. Most of their sons and grandsons had forsaken tribal customs and the Indian way of living and like Jesse Iron Horn, had

adopted the white man's customs and religion and bad habits.

Not so, Mark Old Thunder. So Mark had gone alone to the summit of what the white man's maps called Snake Butte but the Old Men called Medicine Butte. And in a deep crevice was a snake den where thousands of black diamond rattlesnakes writhed and squirmed and rattled and stank. For three days and nights Mark Old Thunder stayed up there on top of Medicine Butte. Fasting. Without a bite of grub or a sip of water. Chanting his songs to the Manitou. Making his prayer to the sun and to the stars. Stripped to breechclout and moccasins. His only defense against the rattlers that crawled up out of the den had been a long stick that he had used to shove them back, hissing and rattling and striking, from the ten-foot cleared circle where he danced. Never killing a snake. Taking care not to get bitten. Sending the snake messengers back into their stinking den with his prayer songs.

**T**HEN Mark Old Thunder had come down from Medicine Butte. And he had gone with a few of the chosen Old Men into the badlands. Where there was a tall medicine pole and a medicine lodge hastily erected around it for a center pole. Long rawhide ropes with the ends divided in two long thongs dangled from the top of the medicine pole. A stockade enclosed it, with the entrance at the left. Inside was a single line of the Old Men with whistles and tom-toms. Chests marked with old scars, skins painted. The old medicine man, stripped to the waist, ready with a sharp knife and two long, sharp-pointed skewers.

Mark Old Thunder, accompanied by his mother, and stripped to breechclout and buckskin leggings and moccasins, had walked in through the entrance. The medicine man had grabbed him. Stabbed slits in each breast muscle, and ran the sharp wooden skewers through each wound. Then fastened the skewers hard and fast to the twin rawhide tails of the rope dangling from the top of the medicine pole. The war drums pounded. Medicine whistles shrilled. The voices of the Old Men broke into a weird chant. And that was the signal for Mark Old Thunder to lunge and rear back and throw himself against the rope until the chest muscles were torn apart. Time and

again he had thrown his weight back until the rope was jerked taut and the hardwood skewers ripped the young brave's breast muscles. Without a whimper or moan of pain. Until the flowing blood drenched him and he was dizzy and sick and getting weaker and then a last mighty heave ripped his flesh to torn shreds and he fell back on the ground and the rawhide rope with its twin tails and bloody hardwood skewers dangled limp and free. And Mark Old Thunder had used the last of his ebbing strength to jump onto his feet and stagger with a bloody mockery of dance steps, out of the medicine lodge. And his squaw mother had dressed the Sundance wounds. So that they were ugly freshly healed scars when Mark Old Thunder had stripped at the recruiting office for his physical examination.

And the old recruiting sergeant who had been born at old Fort Assiniboine and whose father had died with Custer at the battle of the Little Big Horn, this grizzled recruiting sergeant with battle stars on his service ribbons from the last world war, with hash marks from cuff to elbow and five wound stripes, reared in the shade of a cavalry outpost flagpole, had stared. Stared at those scars and savvied. And in an almost awed whisper he had said, "I'll be a son of a ———!"

Too bad that old sergeant from the famous Seventh Cavalry could not get a good look at Mark Old Thunder now as the young Assiniboine crouched, stripped and daubed with camouflage paint, in the jungles of Bataan.

He would probably have shared the question Jesse Iron Horn put into words.

"You got Old Old Thunder's knife. . . . Scalping knife!"

Mark Old Thunder slid the old hunting knife from its sheath and ran his thumb along its whetted edge.

"There were more of us Assiniboines and Gros Ventres here at Bataan a month ago," he spoke in the Indian language. "Now just me and you are left. I saw what the Japs did to those dead Assiniboines and Gros Ventres soldiers. . . . Japs took Jim Walks Slow prisoner. Then they let him get away. I found him still alive. But they had cut him. And they had burned out his eyes. He did not want to live like that. They could not make Walks Slow holler. He was

a Gros Ventres. I stayed with him till he died. That made my medicine strong."

"You talk like a blanket Injun, Mark. You played fullback at Haskell."

"You talk like an old woman, Jesse." Then Mark Old Thunder spoke the white man's language. "You played quarterback. All right, Iron Horn. You call the signals again. Old Thunder carries the ball." Mark Old Thunder grinned. It made his paint-daubed face the more hideous. He took off his steel helmet and rubbed the last of the red paint in his coarse black hair that had long ago outgrown from the stubble of G. I. haircut. Then he shoved the helmet under a green-matted clump and looked around sharply to remember the place. If and when he ever got back to pick up the discarded "tin hat."

Then Mark Old Thunder slid the short bow from its buckskin and pulled the bowstring taut and tested its tautness. He grunted and crouched low and moved without a sound and his paint-daubed body blended into the colors of the Bataan jungle.

Half an hour later Mark Old Thunder crouched, frozen in his moccasin tracks. He had smeared gun grease, cosmoline, all over his painted body and the grease and sweat glistened on his hide like the dank jungle moisture to the green undergrowth. Behind him, Jesse Iron Horn halted, crouched motionless, gripping his rifle. Jesse tried to locate what the sharper, better-trained hunting eye of Mark Old Thunder had spotted. He saw Mark fit an arrow to the bow string. The bow bent almost double under the steady slow pull.

A SHORT distance ahead there sounded the staccato, monkey-like jabber of a single Jap. The arrow sped like a thin streak and the bowstring gave out a little twang. There was a gasping, choking, rattling outcry. The half-naked brown Jap tumbled out of a tree, dropping a rifle. Both hands clutched at the shaft of the arrow buried nearly to the feathers in the brown throat. The monkeylike chattering no longer sounded. A telephone head-set dangled and swung from its green cord up there in the tree. And Mark Old Thunder was crouched on moccasined feet beside the dying Jap. The long blade of the hunting knife glinted swiftly as it drove to its hilt and came out red. Then Mark Old Thunder jerked out



the steel-headed arrow and wiped the blood from its shaft and head onto the dead Jap's dull green-colored uniform pants.

"Skivvy!" Mark Old Thunder's big white teeth were bared. His whisper was like the hiss of a black diamond rattler.

Jesse Iron Horn turned his head away as Mark Old Thunder took hold of the dead Jap's short black hair. The blade of Old Old Thunder's knife glittered in the jungle shadows.

"There's your telephone, Iron Horn. Climb the tree. Our trails fork here. I go on."

Jesse Iron Horn climbed the tree to take over the listening post. He had his rifle and ammunition for it. Hand grenades. And whatever was left behind by the dead Jap. Mark Old Thunder had already vanished from sight in the jungle. Off in the distance and from all around beyond the screen of jungle came the cracking of guns. Planes droned overhead. Jesse Iron Horn examined the dead Jap's rifle. Took quick tally of the Jap ammunition. Picked up the dangling head-set. Through its black mechanism came jabbering like you hear on the short wave radio from a Jap station. Jesse Iron Horn, top scholar of his class at Haskell, eager student of all things, was proud of the chance to use the smattering of Japanese he had acquired.

"There is danger approaching." He pitched his voice to a credible imitation of the now dead Jap's. "I call back later. Nothing more to report. Signing off." He hung the head-set on its hook. Then cradled his gun and sank out of sight in the heavy foliage of the tree. To wait. To kill. Jesse Iron Horn had his share of guts. Only his brain was trained to a white man's way of thinking.

Mark Old Thunder had hidden the dead Jap's body. Jesse Iron Horn wondered if the grandson of Old Old Thunder had lifted his first Skivvy scalp. And he wondered what the tough white doughboys of the Fighting Thirty-first would say about a scalped Jap. They'd add another ribald verse to their song. "Shall I scalp that Jap? Or must I hesitate?"

And the Old Man. . . . Wow! Court-martial Mark because he made war like an Injun? Or let him off with reprimand and a little jolt of company punishment. K.P. was a joke in a mess kit camp. Sentry duty.

Mark could do twenty-four straight hours of that without batting an eye. What the hell? How could you dish out punishment to an Assiniboine reared from infancy to endure anything and everything without a whimper. You couldn't dent Mark Old Thunder whose chest was marked with Sundance torture scars.

Now Mark Old Thunder was alone. War drums pounding in his blood. Making his song inside his Assiniboine heart. Following the trail of that thin wire was boy's play for a tracker like Mark. Bataan had handed him no punishment he couldn't take. Mosquitoes? These Philippine things were dwarfs compared to the mosquitoes along the Missouri River in Montana. Hunger? He'd danced and sang for three days and nights on Medicine Butte without grub or water. Heat was something that made you sweat a little. And snakes were an Indian's friends. The Assiniboines and Gros Ventres had starved and frozen and suffered and lived. He and Jesse had seemed immune to malarial fevers or jungle sores. Mark had been slightly wounded twice and his wounds had healed quickly. And when you mixed ground roots with the gun grease cosmoline and rubbed it on like melted tallow it kept off the flies and mosquitoes. It made your hide stink but it saved you from jungle ailments.

The thin telephone wire was covered with green. You had to almost feel it with your fingers to detect it from the tendrils of vines. But your eye knew what your brain was looking for and you could pick it up from the way it lay straight across between the tree tops. And you kept watching for one of those little human slant-eyed monkeys in the trees. And when you sighted a Skivvy sniper . . .

Mark Old Thunder crouched low and fitted another arrow notch in the bowstring.

"I am Mark Old Thunder, Grandson of Old Old Thunder," he chanted inside his heart. "My medicine is strong. . . ."

The bowstring twanged. There was a flurry in the dense foliage above. But no dead Jap fell out of the tree. But an arm dangled down and then a lolling black head. And it was the head of a dead Jap. But it was one of those Japs who tied himself in the tree so you couldn't tell when you'd killed him or missed him. And there was no time to waste going up after the arrow.

Every minute, every second counted. Count the coup and move on. On along the thin green wire to its far end.

"My medicine is strong because it is good medicine. . . ."

## II

SINCE he was a small boy Mark Old Thunder had been a hunter. He had done his first hunting with bow and arrow. Then with a gun, when he had used Old Old Thunder's muzzle loader, and it kicked like a mule. Then a heavy .45-70 Winchester. Ammunition was always scarce. You were hunting for meat for the kettle and you had to bring back meat for the one cartridge doled out to you by Old Thunder who owned the .45-70. You laid flat on your belly with a small strip of red flannel on the end of your ramrod and you stayed out of sight in the buffalo wallow and waved the red flannel strip slowly and the little bunch of antelope would circle cautiously, closer and closer, their curiosity roused by the bit of red rag. And sometimes it took a couple of hours to flag the antelope close enough and all that time you didn't move. Only your hand swiveled at the wrist to move the ramrod slowly. And you matched your patience against the antelope's caution and wariness and curiosity. And when they got close enough to hit one with a rock, you lined your sights and pulled the trigger and you got a buck antelope. You got meat for that one cartridge. Or you were made to work with the squaws around camp and play games with the girls and you couldn't touch the gun again, even to clean it, for a long, long time. And before he was fourteen years old Mark Old Thunder could stalk even the timid and wary white-tail deer so close that he could toss a rock and hit one. He had hunted mountain lion like that. Mark Old Thunder was a great hunter.

Now his naked brown body, slick with cosmolene gun grease and cleverly streaked with green and brown paint, with streaks of red that looked for all the world, with his sweat-wet black hair, like the scarlet and black wing of some tropical bird as it moved in the dense green undergrowth. He would stand or crouch or lie motionless with the steel of gun and knife hidden, and become a part of the dank green and brown jungle.

And once a score of Japs had passed so close that he could smell their dead fish stink and see the glitter of their slant eyes. He had to hold himself back from plunging his hunting knife into the back of the last Jap in that monkey line. Then they were past and Mark Old Thunder went on and his moving was no more noticeable than the natural movement of jungle growth disturbed by the slithering passage of a giant tropical snake. No native Filipino could have passed through his native jungle with less betrayal of movement. As for the Japs being expert jungle fighters, Mark Old Thunder held them in contempt. His Indian eyes found their Jap snipers in the trees without half trying. His eyes saw them and his ears heard them and his nose smelled them. And an arrow from his short bow put an end to them. And then Mark Old Thunder, hunter, warrior, moved on again, a glistening, slithering, part of the jungle of Bataan.

Then the blazing sun was gone and the shadows grayed and darkness swallowed the jungle. The daylight gunfire slackened, died down to occasional shots. The stars came out. The night was humid and the sweat on his greased skin did not dry. He felt no weariness or hunger or thirst because he was a killer on the prowl and this had been the greatest day of his Assiniboine life and all the dreams of that life come true. His war song swelled in his heart and the war drums pulsed through his veins and the red streaks on his brown hide were not paint but the blood of dead Japs. He found a star in the sky and watched it, motionless, for a long time. And then the star fell, streaking the black velvet sky. And only then did Mark Old Thunder move on. He had made his prayer and the star had fallen and his medicine was strong. Never in all the world, since time began when men fought other men to the death, had any warrior felt more invincible than Mark Old Thunder, Assiniboine, felt tonight as he prowled alone in the far remote jungle of Bataan.

I am Mark Old Thunder. My medicine is strong. It is the medicine of Old Old Thunder. I carry it with me fastened to my war belt. His old medicine pouch is mine now. I have counted eleven coups. There will be many more coups. I have

made my medicine strong. I am Old Thunder. . . ."

What room was there for hunger or fatigue or thirst or fear in the heart of such a warrior?

Long before dusk when the thin green wire was no longer visible, Mark Old Thunder had gotten the direction of it. It was a straight line, or nearly straight. And when the light dimmed he had crouched on his moccasin hunkers and waited with Assiniboine patience, for the stars to appear so that he could get his compass direction from them. And he had chosen a medicine star up there and watched it, with his prayer, until it fell. The sign was good.

Mark Old Thunder saw many Jap enemies that night. Small war parties moving. Larger camps filled with their monkey chattering. Guarded by heavily armed but too-careless sentries. The temptation then to make a daring coup had been too strong to resist. Mark Old Thunder, Assiniboine, sank the long blade of his knife hard and swift and deep. . . . Their Skivvy Jap surprise and fear when they discovered the dead sentry. . . . Mark Old Thunder, Assiniboine, enjoyed his grisly joke on the Jap enemy.

He counted two more such coups before the moon rose. And he had not fired a shot to dirty a gun barrel.

THE moon was still in the sky and it was getting daybreak when Mark Old Thunder came to the end of the field telephone line. And the end of his jungle trip. He had discovered the spot two hours ago. The field telephone was set up in a dry carabao wallow. Camouflaged. Then he moved back and away from it because the sign was not right yet to make its capture. He had things to learn. Things of military value to find out so that he could have something to report to Jesse Iron Horn. And so for two hours or more he prowled, covering much ground, learning all that there was to discover here. And then he slipped back, his greased body soaked and dripping with sweat, to make his coup.

There were four Japs huddled over the field telephone that was well hidden in the thick jungle. One of them was bareheaded and had the ear-phones on his head. He was jabbering like a monkey. The other

three huddled close to him. One of them wore the uniform of an officer and was chattering like he was very angry and upset.

Mark Old Thunder crept close. He made no sound at all as he leaped. The knife blade sank to its hilt in the Jap officer's back. Came out dripping. Stabbed again and its blade drove deep in the neck of a Jap non-com. The third Jap had his pistol in his hand when the Assiniboine gripped his arm and yanked and the knife ripped the bare brown Jap belly deep from navel to ribs. And then he was astride the Jap with the earphone headpiece and had a grip on the tuft of wiry black hair with his left hand as he pulled the whetted edge across the front of the Jap's throat. Blood spurted in the gray dawn.

Mark Old Thunder rolled the dead Japs out of sight in the green undergrowth and laid the captured guns and grenades on the ground around him. Then wiped his hands clean of blood and put on the headpiece with the earphones. For a minute he listened to a staccato jabbering. Then it ceased. He waited a little. Then cleared his throat and spoke.

"How, Kola!"

The Assiniboine greeting. As a white man would say, "Hello, friend!"

Then again, his voice firmer, more natural: 'How, Kola, How, Haymus! How, Haymus!'

"Haymus' was the Assiniboine for "Iron Horn."

Then Jesse Iron Horn's voice sounded, harsh, brittle as smashing glass in Mark Old Thunder's ears. Excited as a white man.

"How, Kola! Meeahmatah tepee washtay wanitch. Tohk tay tepee?"

So something was bad at Jesse Iron Horn's end of the line. In his tree-top. But there was no time to waste asking questions. Jesse was asking where he was located.

Mark Old Thunder wanted most of all to make a lengthy and boastful warrior recital of how he had counted many coups. How he had killed seventeen Japs with the Assiniboine weapons of bow and arrow and knife. And that the bore of his Garand rifle was still clean. He had killed seventeen of those slant-eyed Skivvies without firing a shot. It was a tale that required a lengthy telling to get in all the tiny details. And Jesse Iron Horn was the only

Assiniboine here on Bataan to listen. And if Mark Old Thunder died here, the great story of his seventeen coups would be forever untold. And half the magnificent glory of those daring coups was in the telling of them later. To a white man's way of reckoning, such recitals were called big-mouthed bragging. But to the Indian the telling of great deeds of cunning and bravery were part of a warrior's life. Combine fighting prowess with great oratory. Sitting Bull, Sioux chief, was an outstanding example of warrior and orator.

Harder to endure than Sundance torture right now, this shoving aside and into eternal silence the splendid tale of his seventeen coups. But this was the White Man's Army.

"Listen, then, Haymus. Miss no word. Give this information to the great Wahseegee Chief. My eyes have seen much. There are many Japs. Here are the locations of those Japs and as good a count as I could get at night. . . ."

ON AND on Mark Old Thunder talked in the Assiniboine tongue. He had an Indian's eye for detail. He knew every foot of tangled jungle he had come over. He had counted and estimated the number of Japs he had spotted in his scouting. Their exact locations and approximate numbers. No trained West Pointer or seasoned reconnaissance officer could have given a more concise and accurate report.

Then he was through speaking. And Jesse told him to stay on the line. While he, Jesse Iron Horn, translated the report to the captain who was there with him at that end. And through the ear phones sounded that excited and angry sounding Jap monkey jabbering. Mark Old Thunder guessed that there was at least one cut-in station tapping the line. The Jap had listened, bewildered, excited, fearful because he could not understand a word. Skivvy slant-eyed monkeys. With a monkey curiosity. Mark Old Thunder crouched in the camouflaged carabo wallow, captured Jap guns and a pile of hand grenades. Watching. Waiting. Waiting to kill first. The jungle dawn was filled with intermittent rifle firing. Mark Old Thunder wished he could shove the dawn back into the night. But his medicine was not that strong. In the uncertain light

he saw a Jap's face and head. White teeth. Then another Jap wearing glasses. Mark Old Thunder had the dead Jap officer's automatic pistol in his hand. He had an Indian's love for guns and a gun lover's savvy of weapons. He'd already slid the safety and now his finger squeezed the trigger. Where the big grinning teeth had been was a gaping hole with the blood spilling. His next shot shattered the second Jap's big spectacles. One of them tumbled over the edge of the carabao wallow and the other hung there with his bullet-shattered face and head hanging down.

An automatic rifle chattered and Mark Old Thunder's thighs felt like they'd been stung by hornets. He threw himself over backwards, jerking off the head-set with the ear phones. And slid into the jungle. The automatic rifle raked the carabao wallow. And Mark Old Thunder spotted its position not fifty feet away. He lobbed a hand grenade like he used to throw a baseball when he pitched for Haskell. The explosion of it was loud. He saw the smashed gun in the air. The mangled Jap gunner. And ducked his head as the debris fell around him.

He heard a lot of Jap monkey jabbering. There was the field phone and the captured guns and the pile of hand grenades. He tried to get to his feet but his legs would not hold his weight and when he looked down at them they were covered with blood. He had to crawl back. He was dripping with sweat and losing blood but he felt no pain. Only the very desperate need for haste. Work fast. He hauled the field phone and a Jap automatic rifle and a sack of grenades and all the ammunition for the automatic rifle he could gather, back into the thick green jungle. While rifle bullets sprayed the carabao wallow like hailstones.

Then they came. One after another like a chain of grinning Jap monkeys in uniform and some stripped to the waist. Like kids playing follow the leader. So fast that Mark Old Thunder could not count them. Until they filled the dry carabao wallow. One was an officer. Mark Old Thunder saw that much before he lobbed a hand grenade down into them and as it exploded he tossed the second grenade into the blast. Screams mingled with the sound of the explosion. Debris lifted and hung in the gray black dawn and then showered down on the

dank green jungle and after a while the screams died. Skivvy Japs were weak old women. They squealed and screamed when they felt pain and died. . . . This was a great coup. Mark Old Thunder reached for the head-set and transmitter. Then grunted. The field phone had been shot badly. Ruined. Useless. So he dropped it and began dressing the bullet rips in both his thighs.

This was his last stand now. More Japs would be coming. So this was the end of the trail. He had his own rifle and he had the Jap automatic rifle and a stack of hand grenades. He fastened quick tourniquets above the bullet rips in his thighs and tied on crude bandages. Then he crawled into the heavy undergrowth with his guns and hand grenades and prepared to make his last stand.

Mark Old Thunder felt little pain. He was trained from early boyhood to endure torture. He had danced the Sundance. He had not whimpered from the pain of Sundance torture. That was the Indian test of fortitude. A young buck who made any outcry or failed to tear loose from the rawhide rope with its two skewers was forever condemned as a coward and made to herd with the squaws the rest of his life.

So Mark Old Thunder had danced his Sundance. But there had been Old Thunder and Old Old Thunder there to watch him. And their presence had given him strength and bravery and because they and other Old Men, Assiniboine warriors were watching.

But Old Thunder and Old Old Thunder were not here now to watch. Mark Old Thunder was alone.

**I**T IS one thing to endure pain and ask for more and even face death with a brave heart when there are others there to watch and admire and envy your great bravery and carry away with them the story of the brave death and tell it again and again how they saw a brave warrior die.

But it is something altogether different to face death alone and only the hated faces of the enemy taunting you and here you die without a single friendly witness to take away the story of your fighting death to tell it wherever brave warriors are gathered to boast of great coups.

To die brave is the greatest test of all the

tests a brave warrior meets and passes. It is the supreme coup.

Even now, and full well he knew it, Mark Old Thunder could crawl away, as the big jungle snakes slithered through the undergrowth, to safety. His wounds were nothing. The bones unbroken. A little while and he could use them again. And until then he could crawl and creep away and those Japs could never find him. He could live for many days and nights without food or water. Pain was nothing but a quirt to whip him along. His job here was finished. The field phone destroyed. His detail finished. Escape now was not a cowardly thing. Not a shameful act that would forever shove him into the squaw camps to wear the skirts of a woman. Rather he could turn a cunning escape through miles of enemy-held traps, into a great coup.

But that was not the way Mark Old Thunder had made his medicine. He could not make that into his song.

"I am Mark Old Thunder. Son of Old Thunder, Indian Policeman. Grandson of Old Old Thunder, Assiniboine warrior who took many scalps. I named my star and that star made its streak of fire in the sky and that is my trail and it is a war trail. I have counted many coups since the Sun rose yesterday. Now the Sun comes up again and before it sets I will count more coups. I am Mark Old Thunder and my medicine is stronger than the weak bad medicine of my enemies who do not know how to make a song to Manitou. My medicine is strong because it is good. . . ."

And the war song that swelled in the Assiniboine heart of Mark Old Thunder was no longer mute. It was torn from his dry throat and from his moving lips and it rose above the rattle of gunfire, deep toned as a great bell, then rising to a piercing shrill note that was as thin as the high-pitched scream of a medicine whistle. Then dropped to the deep-chested thumping boom of a war drum. And somewhere in the distance the big guns sounded like thunder. Thunder from which Old Old Thunder had gotten his name. And passed it down to Old Thunder. And this was the war song of Mark Old Thunder. And unless his medicine was almighty strong, this was the death song of Mark Old Thunder on Bataan. . . .

Mark Old Thunder was still chanting his

war song, still fighting, when the fighting soldiers of the 31st and the jungle-bred and trained Philippine Scouts crawled and crept and fought their way through the heavy jungle to kill what Japs they found. His ammunition gone, his hand grenades all used, with both legs crippled, the blood-stained knife of Old Old Thunder his last weapon, gripped in his hand.

At the field hospital Mark Old Thunder asked for Jesse Iron Horn. And they told him that Jesse was dead. He had killed half a dozen Japs when they tried to recapture the listening post. He had held it until the U. S. Soldiers had come up. Jesse Iron Horn had been dying when he took Mark Old Thunder's message and translated it. And when his job was done he had died without a whimper of pain from his wounds. He had refused to let the doctor shoot dope into him to deaden the pain. So Jesse Iron Horn had died as an Assiniboine knows how to die.

"Jesse Iron Horn," Mark Old Thunder told himself, "was weakened by white man's ways. His medicine was not strong."

Private First Class Mark Old Thunder was decorated for bravery. At his request his citation for bravery was sent to Old Thunder and Old Old Thunder on the Fort Belknap Reservation in Montana.

**OLD OLD THUNDER**, with the help of the interpreter who had taken the Agency job once held by Jesse Iron Horn, would recite it when the Assiniboines and Gros Ventres held their annual three days and three nights dance at Lodge Pole:

" . . . Above and beyond the regular line of duty . . . accounting for more than thirty Japanese soldiers in single combat against overwhelming odds. . . ."

There had always been rivalry between Old Thunder and Iron Horn. Iron Horn read the citation awarded posthumously to his son Jesse Iron Horn. They shook hands gravely and smoked. Their hearts were filled with great pride. But their hearts were on the ground. Jesse Iron Horn had been killed in action. Mark Old Thunder was reported missing. Then the interpreter from the Agency visited the lodge of Old Old Thunder. With him he brought a newspaper. And from it he read an article that told of the

fall of Bataan. The writer was a war correspondent who had been released from a Jap prison camp.

" . . . When the United States flag was lowered at Bataan, and our troops laid down their arms, there was one American soldier who did not surrender. That soldier was Private First Class Mark Old Thunder, an Assiniboine Indian from Montana, a scout from the 31st.

"I talked to him the night before the surrender to the Japs. He asked me if it were true that the Big Chief (General Douglas MacArthur) had promised to come back some day and wipe out the Japs and take back Bataan. And I told him that was the Big Chief's promise.

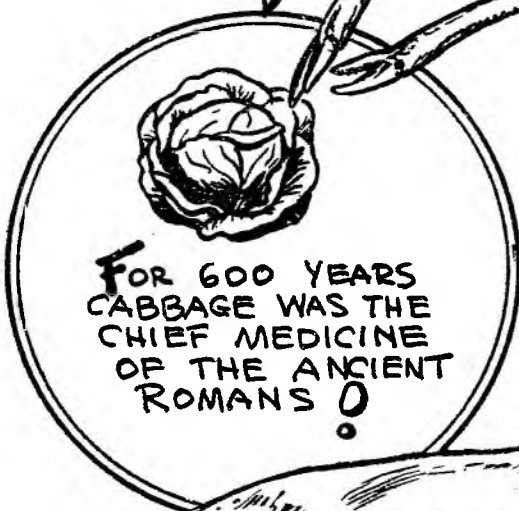
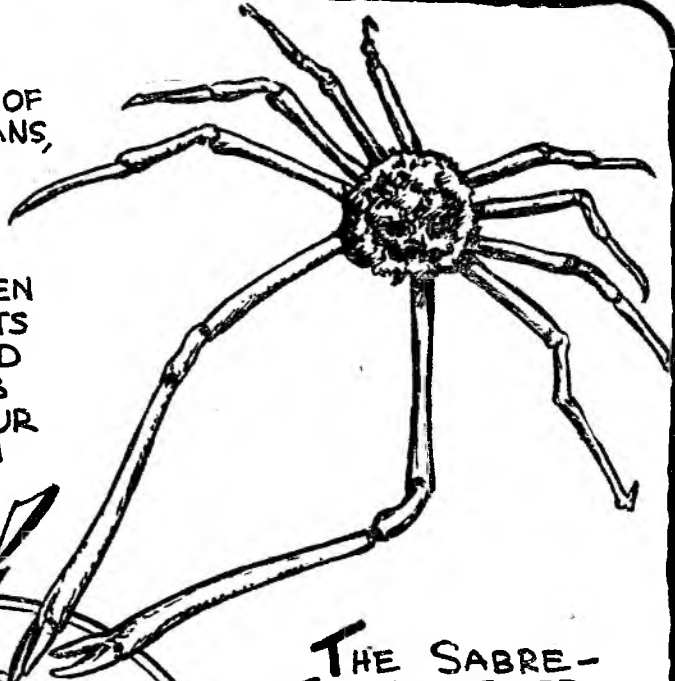
"Then I will stay here and wait for the Big Chief to come back," Mark Old Thunder said. 'I have counted many coups here. By the time the Big Chief returns I will have counted many more coups. I am Mark Old Thunder, Assiniboine. My medicine is strong. Tell that to my father Old Thunder when you get home. Tell my grandfather Old Old Thunder who is older than one hundred years, not to die yet. I will come back and tell him about my many coups. And tell the Big Chief who pinned this medal on my shirt and shook my hand, that when he comes back to Bataan, Mark Old Thunder will be here waiting for him.'

"Mark Old Thunder took his rifle. The bow and arrows and the old hunting knife he carries are not G. I. equipment. There is the legend that tells how Mark Old Thunder, Assiniboine, scalps the Japs he kills. Those of us who have witnessed Jap atrocities and have been compelled to endure their brutal treatment of war prisoners, wish Mark Old Thunder good hunting.

"I saw him that night he left camp. Stripped, his scarred, lithe brown body streaked and daubed with camouflage paint. Straight, proud, unafraid. His lips moved and he was chanting, so low toned it was like a jungle sound. He was alone. For a long moment he stood there and his head lifted and he was watching the sky. I looked up there, and as I looked I saw a falling star streak the sky. When I looked around again, Mark Old Thunder was gone. I saw a faint movement of the night-shadowed jungle . . . that was all."

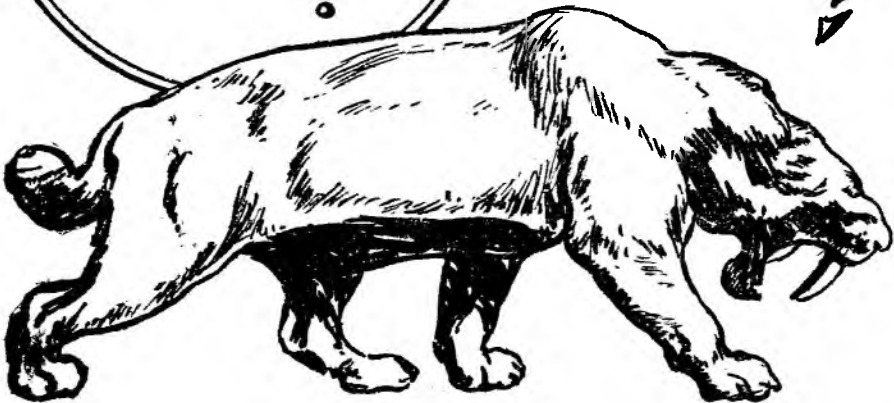
# Curiosities <sup>By</sup> Veill

THE LARGEST OF ALL CRUSTACEANS, THE GIANT SPIDER CRAB MEASURES NEARLY **12 FEET** BETWEEN THE TIPS OF ITS OUTSTRETCHED CLAWS AND IS KNOWN TO OCCUR TO AN OCEAN DEPTH OF **2000 FEET** !



FOR 600 YEARS CABBAGE WAS THE CHIEF MEDICINE OF THE ANCIENT ROMANS !

THE SABRE-TOOTHED TIGER OF 20000 YEARS AGO WAS EQUIPPED WITH POWERFUL EIGHT-INCH FANGS CAPABLE OF PIERCING THE TOUGHEST HIDE OF ITS MOST VICIOUS ADVERSARY !





# BARB WIRE

By W. RYERSON JOHNSON

THE STORY SO FAR

"PIG-TIGHT, horse-high and bull-strong," that was barb wire. It would spell progress for the West, some dared to

including a chunk of lead and a piece of barb wire. A note says that Barney was tagged by the barb wire sign—the enclosed bullet was dug out of his heart. It concludes: "Anyone else working to fence off



Part II

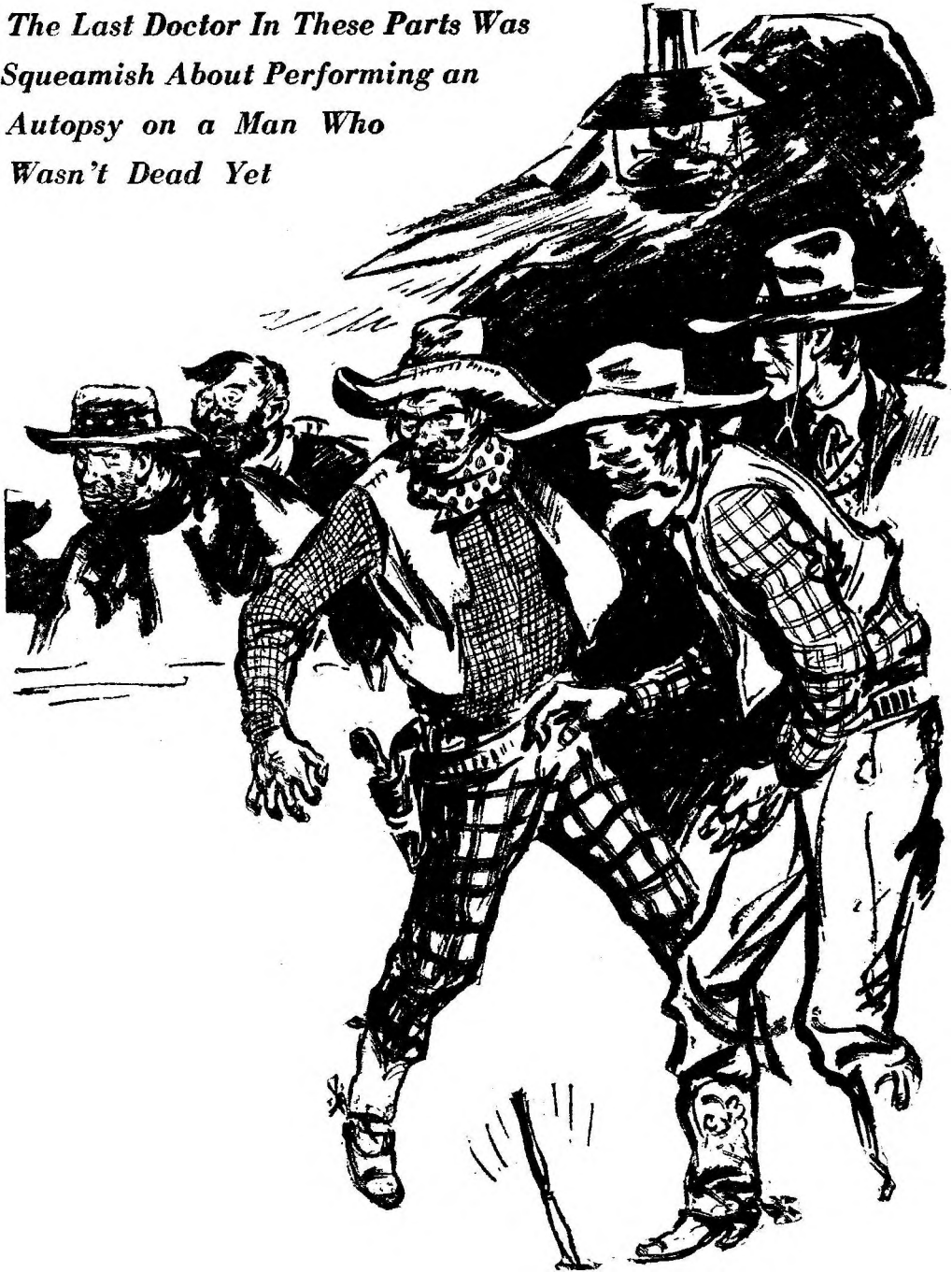
predict. Three of these were Open-range Carson from Sweetgrass Basin and Dr. Clyde Arington, who had both invested in the wire, and Barb-wire Barney a demon salesman.

Carson is murdered as he returns West and sometime later Barb-wire Barney mysteriously disappears. The salesman's home office receives some of his effects by express,

Sweetgrass Basin will get the same. Yours for an open range, signed The Blue Blazers."

Doc Arington goes West to avenge his friends. He learns that Sweetgrass Basin and the town of Gunsight have been terrorized by a bandit known as the Indigo Kid, head of the Blue Blazers. He also finds out that to mention barb wire is almost the same as committing suicide. Sooner than he expects

*The Last Doctor In These Parts Was  
Squeamish About Performing an  
Autopsy on a Man Who  
Wasn't Dead Yet*



he meets up with the Indigo Kid who forces him to come to a secret hideaway to operate on one of the Blazers who is seriously wounded.

Arington is told he'd better do some mighty good doctorin' for two lives depend on it—the man he's going to operate on—and his own.

## CHAPTER VI

### THE PROMISED LAND

**T**HE "shack" was a sizeable stone hut built against the solid cliff wall, and extending cave-like part way into the wall. A girl met them at the door. The doctor at first glance saw only a tired

and worried young woman. She had a sweet face, but it was drawn and lined. Her hair, a tumbled disarray of brown ringlets, was held back from her face with a black velvet band. She wore a gingham dress that had been washed so many times it was soft and flattering to her girlish figure.

She raised her finger to her lips, cautioning silence. The doctor's interest picked up. Here was a girl, he surmised, who had missed the best part of several nights' sleep. Yet her muscular coordination was good. She was dead on her feet, but her lovely body did not slump. She retained a quiet dignity, an exciting alertness. Health. She had health and youth. This was the West for you, the doctor guessed, and here was your frontier woman, resolute, quietly capable, ready to do whatever was required, whether to nurse a man back to health or protect his life in the first place if need be with a gun in hand.

But what was she doing at the Devil's Pasture with this pack of killer wolves? He noticed her cautioning finger, slim and brown and straight against her lips. He noticed her brown capable hands.

"She'd make a good professional nurse," he thought. "I'd like to take her back East with me." But then he remembered he wasn't going back East.

FROM noticing her cautioning finger, he couldn't help but see her lips. Soft and voluptuous they would have been, had they not been tight from worry. And her eyes. They were lustrous brown eyes, holding a challenge that not even the circles under them, nor the little worry wrinkles crow-footing from their corners could eclipse.

The doctor took a deep breath, and his interest jumped another notch. Not only a good nurse, he thought. A good wife! Here was a girl a man could love, a girl he could build his life with. Imagine the sensation in De Kalb if the no-good Doc Arington stepped from the train with this vibrant lovely creature! But then he remembered again: there was a good reason why he wasn't coming back.

Jim Juniper was staring at him, halfway reading his mind. He scowled and jerked his head toward the girl. "This is staked out."

The girl blushed, and stepped farther

back into the cool-shadowed room—and the doctor had an insane urge to throw a fist against Jim Juniper's gabby jaw.

"This way, please," the girl said, her voice somehow like a sad melody.

She led him to a bunk in the corner where the sick man lay.

"You can put your instruments here, Doctor." She indicated a crude table. "I'll bring hot water."

The doctor opened his long black satchel. Suddenly he started, his hands stiffening. His glance was on the wall, just back of the table. An advertising card was wedged there in a cranny of the rock. It was a big card, one that the doctor would have recognized among a million. It was one of Barb-wire Barney's cards, a duplicate of the one received in De Kalb, pierced by the barb-wire tag!

The doctor forced himself to concentrate on the task at hand. He spread a towel on the table, rifled his black bag of bandages and swabs, knives, scissors, scalpels, and a half dozen other gleaming instruments of fantastic shape. He laid them all out in a neat row on the towel.

Then he moved close to observe the patient.

Behind him Jim Juniper threw out, "You understand the terms, Doc?"

"Terms?"

"Like the Indigo Kid said, the buzzards will starve or they'll feed on two."

The doctor had turned the covers low from against the patient's face. One look, one touch, was all he needed to tell him that his services would be useless. The man was unconscious, his pulse beat negligible. His face already had the glazed and waxy look of death.

Behind him the doctor felt the hostile tension mount as these sweaty, stubble-faced men of the Devil's Pasture pressed closer. He turned. His voice was low, contained.

"How long since this man was shot?"

"It's been ten days now," a man answered, "since he's carried that bullet in his chest."

"He died a good three days ago," the doctor said.

Angry protests beat at him.

"I mean it's too late," the doctor said. "He's living, but he might as well be dead. No power on earth can save him. His wound's infected; blood poisoning has set

in. I don't know how he's stayed alive this long. . . . He's not alive in the broadest sense. As I said before, he died three days ago. You've waited that much too long to send for a doctor."

From out of the sullen hush that met his words, a man's words chopped, "Waren't no doctor to send for."

"There's one here now," another said.

The doctor shook his head. "You waited too long. I'm sorry, gentlemen. There's no hope."

**JIM JUNIPER'S** gnarled finger poked against the doctor's chest. His words were implacable. "Cure him, Doc!"

The doctor shrugged. If he knew that he was signing his own death warrant he gave no indication of it.

He turned and started preparing his patient for the operation.

"You've got to get back," he said. "Clear the room."

A muttered protest greeted his order. "Doc," Jim Juniper told him, "we stay right here and watch every move you make. We don't trust nobody. That's how we stay alive. You stay alive by bein' a good doctor."

"But you're all breathing germs into the room, imperiling the patient's chances—"

"Thought you said he didn't have no chance, Doc," a heavy voice hammered.

The doctor bowed in defeat. "You're right . . . it doesn't matter. There comes a time in every man's life when nothing matters."

For a minute then the girl took over. She approached from the other room with a basin of hot water. "Gangway," she said, and came on through, and some who were the slowest to move were splashed with the hot water. She turned on them, her tired eyes blazing. "If you have to stay in the room, at least get back where you won't be in our way. You want this man to have whatever chance there is, don't you?"

They backed away. The girl and the doctor bent to their work. With a long thin-bladed knife the doctor commenced cutting the bandages away. The work necessitated moving the patient slightly. Even this slight jar, it seemed, tipped the balance. The doctor turned to select another knife from among his instruments. When he looked back the patient was dead. The doctor

knew it even before he made the orthodox tests.

Without a word, he lifted the blanket and covered the patient's face. The girl at his side uttered a single wrenching sob. Then they all knew it.

The doctor turned to face them. A doomed man facing a firing squad.

"You killed Gilpin!" an excitable young hooter charged. "You put your knife to his heart." The youngster, eyes wild, face working, stepped out from against the near wall. Knees bent, shoulders hunched forward, his hand slapped down to his holstered gun. "And I'll kill you, Doc!"

Nobody made a move to stop him. They couldn't have if they had wanted to. He was ahead of them all. Only the doctor moved. It wasn't much of a move. Most of them in the room didn't even see when his hand, from where it hung at his side, gave an upward flip that sent his surgical knife on a straight-line drive across the room.

Most of them caught the glint of that narrow razor-edged blade as it crossed the line of sunlight from the door. All of them heard the surprised yelp that went up from the murder-minded youngster, and heard his gun clatter on the floor. And all of them, an instant later, saw him pull the narrow blade from his arm with the shrinking fascination he might have exhibited in yanking away a sidewinder that had driven its fangs deep. He hurled the repugnant blade to the floor and grabbed his bleeding arm.

A kind of animal growling ripped through the room as men braced themselves for a concerted rush at the doctor. Some were pulling at their guns. One, more cool-headed, bellowed, "Wait . . . you'll kill the girl!"

"Yes, wait!" the doctor shouted at the top of his voice. "And I'll tell you why." His hand struck down to grab up the knife with which he had cut the patient's bandages—and with which he had probed for the bullet in the wound, for all they were able to say different. Then he ran a blazer on them, a bluff a mile wide. He brandished the knife. "The slightest scratch from this blade," he warned in a voice now over-quiet, "and you die! The patient died of blood poisoning. The virus is on this knife blade. The slightest scratch will put it in your

blood stream. Nothing can save you. You'll die."

"Not if we gun you down first!" a man bellowed.

"I could flip the knife," the doctor countered. "It wouldn't have to be to the heart. Just a scratch anywhere on your body. One of you would die."

They stared at him while the silence drew out.

The doctor with his puny knife was a ridiculous looking figure. With this long lank body in a forward hunch, his black frock coat and his black string tie dangling, his face beet-red from sunburn, he looked, in fact, a little like a buzzard.

The resemblance was close enough that some of them caught it.

"You buzzard-Doc!" a man ground out, "how long you think you can hold us all off with your pig sticker?"

The doctor said nothing. He just kept holding them off. It was possible because, after all, they had the example of what he had done on his first knife toss. Maybe it had been a lucky throw. But they couldn't be sure. And they couldn't be sure that his present knife wasn't as deadly as he said. So they waited.

"It's only a question of time, Doc," one of them reminded grimly. "Some of the boys'll be comin' up the path. They'll gun you from the window."

"*Madre de dios!*" the Mexican *renegado* muttered. "They come now."

They listened. It was true. The crunch of boots on gravel was audible to all. The sound was coming closer.

With his left hand the doctor was frantically searching his pockets, though without for a second relaxing vigilance on the killer pack which faced him. He kept up a running line of talk. "Whatever direction it comes from," he told them, "a gunshot will jar this poisoned knife from my hand. The Ides of March approach, my friends, for more than one."

IT WASN'T a situation that any of them liked. The doctor's life hung on a thread, and the Blue Blazers thought that some of their lives did too. The cold sweat of fear was showing on more brows than one.

Jim Juniper raised his voice. "Whoever's

comin' outside," he shouted, "stay back, and for God's sake don't shoot!"

From outside the scuff of boots on gravel ceased. Inside the silence clamped down again as the strange death watch wore on. The doctor with his free left hand was still searching his pockets. "Got somethin' to show you if I can find it."

He should have been warned by the sudden gleam that came to the eyes of a few, and the way they lowered their eyes afterwards to cover their instinctive reaction. Perhaps he was warned. Perhaps he reasoned that, after all, what could he do; the knife *wasn't* a lethal instrument.

The first certain warning he had was when he heard a slight stirring at the opened window behind him. By that time it was too late. By that time the small loop, carefully coiled, expertly tossed, snaked through the window and clamped onto the doctor's arm. The man hauled back on the rope. The doctor was pulled off his feet. He lost his knife against the floor.

The Blue Blazers in the room burst forward for the kill.

"Wait!" the doctor roared. "I found it! Eureka! I have found what I was looking for." From where he sprawled on the floor, he held up what he had found.

It slowed them. Incredibly they held off when they saw what he revealed in his hand. It wasn't anything that appeared to amount to much—a two-inch length of barbed wire. While they stared, he fastened it in his coat lapel, hooking it in the fabric by one of the barbs which was bent almost double.

"Why in the hell didn't you let us know in the first place?" Jim Juniper complained.

"I could use a pint of whiskey," the doctor said. . . .

Afterwards, talking to the Indigo Kid, the doctor explained a few things. Jim Juniper escorted the doctor out of the Devil's Pasture, blindfolded, the same as when he went in. They traversed the same sand-blast area outside the Pasture, then they were in the rock again, climbing, descending, turning.

Night caught them, and they threw their blankets and slept, pushed on with the sun the next morning. Somebody had tossed the doctor the dead man's sombrero to wear, so he had some protection now against the furnace glare. It was halfway to noon when

they spoke to the Indigo Kid at Rattlesnake Pass. Jim Juniper made a brief report and turned back. The Indigo Kid assumed the chore of riding herd on the doctor. Together they moved along.

The Indigo Kid was masked, as before. His voice rumbled from beneath the mask as they rode. "Where'd you get the idea, Doc, of flashin' the barb-wire sign when the boys were closin' in on you? From how I heard it, the first time you tried it, at the livery barn in Deep Wells, you near lost your life."

"The way I looked at it," the doctor said, "anything that's important enough for one man to kill for, is important enough for another man to save a life for."

"How'd you know this was the time it would work to save?"

"I took a chance. What did I have to lose? I was a goner anyway."

"You were," the Indigo Kid said positively. "Sorry you were put to all the excitement, Doc. That youngster who threw down on you and started the ruckus was uncommon jumpy on account Henry Gilpin—well, Henry was his brother. You fixed the lad's arm up after, from how they tell me; it'll be all right you say, and I don't think he'll hold a grudge. Most of the boys seem to be complete convinced it wasn't your fault that Gilpin died. He was just plumb too long unattended, that's all. That's the trouble with ridin' the dim trails. A hooter gets shot and he has a hell of a time gettin' the proper doctorin'. Sometimes he's got a bullet wound he don't want to explain, so he can't take a chance of revealin' himself." The Indigo Kid paused. His eyes, looking out from the slit between blue handkerchief mask and sombrero, were hard as quartz. "Now a sawbones who located somewhere abouts, say in Gunsight, and who could be depended on for havin' a steady cuttin' hand and a tight mouth, and who wasn't downright unsympathetic to longriders, might make him some handy money."

"I'll think it over," the doctor said.

"You do that. You'll find quick enough you can't be friends to everyone around here. I'll be sendin' someone for your answer. . . . By the way, that knife you tossed—was it luck?"

"Maybe," the doctor said. "But it didn't used to be. When I was an intern, getting

my start in medicine, I'd sit for long hours on night watches in the hospital waiting for something to happen. I filled in the time by tossing the scalpel around. I got pretty handy. I could stick it anywhere."

"Keep your hand in, Doc," the Indigo Kid advised grimly. "Close up, a knife is as good as a gun; better, some claim."

"I thank you for the advice," the doctor said gravely. "And now, my friend; where are you taking me?"

"I'm going to spot you the trail to Gunsight, Doc. Incidental—what'd you think of the Devil's Pasture, Doc?"

"I wouldn't believe it if I hadn't seen it."

"That's our hole card. No one else quite believes it either. Even men who've lived around here all their lives consider it in about the same light as tall stories about lost gold mines and such, thin facts garbled with the superstitions of the Santa Fe Trail in Coronado's time. Kept your eyes open while you were there, Doc?"

"You've got some fine cows and horses in that pasture."

"Anything else—about the brands maybe?"

"I saw so many different brands I'm all mixed up."

The Indigo Kid nodded in terse satisfaction. "Stay mixed up, Doc. It's healthiest all around in this country."

"The Devil's Pasture," the doctor questioned, "what is it, the crater of an extinct volcano?"

"Could be. I don't know. I do know though that there's no way a man could spot it unless he was forkin' an eagle. The valley's not wide and it snakes around, as you noticed.

"Plenty of high spots in the Devil's Teeth Range, but none of 'em situated in a way that a man could look down from them and see the grass and such."

"You found it," the doctor pointed out. "Why couldn't others stumble onto it in the same way?"

"Possible, but uncommon unlikely. In the first place no one has much occasion to be scrousin' around the Devil's Teeth. Nothin' grows, and there's been neither gold nor silver reported here since the comin' of the white men. Second place, my men control all the outside passes into the Range."

THEY had been moving along through a blistering waste that was all of a sameness. Now, so suddenly that the doctor caught his breath, they came out on a high rimrock. The Indigo Kid didn't have to call a halt. A few more steps and horses and riders would have plunged two thousand feet into—

"Sweetgrass Basin," the Indigo Kid announced. "Your promised land. Look her over, Doc."

Behind them towered the black rock pinnacles of the Devil's Teeth Range, sentinals of a weird unearthly land. But below them lay sanity, with the tawny rangeland stretching into hazy distance as far as a man could see, with here and there a tiny cluster of man-made buildings, with a railroad track climbing into the sky!

The Indigo Kid pointed out a few landmarks. "You mentioned you met an old gent, Open-range Carson, in Chicago, who gave you the steer about Gunsight bein' a likely spot for a sawbones." His hand waved out. "There's the Carson spread where the railroad cuts through. Young Lige Carson rods *Tres Pinos* now. The ranch butts into the Devil's Teeth and extends almost to Gunsight. Directly below us and adjoinin' *Tres Pinos* is old man Chilcott's KZ-connected. The KZ has been a hungry brand these last few years. Ed Chilcott's swallowed and swallowed till now he's runnin' the biggest ranch in the basin. On the other side of him are a couple more big holdin's, Hally Harper's Jackknife brand, and Salt-grass Jimson's Big A 2."

"Has the railroad brought in any farmers?" the doctor wanted to know.

"If you look smart over against skyline you can catch a glimmer that's Crooked Wash Creek. Nesters got a toe-hold along there and in toward Gunsight on the other side. It's a section they call the Patch. Crowdin' Garson's *Tres Pinos* on the off-side are some more nesters and small ranchers."

"Can you see the big trouble from here?"

"What's that?" the Indigo Kid asked sharply.

"I remember old man Carson talked about a 'big trouble' blowing up in Sweetgrass Basin."

"Doc," the Indigo Kid said, "it's a bad habit you got, askin' questions. Keep your

eyes and ears open. If you live long enough you'll learn."

The doctor tried again, not quite so directly this time. "I can see the railroad. My eyes are good enough for that. But I can't catch a sight of the barbed wire where it's strung across the range. From here the basin looks like one solid rollin' plain."

"From down there it looks it too," the Indigo Kid said dryly.

"You mean barbed wire hasn't come to Sweetgrass Basin?" the doctor asked innocently. "I'm surprised. I am, indeed. Barbed wire represents the rolling tide of progress in the fencing world. It furnishes a barrier to man or beast that is pig-tight, horse-high, and bull-strong. It takes up no more room than the edge of a shadow. It shades no grass and uses up no soil—"

"Where'd you get the patter, Doc?"

"From that fence drummer I was telling you about." The doctor had slipped Barb-wire Barney's gold toothpick from his pocket again and was tapping it against his lips in a thoroughly meditative manner.

The Indigo Kid's quartz-brittle stare was on him. "You mean the one in Chicago that was passin' out barb-wire samples in the saloon?"

"That's the one," the doctor said.

"Doc, leave me give you one last warnin'. When you get down there in the basin, you'll find a man in Gunsight they call Deuce Le Deux. He rods the town like Chilcott rode the range. Step easy around both those gents. When you open your mouth, talk about things you know, like doctorin' and the weather. Try not to hold nothin' in your hand more controversial than a bottle of pills or a operatin' instrument. Most special, go easy on flashin' that piece of barb wire you got. You've crowded your luck about as far as it'll go."

The doctor laughed shortly. "Luck," he said, "what's luck? The Ides of March come on apace; a month a year, a little space . . . in which to laugh, to love, to drink . . . ah, drink's the thing— Hell, I'm making poetry, my friend."

"Doc," the Indigo Kid asked suspiciously, "did Juniper slip a pint in your pocket before you left the Pasture?"

"No." The doctor chuckled. "But I slipped a pint out of *his* pocket."

"Doc," the Indigo Kid pried further, "is



it just possible you don't give much of a damn whether you live or die?"

"Such a question!" The doctor sounded shocked. "Why only yesterday I saw a girl who made me very much want to live—very very much indeed—"

"Hold it, Doc," the Indigo Kid said, and repeated the identical words of Jim Juniper. "She's staked out."

The doctor looked dejected.

The Indigo Kid leaned from saddle. "I'll tell you what. You'll more'n like meet another one down there on the Chilcott range that'll suit your fancy even better. . . . Now I'm leavin' you on your own, and you better get goin' if you want to make Gun-sight by night."

## CHAPTER VII

### A GUN AND A GIRL

**R**IDING down the rimrock trail with his pack horse in tow, the doctor nipped sparingly at his bottle of whiskey, and tried to strike a balance in his mind of what he had learned and what he had yet to find out. He estimated that in one day he had learned more about the ways of life of the Indigo Kid and his dreaded Blue Blazers than even old-timers in the basin could tell him. He had challenged the Indigo Kid's notoriously callous trigger finger, and he still lived. He hadn't collected a .44 caliber bullet in the back, nor had he been wrapped in barbed wire and rolled down a long hill.

Specifically, he had identified the Blue Blazers with the barb-wire sign and with Barb-wire Barney. He hadn't, however, established their connection with the barb-wire problem. He didn't even know what the problem was!

But he'd made a start, and there were other people in other places to investigate. He still had plenty of time—well not *plenty* of time. The Ides of March waited for no man. But time enough anyhow for a drink.

A bleakness set on his face as he took another drink. . . .

He rode until he was down on the grassy plain. At the first cut-bank, where he could be sure he was out of sight from long-range glasses, he dismounted, spread his blanket on the ground, and stood on it. Then he shook out his pockets and his button shoes,

and turned his hat band back and shook that. When he had collected every loose grain of black sand he could find, he opened his medicine case and took out a bottle. With his cupped hand he funneled the black sand carefully into the bottle. He corked it and shook the sand around.

"Now," he mused, "if I ever go looking for the Devil's Pasture all I have to do is find a windy patch of black sand that looks like this. I'll know the entrance to the pasture can't be far off." He stowed the bottle away in his case. "Not much to go on—but there are the other things too, the Mexican gold and the forty-four slug and the piece of barbed wire. My exhibits are growing. Sooner or later I'll connect them up." He thought about that for a moment, then took another drink. "It better be sooner," he told himself.

He rode on—and the loneliness of the undulating rangeland rode with him. He topped swell after swell and everything was the same. Sky and grass. There was too much of both for his eastern mind to assimilate. He felt uneasy. He wanted to see a tree or a fence. He wanted to touch a wall. Sky and grass, with only an occasional cut-bank with its clumps of thorny mesquite to relieve the oppressive monotony. He kept turning in saddle to look behind. He was almost certain he was being followed. Once a jack rabbit leaped up ahead of him. It looked as big as a wolf.

Now he knew how Barb-wire Barney had felt about Sweetgrass Basin. "Somethin' squeezy about the whole set-up," Barney had insisted. "Like a curse was laid over the land. It broods and simmers under the sky . . . like all hell's about to break loose."

The "big trouble"—

"Me and my boys are goin' to need your services sudden, Doc," the Indigo Kid, back on the rimrock, had made positive assertion.

The "big trouble?"

"Well," the doctor spoke aloud, stirring restlessly in saddle, "trouble's what I came looking for."

"Trouble's what you've got, Mister."

The doctor started so violently he nearly lost his stirrups. He looked around for the speaker. He didn't see anyone. He was riding at the moment along the boulder-cluttered bed of an *arroyo*. Thickets of

bristling mesquite added to the unreality of the moment. The mesquite was rooted two feet above the level of the *arroyo* floor. Its roots were that much exposed, revealing how tenaciously in the face of successive floods which had gutted the gravelly floor, the mesquite had clung to life.

The doctor kept looking. What kind of country was this where men spied on every move you made, and where talking men appeared from nowhere? First, the Indigo Kid. Now—

THE talking man moved into sight from behind a dense thicket of the mesquite, walking his horse toward the doctor slowly. The man was like so many others the doctor had met since stumbling off the train at Deep Wells. He was dressed like a cowboy, but he looked like a gunman. He had those same hard eyes, tight lips, expressionless features. A scar that ran across one cheek was his only mark of distinction.

The doctor thought it might be a good idea to get the lip-drop on him. So he gave him a hearty western greeting. He said, "Howdy, stranger."

"Who's a stranger?" the man cut back. His hand was on the butt of the six-gun in his holster. "You're trespassin' on Chilcott's KZ-connected. Think up a good story fast."

"I'm the—sawbones from Gunsight," the doctor told him pleasantly.

The man removed his gun from holster and lined on the doctor's middle. "There ain't no sawbones in Gunsight."

"There will be . . . soon as I can get there."

"Don't be so sure you're goin' to get there. Where you from?"

"I came through the Devil's Teeth from Deep Wells."

"You what!"

"I said—"

"I heard you. And you're locoed—or you're one of 'em."

"I take it, my friend, you aren't."

The man moved in closer with his gun. "Aren't what?"

"One of 'em."

"I damn sure ain't!"

"Now we're getting somewhere," the doctor said with enthusiasm. "I damn sure ain't either. What do you think of that?"

The man's face was turning a sullen red

in his anger. He cursed suddenly. "No one of them Blazers is goin' to make a fool out of me—"

"Now, now, my friend," the doctor admonished, "bad for the blood pressure." Moving slow, to be sure to invite no bullet from that close-leveled gun barrel, he worked his whiskey bottle from his coat pocket. He uncorked the bottle and held it out. "Have a drink."

"With a Blazer? A back-shootin', cow-thievin' Blazer? Mister, I got instructions to gun Blue Blazers on sight, and if you can ride their trails you're one of 'em." His finger tensed on trigger. "Know any quick reason why I don't let you have it?"

"Yes," the doctor said, "this!" He smashed down against the man's outstretched gun hand with his whiskey bottle.

Since the doctor's hand was already holding out the bottle before he began his smash, he didn't have to move his body or give any sign of his intention. A quick move of the wrist and forearm—and the surprise was complete.

The man gave an involuntary howl when the bottle whacked his knuckles. His fingers went wide. The six-shooter dropped.

So did the doctor!

It wasn't a clean leap by any means. He pitched sideways off his horse and landed in an ungainly sprawl. Both horses reared. Hoofs missed the doctor narrowly. The KZ man tried to ride him down. But the doctor scooped the gun from the gravel bed and scuttled backwards between two boulders.

The KZ rider didn't wait. He wheeled his bronc. Gravel scudded from the hoofs as he put in the spurs and started away, holding low. The doctor speeded his departure with a blast from the recovered gun. He didn't mean to shoot the man, only give him a good scare. So he aimed at the ground.

He didn't allow for the upward kick of the heavy weapon. Consequently, the man on the horse wasn't the only one who was surprised when the bullet slammed through the crown of his sombrero. The man kept riding, and the doctor chuckled.

"Try laughin' outta the other side of your mouth, you buzzard!"

It was a new voice and it was directly behind the doctor. He turned. A hard-

25  
faced gent, the twin of the first one except for the scar, had moved out from behind the mesquite. He had a six-gun bead on the doctor.

He laughed harshly. "We ride paired-up on the KZ. I thought you Blazers knew that. . . . Drop the hog-leg."

The doctor let his gun fall to the ground. The man who had sprinted away, had wheeled and was riding back now. He had his hat off and was looking at the bullet hole.

"I just put out forty iron men for this sky-piece," he complained, as he rode close. "Now look at it. He claims he's a saw-bones—and he shoots like that!"

Jamming the hat back on his head, he reached for the rope that hung looped from his saddle. "A little hemp medicine will cure him. We'll send him back to the Indigo Kid diamond-hitched to his own nag—and his neck broke."

It looked like a one-way trip for the doctor. With the loop tight on his neck, they led him along the dried watercourse looking for a ledge of rock that would serve to throw the rope over.

Off across the tawny rangeland floor a small cloud of dust bloomed and rolled closer as a horse, hard-riden, approached.

ONE of the KZ men jerked his head in annoyance. "That'll be the Pest. I've been thinkin' it was about time she showed. Let's get this over so's there won't be any argument."

The man with the scar on his face—and the bullet hole in his hat—tossed the rope over a projecting knob of sandstone. The rock broke at the first pressure. It plunked on the ground at the doctor's feet after narrowly missing his head.

"That'll be one way to get him if we can't find a place to anchor the rope solid." The man threw a glance over his shoulder. "The Pest's gettin' closer."

"Maybe she'll take a header and bust her brains before she gets here. The way she always rides—"

"I ain't bankin' on it." He scanned the shallow ledge, looking for a place he could use as a makeshift scaffold. He cursed when he didn't find it.

"Tell you what," the doctor said, obligingly, "I could double up my legs and you

wouldn't have to drop the rope from so high."

They stared at him, both of them frankly gaping.

The scar-faced man rubbed his stubbled jaw. "Sounds like the long bag of bones don't care if he croaks or not."

"He's stallin', that's all. Come on . . . get this over with."

"Come on where? What we gonna hang him on?"

"All right, tie his arms and dab the rope on your saddle horn and drag him around."

"Ain't got time."

"You might wrap me up in barbed wire and roll me down a hill," the doctor suggested. "If we could find a good long hill."

"I'm tellin' you he's locoed!" the scar-faced man said.

"Well, gun him then, like you started in the first place. With the Pest rarin' down on us, it's all there's time for."

The doctor played his last action-delaying card. With this pair so obviously hostile to the Indigo Kid, he didn't look for his action to do any permanent good. But it could gain time.

He flashed the barb-wire sign. "Here is something I've been meaning to show you playful boys." He held out the piece of barbed wire, and motioned with his other hand. "Come closer. I want to pin it on one of you."

For a long moment they stared. Their curses burned the air at the same instant. They looked at each other and back at the doctor. Their hands reached for their guns.

But by that time the "Pest" was close in, and haunching a calico pony to a fast stop.

The girl wore a boy's rodeo shirt of bright yellow silk, unbuttoned at the top, rolling softly away from the sun-kilned skin of her throat. She wore fringed elkskin gauntlets, serviceable corduroy riding breeches, and tiny boots, worn down at the heels a little and scuffed from hard riding through rock and mesquite.

Her handkerchief of soft green silk was tied to make a covering for her hair—coppery red, the hair, where it showed between folds of the green silk; and the eyes, hazel.

Just now they were blazing hazel. She sat her saddle, looking down on them. Her small shoulders rose and fell with her breathing. Her small mobile mouth trembled.

"What do you think you're doing?" she lashed out at the KZ pair. "Release this man immediately!"

They just looked at her at first, registering acute male displeasure at being ordered around by a girl.

"Ditch Tatum," she addressed the scar-faced man, "do you hear me? I said—"

"We heard you, Miss Chilcott. It's just—you don't understand."

"I understand! You're *murdering* this man—"

"But he's one of the Blue Blazers!"

"Oh!" Her voice showed the shock she felt.

Ditch Tatum was quick to press his advantage. "We got our orders from your father what to do to any Blazers we catch on KZ territory."

With a half shrinking glance the girl was studying the doctor. "He certainly doesn't look like one of them," she decided.

"He shoots like one." Ditch Tatum held up his ruined hat.

"It's some kind of trick of the Indigo Kid's," his sidekick declared, "sendin' this harmless lookin' buzzard to gun us in the back."

"He doesn't look like a man to team with an outlaw pack," the girl said again. "He looks—more like one who might run with that ratty town crowd of Deuce Le Deux! He looks more like a tinhorn gambler or—"

"A doctor, Madam. Dr. Clyde Arington." He bowed.

"He's been claimin' he's Gunsight's new sawbones," Ditch Tatum explained. "But your idea sounds all right. Maybe he's lined up with Deuce Le Deux. And him comin' from the Devil's Teeth, that only puts a clincher on what your father's been sayin' all along—that Deuce Le Deux and the Indigo Kid were hand in glove. One's as bad as the other, so whether it's Le Deux or the Kid—or both—that this skinny buzzard is servin', he deserves what we're fixin' to serve *him*. So if you'll run along now, we'll just go ahead—"

"You will not! . . . He says he's a doctor. There's an easy way to find out. Look in his pack."

While she watched, they cursed and muttered—and looked in his pack. They found enough medical supplies and surgical instruments to convince them.

"I'm still for stringin' him up," Ditch Tatum declared. "Doctors can kill as well as cure. And if Deuce Le Deux is importin' him, it's a cinch he's a killer. Doctors got lots of ways, with pills and knives. Lots of ways to kill. This one can even shoot. Look at my hat!"

The girl had the final word. "You boys move along and leave him with me."

**B**ECAUSE she was the pampered daughter of their boss, they let her have her way.

"If he murders you, don't blame us," Ditch Tatum growled back as he and his sidekick turned to ride away.

Left alone, the doctor and the girl surveyed each other. She was still astride the calico pony. He had to look up to her. He had an impression that men had always looked up to her. In a feudal country, and her father the largest land owner, that was natural enough. He wondered if her father's money, her frontier social position, had spoiled her. He decided it probably had.

She was like a thoroughbred, if he sized her up right—and he had done a lot of sizing in his professional life—a grand thing at a horse show, but lacking a fighting heart; nothing to bank on for a cavalry charge or a grinding up-hill pull.

She was prettier than the girl he had met at the Devil's Pasture. He had to admit that. She had an almost breathless perfection of face and figure. Even in corduroy pants she looked good. That was something. And she was poised without being cold. That was something more.

But she'd lose that poise the instant she was off familiar ground. She'd fizzle fast. She wouldn't make nearly as good a nurse, for instance, as the girl at Devil's Pasture.

Or as good a wife!

She was first a lady. That was her trouble. The other girl was first and last a woman. A woman of the people. Not enthroned in a saddle. Both feet on the ground. He remembered the other girl's brown capable hands, her sweet face, so patiently enduring the grief that had shaken her resolute body. But most of all he remembered the fire in her eyes. There was a woman to love, and build a life with—

But here before him, on the horse, was the woman who had *saved* his life!

"For saving my life," he said, "I thank you."

"What's that?" she asked, startled at his sudden speech.

"My life." He took off his sombrero and bowed.

She thought he was mocking her, and color flushed her cheeks.

"You're very lovely," he said. "You're more than pretty; you're beautiful."

Her small red mouth pressed tight in annoyance. "That isn't what you were thinking all this time."

He sighed. "Do you really want to know what I was thinking?"

"No," she said, "I'm not interested."

He chuckled. "Then you *are* different from other women . . . and you practically force me to tell you. I was thinking you wouldn't make a very good nurse."

She tossed her head. "I have no intention of becoming a nurse."

"I was thinking you wouldn't make a very good wife either."

"Oh!" Now the color did rush to her cheeks. Her poise deserted her. "You—you scarecrow! What kind of husband do you think *you'd* make?"

"I don't even think about it." He smiled suddenly. When he did that it took some of the scarecrow look away from him, made him seem appealingly warm and human—and defenseless.

Perhaps it was this last quality that got through to her. Some of the hostility left her glance. This man with his face blotched and cracked from sunburn, his thin face with the cheek bones jutting; his thin shoulders hunched until it seemed they would poke through his ridiculous black coat—He'd be a tall man if he'd stand straight. Why, if he filled out a little, he'd be handsome!

Her own superb body relaxed in saddle. There was genuine solicitude in her voice when she said, "You ought to do something for that sunburn."

He smiled again. "It's not important."

"What is important, Doctor?"

"Whiskey."

She made a little grimace. "It's odd," she said, "how much better I'm liking you by the minute!"

"The ghost of my bed-side manner coming to haunt you. Now tell me, how did you happen to arrive so opportunely?"

"I heard your shot. I do a lot of riding. Dad's short-handed. There are plenty of things I can help him with. I'm more than ornamental, really."

"I'm sure you are." He frowned. "Your two riders who stopped me—I've been wondering; this is only my second day in the West—would you call them typical cow-boys?"

"Typical *gunmen!*" Her patrician nose wrinkled in acute dislike. "The one you put the bullet through his hat—Ditch Tatum, they call him, because of that scar like a ditch across his cheek. The other one—I don't even know his name, he's so new. Dad's been importing gun-hands wholesale lately."

"There's a big trouble blowing up?" He slid the question in easily.

"A big trouble? What do you mean?"

"I was talking to the Indigo Kid. He mentioned he expected to need the services of a doctor. Sudden was the word he used. I was wondering if it was your father's gun-hands that were worrying him."

Her eyes chilled. "So it's true, what Ditch Tatum said! You're an outlaw's doctor!"

"Nothing of the kind, my dear young lady. Until yesterday I had never heard of this remarkable personage, the Indigo Kid. I met him by chance when I was riding over the Devil's Teeth from Deep Wells. He guided me through Rattlesnake Pass."

SOME of the friendly interest which had drained from her face, returned. "You met the Indigo Kid! Tell me about him. What did he say?"

"He talked about you, for one thing."

"About me?" she gasped.

"He said I'd probably run across a girl on the Chilcott range that I'd like even better than the one I met at the Devil's Pasture."

"The Devil's Pasture!" She laughed nervously. "I see you're acquainted with our local superstitions." As though impelled by some force beyond her power to resist, she lifted her glance to the high Devil's Teeth pinnacles. "Sometimes I've wondered," she said, soberly. "There must be unexplored sections in the Devil's Teeth Range. Cattle can't disappear in thin air. Or men either. They have to go somewhere, don't they?" She looked toward the doctor again, and for

just a moment let him see some of the tension she was under, as she poured words in sudden outburst. "Why should you come here? Why? Why should anyone come when they don't have to? Life must be good outside this valley! There must be people out there who trust and love! People who don't live every minute under a terror. Why don't you go away? Quick, while there's still time—" She bit her lip. "I've said too much. Forget it."

"Perhaps you'll tell me this," the doctor murmured. "Are you staked out?"

"Am I what?"

"Every girl I've met since I got off the train at Deep Wells has been 'staked out'."

The barest hint of amusement came to her eyes. "Just who do you think I might be staked out to?"

"I thought, perhaps, Lige Carson."

"Lige Carson!" Her nose wrinkled strenuously. "Of all the stubborn, mulish men on earth— Lige Carson doesn't know enough to come in out of the rain! He can't save his own hide, and he won't let anybody else save it for him—" She popped her hand over her mouth. "I'm talking out of turn again. But that gives you some idea what I think of Lige Carson."

"It gives me a very good idea. My diagnoses is that you are in love with him."

"I hope," she retorted, "you diagnose your patients' sickness with more accuracy."

He smiled. "Love is a sickness, wouldn't you say?"

She leaned toward him in saddle. "Only when it's not returned, Doctor."

"That's one for your side." He looked around. "I'd better collect my horses and start moving."

Her eyes flashed. "The Indigo Kid guided you through his domain, you said. I'll do as much for you on the KZ. It's not far from here to the *Tres Pinos* border. Before you trail all the way through that you'll likely meet Lige Carson. He watches his range these days as closely as we do ours."

## CHAPTER VIII

### TAG—YOU'RE DEAD

THE doctor did better than meet Lige Carson. He met Lige Carson and old man Chilcott both. The two were engrossed in

talk near their common borderline. When the doctor rode up with Myrna Chilcott they turned in saddle to stare.

Myrna made the introductions. "Father, Lige . . . this is Dr. Clyde Arington. He's on his way to set up practice in Gunsight."

"On the way from where?" Ed Chilcott asked bluntly.

"From Deep Wells," the doctor made soft answer. "Over the Devil's Teeth Range by way of Rattlesnake Pass."

"The hell you say!" Ed Chilcott looked him over, suspicion in his glance. The owner of the KZ-connected was a stocky man with iron-gray hair and brows. He was smooth shaven, and had a naturally florid complexion. He looked as little like his daughter as possible, with a pug nose and drooping bull-dog jowls.

"Dad doesn't trust his own shadow any more," Myrna told the doctor. "You mustn't mind if he shows his teeth and snaps at you."

"Expecting trouble?" the doctor led off, agreeably. "The Indigo Kid was too."

Ed Chilcott's face turned a genuine bull-dog purple. Before his thick lips could push out words, Myrna said, "Now, Dad, quiet down. Dr. Arington met the Indigo Kid on his way across the Range, that was all. The Indigo Kid even guided him to our property line!"

Lige's reaction was the one that interested the doctor. He looked at this assured young man who, in contrast with Chilcott, sat his saddle quietly, watching and waiting, reserving judgment. The doctor was drawn to him instantly. Lige reminded him amazingly of that grand old-timer, Open-range Carson. He had his father's same big frame, though more solidly muscled; he had the same strong face, and his blue eyes were truly remarkable. They had the blend of imagination, intelligence, and humanity that had endeared Open-range Carson to the doctor; and they had a restlessness, a driving force that was fully the equal of the old frontiersman's.

Lige asked a question. There was a reminiscent timbre in his voice that gave the doctor a start.

"What do you think of our country, Doc?"

"It was a good opening for the doctor. "What do I think of your country?" he answered. "It's big! Not even a tree or a

fence to limit it. Back East the landscape's all cut up with green hedges. And barbed wire's come in the last few years. Say, I've seen factories turning out barbed wire by the mile. Where does it all go? We can't use it all in the corn and wheat country, and I don't see any here."

Ed Chilcott answered that one. "Nobody's fencin'," he said.

The doctor tried to make his next question sound casual, "Why not?" He turned his glance to include Lige Carson.

Lige said, merely, "It's not practical."

The doctor hid his disappointment. "Has it ever been tried?"

LIGE nodded. "The Old Man bought a whole carload of it the last time he was East. It's in the shed now—rustin'."

"But why?" the doctor persisted.

"You heard what Lige said," Ed Chilcott barked. "For Sweetgrass Basin barb-wire ain't practical."

The doctor shook his head stubbornly. "I always heard barbed wire was going to revolutionize ranching—"

"Listen, Doc," Ed Chilcott barked again, "maybe we don't want it revolutionized. Maybe we like things the way they are." He turned searching eyes on Lige. "How about it, son?"

"I'm not complainin'," Lige said.

"That beats me," the doctor declared. "I heard a salesman once in a saloon in Chicago—I can remember his very words. 'Barbed wire,' he said, 'is the answer to the cattleman's prayer. It furnishes a barrier to man or beast that's pig-tight, horse-high, and bull-strong—'"

That was as far as the doctor got. At his first quoted words Ed Chilcott and Lige had swapped quick informing glances. Now Lige broke in to ask, "This wire drummer, was he a little fat fella with a baby face and a tongue that would talk the spots off a paint horse? Did he carry a gold toothpick on his watch chain?"

"That's the one," the doctor said, raising his voice to sound excited. "Fish-mouthed, and always smoking a stogy. He gave me one of his cards. It was an odd name. I don't remember—"

"Barb-wire Barney," Ed Chilcott supplied.

"That's it! Well, well."

"Small world after all," Chilcott said, an edge of sarcasm to his voice.

"How long ago was he here?"

"Not so long ago."

"Do my heart good to see him again. I wonder where he is now?"

"There's varied surmises on that. He left no forwardin' address."

"You don't mean—" the doctor hesitated—"he met with foul play?"

Ed Chilcott appealed to Lige with an eloquent look. "Now did I say anything like that?"

"No," Lige cooperated, "you didn't." He turned to the doctor. "You've been askin' a lot of questions. Now answer one. Can you think of any reason why a barb-wire company or maybe a Chicago detective agency might send a man to Sweetgrass Basin pretendin' to be a drunken doctor?"

MYRNA CHILCOTT'S quick laugh cut through the tension. "Wrong guess, Lige. He's drunk and he's a doctor. Ditch Tatum checked him on that."

The doctor nodded. "I've been searched by experts. The Indigo Kid was the first one."

"The Indigo Kid's recommendations," Ed Chilcott snorted, "don't pack much weight in Sweetgrass Basin—unless with Deuce Le Deux."

It was an item the doctor was pleased to have verified. He gave it thoughtful consideration while they searched his things. Lige Carson ran across the bottle containing the black sand from the sand-blast strip near the hidden entrance to the Devil's Pasture. He held it up.

"What's this?"

"That?" the doctor stalled. "Some gold-bearing sand I bought from a fellow in Deep Wells."

Lige shook the sand in the bottle. "Where's the gold in it?"

"It requires a chemical treatment to make it show, the man told me."

Lige Carson's eyes were narrowed in thought. "Where'd it come from?"

"That's just what I was going to ask you. He never could find the place again. The sand covers a whole valley floor, he said, somewhere in the Devil's Teeth. You'll notice it's weathered down in peculiar fash-



ion. I never saw any sand just like it, did you?"

Lige passed on the remark to Chilcott. He held up the bottle. "Make anything out of this?"

Chilcott looked. "No," he grunted.

"Perhaps," Myrna contributed, with mock seriousness, "it came from the Devil's Pasture. Did we tell you the doctor spent yesterday at the Pasture? He saw a lot of KZ-connected and Three Pines cows there."

"There certainly were a lot of them," the doctor remarked.

They paid absolutely no attention to the Devil's Pasture talk, as the Indigo Kid had warned him they wouldn't. The doctor was really impressed by this time that, in being allowed to visit the Devil's Pasture, he had been extended a rare privilege. The place was so carefully guarded that its very existence was doubted!

"You got played for a sucker on this sand, Doc," Lige Carson told him. "Shall I throw it away, or do you want to keep it for a souvenir?"

"I'll keep it," the doctor said.

While Lige was poking the bottle back in the case, the doctor was standing near him, engineering an act of his own. He was feeling in his pocket for the piece of barb wire. It was his plan to drop it unobtrusively on the ground, and pretend to discover it . . . and carefully observe the effect of the discovery on all present.

Everyone could be as close-mouthed as they pleased, but soon he would have enough accumulated data from observing and comparing reactions to the barb-wire sign and his other trinkets, to make some reasonable deductions of his own. After he finished up here, there would be only this Gunsight slicker, Deuce Le Deux, that everybody talked about, to include in his pattern of investigation.

There'd be time . . . there would have to be time! A hunch he had had from the first was rapidly becoming a conviction. He wasn't down here on a mere vengeance prowl, to bring justice to men already dead. He was here to keep more from dying! There was the haunting fear on the face of the girl at Devil's Pasture. There were these lies Lige Carson—and probably Chilcott too—had felt impelled to tell. A few weeks ago Lige had ordered a whole train load of barbed

wire. Now he asserted he didn't want fences in Sweetgrass Basin. Why? It was something, it seemed, that the doctor was going to have to find out for himself. He had counted on Lige Carson to be his most valuable ally. But even Lige remained dumb under this blight of fear which blanketed the basin and extended far beyond the Devil's Teeth Range.

Far in space and far in time. Three years at least since the doctor had heard of the big trouble—

Lige Carson cut in on his tragic speculations. His voice was sharp, incisive. Lige had put away the bottle of sand and was still poking through the doctor's gear. The doctor's fingers, probing his own pocket had located the piece of barbed wire. He was on the point of dropping it and going into his act—pretending to discover it and observing the effect of his discovery.

But he held off when he caught the note of alarm in Lige Carson's voice.

"Doc, come here," Lige said. "Somethin' you ought to see. And somethin' you've got to hear, if you don't already know."

The doctor moved closer, peered inside his satchel where Lige had half unrolled an official looking document and was holding it open. It was the doctor's license to practice medicine in the state of Illinois. The place where the doctor's name was neatly written in with undying India ink was partly obscured now—by a two-inch piece of barbed wire!

ONE of the barbs had been bent almost double and it was thrust through the heavy paper in the same manner a similar one had once penetrated the personal business card of the fencing world's ace drummer, Barb-wire Barney.

Ed Chilcott and his daughter, Myrna, were looking too. Chilcott was ominously silent. Myrna gave a startled little gasp.

"Maybe you know it and maybe you don't, Doc," Lige said tightly, "but you appear to have been tagged by the Indigo Kid's barb-wire sign."

The doctor played along. "The barb-wire sign?"

"Others that's been tagged with it," Ed Chilcott said bluntly, "have died, violent and sudden."

"The Ides of March," the doctor mur-

mured. Unexplainably, he commenced to laugh softly to himself.

"It ain't a laughin' matter, Doc," Lige told him.

"That's for me to know, my friend," the doctor insisted. "One more question please. You said I *appear* to have been tagged. Is there, then, some doubt of it?"

"Considerable, I'd say—if you aren't who you appear to be. If you're a barb-wire company detective, for instance, posin' as a doctor driftin' into Gunsight just to make a livin'."

"And in that case?"

"In that case you could have put the death tag on yourself."

"Why would I do that?"

"To throw off suspicion from yourself, so you could do your detectin' unopposed."

"What detecting, my friend?"

"That's somethin'," Ed Chilcott broke in, "you ought to know even better than us."

The doctor shook his head. "There's no way to prove it, but I didn't put the wire there myself."

"Your dead body'll prove it then," Ed Chilcott said.

Myrna broke in, her hazel eyes flashing. "You're perfectly horrid, both of you!" Her words were directed equally to her father and Lige. "Because the terror has gripped this range for so long, you've lost your perspective completely. I doubt if you even trust each other. And you might at least show a little concern for a total stranger who's dropped into our—our hell-brew—and through no fault of his own has been picked to die. I've had a long talk with Dr. Arington. He's a doctor. It's as simple as that. It's cruel of you both to try to twist it into anything else. Cruel and not very intelligent!" Instinctively she moved closer to the doctor, as though to shield him.

"That's your emotion talkin', Myrna," her father said, "not your reason. If he met the Indigo Kid yesterday, why didn't the Kid gulch him instead of draggin' it out with this barb-wire hocus-pocus?"

"Who knows why the Indigo Kid does what he does?" Myrna flared. "He's never been consistent before. Why should he start now?"

"There's this possibility," Lige said thoughtfully. "If the doctor's on the level with us, and he's sure enough been tagged

by the Kid, it could be in the nature of a warnin' tag." His level eyes probed the doctor's face. "Did the Kid by any chance ask you to be his medico?"

"It amounted to that," the doctor admitted. "Said I'd find down in Gunsight that I couldn't be friends to everybody. Said his crew expected to need a lot of 'doctorin' sudden'. Said he'd be sending for my answer."

Hard triumph showed in Lige Carson's eyes. "There it is. The barb-wire tag could be a warning for you to make up your mind. When the Kid sends for your answer you'd be the one to say whether you became an outlaw's medico, or—"

"Or got my bullet-weighted body wrapped in barbed wire and rolled down a long hill?"

"It's been done before!" Ed Chilcott's bull-dog jaws snapped shut over his words. Then he stepped so close the doctor could feel the man's hot breath on his face. "And Doc—if you are a doctor, which I'm still some in doubt—leave me give you a tip. While you're waitin' for the Indigo Kid to send for his answer, keep sober enough to know what's goin' on around you. And don't be surprised if the Kid's question is put to you by way of a gent they call Deuce Le Deux."

"I've been hearing a lot about Deuce Le Deux," the doctor said, "and none of it good."

"You'll be hearing more," Lige promised, "And none of it good. From a little room in the Crystal Palace Saloon he sits in his plum-colored pantaloons and beaded vest, and runs all of Gunsight. And his ambitions don't stop there."

The doctor hazarded a guess. "A squeeze play perhaps, between this Deuce Le Deux and the Indigo Kid for control of Sweet-grass Basin?"

"Draw your own conclusions, Doc—and keep your powder dry."

MYRNA, standing near the doctor's open satchel, had spied a jar of medicated salve. Her hand darted in and picked it up. She had the lid off in a jiffy. "You must do something about that sunburn," she told the doctor. "If you won't, I will. . . . Here, stand still."

She tossed aside his protests, and put a

small firm arm around him to hold him when he started to back away. Her touch was gentle.

"May I take back something I said?" he questioned. "I believe you would make a good nurse after all."

Her hazel eyes smouldered. "The time will come," she promised, "when you'll take the other back too."

Lige Carson was holding them under a speculative gaze. "What other?" he asked.

She flashed him a quick glance. "The doctor said he didn't think I'd make a very good wife. What do you think, Lige?"

Ed Chilcott made a disagreeable noise in his throat, and stomped toward his horse, plainly embarrassed at the turn the talk had taken. Lige, himself, looked confused. He didn't say what he thought.

What the doctor thought was that this whole act of the girl's was put on for Lige Carson's benefit. If he had ever seen a young couple that were meant for each other, it was this pair. With trouble weighting him down, Lige, it appeared, was slow to recognize it. But not so, the girl.

Regardless of the impulse that might have prompted it, Myrna's action was the first bit of solicitude the doctor had experienced for a long while. He couldn't help being a little touched by it.

"You're very kind," he said.

"I can't help but think that you are too," she said, "in spite of the way you started right in saying unflattering things about me."

He smiled in that half-mocking way. "You see, Miss Chilcott, there comes a time in a man's life when he realizes he doesn't have to make the effort to be polite anymore—"

"But that's only for very old people," she protested. "The ones whose lives are finished, people who have folded their hands and are just waiting. They can afford to be cantankerous. But there's no excuse for you to be like that. You're young—"

"It's more than personal vanity that compels me to insist," the doctor said gently, cryptically, "that mine is a very special case."

Ed Chilcott overheard the last part of the remark. "I'll say it's special. Either you're too dumb to know up from nothin', or else you know a lot too much."

The doctor raised his glance to the black

and brooding Devil's Teeth pinnacles in the direction from which he had come. Then he looked over the tawny roll of rangeland in the direction of Gunsight where he was going. Then he looked at his watch.

"I know too much," he said.

## CHAPTER IX

### A SAWBONES FOR GUNSIGHT

IT WAS nearing sundown when the doctor dragged into Gunsight. Dragged was the name for it. This was more riding than he had done in one stretch in his life. Trail's end! He lifted tired, red-rimmed eyes to survey the rambling clutter of adobes, and shacks of unpainted, sun-warped board.

He didn't have to sniff high to know that Barb-wire Barney's estimate had been right—the smell of death was on this place. It dripped with the dust from the hoofs of his horses. It shimmered on the day's heat that rose in waves from the sun-baked ground. It glinted from the rails that stretched into distance two ways from the boxcar station.

Death. The doctor should know. His business was the preservation of life, but—as in the case at Devil's Pasture—he dealt in death sometimes unwittingly.

A few men were astir on the town's single street. They were more of the silent, hard-faced brand. They watched the doctor without appearing to—slant-wise, as Barb-wire Barney had expressed it—as he moved on past Shively and Neeson's big livery barn at the edge of town, and rode slowly past Harry Rettburg's blacksmith shop, past the Little Gem restaurant, past Tom Taylor's Post Office Emporium . . . and climbed stiffly from saddle in front of the town's most imposing structure.

It was a building with a wooden awning that extended out over the plank sidewalk. Ornamental spindles had once adorned the front of the awning. But cowboys, feeling their oats, prompted by the same exuberance that makes a boy throw a snowball at a row of icicles, had long since shot most of them out. Above the awning on the high false front a sign in sun-faded lavender paint proclaimed that this was the CRYSTAL PALACE SALOON.

The doctor hitched under the shade of a dusty-leaved cottonwood, crossed the side-

walk, pushed through the paint-scaled doors. For a moment he stood blinking to accustom his eyes to the shadowed interior. Then he moved forward, scuffing sawdust. At the bar he hefted his black bag to the imitation mahogany, took a good foot-hold on the rail, and ordered whiskey.

The bartender was short and fat, known locally as Barrelhouse. He set out a bottle and a glass and watched while the doctor poured himself a drink. With the glass half-way to his lips, the doctor's hand started trembling so violently that whiskey sloshed out and wet his fingers. The bartender turned to look where the doctor was looking: at the bar mirror.

"What's the matter?" he asked, sarcastically. "You so tough you scared of your own reflection?"

"Been losing sleep," the doctor muttered. "Got the jitters."

He downed the drink along with another quick one—and tried to keep his glance from straying back to the lower left-hand corner of the mirror where, plain as day, stuck in the loose frame, was one of Barbwire Barney's oversized advertising cards!

The first one, the doctor was vividly recalling, had shown up at the Devil's Pasture. It was beginning to look as though everyone was right in tying up the Indigo Kid with Deuce Le Deux at the Crystal Palace. All right, he'd feel his way along. Things were beginning to add up now.

The bartender was swiping his damp bar rag in the direction of the doctor's medicine grip. "Get your sample case off my bar before I shove it off," he ordered. "Whatever you've got to sell, I don't want any."

"I'm selling life, my friend," the doctor said.

He left his black bag where it was, and the bartender's hammy hand reached out and shoved it off. "I told you—"

"And I'm telling you, my friend!" The doctor caught the bag before it hit the floor and planked it hard atop the bar again.

The bartender muttered under his breath and reached out both hands with the intention of knocking the case to the floor and maybe it's owner too. He stopped with his soggy fingernails scraping the leather. He stopped because his scarecrow customer had whipped out a deadly looking instrument.

It was a hypodermic syringe. The doctor

rested his arm on the black bag and held the unfamiliar object of gleaming steel, glass, and red rubber where the needle was within inches of the bartender's puffy hand.

"The slightest jab with this needle, my friend," the doctor warned, "and you die. I keep the instrument filled with a particularly loathsome poison."

As a matter of fact, the glass barrel was empty, but the bartender wasn't in position to know that. He sputtered, glared—and was careful not to move his hands as much as a quarter of an inch until the doctor drew back and returned the instrument to his inside coat pocket.

"I can draw it," he warned again, "as fast as you can draw a gun. I can even throw it if necessary, the way no doubt you've seen me throw a knife. Now that we understand each other, my friend, I invite you to have a drink with me."

THE bartender drank with him, but he didn't feel easy about it, and he didn't take a chance on pouring his whiskey from the doctor's bottle.

"I assure you I haven't poisoned the liquor," the doctor said. "And I'm sorry I got off on the wrong foot with you. But I had to stake it down at the beginning that Doc Arington wasn't somebody who could be pushed around."

While he talked the doctor studied the room through the bar mirror. There were a few games going on at round-topped poker tables. But the play was casual. This place wouldn't really come alive, he surmised, until after dinner when the crystal chandeliers were aglitter with the light from their kerosene lamps, and the faro bank and the roulette lay-out competed with the bar and the painted ladies for all the loose money in Sweetgrass Basin.

Farther down the bar half a dozen men were clustered. Closer to the doctor, a solitary drinker met his eyes in the bar mirror. Like all the others, the man's eyes were hard, his face at first glance expressionless. But, looking at him, the doctor felt a warning tingle his veins. He had a distinct impression that he had seen this man before. He looked again. Range-garbed, holstered, there was little to distinguish him from the others except that against his vest of soiled velvet a blue-green disk of what ap-

peared to be turquoise dangled from his watch chain.

"The man down the bar from me," the doctor questioned the bartender, "Who is it, Deuce Le Deux?"

"Naw, that's Al Ochs." He said it loud enough for the man to hear.

Al Ochs turned. "Who's askin'?"

His voice wasn't friendly, but the doctor ignored it, and nodded his head. "I'm the new sawbones in Gunsight."

"Since when?"

"Since right now."

Al Ochs left his drink, and moved closer. "Where'd you ride in from?"

"Deep Wells."

"That's funny. I'm just in from that way myself. Why didn't I see you along the trail?"

"Maybe we didn't ride the same trail."

"I rode the trail everybody rides."

"Then that," the doctor said softly, "is the answer."

"What's the answer?" Al Ochs blustered.

"I came through the Devil's Teeth by way of Rattlesnake Pass."

"The hell you preach!" Al Ochs let his hand drop to his holster.

The bartender horned in. He wanted to divert Al Ochs's attention and keep him from asking, unknowingly, for needed death. "Easy, Al," he cautioned.

"Shut up, Barrelhouse," the gunman said.

Barrelhouse looked at the ceiling. In some ways this man was deceptive. He looked soggy, as though probably he drank too much of his own beer. But his mind wasn't soggy. His problem now was to warn Al Ochs that this scarecrow was a tougher customer than he appeared to be, and do it in a way not to rile the scarecrow. He said, "The world's full of surprisin' ways to die. I even seen a man with a neck-hold on a buzzard once, and you know what? That buzzard pecked clean through the man's heart."

Al Ochs took the warning under immediate consideration and didn't draw. Puzzlement creased his eyelids even closer together than they had been. He moved back a step and his hand strayed up from his gun-belted middle to rub at his stubbled jaw.

"You tryin' to tell us you're the Kid's medico?"

"The Kid's?"

"Don't play dumb! If you came the Devil Teeth trail, you were safe-ticketed through."

The doctor knit his brow—then smiled suddenly. "Oh, you mean the man with the blue mask? He stopped me and asked a lot of questions. I thought he was going to rob me, but he didn't."

Men were moving in from farther down the bar now, having caught a signal from Barrelhouse. With hands in easy grab-reach of their guns, they ganged around, hemming the doctor in on all sides. A small boy, a Mexican lad in tattered straw hat and overalls cut off at the knees, kept pushing and shoving from behind, padding on his bare feet first this way and then that, trying to squirm through the cordon of Deuce Le Deux's gunners and see what was going on. The men kept pushing him back. Finally a beefy looking hardcase with heavy features, mean little eyes, and a mouth that was like a steel trap, pushed the boy hard in the face and knocked him down.

The boy bounced up and got his bare toes out of the way just in time to keep the hardcase from stamping on them with his heavy boots.

"Ya-aw, you missed," the boy taunted, with only a little below-the-Border accent in his voice.

"I won't miss next time," the man threatened.

THE doctor poked a thumb and asked at large, "Who's the brave man fighting the boy?" It had made his temperature climb to see the way those stamping boots had missed the bare toes by inches.

The man pushed in close and answered for himself. "I'm Hymie Wert." His shoulders moved in a truculent swagger; and he wore his hat, arrogantly, far back on his close-cropped head. "Let's see can you move quick as the boy."

Hymie Wert kicked viciously, with the intenton of raking the doctor's unprotected ankle with his spurs. The doctor was looking for it. He jerked to one side and the saloon bully, overblanced, rammed into the bar. He grunted, cursed, untangled his foot from a bucket-sized brass spittoon, and struck for his gun.

"I'll beat your ears in!" he raged. With his long-barreled six in hand, he smashed down at the doctor's head.

The doctor's hand had been jerking nervously at his watch chain. It sprawled across his vest from pocket to pocket, with his watch fastened to one end of it and a temperature thermometer on the other. At the instant Hymie Wert made his play, the doctor's hand tightened on the chain at the thermometer end. He pulled upward, his elbow jutting as he leaned forward—leaned directly into Hymie Wert's descending gun. The big hunting-case watch, gift of a patient whose life the doctor had saved, made a blurring glint as it swung in an arc on the end of its chain.

There was a mellow-thumping sound.

It wasn't Hymie Wert's six-gun barrel against the doctor's head. It was the doctor's watch beating the gun barrel to the punch. The watch thumped against the saloon bully's cropped head. The case was jarred open. Broken glass, watch springs and wheels flew in all directions. Hymie Wert's beefy body slumped to the floor in a groggy heap.

"Take a look, somebody," the doctor directed. "See if it's a job for me or the undertaker."

Quicker than any one of them, the Mexican boy darted in, scooped up Hymie Wert's gun from the floor and tried to put it in the doctor's hands.

The doctor refused it. "Put it on the counter, son. I'm not a gunman, I'm a doctor. I'm supposed to deal life, not death."

His complete self-assurance kept them from leading him down. Life on the cattle frontier ran in patterns of conventionalized violence. The doctor was showing them something out of the groove. It confused them, blunted their action reflexes.

"How the hell do we know you're a doctor?" one of them demanded.

The doctor smiled brightly. "That's easy. Here's my card." He pinched a card from his pocket and held it up. "You'll notice it says Physician and Surgeon on it." He looked around, rested his glance on the corner of the bar mirror, then addressed the bartender. "Tell you what, just stick my card in your mirror next to that other one. Everybody can see it there. It can serve as an announcement that now there is somebody in town who can sew up their broken heads and cut their bullets out. I also cure stomach ache."

Barrelhouse took the card from the doctor's outstretched hand. Scowling, he stuck it in the edge of the mirror next to the one already there.

The doctor studied it critically. "The printing isn't big enough, is it? My card doesn't make a very good showing against that other one. I can almost read the other one from here." He leaned closer. "I can read it! Barb-wire Barney. Why, say, there can't be two men with that name. Barb-wire Barney! I know him!"

"You just think you do," Barrelhouse said sullenly.

"I'm sure I do," the doctor declared. "Man about your build, but more cheerful looking. Blue eyes, yellow hair, mouth like a fish. And he smokes a stogy and talks around it in a bass voice. I met him once in a saloon in Chicago."

"How long ago was that?" Al Ochs cut in.

"Three years ago I guess."

There was hard malignance in Al Ochs' voice when he said, "You'd hardly recognize him now, Doc."

"Has he changed so much?"

Men swapped tense looks all around, then one with eyes the color of rain-washed straw, flat eyes in a flat bleak face, said, "You ought to know. You claim to ride the Indigo Kid's trail."

A WARNING tremor of excitement prickled the doctor's hide. If, as it seemed to be proving out, the Indigo Kid and Deuce Le Deux were operating together on a squeeze play against the basin ranchers, it was reasonable to suppose that word about the traveling medico had already come down from the Devil's Pasture to the chief of the Crystal Palace. It was going to be good sense, the doctor decided, not to play his cards too wild.

"I got off the train at Deep Wells by mistake," he said truthfully. "And I rode the Indigo Kid's trail because I didn't know any better."

He was looking ruefully at the remains of his watch. Slowly he gathered in the chain, crammed the watch back in his pocket. At the same time, concealing his action, he lifted one of the barb-wire tags from his pocket. There was still this last test to make.

He swung the talk back to Barb-wire Barney. "I didn't have to climb any fences on the way across the basin. I judge Barney isn't the salesman he thinks he is."

The man with the pale yellow eyes said, "All the barb wire you'll find in Sweetgrass Basin, you can roll it in a quirley and smoke it."

The doctor was looking at the floor, aimlessly it seemed. Suddenly he bent. His hand reached out quickly to a scuffing of sawdust. "Why, here's a piece of it right here," he exclaimed.

He came erect, holding the two-inch cutting of barb wire in his hands so that all could see. He turned it in his fingers, examining it with interest. "One of the barbs is bent almost double," he observed. "Somebody stepped on it, I guess." He looked up, as though entirely unaware of the taut silence which had clamped down. He smiled. "Which one of you was it said there wasn't any barbed wire around here?"

The yellow-eyed man said ominously, "You'll be lucky, Doc, if that's the only piece like that you ever see."

The doctor juggled the barb-wire tag in his hand. "Think I'll keep it for a souvenir," he said, and reached to open the snap on his black bag which still reposed there on the bar. He dropped the piece of barbed wire inside and let his hand rest on the opened bag. Secretly he was elated. The frozen silence with which these men confronted him was the last proof he needed to clinch things in his mind. They were guilty equally with the Indigo Kid. As a matter of fact it was probably the Crystal Palace that was the fountain-head of the "big trouble" that weighed in brooding malignance over the basin. The Devil's Pasture, judging from the way things were shaping up, was merely a desert outpost for the Crystal Palace.

But Deuce Le Deux had a good man on watch at the outland station. The Indigo Kid, striking terror in his blue mask, tagging his victims with the barb-wire sign—

The doctor felt his pulse quicken as a certain fantastic possibility came to his mind. The Indigo Kid and Deuce Le Deux— Was the Crystal Palace chief also a six-footer? Did he have blue eyes?

The question was answered almost in the instant of the doctor's wondering. From

the gathering shadows at the back of the big room a sharp authoritative voice called, "What's going on here?"

A significant stir rippled through the men who hemmed the doctor to the bar, and they spread backward in an opening wave to make way for the man striding close.

At first glance the doctor was disappointed. The man who pushed into view had something of the same truculent swagger that Hymie Wert had shown. He was older than Hymie, and he had enough hair for Hymie and himself too. He looked as unkempt—and as fierce—as a hungry wolf. But he didn't look like the caliber to hold this criminal pack together and have enough drive left over to control the Devil's Pasture outpost.

But then the doctor's glance was taken by a second man who loomed behind the first. Quick realization came to the doctor that this hard-bitten gun-wolf in the lead was only one of the pack acting as bodyguard for the man directly behind. And the man who followed was Deuce Le Deux! The plum-colored pantaloons tucked inside polished leather boots, the fancy beaded vest, and mauve sombrero would have been enough to identify him. But in addition to that, a restrained insolence, a kind of universal contempt in his general bearing, marked him, and marked him well.

And Deuce Le Deux was big, the doctor was interested to observe—as big as the Indigo Kid. And his eyes were blue!

## CHAPTER X

### TWENTY DOLLARS BUYS A TURQUOISE

STARING down from his sinister height, thumbs hooked in the bottom pockets of his beaded vest, Deuce Le Deux probed with polished boot toe at Hymie Wert who was in process of sitting up and feeling his head. "What's the matter?"

Hymie only groaned.

The chief turned toward the man whose face was fashioned in flat planes, whose eyes looked flat too and were something the color of wet straw.

"What's the row here, Topaz?"

Topaz Bane jerked his head toward the doctor. "The scarecrow there fell on him."

Deuce Le Deux held mildly curious eyes



on the doctor. "How come," he asked at large, "the scarecrow bosses the show?"

"He's got peculiar persuaders," Barrelhouse growled.

"Such as what?"

"Such as poison needles that kill with a scratch!"

"What's the chip he's carryin' on his shoulder?"

"I can talk, you know," the doctor said sharply. "Why don't you ask me?"

Deuce Le Deux continued to ignore him . . . but his eyes tightened just a shade as he noted the doctor's hand at ease on his opened surgical kit.

"Claims he's a medico," Al Ochs contributed.

"Who brought him here?"

Al Ochs' fingers were pinching nervously at the disk of turquoise which dangled from his watch chain. "That's somethin', Chief, we thought you might know the answer to."

"That's why we've been easy on him," Topaz Bane added.

"You're sure," Deuce Le Deux mocked, "it wasn't his peculiar persuaders that made you easy on him?"

"Does he look," Topaz Bane mocked back, "like anything that anybody you'd hire would be gun-shy about?"

"Well?" The chief's voice had a deadly soft sound. "What's everybody waiting for?"

Deuce Le Deux's inference was plain. They all understood that he was declaring open season on scarecrows. They traded quick, side-long glances with each other to be sure they were all in accord. Why he wanted his floor bloodied and maybe his mahogany splintered was more than they could comprehend. But it was his saloon. If this was the way he wanted it—their business was gunning whenever he gave the word.

On an even heat about six of them started grabbing. . . .

The reason they stopped with such ludicrous precision, and stood there with elbows bent and fingers widely spread was because the doctor, with a turn of his wrist, had spirited a knife from his black case and thrown it with force. It made a taut sounding *pung* when the blade drove into the floor at their feet.

For a split-wink their eyes were held in shrinking fascination by that trembling

blade. Long, narrow, and curiously tapering, it wasn't like any knife they had seen before. Those whose nerves were most under control noticed one other thing. Before the sleek blade had driven into the wood, it had almost exactly bisected a cigarette stub that someone had dropped to the floor.

What really slowed them, though, was the second knife. When they looked up, only a fraction of a second later, there it was in his hand. It had the same unfamiliar—and so, deadly—gleaming sleekness as the other.

"If I have to throw again," he told them, a little hoarsely, "make no mistake, it will be through somebody's heart."

Deuce Le Deux's suave voice sounded in answer. "It's a nice act, Doc. Where'd you learn it, in a show somewhere?"

"Now you're asking me," the doctor said grimly. "But if you get it through your heart it won't make much difference to you where I learned it." He had a real inspiration then. He said, "I don't mind telling you one thing. I used to put a match on the floor, and stand twice as far away from it as I am from the cigarette stub . . . and throw this same knife . . . and light the match with it."

"That's an even better trick," Deuce Le Deux conceded. "But it's one thing to throw a knife against a target, and another to throw against a live man. When killin's not your business, the hand loses its cunning, Doc."

"Not mine," the doctor warned. "Standing on your feet, or stretched out on an operating table I can cut your heart out as easy one way as the other."

From the first, when Deuce Le Deux had put the open season on the doctor, he had watched in cruel-eyed, cynical amusement. Now his hand cut a flat swath through the air. "All right," he told his men, "you had your chance at him. Go on back to your knittin'." To the doctor, he said, "The drink's on me. I want to talk to you. Come on back in my office."

**I**T WAS the invitation the doctor had been angling for. It had been his strategy from the first to make himself important enough that Deuce Le Deux would come to him.

Inside the office, Deuce Le Deux waved the doctor to a comfortable leather-bottomed

chair. Deuce, himself, sat down in a creaking swivel and bent to open a compartment of his roll-top desk. He took out a box of cigars and a bottle. He reached to put them both near the doctor's elbow.

"There's Havanas, Doc; and what's in the bottle is private stock—Napoleon brandy."

The doctor helped himself to both, and relaxed luxuriantly. It was dark enough to have a light now. A lamp of polished brass stood on the corner of the roll-top and threw down a comforting yellow glow from under its green glass shade.

Deuce Le Deux leaned forward, his cruelly handsome face highlighted in the glow. "Sorry if I let you sweat out there, Doc. But I needed to find out what kind of stuff you had."

The doctor blew cigar smoke at the ceiling. "One thing I'd like to know. Were you going to let them kill me if I hadn't been able to take care of myself?"

"That's my professional secret, Doc."

The doctor said nothing. At the moment he was holding high hand here and he knew it. He waited for Deuce Le Deux to force the play.

The chief came to it finally. "I'm going to make you an offer, Doc."

The doctor continued to blow smoke at the ceiling, and Deuce said, "I drifted in here about four years ago and took a job runnin' the blackjack game. You're listenin' to a success story, Doc. In that four years I spread out fast. Now I own this saloon and most of the town—" he leaned forward—"and, Doc, I haven't started putting on the heat yet!"

"But you're about to?" the doctor inquired pleasantly.

"Right!"

"You spoke about an offer."

"Doc, before you've been here long you'll find you can't be friends to everybody." He paused, eying the doctor with cynical speculation.

The doctor felt his pulse step up a notch. You can't be friends to everybody—those were the identical words of the Indigo Kid! He tried to remember what the Kid's voice had sounded like. It had been muffled by the mask, and perhaps held purposely in an unaccustomed register. But even so, it wasn't too different from Deuce Le Deux's.

The fantastic possibility which had

gripped the doctor's imagination when he had first observed that Deuce Le Deux's eyes and physical build checked with the Indigo Kid's, gripped him even more strongly now. It was more than possible, yes, that the Indigo Kid and Deuce Le Deux were one and the same person!

"Every man has his price, Doc," Deuce continued cynically. "Realizin' that one simple fact is what I've built my success on. What's your price, Doc, for attachin' yourself to my outfit exclusively? I can use a medico who can cut a man's heart out as easy him standin' up as stretched out on an operatin' table. My last doctor, I had to kill him myself. He was squeamish about performin' an autopsy. Claimed the man wasn't dead yet."

Relaxed, the doctor continued to blow smoke in evident enjoyment. But his mind was seething. The Indigo Kid had warned that he would be sending for his answer. And hadn't the barb-wire sign, penetrating his name on the medical certificate warned what that answer must be? All right; but it was a game that two could play. Intrigue wasn't indigenous to the cattle frontier. Ail in all, this was probably the best thing that could have happened. Working inside, he should be able to uncover more in a week than he could in a month on the outside—always assuming he lived a month. Or a week!

"Your answer, Doc," Deuce Le Deux broke in on him. "I'm waitin'. Feed it down."

The doctor reached again for the Napoleon brandy. "Why do you think I risked my life making an impression on your boys outside? I've been angling for your offer. I'll string along—sure."

A little later, when the doctor was moving toward the door, Deuce Le Deux said, "There's one question I want to ask you. When you put your knife in the floor at my feet, did you go to cut that cigarette butt in two . . . or was it an accident?"

The doctor smiled sardonically. "That's my professional secret, Chief."

OUTSIDE the door the rag-tag Mexican lad was waiting for the doctor. He smiled up so ingratiatingly that the doctor couldn't resist an impulse of generosity. The boy, he surmised, had taken plenty of kick-

ing around of the kind Hymie Wert a while ago had directed toward him.

"Open your hand," the doctor said.

The boy held up a grimy paw and the doctor dropped a silver dollar in it. The boy's eyes grew until they looked as though they would eclipse his face. It was a thin and undernourished face, the doctor observed.

All at once, as though if he waited a second longer he couldn't bear to do it, the boy reached the dollar back to the doctor. "*Gracias, Senor*, I don't want it. I have much money of my own."

There was nothing the doctor could say that would make him change his mind. "Curious little devil," the doctor thought, and smiled self-consciously as he pocketed his own dollar. "What *do* you want, son?" he asked.

"I just want to be near you," the boy said.

There was nothing the doctor could do to discourage him. For the rest of the evening the boy was his constant shadow.

The lamps in the crystal chandeliers were glowing now. A Mexican croupier was spinning his wheel, trying to collect a crowd and get his roulette game started.

"Sixteen on the red," he droned, and a house-shill dragged in ostentatiously on his "winnings."

Some of the percentage girls were circulating. They wore low-necked evening gowns of more-or-less soiled silk. With their bleached and hennaed hair, blue-shaded eyes, rouged cheeks, and painted lips, they looked anything but natural. But that was the main idea, of course—not to look natural.

The frontier was fed to death on "natural" things, the doctor realized. Natural cows, natural rocks, natural human cussedness. The West was still new and wild. The natural process of making a living was attended by such hardships, necessitated such unrelenting toil, that there was little excess time or energy for "prettying" anything, whether it was a woman, a house, or a town street.

Deuce Le Deux hadn't figured it out in so many words, but he was shrewd enough to sense that money would flow to anyone who could offer momentary release from what for many was a life of Arab monotony. So Deuce brought in the crystal chandeliers

and the big bar mirror and the artificial mahogany. And he decked his girls in silk and paint. He was even considering putting the spindles back in the wooden awning that extended over the sidewalk. . . .

A bull-fiddle and a piano started working on a fandango and a few of the girls dragged partners to the dance floor. Men were drifting in now through the fanning bat-wing doors. They were lining the bar, or just cruising around the big room.

They were range-clad men for the most part. The doctor caught snatches of conversation which let him know that there were men here from both Carson's *Tres Pinos* spread and Chilcott's KZ-connected. Chilcott's hired gun-hand, Ditch Tatum, the one with the scar across his cheek, came in and prowled around for a while. He scowled when he saw the doctor. Lige Carson, himself, came in later. Lige nodded curtly. The doctor was grabbing a quick one at the bar and it seemed to him that Lige's face expressed, if not contempt, then at least severe disapproval.

The doctor wanted to speak to Lige, but the young rancher had cronies waiting; he promptly immersed himself in a poker game. So the doctor spoke to Deuce Le Deux instead. He was still feeling out, trying to learn things. He put his question this way:

"Here we are, set to grab the whole basin. These men in here—we're going to cut their jobs, their land—maybe their lives—right out from under them. They know it! And yet they come to your place and spend money. Why?"

From where he lounged against the wall in insolent assurance, Deuce Le Deux laughed shortly. "Where else can they go?" He slipped a card from a pocket of his beaded vest and handed it to the doctor. The card read: Crystal Palace Saloon and Gambling Hall—Deuce Le Deux—Proprietor.

"I've run all the rest of 'em out of business, Doc. I've got the entertainment business in Gunsight tied up tight as a fence post sunk in *caliche*."

"Reminds me," the doctor remarked, "I haven't seen many fence posts in this country."

"Stay a long time and you still won't see any."

"That seems to be one point of agreement you've got with the ranchers."

Duce moved away, and his shaggy-haired gun-guard, Chewed-Ear McCabe, moved with him. "Stick to your pill bottles, Doc," Duce flung back at him.

During the next few hours the doctor loafed around, getting acquainted. He kept a weather eye out for a man who might be wearing a Mexican gold piece for a watch charm. His vigilance was unrewarded. He did some judicious inquiring about bullet sizes too. The results of that were equally discouraging. There weren't as many .44 calibered guns in evidence as there were .45s. But there were enough to make the inquiry confusing. Al Ochs wore a .44, and so did several of Duce's other gunners.

SEVERAL times during the course of the evening the doctor was uneasily aware of stares directed his way. Hymie Wert, nursing a grudge because of the lump the doctor had put on his close-cropped head, seized every opportunity to scowl threateningly.

But that was to be expected. It was Al Ochs who worried the doctor most. Al Ochs' surveillance seemed to be merely speculative. But that was what had the doctor worried. He had never lost his first impression: that somewhere he had seen this man before. Al Ochs, the doctor judged, was laboring under a similar impression.

The gunman brought things to a head finally. While the Crystal Palace roared, he sought the doctor out where he was standing at the lunch counter at the far end of the bar, taking on a foundation for some really heavy drinking. Through the bar mirror the doctor saw him coming. He bent over the counter, finished building himself a man-sized sandwich, topped it with a piece of bread, and turned to meet him.

"You seen me before some place?" Al Ochs asked flatly.

The doctor nibbled at a corner of his sandwich. "Not that I know of."

"I've seen you. I've been tryin' to think where."

Suddenly, the doctor knew where! Or at least he had a healthy hunch. It was a hunch which sobered him in a chilling flash, and set the hair at the back of his neck tugging at its roots.

His glance, as once or twice before that evening, had been arrested by the gunman's

nervously moving fingers. His fingers kept smoothing over the moon-shaped turquoise that dangled from his watch chain. The blue-green semi-precious stone had been ground to form a perfect disk. It was held within a gold frame.

The doctor took another nibble on his sandwich, then lifted his free hand from his pocket to reach out and touch the turquoise. "Handsome stone you've got, my friend."

"Huh? Oh yeah . . . yeah. Come from Mexico."

"I don't suppose you'd want to sell it?"

"Huh? Naw—" The gunman's tight lips pressed tighter still. The doctor could almost see him thinking, planning how to run up the price on an unwary easterner. "What's it worth to you?" he asked.

"About twenty dollars," the doctor said. With his thumb, he succeeded in poking the turquoise clear of its gold frame.

"Here, what the hell?" Al Ochs barked.

"I've bought it," the doctor told him. "I've bought the Mexican turquoise, and I'm paying for it with Mexican gold. That's fair enough, isn't it?" He moved in closer.

"Here, stand still. I've got the gold piece in my hand. Mexican gold. I'll fit it in the rim for you. Lucky, isn't it? The same size exactly as the turquoise. Wouldn't find a fit like that again in a hundred years—"

A noise something like the quick escape of steam from a jet came from Al Ochs' tight lips. "Now I know you! In the train with the old man. Goin' to De Kalb that time. Three years ago."

His elbow sliced backward and his knees and shoulders thrust forward as he slapped at his holstered gun.

A girl from somewhere in the big room screamed, "Oh, my God!"

Men who were close enough to see what was happening didn't say anything. And they didn't do anything. There wasn't time.

PRECISELY what happened next was a matter for debate during the rest of the entire night. Some said Al slipped. Some said the damn fool medico fell into his gun. Most of them saw the doctor's hand go up. All of them saw the two antagonists grapple and fall. All of them heard the single shot. All of them saw the medico get up and start brushing the sawdust off his clothes.

There was sawdust on Al Ochs' clothes

too. But Al wasn't doing anything about it. Al was dead from a bullet out of his own gun.

When they turned Al over they saw that his face and eyes were smeared with a sticky brown substance.

"It's some of the sawbones' poisoned ointment!" Hymie Wert blared. "That scarecrow ain't human. Usin' witchcraft is what he is. We'd ought to lynch him—"

"Poisoned ointment, your sick grandmother!" Barrelhouse sounded off from where he stood behind the lunch counter. He lifted a thick squat bottle. "The sawbones must of savvied what was comin'. He smeared a piece of bread about an inch thick out of this bottle. Then he put a sandwich top on it easy-like and kept his finger between. I was watchin' him and I thought he was nuts. But when he flicked the top of the sandwich off and smeared the mustard in Al's eyes—"

"Mustard!" The word came back at him from here and there all over the room.

"Yeah, mustard! I got to give the scarecrow credit. It's an old trick, and I heard about it bein' worked before, but always with loose tobacco or pepper, not mustard."

Deuce Le Deux came up to where four or five of his boys had the doctor strait-jacketed. "What have you got to say for yourself, Doc?" he questioned.

"You heard Barrelhouse," the doctor said. "After I put the mustard to his eyes I grappled with him for the gun. We both fell and the gun went off. I didn't have it in my hand first to last. The way it worked out, he shot himself."

"Barrelhouse says you saw it comin'."

The doctor said: "He'd been givin' me the bad eye all evening. I started scooping mustard out of the bottle when I saw him coming, just in case. You know, he told me yourself, Chief, to stick to my bottles."

"What'd Al make his play on?" Deuce asked harshly.

"It was about that turquoise he wore for a watch charm. He was trying to sell it to me. I offered him twenty dollars. We had an argument—" The doctor turned his hands palms upward in a gesture of finality. "He was looking for trouble I guess."

They carried Al Ochs' body away, and sprinkled more sawdust where his blood had

wet the floor. Men went back to their games and their drinking.

Privately Deuce Le Deux confessed to the doctor that the way it had turned out was all right.

"Al's been with me from the first," Deuce said. "I've trusted him on some special jobs that nobody else knows anything about. Al knew more than was good for him. It was time he got it. I've been thinking of turning the job over to one of the boys. You saved them the trouble. How much do I owe you for your first job, Doc?"

The doctor was still worrying with the string tie. "I lost my gold piece in the shuffle," he said. "And I ought to get enough back to pay for the watch I had to break over Hymie Wert's head. It was a good watch."

The chief's cynical face cracked in an amused grin. "Looks like we'll get along, Doc," he said.

The doctor was tired, and he showed it—tireder in spirit even than body. "There's one thing I wish you'd do," he said, bleakly. "Pass the word around to your boys that I'm not fair game for killing tonight. I'm going to start in right now and get blind-eyed drunk."

The doctor did just that; he got blind-eyed drunk.

The thing that rubbed him the rawest was that he had closed his most likely source of information. Al Ochs was dead . . . and Open-range Carson was avenged. But Al Ochs had known things. He could have been made to talk about the big trouble, about those already dead, and about those who were marked to die.

The odds were high that it was the Indigo Kid who had murdered Barb-wire Barney. But Al Ochs could probably have talked about that too. But now who was there to talk? And who could be found to talk in the time that was left to do it in? Time! If only a man had time for everything in this life. It was such a short life. A man barely got started, and learned a few things about making it pleasant and safe, and then it was finished.

THE doctor got into his Shakespearian groove. He cried havoc, and let slip the dogs of war all over the saloon; and warned everyone to beware the Ides of March.

While he still had a toehold on reality, something happened which sobered him for a minute or two. He was drinking at the bar, holding himself up with one hand. A little way down from him, Deuce De Deux was talking with some of his gunners.

Suddenly, the chief swore. It was deep-throated swearing that packed a meaning.

He pointed. "What's that?" he demanded.

The doctor looked where he was pointing, at the corner of the bar mirror where the business cards were stuck, the big one of Barb-wire Barney's, the doctor's own—and a third one which had not been there before.

Barrelhouse took the card from the mirror, holding it gingerly between thumb and a single finger. He passed it over to Deuce Le Deux without a word.

The uneasy silence held until Deuce broke it in a voice of menacing urgency. "Where'd that card come from?"

"I dunno," Barrelhouse said. "I been workin'. I never seen it till now."

The bartender's voice sounded dry and strained. All at once it came to the doctor that the barman was scared. The doctor also had the curious impression that Deuce Le Deux was scared.

The chief had Barrelhouse round up all the helpers who had worked behind the bar that night. He fired questions at them. They were scared too. But it was apparent they didn't know anything about the card.

The chief stalked toward the doctor. "Let me see the card I gave you a while ago, my own personal card."

The doctor fumbled it from his pocket.

"I guess that lets you out," Deuce said.

"What's . . . about?" the doctor questioned, drunkenly.

Deuce held up the card which had been stuck in the edge of the mirror. It was another of his personal cards. Appended to it was something that the doctor's blurred vision at first took to be a scorpion. But then he saw what it really was on the card.

It was a small cutting of barbed wire. One of the barbs on the wire was bent almost double. It pierced the card at the exact place where Deuce Le Deux's name appeared.

Deuce Le Deux had been tagged by the barbed wire sign!

The doctor's mind was fuzzy from the liquor. It took a minute for him to comprehend the meaning of the sign. But then he got it. If Deuce Le Deux had been tagged by the Indigo Kid's death sign, then Deuce Le Deux and the Indigo Kid must be two separate persons after all. They weren't even playing ball together. This wasn't just some gag of Deuce Le Deux's. The under-current of very real fear in his voice precluded that.

Topaz Bane's voice sounded. "Chief—take a look. You're in good company."

Deuce Le Deux and all of them looked. They looked at their new medico. The doctor's hand groped up to feel where they were looking. His hand stopped at his coat lapel. He didn't have to look to tell what he was feeling.

It was another of the barbed wire signs!

Twice in the last twenty-four hours he had been tagged. That meant—that meant what? The whiskey was feeding fast on his brain. It was difficult to think. He made a prodigious effort. It meant that the Indigo Kid had not yet sent for his answer, that this was a second warning for him to be ready with it. . . .

Or did it mean something more fatefully alarming?

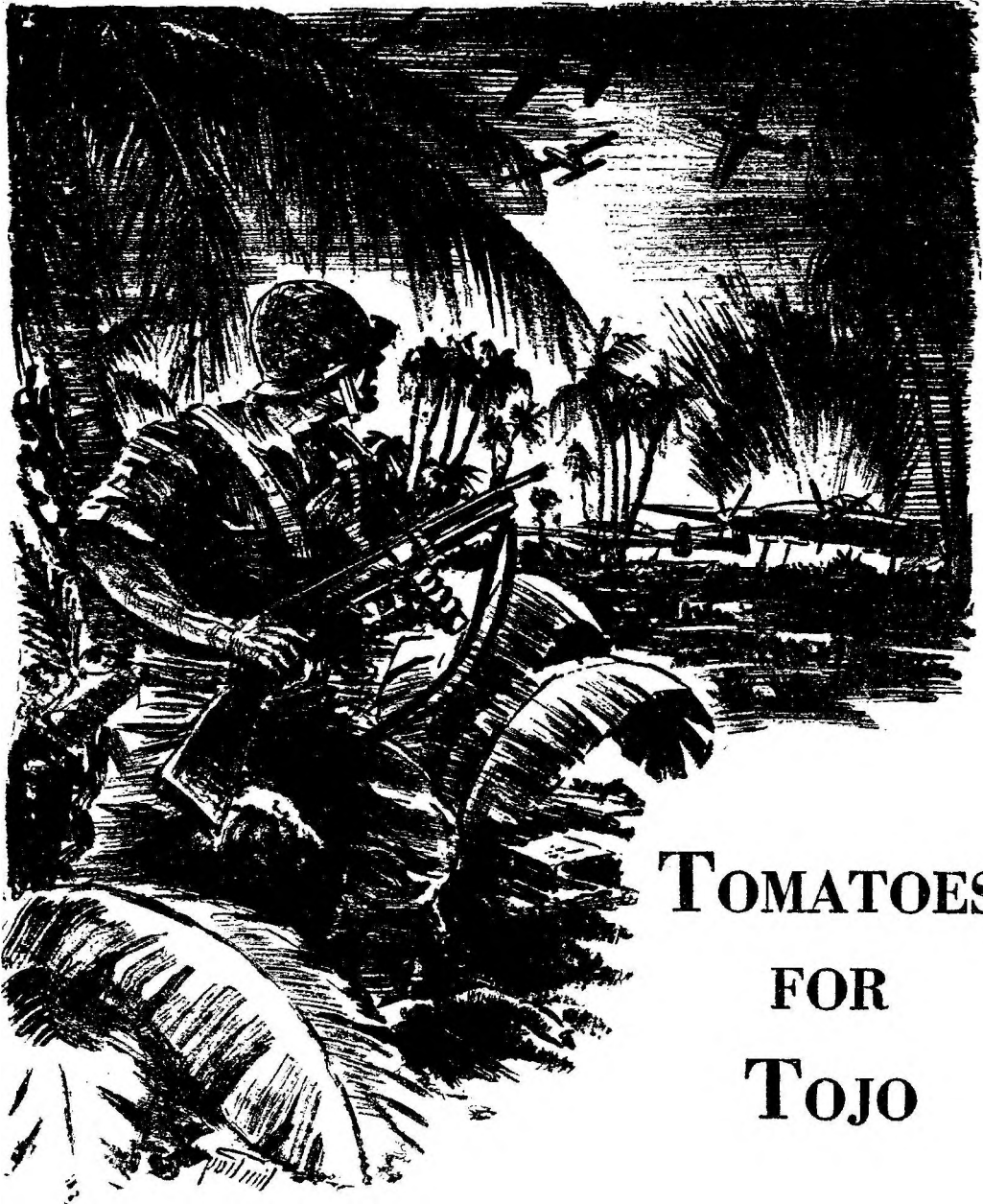
"You can't be friends all around," the Kid had warned. "You'll have to take sides—or else."

The doctor had already taken sides. And it was the wrong side!

The fog closed in again on his brain. The bar seemed to be collapsing under his hand. Why didn't they make these things stronger? False mahogany, that was the trouble. Everything false in this life. Nothing the way it seemed. He was falling . . . rolling down a long hill, it seemed with barbed wire wrapped around him. At the bottom of the hill was a man with a pearl-handled six-gun. The man wore plum-colored pantaloons and a beaded vest. . . . Yon Cassius has a lean and hungry look. He thinks too much; such men are dangerous. . . . Get you to bed again, it is not day. Is not tomorrow, boy, the Ides of March? . . .

The doctor passed out cold.

*"You Fool Kids Bull Into Everything and to Hell With What Happens. You Can't Win a War That Way!"*



## TOMATOES FOR TOJO

By **NELSON W. BAKER**

**S** ECOND LIEUTENANT CAL BRADFORD raised a grimy countenance from the guts of the Allison he was overhauling and stared with sullen longing at the two P-38's warming at the far end of the runway. His face brightened as their motors

revved and they rocketed down the strip, leaping away from the dusty yellow plain at a steep climb. His eyes followed them as they shot over the brow of the hills, circled Madang and Astrolabe Bay, then roared back across the field northwest toward the fleeing Jap, until their slim dual bodies lost



themselves among the high dark shoulders of the Finisterres.

That would be Arno and Benson, he thought; good, steady fighter pilots, knocking down Zeros and Mitsubishis regularly, getting a nice string of little Rising Suns stenciled on their ships. Swell. But it hurt like smoke to see guys in his own squadron running up their scores of Nips on him, while he ate his heart out down here in the sweltering heat and dust.

His stubborn young face lost the little-boy-on-Christmas-morning look, and he forced his attention once more on the oily intricacies of the motor, hating New Guinea, the Air Force, the brass hats, the whole lousy setup. It wasn't enough to ground a guy because he'd had the cussed luck to crack up a plane or two accidentally. The Old Man had to stick him in Maintenance, make a grease monkey out of a guy who belonged up there where it was sweet and free, and he could pour it on the Nips with everything in him. What the hell kind of efficiency did they call that, when the Aussies had the Japs on the run toward Dutch New Guinea, and every good flyer was needed to blast hot enemy bases like Rabaul and Kawieng? Every good flyer—that was it; the Old Man thought he was a washout.

He jammed a torque-wrench over a nut, gave it a vicious twist that shot the gauge-needle far beyond the required pressure-point. Before he could remedy the conscious error, a shadow loomed over him, relentless as doom.

"Tryin' to wreck my babies?" Sergeant Bill Scott exploded. "Back that nut offa there an' set it right, or—"

Bradford glared up at Scotty, who stood on the cowling, fists punched into his sides, a look of hopeless exasperation on his sun-burned Highland face. Scotty, ground-crew chief, was a fussy old woman about his planes, but a Simon Legree with his men—Bradford knew.

He wiped grimy sweat from his forehead. "Yeah?" he said with painful deliberation. "Don't use that tone of voice when you address a commissioned officer, Sergeant." He emphasized the "sergeant."

"Nuts to that stuff," Scotty said. "You're just another grease monkey to me—and a lousy one. The Old Man sticks you in Maintenance because you bust up his planes. 'Let

him fix 'em a while and see how he likes it,' he says, and I'm stuck with you—you're still wreckin' 'em!"

Bradford took his hand off the wrench. "You've been riding my tail for two weeks, Scott. I'm sick of you."

He hand-hopped up onto the cowling and swung a wild punch for Scotty's square jaw. The sergeant was a ham wrestler, broad as he was tall in his greasy O.D. coveralls. He ducked and locked his caliper arms around Bradford's middle. Bradford was lanky, with the awkward grace of movement that marks an overgrown kid; but harsh training had put steel in him. He grabbed handfuls of the older man's clothing and heaved. They sailed off the plane, hit the ground in a grunting, rolling tangle of furiously-twisting arms and legs.

PILOTS and grease monkeys came running. It might have been a scrap in the local ball park back home, instead of at an air-base on wild New Guinea, with the threat of sudden, screaming death hanging in the air, the way they yelled enthusiastic, if profane, encouragement.

Bradford found himself pinned on his back; grounded, when the limitless blue sky was up there pulling at him like a magnet. The thought set him wild, numbed him to the boncracking pressure of Scotty's arm-lock. He kicked and whacked with indiscriminate abandon of the rules of fair fighting. He wasn't just fighting Scotty; this was physical release from the mental battle he'd been fighting ever since the Old Man had clipped his wings.

"Cheez," somebody hissed in a stage whisper, "here comes the Old Man!"

Bradford didn't hear; but he suddenly realized Scotty wasn't hugging him any more.

He sat up. The crowd was gone. Scotty was on his feet, rigid as a poker, right hand at a smart salute. Bradford turned his head and saw the Old Man. Something like an electric shock hit him in the stomach, and he scrambled to his feet with a celerity that caused his caved ribs to scream protest, snapped stiff fingers to his right eyebrow.

"At ease," the Old Man barked. He was small and straight, with a set gravity of face, and war-won wisdom in his gray eyes. He

heard them out, then stared frostily at Bradford.

"You've had an excellent record, Bradford. What's got into you?"

Bradford said doggedly, "All my fault, sir—but I'm a fighter pilot, not a gr—mechanic."

"Obviously, from what Scott says," the Old Man snapped. "I'm beginning to doubt that you're a flyer. I warned you if you cracked up another P-38, I'd take you out of them. You did. I put you on medium bombers to slow you down, and you drop the first one miles back in the jungle. Now you're in trouble with Scott—"

"I had a run of tough luck with those Lightnings, sir," Bradford said stubbornly. "And that medium—"

The Old Man tossed an impatient hand. "I've heard all that before, Bradford. We've only a small holding force here, and we're short of all types of planes. I can't have a man throwing them away simply because he can't control his eagerness. Do you realize the parts from that medium you crashed would put some of our cripples back in the air?"

"Yes, sir," Bradford admitted. "But I've six Japs to my credit. Doesn't that mean anything?"

The Old Man bristled. "Certainly. But I run an Air Force, not a flying circus. For the life of me, I can't understand how some of you flat-hatting young punks get your wing commissions. What did you do back in the States before the war, Bradford?"

"Er—nothing much, sir." Bradford's eyes dropped, a rush of warm memories bringing a nostalgic lump into his throat. "When I got out of high school, Dad wanted me to go in brokerage with him; but I liked auto racing. I had an old jalopie—called her 'Mable.' I spent a lot of time souping her up. Dad got kind of interested after I won a couple of races at the dry lakes—110 m.p.h. the last one. But I turned over. Dad wouldn't even let me drag what was left of Mable out of the desert. I could have fixed her good as new." The wistful enthusiasm faded from his eyes, and he flushed. "I just craved speed, sir, so I went to flying school."

A corner of the Old Man's mouth twitched. He killed a full minute glaring up toward the gap where the Nips came

through the ranges from straggling northern bases on their raids.

"All right, Bradford," he said gruffly. "You're at fault here by your own admission. There's no place in this war for temperament. Report to the O.D. for guard duty until further orders."

Bradford bit his lip. He saluted, said dully, "Yes, sir," and stood there, staring at nothing, while the Old Man walked away.

He wasn't aware of Scotty standing beside him, until the sergeant muttered, "Of all the crazy damnfools. Stop fightin' yourself, kid, and come down to earth."

It wasn't said with rancor; but Bradford's head came around fast, his eyes clouded and snapping. "Where the hell do you think I *am*? You've got nothing to beef about, Scott — you've got the berth you want."

"Sure," Scotty agreed emphatically. "Because I use my brains. Us older guys take time to figure things out before we bust into 'em. You fool kids bull into everything, and to hell with what happens. You can't win a war that way."

"Yeah?" Bradford scoffed. "I suppose a guy has time to park on his hips and take it to Congress with a couple Zeros chewing his tail. Try and win your war *that* way, Scott."

He left Scotty cussing and mumbling something about "babies with wet diapers." He was too sick to make an issue of it.

THEY had a raid that night. Bradford was on guard post with a tommy-gun slung behind his shoulder, pounding his arches around a couple of damaged P-38's under a shrimp-net camouflage at the edge of the field. His mood was one of morbid dejection. A guy might have an excuse to go over the hill, if they wouldn't let him fight, he thought; except that guard duty was better than Scotty's spying and nagging. Scotty and his old-fashioned ideas about winning a war! What a guy!

He stopped his pacing, and his eyes were drawn to the sky. It was alive with the movement of scudding clouds that made a blinker-light out of a fat moon. Swell night for flying, he thought gloomily, and swiped at the horde of mosquitoes buzzing around his face. Damn "annies," forever hanging around waiting for a guy's G.I. mosquito-

lotion to wear off. A pair of night-fighters on high-altitude patrol droned over, the heavy beat of their motors punching through the eternal hum of insects. From the ranges behind him came an incessant excited bumping of native "kundu" drums, a sudden rattling cough of machine-gun fire, and the pumping of mortars. Somebody was getting merry hell—the Japs, he hoped. He wondered what would happen if they broke through. The Old Man would probably let him fly quick enough then. If he didn't—Holy Cow! It would be awful to fight down here in the dust. He unslung the tommy and cuddled it in his left arm, staring up toward the black ranges.

He was standing that way when the air-raid alarm exploded its screaming warning. Scramble! Instinctively he started to run toward the string of fighter-planes at the end of the runways, then checked himself, his heart beating like a trip-hammer. Excited voices crackled across the field, the sound of men running. A gunned jeep-engine buzzed waspishly. Already warm motors roared to life, and night-fighters blasted down the strip on the take-off.

The Japs came in from the sea, at low altitude, with cut motors—an unprecedented tactic that almost caught the base napping. Even before they dropped flares to light the target, Bradford saw their batlike shapes against the moon. The boys in the AA emplacements must have seen them too, for the night sky was suddenly horribly beautiful with spanging tracers and a bedlam of sound.

Bradford heard the screeching descent of the first stick of bombs and dived into his slit-trench. They struck short of the field, their spaced concussions jarring his brain. He crouched, open-mouthed, waiting for the second stick. It fell, the last crumper so close he could feel the vicious whiplash of its breath across his trench. The third stick struck somewhere on the field; the fourth went wild—jettisoned; and that was all. He came up for air, shaking a little. There were some fires across the field, but the boys up there were tearing into the Jap planes now. The sky was ghastly with moonlight, slow-descent flares, and red tracers from the .50's. A plane burst into flames and fell away in a beautiful arc, like a comet—a Jap bomber, he could tell by its size. Holy Cow,

what a show he was missing! He stood up, yelling, and fired at an enemy fighter zooming low to strafe the field.

Standing, he became aware of a revealing brightness growing around him. He turned and saw a halo of fire leaping from one of the crippled P-38's. Gasoline! He scrambled out of the trench and under the shrimp-net, looking for the fire-extinguisher cart and not finding it. Scotty and a grease monkey ran up. Scotty was swearing, his face red and glistening with hurry.

"Get a scooter here, Case," he yelled. "Gotta get this baby out before she catches the other one. Snap it up, Case. Who in hell took that fire-cart? I'll get 'em court-martialed!"

Bradford caught Scotty's arm, pointing past the burning plane. "Motors okay in that one?"

Scotty bobbed his head, and Bradford shot him a scathing look. "Then what the hell are you waiting for?"

**H**E RAN to the plane, climbed up, and ducked into the open cockpit between the motors—boy, it was sweet to pile into that cockpit, fire or no fire! Flames from the burning plane were licking at the wing-tip before he brought the cold motors to life. He gunned them and the plane lurched ahead out of reach of the blaze. Scotty would give him forty kinds of hell for razzing those cold Allison's—but the baby was safe, wasn't she? While "take-it-to-Congress" Scotty was thinking about it. He cut the ignition, piled up, and ran back to help with the other plane.

Scotty was still damning whoever took the fire-cart, and squirting at the blaze with a small extinguisher. He wasn't getting anywhere, Bradford saw, because he couldn't get close to the heart of the fire, which seemed to be centered on a wing, between a motor and the pilot's nacelle. Bradford wanted to tell him he could reach it better from the other side; but you couldn't tell a guy like Scotty anything.

There was a bucket sitting beside one of the net supports. Bradford snatched it up and scooped it full of loose dirt. He ran around to the opposite side of the plane and climbed up on a wing beside the nacelle. Through the closed glass hatch he could see the nucleus of the blaze eating into the

motor housing; when it reached the gas tanks— He slid the hatch with a bang, and the heat struck him like a blow in the face, scalding his eyeballs. Squinting, he flung the dirt, slammed the hatch, and stood back, digging at his eyes. He knew an instant of panic—what if he couldn't see again? A guy with 20-15 vision gone blackout would be grounded for keeps! He opened his eyes wide, and the glaring heart of the blaze seemed to be gone. Or was it? Hell yes; everything else was there — Scotty, the smoke, a half-dozen fires on the field beyond.

He was a little slow getting back to where Scotty was working. Case had brought up a "cat" and a couple of men with a large extinguisher. There wasn't much left for them to do except cinch the job. They buzzed away, and Bradford remembered he was on guard post. He found his tommy-gun and stood blinking at the smoking plane. He could feel Scotty's eyes on him.

Scotty said reproachfully, "Bullin' into a thing like that mighta got your eyes burnt out, kid."

Bradford looked up at the sky, watching the night-fighters chase the Nips. All of a sudden he felt pretty low.

"So what?" he said. "I don't need 'em much down here."

Scotty threw down his extinguisher. "Crazy as a goony-bird," he said feelingly, and stalked away.

The racket in the sky had stopped. Bradford stood in the darkness, his stomach all hollow, and watched the fighters land one by one by signal light—those who were coming back. Things settled down, and the base was left to clean up its debris and count noses. Not a man would sleep that night, Bradford knew, except the dead, and the poor guys that got the morphine needle. Hell, he might as well be one of them, as a helpless dope on the sidelines. If the Old Man wasn't ever going to let him fly again—he started pacing, kicking vindictively at the dust, and mentally putting the Old Man in his place. All at once he stopped, thinking about something the Old Man had said when he'd dressed him down that morning—something about that medium bomber he'd crashed back in the jungle. A grin that almost hurt cracked the morbid set of his face. Holy Cow! Maybe *there* was a

way he could get the Old Man to let him fly again!

THE day was ablaze with sunlight before a jeep buzzed across the field between shuttling planes to pick him up. He could have kissed the bleary-eyed corporal at the wheel as he piled in.

"Take me to HQ on the double, Gus," he said. "I got to see the Old Man."

Gus yawned and expertly dodged a bomb-crater. "You're tellin' me, sir—the Old Man craves to see you, but plenty."

"Yeah?" Bradford's thoughts backwashed, searching for a slip that might have got him in deeper. "What's the deal?"

Gus shrugged. "How should I know. I only work here, and do I work! Gee, we took a pastin' las' night. Messed up our runways and got six of them ten new mediums that just come in, settin' like ducks on a lake." He jerked his head at a mass of tangled wreckage.

"Holy Cow!" Bradford breathed, and cased the field, his mouth twisted. Most of the craters had been filled and smoothed over to permit intensive flight operations to continue; but a bulldozer and a crowd of men were working at a mess around Operations, and one camouflaged hangar was a wreck. The Nips were sure fools for luck, he thought. Six new mediums shot to blazes. Boy that was tough when the base was so short. If the Old Man didn't listen now—

Like the field, Command HQ was a beehive. Scotty, looking like a booze-fighter the morning after, was talking to two Aussie Beaufighter pilots outside the Old Man's office. As Bradford went in, he saw the sergeant tap his head and shake it in his direction. Nuts, was he? Okay, he'd show 'em. The Old Man didn't look any too happy to see him, he thought apprehensively. He came to attention and a salute.

"Lieutenant Bradford reporting, sir."

The Old Man said without preliminaries, "Sergeant Scott tells me you saved two P-38's from burning at considerable risk to yourself, Lieutenant. That puts you in line for a decoration, you know—we've a few more to award after last night."

Bradford felt his face grow hot. He said, "Thank you, sir—but I'd rather you considered those planes compensation for

the two I crashed." He got the rest out quick. "And, sir—I want to make up for that medium I crashed. It wasn't in bad shape, and you'll need those parts more than ever now. Give me three grease monkeys and fly me back there, sir. I'll salvage enough parts to put some of our cripples back in the air."

For a minute the Old Man just stared at him, then smiled crookedly. "Bradford, I believe you'd go to any lengths to get out of guard duty."

"I'd do anything to get back in the air, sir." Bradford said quickly. "I can fight up there."

He felt his stomach contract under the twin gun-muzzles of the Old Man's eyes. To his surprise, the Old Man's voice was oddly gentle.

"You understand the risk, Bradford—we don't know how close the Japs are patrolling that area?"

"I understand, sir."

The Old Man hesitated a moment, then nodded. "All right, Lieutenant. We do need those parts—desperately. I'll give you your grease monkeys and have you dropped back there. Think you'll be able to locate that plane?"

"Yes, sir," Bradford said. "The natives have a lot of wild tomato patches close by. I can spot 'em easy from three thousand."

"Good enough," the Old Man said. "In three days we'll send in a transport to pick you up. Now let's get Sergeant Scott and call for volunteers."

They picked Scotty up on the way to Maintenance. When he found out what was doing, he shot Bradford an "I-can-take-it-if-you-can" look and said with shocking celerity, "Count me in, sir. I need a vacation."

"Very well, Sergeant," the Old Man assented, a twinkle in his eye.

Bradford groaned inwardly. Stuck with "Take-it-to-Congress" Scotty—Holy Cow, was the Old Man making it tough! He stood by, grinding his teeth, while they called up two more volunteers—Bugs Macy and Cappy Riggs. Bradford groaned again without sound. A couple of good guys, but Scotty's stooges. He saw Scotty grinning smugly, and he could have smacked the guy.

The Old Man briefed them and assigned them a light bomber. They got their stuff

aboard, and Bradford was just climbing in when the Old Man called to him.

"Luck, Lieutenant, and don't forget—we are counting on you."

There was something in the Old Man's voice that made Bradford's heart leap—something the Old Man kept in hallowed reserve for his tough, impulsive kids when they needed it. As the plane took off, Bradford looked back and saw the Old Man standing there among his grease monkeys, a look of pride and confidence softening the stern lines of his face, and he thought, Oh, Lord, I've got to make good!

THEY were skirting a high valley, bisected by a sinuous river, and splotted with patches of green jungle and tawny "pit-pit" grass when Bradford spotted the wild tomato patches.

"Bradford to pilot," he said quickly over the inner-phone. "We're over the crash area. I see the plane now, sir—straight ahead along the river. See her wing sticking out of the jungle?"

In a moment the skipper's voice came back, "Got it. Can't risk a landing. Better drop your equipment and get set to bail. Bribe the fuzzies to clear a strip for us near as you can to the plane. We'll see you in three days. Luck."

They got down all right, but Scotty sprained his wrist. By the time they found the ship, Scotty's face was all locked up with pain. Bradford bound the wrist tightly.

"You'll never make out with that flipper," he said.

"The hell," Scotty declared. "I'll work left-handed."

Holy Cow! Bradford thought; left-handed the guy would be slower than ever—just when they needed fast action! He looked around at the silent jungle, the sea of six-foot pit-pit grass, thinking of the Old Man's warning about Jap patrols, and anxiety gripped him.

"Okay, fellows," he said. "Sidearms at all times, and keep those tommy-guns handy."

They were unpacking the supplies and equipment when the natives appeared—fuzzy-haired muscuar black fellows wearing their birthday suits and carrying wicked spears and warclubs. There had been no sound; they were just there, abruptly, big-

eyed and curious as children. They seemed to remember him, Bradford thought, for they returned his friendly grin. To get rid of them, he distributed trinkets and tobacco, and set them to work clearing a landing-strip, and cutting the jungle away from the plane.

They went over the ship carefully, and Bradford decided she didn't look so bad—dense, springy growth had eased the shock on the motors, trees had hung up the tail; one wing was out of line and full of holes; but the landing-gear was okay, and there was gas in her tanks; enough, maybe, to—

"Hey, Scotty," he said. "If we can get those motors perking, I believe I can fly her back!"

Scotty shot him a dirty look. "She'll never get off the ground."

"Wait a minute," Bradford said. "We're in hot enemy territory. We've got to get this job done the quickest way and get out. You're no good with that wrist, and you admit I'm a lousy mechanic—that leaves Bugs and Cappy on the big jobs. We can repair quicker than we can salvage; if we can get back to Base before the three days is up, we'll save the boys a trip and be bringing in a whole plane."

Cappy and Bugs looked at Scotty. Scotty spat with scornful deliberation.

"Bullin' into it again," he said.

Bradford grabbed his temper in time. "Okay, Scott. I'm C.O. here—I say we try it."

With the natives' help, they got the ship on an even keel, and went to work on the motors. By noon the second day, things were looking good. Scotty had passed inspection on one motor, but Bradford wouldn't let him start it because of the danger of attracting a Jap patrol. Scotty was sullen and taciturn. He supervised, doing what he could with his good arm. Bradford found it best to stay out of the way. Watching the slow progress of the work strained his race-horse nerves almost to the breaking point; so he stood by with a tommy-gun, his restless eyes on the jungle fringe. At mid-afternoon, Scotty announced flatly:

"Got to tear this port motor down to the raw."

Bradford went over. "Look here, Scott—if that's a stall—"

Scotty's face went livid. "I'm not riskin'

my neck or these guys' on any hair-brained kid-stuff. That motor's fixed right, or we stay here, order or not!"

Bradford held onto himself, wishing to God he knew more about motors. "How long will it take?"

"I ain't promisin' nothin'," Scotty said defiantly.

With a helpless shrug, Bradford stalked off toward the river. "Take-it-to-Congress" Scotty. Holy Cow, what could you do with a bull-headed guy like that? He'd cooled off a little by the time he reached the wild tomato patches. There were some native women picking tomatoes and putting them into woven fiber bags they carried over their shoulders. At sight of him they started to flee; but he grinned and they halted in a little group, giggling and watching him. He pointed to a tomato, then to himself, and they nodded. He picked a ripe fruit and bit into it—Boy, it tasted swell here in this awful heat. The guys back at Base would sure go for these—maybe he could get some from the natives to take back.

**I**T WAS late afternoon when Bradford left the native village, a gang of natives at his heels carrying enough tomatoes to feed half the Air Force. He had almost reached the plane when a sputtering roar burst upon the jungle quiet—Holy Cow! Scotty must have started the motors. He began to run.

He met Scotty climbing out of the plane, pushed past him, and cut the switch. "I told you not to start those motors till we're set to pull out," he said. "If there's a Jap patrol within five miles it'll be on our necks now!"

"How the hammered hell you expect me to tune 'em?" Scotty demanded harshly.

Scotty's protruding jaw was a temptation. Bradford resisted. He said, "Are they ready to go?"

"Hell no! An' we ain't night-flyin' this crash job of yours till I know them motors'll get us back!"

Bugs said, "That port motor's got to be adjusted."

Cappy nodded.

Bradford looked into their weary, sober faces, and the impulsive anger drained out of him. After all, these men were trained mechanics; he was only a pilot; his life,

theirs, depended upon their knowledge and judgment. And the Old Man was depending on *him!* He took a steadying breath.

"Tune 'em, then," he said resignedly. "But keep those tommy-guns right beside your tools—and go easy on the gas."

While the natives finished clearing a strip, Bradford loaded the bags of tomatoes on the plane. There were a dozen, bulging with ripe fruit. Night fell, and the natives left. Scotty came up and lit a match.

"In your hat," Bradford snapped.

Scotty swore. "Get my head sniped off some day with this weedin'."

"How much longer?" Bradford asked.

"Give us two hours in the mornin', an' the baby'll fly home," Scotty promised.

Bradford said reproachfully, "We'll have to wait for the transport now. If I'd got the radio perking, we could have saved 'em the trip."

"Yeah—if," Scotty said sarcastically. "If a lotta things in this screwy war."

Bradford ignored the implications. "Go grab some shut-eye. I'll stand watch."

**T**HE night was black and interminable, and alive with nerve-shattering sounds that kept Bradford's heart in his mouth and his finger tense on the tommy-gun trigger—but nothing happened. At dawn, after Scotty got the boys working on the port engine, his spirits picked up a little.

The sun was well up before Scotty started the motors. He let them warm, then shoved them through their paces, head cocked, listening. Finally he cut the switch, and a grin broke the strained lines of his face.

"Cooin' like well-fed babies," he announced proudly.

Bradford grinned; so did Bugs and Cappy. It was just a matter of waiting now. They loaded their equipment aboard and sat around the plane, not talking or smoking, their eyes on the south sky, their ears tuned-in for the drone of motors. Bradford quirmed, glancing uneasily along the jungle fringe. He couldn't get Jap patrols out of his head. All of a sudden Scotty jumped up and started waving his arms.

"Here she comes," he yipped.

Cappy and Bugs started waving their caps. Bradford saw her, then; just a line and three bumps slicking in for a landing on the improvised strip.

"Take cover," he snapped. "Wait'll you're sure she's ours before you bull into it." He looked straight at Scotty.

They ducked behind the plane until the incoming ship gave them a buzz, and the sun flashed on the old familiar star-circle. Bradford let his breath go—just a matter of minutes now, and they'd be on their way. Before the transport bumped to a stop at the far end of the strip, he was running toward her, the rest on his heels. The loading door was open, and the skipper and three men were jumping to the ground. Bradford headed straight for the skipper.

"No salvage, sir," he said breathlessly. "We're flying her back in one piece—sorry we couldn't have saved you the trip, but the radio was shot." He couldn't help grinning, thinking what the Old Man was going to say.

The grin froze into stark meaninglessness as shots burst from the jungle behind the medium. Bullets spattered the transport. Some didn't reach it—the radioman folded; Bugs gasped and grabbed his shoulder; the skipper grunted and went to his knees.

"Nips!" Scotty yelled.

Bradford saw them slinking out of the jungle, using the medium as a shield. He whipped the tommy up and let go at the pairs of bandy legs moving between the body of the plane and the ground. There were yells and more shots. Somebody slammed him down on the ground. It must have been Scotty, for he was right beside him, shooting with his good arm—and the rest who could were shooting too; slow-spaced shots that made Bradford's heart do a nose-dive—his was the only tommy-gun—Scotty and the boys had left theirs in the medium. Four issue .45's and one tommy against God knew how many Japs armed with automatic rifles! And just a matter of minutes till they'd have been safe up there in the blue sky—

The Japs were advancing across the strip, firing methodically — Bradford counted a dozen. The way the little Nip twenty-five caliber stingers were buzzing around him like mad hornets, there might have been a hundred. He glanced around; all the guys were flat; but they were openly exposed here. Thirty yards away in the tall pit-pit at the edge of the strip he saw a rock outcropping. Thirty yards—



He jerked a thumb toward it. "Scotty—get the skipper and hit for those rocks—I'll cover you."

He laid a full clip in front of his nose and opened up on the Japs. A man went down, and the rest did a belly-flop. There was a lull in the firing. Scotty hesitated.

"For God's sake, get the lead out!" Bradford yelled.

Scotty got going, and Bradford emptied the clip and slammed in the full one. Lord! He had to hold 'em till the boys made it. Thirty yards—would they never get there? He fired the clip half-empty, not daring to look around. Then he heard Scotty yelling.

"Come on, kid—we'll keep 'em down!"

Bradford leaped up and ran. Bullets snapped at his heels as he ducked behind the rocks. Everybody was shooting, even the skipper, who was sitting up with a white face and a bloody shoulder. Bradford found a crevice. The Japs were up and advancing on the run. When he opened up with the tommy-gun, they swerved and dived into a shallow depression.

"Hold your fire," the skipper said. "Keep down and let 'em pot away—got to save our ammo."

THE Japs evidently had the same idea. They stopped shooting. The skipper took inventory, and his face turned a shade whiter—two sidearm clips apiece, and ten shells in the tommy-gun. Nobody said a word. Bradford looked at the tense, grim faces, and something hit him between the eyes—not a bullet; something worse. They couldn't hold out very long. Then all these swell guys would be killed. It was his fault. He'd crashed that medium, hadn't he? It was *his* idea to come out and salvage it. All because of his damned selfish craving to get back in the air again. He looked at the tommy, then out to where the Japs were holed up. Hell, one grenade tossed in that depression would wipe 'em out; but they didn't have any grenades. He could rush 'em with the tommy, he thought—Lord, he'd do anything to save these guys and those two big planes.

Planes — he stiffened. Hey, there were three tommy-guns and extra clips of ammo back there in the medium where Scotty and the boys had put 'em—if the Japs hadn't found them. Holy Cow! It was a chance—

He shoved his tommy-gun into Scotty's hands.

"I'll be seein' you," he said.

"Hey, Bradford, you can't—" the skipper started; but Bradford had dived into tall pit-pit behind them.

He never quite knew how he got back to the medium by the circuitous route he had to take to keep out of sight—some kind of homing instinct a flyer has, maybe. But he made it, and found her unattended by the little brown men. He slipped up to the open hatch and crawled in, his heart pounding. It almost stopped—because the tommy-guns and clips of ammo were gone! Nothing inside the plane but tools and tomatoes. A dozen bags of tomatoes—maybe four hundred pounds of them, when what he needed was one grenade, some ammo, or a bomb. A bomb! One exploded inside his head then; just the way a ripe juicy tomato had exploded against it that time back in Alhambra when the Moots and South Pas Tigers mixed it up after a football game. Holy Cow, what a screwy slapstick idea—but it might work.

He began frantically heaving the big bags of tomatoes into a tight pile on top of the bomb bay doors. He grabbed a rope from the tool kit and tied them in place, then ran to the front of the plane. There was a scream of gears, and the plane shot forward along the bumpy strip. A bullet made a splintery sunburst against the glass beside him. Then he was up, roaring out over the jungle. Boy, were those motors sweet—thanks to Scotty's "take-it-to-Congress" patience. The guy sure knew his onions. He could see him down below, standing and shaking his fist.

"Thinks I'm running out," he muttered. "The old billy-goat!"

He banked sharply and brought the ship down in a long slant, straight for the ten Japs huddled in the depression; a made-to-order setup, if he ever saw one. He saw the Japs, apparently unperturbed, roll over and start shooting at him as he came within range. Just scaring 'em, was he? His lips drew back as the ground rushed up at him. His eye gave him the signal, and he prayed that he wouldn't miss. He jerked the bomb-door release—four hundred pounds of gooey-ripe tomatoes spewed downward—

He circled and swung back to come in.

Then he let out a yell. The Japs were wallowing in a juicy red smear, trying to fight off Scotty and the guys, who were swarming all over them.

Bradford yelled again, so loud it hurt his tonsils—

**I**T WAS Sunday morning. Everybody was lined up in front of Operations, where a big new P-38 stood with a tarp over its nose, like a veiled statue. Bradford wondered what it was all about. The Old Man gave them a little speech on Yankee courage and ingenuity. Then he looked at Bradford, a twinkle in his eye.

"As long as our Air Force has flyers like Lieutenant Bradford," he said, "who can slap down the Jap and win an objective with a mere plane-load of tomatoes, how the hell can we lose a war? Lieutenant Bradford, step forward."

There were cheers. Bradford came to at-

tention before the Old Man, his ears burning.

"I couldn't have done it, sir, without Sergeant Scott and the boys," he said.

There were more cheers, and the Old Man personally decorated him, then motioned to two men standing beside the P-38. They grinned and slowly pulled the tarp off its nose.

"Lieutenant Bradford," the Old Man went on, "in view of the fact that you've proved yourself courageous, capable, and resourceful, I'm reinstating you with your squadron as a fighter pilot. This P-38 is your ship—take her, and luck to you."

The tarp fell. Painted down the side of the plane were six little Rising Sun flags, and across the long nose in great white letters was a name.

Bradford looked and a lump rose in his throat. "Mable," he said. "Holy C—Cow, sir!"

## THE STORY TELLERS' CIRCLE

(Concluded from page 5)

battle six months after it was fought. But now we turn on the raddio an' here the news five, six times a day, along with some interestin' facts about vitamines, an' soap, an' shoe polish. This here's all right, in a way—but jest the same, when me an' Black John gits to thinkin' over them old times whilst we're shakin' dice fer the drinks, we shore wisht they was back.

"I'm writin' this here letter to ask you if you kin find out if the Gov'mint figgers on keepin' this road up after the war's over? If they do, I figger on puttin' in a gasoline pump, an' mebbe buildin' me a tearoom alongside the saloon, an' riggin' up one corner of the barroom fer a gift shop, fer the towerist trade. Could you send me the name of some company that makes genuyne Alaska an' Yukon relics fer to sell to towerists, an' also the name of some good lookin' young woman who would like a good job sellin' these here relics, on commission, with her board an' lodgin' throw'd in? Black John, he figgers mebbe he'll build a front porch on his cabin an' screen it so he kin set there an' watch the towerists go by. He claims that if enough of 'em goes by, there's bound to be a skulldug

amongst 'em that we could pick off an' hang, now an' then, fer old times sake. I'm afraid the old times is gone fer good, if the road stays open. But Black John's an occultist, which is his way of sayin' he looks on the good side of things.

"If the Gov'mint don't aim to keep the road open, could you find out if they'd mind if me an' John slipped out an' blow'd up parts of it, so no cars couldn't git past? We know a lot of places where we could put in a good shot of giant an' blow the road to hell an' gone. Tell the Gov'mint we'd do it free, usin' our own dynamite, an' caps, an' fuze.

"Yers truly,  
"Cush."

"P. S.—If you know the date they're goin' to start this here invasion er second front, me an' Black John will slip you ten thousand dollars if you'll tell us, because we know where we kin git a bet of a hundred thousand on it. The party that wants to bet is Cuter Malone, who is a damn crook, an' it would serve him right to lose a hundred thousand—besides me and John could make some slight profit.

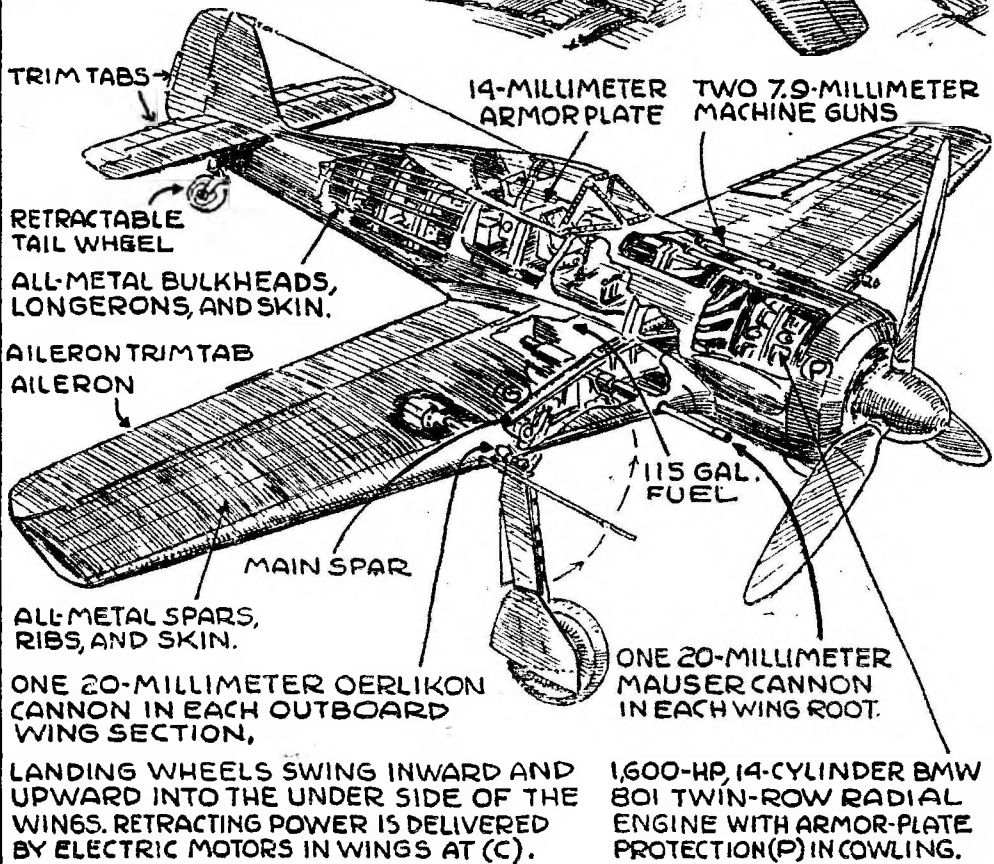
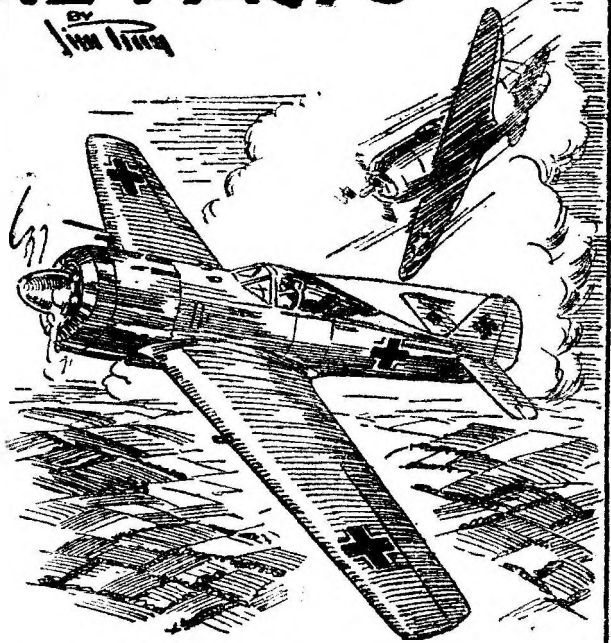
"Cush."

# PLANE FACTS

By  
Ivan Tacey

## FOCKE-WULF FW-190

POWERED WITH A TWIN-ROW RADIAL ENGINE, THE FW-190 IS GERMANY'S LEADING SINGLE-PLACE FIGHTER. IT HAS A TOP SPEED OF 375 MILES PER HOUR, A RAPID RATE OF CLIMB, AND A SERVICE CEILING OF 37,000 FT. THE FW-190 HAS A WINGSPAN OF 34 FEET 5 INCHES AND A LENGTH OF 29 FEET 5 INCHES, AND HAS A GROSS WEIGHT OF 8,580 LB.



*It Was When They Were Taking a Short Cut Across Country That Dug and Smoky Heard the Four Shots That Heralded Disaster*



## SHORT CUT TO TROUBLE

By GENE VAN

*Author of Other Stories of Smoky and Dug—Who  
Were Trying to Be Range Detectives*

“I STILL can't see why we're comin' this way,” complained Dug Evans as he turned in his saddle and squinted at his pardner, Smoky Smith.

“I told yuh a million times,” snapped Smoky. “Goin' down through this valley will save us fifteen miles. You know dang

well yuh don't feel any more like ridin' that extra distance than I do—an' this way we'll get there quicker.”

“Yeah, an' we'll be in Jimmy Holton's office quicker,” groaned Dug. “I don't think much of that, 'cause he just don't appreciate our work. We damn near get killed, an' what does he do but order us back to his office.”

"Mebbe that's why, Duggie," said Smoky. "He just don't want his brother-in-law gettin' killed, that's all."

"I'm glad he's yore brother-in-law, 'cause if a sister o' mine ever married a jasper like him, I'd choke her!" snorted Dug as he straightened in his saddle and looked ahead.

They were on a winding, dusty road that wound its way along the side of a hill, leading down into the wide valley that spread before them. Both men were saddle weary, covered with dust and grime. Both their horses were walking along, nodding their tired heads. They had been riding since sun-up, and it was now late afternoon.

Smoky Smith spurred his horse in beside Dug's. He was a tall, lean young cowboy dressed in a pair of dusty overalls, a once-white shirt, worn high-heeled boots, and about his slim waist hung his cartridge belt, his Colt .45 resting in his holster which was fastened to his thigh. There was a devil-may-care expression in his gray eyes and a half smile on his wide lips. He shoved back his battered old sombrero and wiped his forehead.

"Hot, ain't it?" remarked Dug as he squinted at Smoky. Dug Evans was short, heavy-set, with a round moonlike face, pug nose, and large blue eyes. He was dressed in the same fashion as Smoky.

These two cowboys had drifted together years ago, and had thrown their lot together, traveling about, working ranches here and there, always seeking adventure. After years, Smoky got the idea that he would like to be a detective, so he contacted his brother-in-law, Jimmy Holton, Secretary of the Cattle-men's Association. Jimmy knew that neither Smoky nor Dug had the brains to be range detectives, but Smoky's sister talked him into hiring them. So far, not through their ability, but through Lady Luck, they had managed to clear up several cases of cattle rustling and murder.

"It won't be hot much longer, Duggie," sighed Smoky as he pointed up at the sun. "It's almost behind the hills now. By the time we hit the bottom, it ort to be shady."

"Yeah," agreed Dug. "But I sure as hell hope yo're right about this savin' us time."

They followed the road to the bottom of the valley, where the road straightened out, cutting directly across the center of the valley. The rolling of the land prevented their

seeing very far ahead. The sun had dipped into the hills, but it was still warm.

"Now, there's the kind of a ranch I want," said Smoky as he pointed off to the right of the road. A small, rambling ranch-house sat in a grove of trees, half buried in the rolling hills.

"She sure looks peaceful," said Dug. "Nice grazin' land—an' from the looks of it, plenty water, too. Say, Smoky, there's an idea—why don't we settle down. We'd live longer, too."

"We can't Duggie, we're detectives, an' we owe our services to our fellow men," said Smoky seriously. "We got ourselves into a job that we can't just give up."

"We got!" snorted Dug. "Lemme tell yuh somethin', Smoky, it was all yore idea! If I had to do over again, I wouldn't—"

DUG stopped as both men jerked up on their reins. Three evenly spaced shots rang out. They glanced at each other, then about the countryside. A fourth shot sounded!

"Sounded like it came from that ranch-house," said Smoky.

"Let's get outa here, Smoky."

"We're detectives," reminded Smoky. "We'd better look into it."

"Whoever done that shootin' don't know we're detectives," said Dug, "an' they're liable to notch their sights on us if we ride over that way."

"C'mon," snapped Smoky as he swung his horse about and headed through the archway that led to the ranchhouse. Dug hesitated a moment, then he followed. Deep inside him he knew better, but he didn't want Smoky to ride into trouble alone.

They rode into the ranch yard, and slipped from their saddles, both men moving in behind trees, their right hands grasping their six-shooters. They watched the still house for several minutes, but there was no sign of life.

"Mebbe you were wrong, Smoky," said Dug. "Yuh know, you've been wrong before."

"When?"

"Let's not go into that," sighed Dug. "C'mon, let's get out of here."

"I'm goin' to look around," said Smoky as he stepped out from behind his tree.

"Yo're stickin' yore neck out," warned

Dug as he remained behind his tree and watched Smoky cross the yard and go up on the front porch where he went to the door and knocked loudly. There was no reply, so Smoky tried the door. It was unlocked, so he shoved it open and entered.

Dug scratched his head, sighed, and hurried up to the house where he found Smoky in the living room. As Dug entered, Smoky whirled, his gun covering his pardner.

"Oh, it's you, Duggie."

"Yeah, it's me. Who didja expect to see?"

"I dunno," replied Smoky. "Don't seem to be anyone around here."

"We'd better get out before someone comes home an' finds us here. It's against the law to enter a house like this."

"Let's just take a look, then we'll go," said Smoky as he turned and entered a small bedroom. The room was empty. They looked into another bedroom, then the dining room.

"I wonder where them shots came from?" queried Smoky.

"Mebbe someone huntin'," suggested Dug, as he shoved the kitchen door open and stepped into the room, where he stopped in his tracks and grabbed Smoky's arm. "Look! Blood! Smoky!"

There was a thin fresh red trail across the kitchen floor. It disappeared out the rear door. Carefully, so as not to touch it, they made their way to the rear door. Outside, the trail disappeared. The two men looked at each other.

"I—I think we'd better get goin'," said Dug. "That's fresh blood, Smoky."

"Uh-huh," nodded Smoky. "Smell the powder, Duggie. That shootin' took place in here, I'll betcha. Funny we didn't see anyone, isn't it?"

"Mebbe they're still around here, Smoky. We—we ort to get outta here—while we're still alive."

Just then a sound caused both men to stand motionless. Slowly, they turned their heads, their eyes flashing about, seeking the cause of the noise. They couldn't see anyone, so they turned and moved toward the dining room door. Again they heard the sound.

Smoky motioned with his six-shooter toward the dining room, and Dug slowly shoved the door open. Both men stepped

into the room, ready for action, but there was no one there."

"What in blazes!" snorted Smoky. "I could swear that there was someone in here. Didn't you hear the noise, Dug?"

"Uh-huh," nodded Dug. "Mebbe they're goin' to kill us without lettin' us see 'em."

Again they heard the noise, this time louder. Smoky nearly jumped off the floor, as the sound seemed right at his elbow. He grabbed Dug.

"Ghosts!" he whispered hoarsely.

Dug nodded as they started across the room toward the living room. Just then a sharp, not too loud, cry pierced the air. The two men stopped, looking at each other. More sounds, a mixture between sobs and cries. They looked about. Smoky's eyes widened as he pointed with his gun barrel toward a large basket that was sitting on the floor, half way under the table.

As they watched, the basket rocked slightly as the cries grew in volume. The two cowboys moved forward, their eyes wide, their guns poised for instant action. They stopped beside the table and looked down into the basket. Settled in a gray blanket was a baby, its small red face twisted in anger as it cried.

"My Gawd!" gasped Smoky. "A—a baby!"

"Uh-huh," nodded Dug as he holstered his gun. "What's it doin' down there—hidin' from us? Yuh don't suppose it did all the shootin', do yuh, Smoky?"

"Duggie, don't be silly!" snapped Smoky. "That little feller couldn't hold a six-shooter. Look at those small fingers, they couldn't pull a trigger."

"Mebbe he knows about the shootin'."

"If he does, I don't reckon he'll be tellin' anyone for a long time. We'd better get outta here, Duggie."

"I told yuh that a long time ago," sighed Dug. "Funny anyone would leave that baby here alone—especially with all the shootin'. What about the kid, Smoky?"

"I dunno," replied Smoky as he eyed Dug. "I don't think we should leave him here alone."

"Now, Smoky," cautioned Dug. "I ain't going to play nurse to no baby—that's final! I don't think you should stay here, either. People might get ideas, yuh know."

"Uh-huh," nodded Smoky. "Mebbe we

ort to take the little feller into town. I don't like the looks of things."

"Do yuh think we should take him into town?"

"I think so," replied Smoky. "Can't leave it here to starve."

SMOKY holstered his gun, then he gently lifted the baby out of the basket. An amazed expression came over Smoky's face, as he carefully let go with one hand.

"What's the matter?" asked Dug.

"Wet."

Dug grinned as Smoky glared at him. He turned and walked out of the house. Smoky studied his horse, then the baby. "Can't make it, Duggie. Here, yuh hold him until I get mounted."

Dug took the baby, holding it clumsily, and far out from his body. He nearly dropped the youngster as it twisted and squirmed. Smoky swung into the saddle, and Dug handed the baby to him, grateful to get rid of it. He then mounted and they rode away from the ranch house. The baby stopped crying, and Smoky smiled at Dug.

"Now that yuh got the baby, what are yuh goin' to do with it?" asked Dug as they swung down the road toward town.

"I dunno," confessed Smoky. "Mebbe we'll find the mother or father in town."

"I hope we do," sighed Dug. "Somethin' ort to be done—the poor kid's all wet."

As they swung up over a slight rise, they spotted two riders approaching them. They exchanged glances, then swung their horses to the right side of the road. Smoky looked down at the baby, then at the approaching riders.

"Duggie, what're we goin' to do?"

"You do—not me," sighed Dug. "You've got it, not me."

As the two men came abreast of them, they drew to a stop. Smoky's eyes narrowed as he saw a five-pointed star on the broad chest of the man nearest him. His heart leaped into his throat, preventing his acknowledging their greeting.

Sheriff Hank Webber eyed the two strangers, then his brown eyes came to rest on the child in Smoky's arms. He was a big man, with a red face, large nose, broad mouth, and he was wearing a short-cropped mustache.

"Where you strangers headin' with the baby?" he asked in a gruff voice.

"We—we—" Smoky's voice refused to utter any more.

"Yuh'll have to pardon Smoky," said Dug apologetically. "He—he found the baby."

"Found the baby?" queried the sheriff as he rode in close to Smoky. "Where'd yuh find the baby?"

"In—in the house," replied Smoky slowly, then he told the two officers about the shooting and the finding of the child.

"Sounds like the Hughes' place," said Webber.

"Uh-huh," nodded his deputy, Slim Snyder. Slim was just what his name implied; he was built like a two-by-four. His face was lean, tanned, with a large hooknose, small eyes, and a narrow mouth. His neck was extra long, and his Adam's apple was large, and as he nodded, the Adam's apple bobbed up and down.

"Don't know the name of the place," said Dug. "No one was there but the baby—an' he wouldn't talk."

"A he, eh?" grunted Slim. "How do yuh know, feller?"

"Well, I—e-r-r-r-r-r," Dug sighed and shook his head.

"Just took it for granted, eh?" snapped Slim. "Bet it's the Hughes' baby, Hank. Heard that they had a new one last week."

Webber rubbed the ball of his thumb on his chin. "Yore story sounds queer to me," he said. "Are yuh sure that yuh looked for someone? Sure yuh didn't take the kid in hopes of gettin' cash outta the parents?"

"That sounds logical, Hank," grunted Slim. "Especially with the Hughes' sellin' out to King Lippert. They got money now, yuh know."

Before either Smoky or Dug could defend themselves, the two officers had them covered. Sheriff Webber rode in close and quickly removed their six-shooters.

"Probably fate that sent us out this road, Slim," he said as he glanced at the baby. "Lucky thing for the kid, too. You can lock these child rustlers up while I go out an' look around the Hughes' place. Better take the baby with yuh just in case things aren't all right out there."

"Say, yuh can't do this to us!" protested Smoky.



"Can't, eh?" grunted Slim. "We'll show yuh we can. Go ahead, Hank, I'll take care of these two."

Sheriff Webber swung his horse about and galloped up the road. When he was out of sight, Slim Snyder rode around the boys, then he ordered them down the road.

"What about the baby?" asked Smoky.

"You just hold onto it," replied Slim. "Now, ride nice like, or I'll have to waste a little lead on yuh!"

THE sheriff's office at Twin Forks was small, with the cells built in the rear. There were two cells, but right now only one was occupied; by two men and a baby. The two men were seated on the edge of a rough bench, while the baby lay on a cot, rolling and tossing, crying its little heart out.

"Short cut!" snorted Dug Evans as he motioned to their surroundings. "Just a short cut to trouble—that's all."

"It's a short cut, if we hadn't gotten in here," pleaded Smoky Smith. "That little feller really got us into somethin'."

"There yuh go, blamin' the baby, when it's all yore fault, Smoky," grunted Dug.

"Hey, can'tcha stop that baby from hollerin'?" snapped Slim Snyder as he leaned back in the sheriff's chair and propped his feet up on the edge of the desk. "It disturbs me."

"That's too damn bad!" snorted Smoky. "Mebbe you know how to stop him—we don't." Smoky walked over to the bars, but the deputy ignored him. He turned and moved over to the cot, where he picked up the baby. He studied the little, twisted, red face in the flickering lamplight. "Looks like a Chinaman when he screws his face up like this," he added.

The baby stopped crying, its small blue eyes being attracted by the lamplight. Smoky grinned and looked down at Dug.

"Whoa-a-a, there, Smoky," snorted Dug. "It's the lamp, not you that stopped the cryin'."

Just then the front door banged open. They all turned to see who it was, hoping that the sheriff had returned, but it was a small, thin man with a very decided limp. He stopped just inside the room and slammed the door shut. The noise started the baby crying again.

"Now, look whatcha done!" snapped Smoky as he eyed the crippled man. "The baby'd stopped, an' yuh started him off again!"

The crippled man limped to the center of the room, squinting toward the cell. He rubbed his crooked nose, sniffed, and turned toward Snyder.

"What in hell's goin' on here?" he demanded. "Turnin' this place into a nursery?"

"Hell, no!" snapped Snyder, as he kicked his feet off the desk and sat upright in his chair. "Them's two child stealers with their loot, King."

King Lippert sniffed again and squinted toward the cell. "That's somethin' new—stealin' kids!" he snorted. "We ort to have a little necktie party, huh, Slim?"

"Now, listen, mister," pleaded Dug as he stepped in beside Smoky at the bars. "We didn't steal this baby. Smoky—that's this here feller, he found the baby alone, an' thought we'd try to find his folks in town. We didn't do nothin' wrong."

"Huh!" Lippert looked at Snyder. "Where's Hank?"

"He's out to the Hughes place," replied the deputy. "We thought mebbe this was the Hughes' baby."

"Hughes' spread, eh? That's my place now! The Hughes ain't there—they left yesterday. The boys didn't say anythin' about a baby being out there."

Smoky shook the baby in an effort to stop it crying, but all his work was in vain. Smoky sighed and shook his head. "Don't stand there like a dummy—do somethin'," he pleaded. "This baby needs food."

"Food?" queried Snyder. "It can't eat yet—ain't got no teeth. It probably drinks milk."

"Then get a cow," snorted Dug.

"Cow! Baby!" snorted King Lippert. "This is a hell of a place!" He turned and limped out of the office, slamming the door behind him.

"Lotta help he was," sighed Smoky.

"Help? Man, that was King Lippert," said Snyder.

"So what?" queried Dug. "Who's he—the mayor of Twin Forks?"

"He's the meanest devil that ever forked a bronc!" replied the deputy. "He hates everyone, an' blames 'em for his limp."

Someone loosened his saddle once, an' he was thrown, breakin' his leg. He ain't got no use for anyone but King Lippert. We have had many complaints against him, but we never been able to get the goods on him. It runs anywhere from rustlin' to murder!"

"An' yuh have to arrest innocent punchers," wailed Smoky.

JUST then Sheriff Hank Webber entered the office. Smoky and Dug crowded against the bars, eager to hear what the officer had to report. He tossed his sombrero on the desk, then he turned and looked toward the two prisoners and the baby.

"I dunno what to say," he grunted, hooking his thumbs over his cartridge belt. "I think yo're either crazy or damn liars!"

"Mebbe Smoky's both," sighed Dug. I've often wondered."

"What are we goin' to do with 'em, Hank?" asked the deputy.

"I reckon we'll turn 'em loose, Slim," replied the sheriff. "I couldn't find any blood on the kitchen floor, an' there's no one livin' there."

"But—but, Sheriff, it was there when we was there!" snorted Smoky. "Duggie, yuh saw it, too."

"Uh-huh, it was there all right, Sheriff."

"Crazy as bedbugs!" snorted Webber. "Now listen, fellers, where didja find that baby?"

"We done told yuh!" snapped Smoky. "We found it—oh hell, it's no use, Sheriff! What're we goin' to do—we can't take the baby with us."

"I've been thinkin' about that. Molly Moore would love to take care of it for yuh," said Webber. "An' you fellers ain't goin' nowhere until this thing is straightened out."

"Yuh—yuh mean we're goin' to stay in here?" asked Smoky.

"I'll let yuh out, but yuh can't leave the valley until I say so."

"But we got to get to—"

"Would you rather stay right here?" snapped Webber.

"Gosh, no," replied Dug quickly. "Smoky gets excited, Sheriff," he added as he glared at his pardner. "We'll stay around here."

The front door opened and a short heavy-set man dressed in a dark suit appeared. He

glanced about, then hurried over to the cell. He peered at Smoky, Dug, and the baby.

"I'm Elmer Jason, attorney-at-law," he said. "I see you need a lawyer—and I'm available. What happened, wife leave you with the baby? They will do that—another man, I suppose, and you found out and killed him." He shook his head while Smoky and Dug stood there open-mouthed, unable to speak.

"Elmer!" snapped the sheriff. "These men don't need you. I'm goin' to release them now."

Jason glanced over his shoulder at the sheriff, then he turned back to the boys. "Well, a man can't be too slow in drumming up a little business."

"You, King Lippert's lawyer, an' yet yuh always bust in here, tryin' to pick up a few extra pennies," snorted Webber. "Doesn't King ever pay yuh?"

"Well, yes, he does, but a man must work if he wants to reach the top," smiled the lawyer as he turned and walked slowly toward the front door. "Remember me, gents, if you should need me." He opened the door and stepped outside, closing the door behind him.

The sheriff unlocked the cell door and took the baby from Smoky's arms. "You boys are goin' to the hotel, an' I'm goin' with yuh."

Smoky and Dug walked out of the office with the sheriff following behind them, the baby in his arms. They crossed the street and went up the high boardwalk to the hotel. They climbed the stairs and crossed the porch when a shot rang out from across the street.



Smoky and Dug whirled as a bullet whistled between them and shattered the glass in the hotel door. Webber dropped to one

knee, grasping the child in his left hand, his right hand streaking for his six-shooter. His eyes glanced about the dark main street, trying to locate the person responsible for the shot. Just then another shot was fired, and this time the sheriff fired back at the orange flash which appeared across the street.

Smoky fell flat on the porch, his hand clawing at his gun while Dug glanced about, trying to locate his sombrero, which had been in line with the second shot. He saw the sombrero rolling along the porch past the kneeling sheriff. As he started for it, another shot was fired from across the street, and in the same moment, Smoky reached out, grasped Dug by the right ankle and tripped him with a resounding thud.

"Did he get hit?" asked the sheriff over his shoulder as he whirled and handed the baby to Smoky.

"I—I tripped him. I—" Smoky glanced down at the baby, then up at Webber as the officer sprang off the porch and raced across the street, where he disappeared down a dark alley.

"You—you tripped me!" snorted Dug as he sat up on the porch. "I—I thought I was hit."

"Yuh didn't get hit, didja, Duggie," grinned Smoky. "I saved yore life, that's what I done."

"Yeah—jist look at my chin. Splinters off this damned floor."

"Who did it? Who did it?" demanded a short, fat, red-faced man as he appeared in the doorway of the hotel. "Who broke my glass?"

"Someone shot at us," replied Smoky as he got to his feet, the baby grasped in both hands.

"Look at my window," wailed the man. "I—I'll kill the man who did it. It costs money for glass windows—and I didn't put them there to have them shot at, either."

"Hey, what's goin' on?" demanded Slim Snyder as he came up on the porch. "Where's Hank? Didja kill him?"

"My Gawd, we didn't do nothin'," wailed Smoky. "He's chasin' the feller that shot at us."

"Someone shot at yuh? Why?" queried the deputy.

"We dunno," replied Dug.

Sheriff Webber came back as the boys were registering for a room in the hotel.

He took the baby. "Couldn't find hide nor hair of anyone," he reported. "Someone must be crazy around here. I'll take the baby down to the Moore's. See you boys in the mornin'."

Once settled in their small hotel room, Smoky pulled off his boots and sprawled on the bed while Dug sat down in a rocker and rocked. Smoky lighted a cigarette and began blowing smoke rings toward the ceiling.

"Do yuh think someone was shootin' at us or the sheriff?" asked Dug as he began pulling off his boots.

"At the sheriff, of course," replied Smoky. "No one here knows us, so why should they shoot at us."

"Mebbe we'd better warn him—I don't think he has brains enough to realize that he's in danger."

"Warn—nothin'," snorted Smoky. "We are goin' to keep out of all trouble."

"Smoky, are yuh feelin' all right?"

Smoky took the cigarette from his lips and smiled. "Yeah, we can't waste our time here when Jimmy might be needin' us."

"Are yuh kiddin'?" asked Dug. "Smoky, there's times when I wonder about yuh."

**SMOKY SMITH** and Dug Evans spent the entire next morning trying to get Sheriff Webber's permission to leave the valley, but the sheriff refused them. Finally the officer became angry and threatened to lock them up, so they left him alone. After dinner, they sat on the hotel porch. People looked curiously at them, as word had spread around town about their appearance with a strange infant.

In mid-afternoon, they saw Sheriff Webber ride out of town, so they left the hotel porch and sauntered down to the sheriff's office where they found Slim Snyder alone.

"No!" he snapped as they entered.

"We—we haven't said a word," grunted Smoky.

"I know what you were goin' to ask," said the deputy.

"Smart, aren't yuh?" growled Dug. "How much longer do we have to stay here?"

"That all depends on the sheriff," replied Slim. "He'll tell yuh when yuh can leave—an' yuh'd better not try leavin' before that."

"Uh-huh," nodded Smoky as they turned.

They nearly bumped into two cowboys, who shoved past them and into the office.

"Hyah, Slim," greeted the larger of the two men. He was a big, brawny, buck-toothed cowboy. "What's new?"

"Nothin' much, Buck," replied the deputy. "What's on yore mind—or on Andy's?"

"We heard about the two child stealers from King, an' we thought we'd get first-hand information. King's a hell of a liar," grunted Andy Martin, a medium-sized, bow-legged cowboy. One cheek was bulging with a chew of tobacco.

"It's a queer thing, fellers," sighed Snyder. "Hank's out at the Hughes' place now, tryin' to piece together their wild story."

"Ain't no one out there," said Buck Steddom, foreman for King Lippert's spread. "Anyway, they didn't have no kid, did they?"

"Uh-huh," nodded Slim. "Molly Moore was out there an' helped Mrs. Hughes at the birth a week ago. Molly claims that it's the Hughes baby because of a birthmark on its right arm."

"It's damn funny, that's all I can say!" snorted Andy Martin. "Why didn't the Hughes take the kid with 'em? They never said anythin' to us when we went out there with Jason to complete the sale of their spread. Wouldn't think they'd go away an' leave the kid."

"It doesn't make sense," agreed Slim.

"Nothin' around here does," snorted Buck. "Reckon everyone wants to get outta the valley just as soon as King buys 'em out. Mebbe King'll get what he wants—the whole damn valley with no one livin' here but himself."

"The Larkins an' the Moores are the only ones that won't sell to him," said Martin. "He'd made 'em offers, but they turned him down."

"They'll sell," grinned Snyder. "I know King—he'll either poison their herd, shoot their cattle, or burn the place."

"Yuh can't prove that!" snapped Steddom.

"All right," sighed the deputy. "But yuh all know the reputation that King's got. Buck, you've worked for him for eight years, so yuh ort to know what I'm talkin' about."

"Them's fightin' words!" snarled Buck immediately.

"Aw-w-w-w, Buck," protested Andy. "Snap outta it—we didn't come here for trouble. C'mon, let's get that drink we came after." He took Steddom by the arm and led him out of the office, much to the relief of Slim Snyder.

SMOKY and Dug had an early supper, S they returned to the hotel porch, where they watched the people as they went up and down the main street. It was nearly dark when a young cowboy came up on the porch. He glanced at the two boys, then walked over to them, introducing himself. It was Eddie Moore.

"I thought I'd stop by and tell yuh that the baby is comin' along in tip-top shape, an' that Molly's in seventh heaven," he said. "I knew you were the boys."

"Why? Do we look like baby stealers?" queried Dug.

"Oh, it's not that, really," smiled Moore as he sat down on the porch railing facing the two cowboys. "The sheriff pointed yuh out from his office. I thought you'd like to know about the baby. We'd like to have yuh come out to our ranch sometime an' see the baby—an' meet the wife."

"Thanks a lot," said Smoky, "but we're pullin' out just as soon as the sheriff'll let us."

"Moore, what do you think of the Hughes leavin' the baby? Yuh knew 'em, didn't yuh?" asked Dug.

"It's damn queer, that's all I can say," replied Eddie. "Doesn't sound like Jane an' Ted goin' away an' leavin' the baby, 'cause they thought so much of the kid. Lucky yuh came along an' found it, or it'd died."

"Wished the sheriff was glad," sighed Smoky. "We'd like to get outta this here valley."

"Everyone wants to leave here," said Moore. "I dunno why, though. This is a grand valley with great opportunities ahead. If we could get rid of King Lippert, people'd stay. He's got one idea—to boss this valley. He's buyin' out everyone, after doin' somethin' to make 'em sell, even if they didn't want to."

"What do yuh mean?" asked Smoky.

"Oh, people find their waterholes poisoned, or their houses seem to catch fire,"

replied Eddie. "I warned King that if anythin' ever happened to my place, I'd kill him! I'll fight him to the end!"

"Too bad others don't take the same stand," said Dug.

"Guy Larkin's takin' the stand with me," said Eddie, "but the others sold an' left here so damn fast I didn't get a chance to talk with 'em. No matter how much Lippert offers me, I won't sell to him."

The hotel clerk came out on the porch and lighted the old yellow oil lamp that hung beside the door. He glanced at them, nodded, and started back inside when the report of a shot halted him in his tracks. Smoky, Dug, and Eddie sat upright, glanced up and down the poorly lighted main street.

"Sounded like it was fired inside somewhere," said Eddie.

"Sound like it came from across the street," said Smoky as they got to their feet.

Another shot rang out. Eddie rounded the porch railing and hurried down the stairs with Smoky and Dug behind him. The hotel clerk paused, then followed. Several people were gathering in front of a small office across the street from the hotel, so they hurried over there.

"What's goin' on?" demanded Sheriff Hank Webber as he shoved his way through the fast-gathering crowd.

"Sounded like two shots inside Jason's office," replied a bystander.

The sheriff tried the door, but found it locked. He glanced at the crowd, then asked, "Are yuh sure the shots were fired inside?"

"Sure as I'm standin' here, Sheriff," replied a man. "We was walkin' by when they was fired."

Webber hammered on the door, but received no response, so he went to one of the front windows and tried it. It was unlocked, so he quickly opened it and climbed inside. Smoky and Dug stood beside the door, patiently waiting.

"My God!" gasped a man who was leaning over the window sill, staring inside. "It's Elmer Jason—dead!"

THE door opened and Smoky and Dug shoved their way inside along with Eddie Moore and Slim Snyder before the sheriff could close the door. The deputy lighted

an oil lamp on the small roll-top desk while the men stood motionless, their eyes glued on the still figure of Elmer Jason.

The lawyer lay at the foot of the desk, his head resting in a fast-growing pool of crimson. There were two bullet holes through his head. The sheriff studied the body for a moment, then he turned away and glanced about the small office. At the rear was a small safe, which now stood partly open, with papers scattered about the floor.

"Murder an' robbery!" snorted Webber as he moved over to the safe and peered inside. It was empty.

"This is awful," said Snyder softly. "Elmer Jason the victim of such a thing. He never hurt a soul."

"Uh-huh," nodded Eddie Moore. "Elmer was timid—an' never did anythin' unless King Lippert ordered it. This will be a blow to Lippert."

"There's nothin' we can do here," said Smoky to Dug as he backed to the door.

"Yeah," agreed Dug. "Let's go back to the hotel."

They halted on the hotel porch where they sat down and watched the people across the street at the lawyer's office.

"Duggie, this is a hell of a place."

"Uh-huh," agreed Dug. "Now if we hadn't taken that short cut through we—"

"Now, Duggie," interrupted Smoky. "You followed me—I didn't make yuh come."

"I'm jist a damn fool—followin' another damn fool!"

KING LIPPERT sat hunched upon the seat of his buckboard, the reins dangling in his long, lean fingers. He was in no hurry to reach Twin Forks this fine bright morning, so his horses were walking along the dusty road. He was returning from a tour of inspection of his new spread—the Hughes ranch. King's eyes were studying the surrounding country, most of which he owned, and that which he didn't own, he had hopes of owning in the near future.

A sly, greedy grin crossed his thin, parched lips as he dreamed of the day when he would rule the valley as he saw fit. Back in his mind were names of people that he would ask to leave the valley; people who

had done things and said things to arouse his ire.

As the buckboard came over a slight rise, he looked up to see two horsemen approaching. He pulled the buckboard to a halt in the center of the road and waited for the men to come abreast of him. King Lippert's eyes narrowed when he saw Smoky Smith and Dug Evans.

"Child rustlers!" he snarled as they drew to a stop.

"Not us," protested Smoky quickly. "We just brought the baby into town to—"

"Shut up!" snapped King. "How'd yuh get out of jail?"

"Meaner'n they said he was," observed Dug, looking at Smoky. "It's too damn bad when a man gets that mean. He's no good to anyone nor to himself. Ort to take him out an' shoot him."

"Waste of lead," sighed Smoky.

"Mind yore own damn business, strangers!" snarled King.

"We aim to," said Smoky.

"Then, where do yuh think yo're ridin'?"

"That's none o' yore damn business!" snapped Smoky. "Just 'cause yuh own a lotta this here valley, don't make yuh a tin god. We go where we please, an' do as we please, *Mister Lippert!*"

"That's tellin' him, Smoky," grinned Dug. "Probably bite himself now—then he's sure to die."

Lippert lifted the reins and drove on without another word. The two boys watched for a moment, then rode on toward the Hughes ranch. They didn't stop until they reached the gateway, where they halted and looked about.

"Bet Lippert was out here lookin' over his new ranch," said Smoky.

"Uh-huh," nodded Dug. "Man, I wonder how he's lived so long? People must be plumb afraid of him, that's all."

"I wonder where the sheriff is—don't see his bronc around the house," said Smoky. "Didn't Snyder say he was out here?"

"Yeah," replied Dug. "We never met him on the road, either."

"Mebbe he cut through the hills," suggested Smoky. "There might be a short cut, yuh know."

"Oh, my Gawd!" groaned Dug. "You an' yore damnable short cuts!"

Smoky grinned as he swung his horse into

the ranch yard. Dug followed. They halted near the front porch where Smoky dismounted.

"Well?" snorted Smoky as he noticed Dug still in the saddle. "Ain'tcha comin' in?"

"Smoky, you ain't goin' in there—especially after what happened the other night."

"Aw-w-w-w, Duggie," snorted Smoky. "We ain't got nothin' to worry about. The baby's in town."

"I'm not afraid of the baby!" snapped Dug, as he dismounted. "Yuh know it's against the law to enter a house, don'tcha, Smoky?"

"I'm a detective."

"Ye-e-e-eah?" drawled Dug. "But who knows it but me? Ain'tcha ever goin' to use the brains God gave yuh, Smoky?"

Smoky glared at Dug for a moment, then he shoved the door open and stepped inside. Dug followed Smoky into the living room. He remained there while Smoky went straight to the kitchen.

"The blood's gone all right," said Smoky as he returned, "an' that basket that the baby was in—it's gone, too."

"Mebbe the sheriff wasn't lyin' last night, Smoky," said Dug. "Mebbe someone saw us, an' when we left, they cleaned up the blood in a hurry."

"Uh-huh," agreed Smoky. "It could be. Well, there's nothin' more around here."

"Smoky, you—you mean yo're ready to go back to town?"

**S**MOKY shoved past Dug, stepping out onto the front porch as a report of a shot ripped the still air, and a bullet hummed near Smoky's head, embedding itself in the door-casing.

"Watch out!" yelled Smoky as he fell flat on his face on the porch, his hat falling to one side, his right hand streaking for the butt of his six-shooter.

"Watch out—hell!" snapped Dug. "Get back in here, yuh fool!" Dug grasped Smoky's right foot and started dragging him back into the room.

"Ouch! Lemme go!" wailed Smoky. "There's splinters on the floor!"

*Crash!* A front window shattered as a bullet hit it. Another bullet hit just short of Smoky, showering him with splinters. He muttered a curse, backing into the room as

fast as he could, his left hand pawing at his face, trying to remove the splinters.

"My Gawd!" gasped Dug. "Smoky Smith, yo're a mess!"

"Thanks—I know it!" grunted Smoky. "Where's that dirty skunk that tried to dry-gulch me? Just lemme at him—that's all I ask."

"I can't see him," replied Dug as he moved to the broken window and peered outside. "He's out there in the hills, jist waitin' for us."

"He can't do that to us," snorted Smoky as he rid himself of his last splinter. He got slowly to his feet, gun gripped tightly in his right hand, and started toward the open doorway, but Dug made a lunge and grabbed him, dragging him backward.

"Duggie!" snapped Smoky. "Lemme go—will yuh!"

"All right, go ahead an' get yourself killed!" snapped Dug as he released his hold on Smoky.

"Get killed?" Smoky stopped and looked at Dug. "You—you let me go out there an' get killed? Dug Evans, I thought yuh like me more'n that."

"Smoky, yo're next to impossible. Here yuh want to argue—there's someone out there tryin' to kill us."

"Huh?" Smoky blinked thoughtfully. "Yeah, that's right. Well, let's go get him."

"How?"

"Well, we can—we can—hell, I dunno!" grunted Smoky as he moved near the window and peered outside. "I can't see nothin'."

"Watch that hill out there," said Dug as he picked up Smoky's sombrero and stuck it on the end of a bar which was used to fasten the front door shut. As the hat appeared in the doorway, the fire opened up, and the hat went spinning across the floor.

"I see him!" shouted Smoky as he fired three shots toward the hill.

"Didja get him?"

"I—I dunno," replied Smoky as he slipped to the doorway and glanced outside. "I saw sunlight on the barrel of a rifle, but the person's hidden in that thick brush. I shot at it." Smoky stepped into the doorway.

*Wham!* A bullet whistled past his head and thudded into the back wall of the room. Smoky flung himself forward, and out of line of the open doorway.

"You didn't get him," said Dug soberly.

"No, I reckon I didn't," sighed Smoky as he sat up and looked at his bullet-riddled sombrero which lay beside him. His eyes narrowed and he squinted up at Dug. "You—you used my hat?"

Dug nodded. "It was a good trick—only yuh missed him."

"Good trick!" groaned Smoky, as he picked up his sombrero. "Just look at it, Duggie. Why didn't yuh use yore own hat?"

"I didn't want any holes in it."

"Yuh didn't want any holes in—" Smoky scrambled to his feet, clamping the sombrero on his head. "Duggie—who was jist talkin' about brains?"

"Me," replied Dug. "I used mine."

Smoky sighed deeply, pulled up an old rocker, and sat down, facing the open doorway, but not in direct line with it. Dug sat down across the room, his back against the wall, his gun resting on his knees.

"What're we goin' to do?" he asked.

"Wait," replied Smoky. "He might get tired."

**S**MOKY SMITH was wrong, the person out in the hills didn't get tired. It was nearly dark when Smoky finally got to his feet and moved about the room.

"It'll be dark soon, then mebbe we can get outta here," he said.

"Yeah, an' we won't be able to see 'em," said Dug. "They know this country, an' they'll probably be waiting for us along the road. A fine mess yuh got us into, Smoky!"

"Aw-w-w-w, Duggie, it'll all work out. See if they're still out on the hill."

"Me see, huh? What's wrong with you?"

Smoky got slowly to his feet and moved to the front door. He leaned against the wall and peered around the corner. The sun was sinking fast in the west, sending weird purple shadows across the brush-covered hills, making it impossible to locate anyone in the brush.

"I don't see anyone," said Smoky as he turned, his back slipping into the doorway.

*Wham!* A bullet hit the casing beside Smoky, and he fell forward to his knees, landing at Dug's feet. He looked up at Dug, a silly grin on his face.

"He's still there," he said soberly.

"Uh-huh," nodded Dug as he helped Smoky up. "What'll we do? We can't stay here all night."



"Who said anythin' about stayin' here all night?" demanded Smoky as he sank down in the rocker. He rolled a cigarette, lighted it, and puffed thoughtfully, blowing smoke rings toward the ceiling. The sun went down, and presently it grew dark.

"Well, what are we goin' to do?" asked Dug.

"I dunno," replied Smoky. "It's late. Mebbe he's gone now."

"If he's as hungry as I am—he's gone," grunted Dug.

Smoky got to his feet and moved to the doorway. It was pitch dark outside, with no moonlight whatsoever. Smoky eased himself into the doorway, but his appearance failed to draw any firing.

"I reckon he's gone," he said.

"Yeah, an' then mebbe he could be waitin' for us out by the front gate," said Dug.

"That's what he might be doin'," agreed Smoky, "but we don't have to go out the front gate. We'll cut across the—"

"Whoa-a-a-a!" interrupted Dug. "No cuttin' across anythin'—'cause you don't know this damn country any better'n I do—an' I don't know it at all."

"All right," sighed Smoky. "You can stay here all night. I'm headin' for town."

Smoky stepped out on the porch, leaving Dug alone in the living room. He could hear Smoky walking across the yard to where they had left their horses tied to a railing. He thought the situation over, then decided that he would be better off riding with Smoky than staying here alone. He got to his feet and started through the doorway when he bumped into someone, whose weight was thrown against Dug, knocking him backward against the wall.

"What in hell!" snapped a hoarse voice, and Dug realized that the man wasn't Smoky. Dug's right hand went for his gun, but it discovered the holster empty. Dug reached out with both hands, grabbing the intruder and pulling him in close.

A hard punch to Dug's stomach caused him to let go of the other. He went into action, swinging both fists, which met their target in the dark. The stranger grunted, cussed, and hit back. Both men, unable to see who they were fighting, traded blow for blow.

Suddenly something hit Dug on the back of the head. He felt a sharp pain, then

everything went black as his knees started to buckle.

"That did it," snorted Smoky Smith. "Duggie, I just have to watch over yuh like—"

*Wham!* A fist hit Smoky full in the face, jerking his head back where it hit the wall. He reeled forward and grabbed wildly, his arms encircling someone, and the two of them crashed down on the porch with a resounding thud. Smoky landed on top, and though dazed, he was ready to offer a fight, but the figure beneath him failed to move.

Smoky carefully took out a match and struck it on the floor. In the flickering light, he looked down at the man upon whom he was sitting. It was a stranger. Smoky blinked several times, then looked over at Dug, who was slumped against the doorway, just regaining consciousness.

"Duggie," said Smoky. "Can yuh hear me—Duggie?"

"Wha-a-a-t hit me?" groaned Dug as he gingerly felt the back of his head.

"Did somethin' hit yuh?" asked Smoky seriously. "Ouch! Damn these matches. Burned my fingers." Quickly he lighted another.

"My Gawd, I got an egg on the back of my head—Smoky, yuh ort to feel it."

"I can't, 'cause I got this hombre pinned down."

"Yuh—yuh got him?" Dug blinked his eyes and squinted at Smoky. "Who is he?"

"A stranger," replied Smoky. "Never seen him before."

"Yuh don't suppose he was the jasper that was shootin' at us, do yuh, Smoky?"

"Could be," sighed Smoky. "Mebbe we'd better get outta here."

"That's the most sense you've shown in years," said Dug as he picked up his hat. He tried to put it on, but it hurt his head, so he held onto it while he got slowly to his feet.

**S**MOKY tossed away the match, and in the dark he removed the man's belt and fastened his hands behind him to the porch railing. He then lighted another match and inspected his work.

"C'mon, let's get goin'," said Dug as he started toward the horses. Smoky blew out the match and followed.

Smoky swung his horse about and rode

past the house, with Dug following him. After they had gone some distance, Dug called to Smoky to stop.

"What's the matter, Duggie? Does yore head hurt?"

"Where in hell are we goin', Smoky? This ain't the way to the road?"

"Yeah, I was wonderin' where the road was," replied Smoky soberly. "Well, we might as well go on—besides, someone might be waitin' out there for us."

"Yo're plumb crazy, Smoky!" snorted Dug. "I got a good notion to go back an' find the road."

"It ain't lost, Duggie—but I think we are."

Before Dug could say any more, Smoky spurred his horse forward, so Dug followed, preferring to remain with Smoky rather than being left alone in the dark. As they rode, the moon gradually appeared over the distant hills, giving them some light. After a while, Smoky drew to a halt and Dug rode in beside him.

"Well?" queried Dug.

"Look, an old road."

"Uh-huh, but which way is town? That's what I want to know more'n anythin'," grunted Dug.

Smoky rubbed his nose thoughtfully. "It must be that way, Duggie," he said, pointing to his right. "We been ridin' away from the ranch, an' the road at the ranch was to the right of where we were."

"Yuh aren't sure—are yuh, Smoky?"



"Well, I—I'm not sure, but, well, this road outta lead to somethin'. Mebbe we'll find someone who can straighten us out."

"Yo're the one that needs straightenin' out—all I need is a doctor to fix this damn head."

"Yore head hurt bad, Duggie?"

"No—not very bad, but I need a doctor to examine my head to see if I'm crazy—for followin' you!"

THEY swung to the right, following the trail as it wound up through a canyon. Smoky was in the lead with Dug close behind him. Both men were wondering where the road would take them. The moon was higher in the star-studded sky by now, lighting up the desert hills. At times the road was banked on each side by the hills, which were covered with mesquite and boulders.

Suddenly Smoky reined in his horse, causing Dug's mount to bump into him. As Dug started to speak, Smoky halted him with a hissed warning. Dug edged his horse in beside Smoky and whispered:

"What's the matter?"

"I seen a light ahead."

"Good!" exclaimed Dug. "There must be someone up there. C'mon, here's our chance to find out where we are."

They rode up the trail, side by side, their eyes trying to locate a light. Finally they came to a halt, and Dug reached out and tapped Smoky gently on the right arm.

"Are yuh sure yuh saw a light, Smoky?" he asked.

"Yo're darn tootin' I did!" snorted Smoky. "It was up here—somewheres."

"It ain't here now," sighed Dug. "Now if it was me, after that blow on the head, yuh could expect anythin'."

"But, Duggie, I wasn't secin' things," protested Smoky. "I did see a light. It was just about—say, isn't that a buildin' over there?"

"Secin' somethin' else, eh?" grunted Dug. "Smoky, if yuh ever get—yes, sir, it is a buildin'. Smoky, mebbe yuh did see a light after all. They was probably goin' to bed. Let's wake 'em up an' find out the way back to Twin Forks."

They dismounted, tied their horses to some brush, and walked up to a small cabin that was built just off the road. The place was dark, and looked deserted. They discovered the front door partly open, so Smoky shoved it wide open and looked inside. It was dark, except for a shaft of moonlight that poured in through a side window.

"Nobody here," said Dug. "Smoky, I'm wonderin' again."

"I did see it!" snorted Smoky as he stepped into the room and lighted a match. The place was empty, except for several chairs that were placed around a crude table, and on the table was a battered old oil lamp.

Smoky crossed to the table and reached out to light the lamp.

"Ouch!" he yelled. "Duggie, this chimney's hot!"

Dug glanced about as Smoky blew out the match and his right hand dropped to the butt of his six-shooter. "Someone musta been around here, Smoky."

"That's what I been tryin' to tell yuh," wailed Smoky. "That old lamp's hot, Duggie. Someone's just put out the lamp."

"The room's empty, though."

"Funny place for anyone to be," remarked Smoky. "No bunks—no food. Wonder why anyone would come out here?"

"We're not goin' to stay around here an' find out, either!" snorted Dug as he backed out of the cabin. Smoky followed. As they started toward their horses, Smoky grabbed Dug by the arm and stopped him.

"Over there—Duggie, see that light?"

"Uh-huh. Match light, too."

"Someone's over near the hill," said Smoky.

"Let's get outta here, pronto!" snapped Dug. "I don't like the looks of—Smoky, there's another place over there—didja see the door open an' someone go inside?"

"We're either seein' things, Duggie, or there's another cabin over there. Let's see."

"Huntin' for trouble? Not me, I'll stay here. You go ahead an' look if yuh want to."

SMOKY left Dug and moved toward the side of the hill where they had seen the light. As he came in close to the hill, he discovered a storehouse built into the side of the hill. Smoky stopped and studied the place. A sound at his side caused him to turn. Dug Evans was coming in beside him.

"A storehouse, Duggie," he said.

"Hell of a place to live."

"Sh-h-h-h! Listen—can yuh hear voices, Duggie?"

"Sounds like people inside, Smoky," replied Dug. "Let's ask 'em where town is. I don't like the looks of this here place."

Smoky stepped forward and started to knock when he heard a voice from inside say:

"Glen ort to be back soon. Hope he got Smith an' Evans. Damn fools caused us too much trouble. Glen's a damn good shot."

Dug grabbed Smoky by the arm. "He—he's talkin' about us," he whispered.

"I—I ain't deaf," grunted Smoky. "We'd better find our way to town an' get the sheriff."

"He wouldn't believe us, Smoky."

"Do with 'em?" snarled a voice from inside. "Hell, we'll dump 'em down the shaft with the rest. No one'll ever find 'em down there—an' if they do—they won't be able to pin it on us."

"Why don't we dump these folks down that shaft now?" asked a voice. "Why do we have to wait for Glen? The sooner they're gone, the safer I'll feel. We've held onto 'em long enough."

"No one'll ever come out here, so stop yore worryin'!" snarled the first voice. "It'll be over in a few hours, then everythin' will be ours—to do as we see fit!"

Smoky and Dug shook all over.

"Let's go," whispered Dug.

"Go—go ahead, I—I can't move. My legs won't start," whispered Smoky.

"Damn Glen!" snarled a voice inside. "He ort to be here by now. 'I'm goin' to take another look down the trail."

Smoky and Dug found strength enough to move away from the front of the building.

They hid in the heavy brush just as the door swung open and a big man stepped outside. The flickering lamp light was behind him, and they were unable to see who it was. He left the door open as he moved past them.

From their position, they could see one corner of the room, but there was no one in sight. They did hear sounds inside the cabin, then a voice said:

"Damn your nosey hide, Sheriff! Yuh walked right in on the party, so yo're goin' to get yore dues jist like the rest of 'em."

Smoky pinched Dug's arm. "Didja hear that, the sheriff's a prisoner in there, too."

"Now who'll we get to help us?" queried Dug. "I don't like that deputy."

Just then they heard the two men returning from the trail. From the sound, he was in a hurry. He trotted past them and into the house where he banged the door. Smoky and Dug shifted through the brush toward the house just in time to hear someone say:

"Two horses, eh? Now who in hell could that be?"

"Well, I turned 'em loose!" snarled the big man. "What'll we do, boss?"

"Put out the lamp an' wait. Two more bodies in the shaft won't hurt none."

The lamp in the house went out. Smoky and Dug removed their six-shooters and waited outside for the door to open.

"It's a long walk to town," whispered Dug.

"We'll stay here an' see what happens."

"Stay here an' end up in that shaft they're talkin' about," groaned Dug. "Not me—I wanna live, Smoky."

"It's two of us against—well, I reckon there's only two of them in there—so it's even-stephen. We'll play smart an' wait for them to make the first move."

"Only smart thing we can do is get outta here," sighed Dug.

"Duggie, yuh can't do—sh-h-h-h-h!"

THE door creaked slightly as it swung open. Smoky moved away from Dug, sliding in close to the front of the house. It was several minutes before anyone put in an appearance in the doorway. A man stuck out his head and looked around, then very carefully, he stepped outside. There was enough moonlight for Smoky to see the man. He was small; not the man he had seen a few minutes before.

"Andy, do yuh see anyone?" asked a voice from inside.

"No one around here," replied the man. "I'll go down the trail a ways an' look. You wait here at the door. We can't afford to take any chances."



The small man moved down the path toward the trail. Smoky and Dug remained silent, afraid to make a sound for fear of trouble. The big man stood in the doorway, leaning against the wall. Smoky could almost reach out and touch him. Thoughts flashed through his mind. Carefully, slowly, Smoky shifted the gun in his hand. Then

in a cautious, easy motion, Smoky raised his arm above his head. He stepped forward, his right hand streaking down, his six-shooter striking the big man on the side of the head.

The man grunted, staggered sideways, then his knees buckled. Before he could fall, Smoky grabbed him and dragged him back into the house. Smoky stopped just inside the doorway and listened. He could hear some heavy breathing, but no one was moving about. He dropped the man on the floor and shoved him against the wall.

"Smoky!" hissed a voice in the doorway. Smoky turned to see Dug standing there, peering into the room. "Smoky, are yuh in here?"

"Sh-h-h!" warned Smoky.

"Hold fast, stranger!" snarled a voice behind Dug. "Drop that gun!"

Smoky stood motionless while Dug dropped his gun at his feet. The man behind Dug quickly scooped it up.

"Buck, are yuh all right?" asked the man.

"Yeah!" drawled Smoky in a husky voice, hoping that he would be able to fool the man.

"Fine!" snapped the man. "This guy here was tryin' to sneak in on yuh. Stranger, get inside, an' don't make any foolish moves, or yuh'll die ahead of time!"

Dug was shoved into the room, the small man following him with his gun barrel drilling Dug in the middle of the back. Smoky moved forward, his gun ready. As the man shoved Dug ahead, Smoky stepped in and jabbed his six-shooter in the small man's ribs.

"Drop that gun!" snapped Smoky.

"What in hell!" gasped the man as he dropped his gun.

"Dug, light that lamp, pronto," ordered Smoky.

Dug quickly lighted a match, then the oil lamp on the table in the center of the room. Smoky glanced down at the man who lay sprawled on the floor in front of him. In that second, the small man tried to get away, but Smoky hit him with the barrel of his gun, knocking him off his feet. The man he had hit was Andy Martin.

"My Gawd!" gasped Dug. "Look over there, Smoky!"

Seated on the floor, with their backs against the wall, their arms and legs tied,

and gags in their mouths, sat Sheriff Webber, King Lippert, a young woman and a man. Smoky watched Martin, who was trying to sit up. Dug went over to the prisoners and started to remove their bonds.

"What a welcome sight!" gasped the sheriff as Dug removed his gag. "They—they were goin' to kill all of us."

"We heard 'em," said Smoky. "How come yo're here, Lippert?"

"They—they kidnaped me," panted King. "Damn 'em—double-crossin' skunks. Lemme kill 'em!"

"Oh, dear me," sighed the woman. "I—I don't know who you gentlemen are, but thanks. You—you saved our lives."

"They're the boys that discovered yore baby," explained Webber, then he introduced Smoky and Dug to the Hughes. "They was prisoners here when I was brought out here."

"How in the world did you boys find this place?" asked Lippert.

"We—we got lost," replied Smoky. "They tried to kill us at the Hughes place, so we thought we could find—"

"You thought," corrected Dug quickly. "Smoky's always lookin' for short cuts—an' I'm always followin'. Anyway, we got lost an' ended up here."

"Thank God for that," sighed Hughes as he turned to Lippert. "I don't understand why they kidnaped you, Lippert. I thought you were the head of this cutthroat gang."

**K**ING LIPPERT smiled weakly and shook his head. "I discovered what they were doin'. I'd give the money to Jason to pay for the ranches, an' then him an' Steddum, an' Martin killed the ranchers an' kept the money. I didn't know it. They brought me the signed papers. Either Steddum or Martin killed Jason an' took all the money. I accused 'em of it this afternoon. They knocked me down and brought me here." He paused and took a deep breath. "The damn fools didn't know the Hughes had a new baby, an' that's where they made their big mistake."

"Mistake is right!" groaned Andy Martin as Dug tied him with the ropes that he had taken off the prisoners. Dug then tied Steddum, who was starting to regain consciousness. When they were finished, Smoky holstered his six-shooter.

"Duggie, we sure ran into somethin'," grinned Smoky.

"Uh-huh," agreed Dug, "an' we damn near ran into a shaft."

"Andy," said Lippert, "what did you fellers do with the furniture and stuff that was left at those ranches?"

"We dropped it down the shaft, too," replied Martin. "It's over five hundred feet deep. It was Jason's idea."

"An' yuh didn't know the Hughes had a baby?" asked Smoky.

"Do yuh think it'd be alive if we did?" snarled Martin. "We seen you two noseys fools ridin' in, an' we hid out. After you was gone, we tried cleanin' things up a bit."

"Where's my baby now?" asked Mrs. Hughes.

"Molly Moore has it," replied Sheriff Webber. "It's in good hands."

Hughes placed an arm about his wife's shoulders and patted her as he kissed her pale cheek.

"What happened to Glen?" asked the bewildered Steddum as he managed to sit up.

"We left him tied up at the Hughes place," replied Smoky. "He'll be with yuh in jail. The three of yuh will stand trial for murder!"

"Like hell we will!" snarled a voice in the doorway. They all turned to see Glen Norton, streaks of blood across his thin face, his six-shooter covering them. "We'll have our trial right here."

"Good old Glen!" grinned Martin. "Get us outta here, Glen."

"Get you out? Are yuh crazy, Andy? I'm going to take all the money, an' leave nothin' but dead bodies to tell the tale." He shifted his gun and fired into the twisting Martin. The bullet thudded into the man's chest. He coughed, kicked, then rolled over on his back.

"Yuh—yuh killed him!" exclaimed Webber. "Glen, drop that gun!"

**G**LLEN whirled on the sheriff, and in that fraction of a second, Dug and Smoky both hurled themselves on the crazy man, driving him against the wall. He dropped his gun as he tried to defend himself. They went down on the floor, and Glen's outstretched fingers grasped the fallen gun. He managed to raise it, but before he pulled the trigger, Smoky kicked his wrist. The

gun went off, the bullet smashing into Buck Steddum's shoulder.

Before Glen could do any more damage, Smoky and Dug took the gun away from him, and had him stretched out on the floor. Dug quickly roped him.

"Nice work, boys," grinned Webber. "I thought sure my time had come. That man's crazy. I don't know how we'll ever be able to repay yuh for all that you've done tonight."

"All yuh have to do is show us the way outta this valley," said Dug.

"We'll escort yuh out of here," said Lippert.

"I dunno what escortin' means," grunted Dug. "All we want is just to be led to the road goin' out of here, that's all."

"We'd like to have yuh stay around here," said Lippert. "I need men for my spread."

"We have jobs," said Smoky quickly. "We're range detectives, workin' for the association."

"Detectives!" gasped Sheriff Webber. "My Gawd, an' I had yuh in jail!"

King Lippert shook his head sadly. "I could use men like you boys. I've got lots of work ahead, tryin' to straighten things out that Steddum, Martin, an' Jason did. They made me hate people, an' they made people hate me. I'm goin' to sell every ranch but my own. I only wished God could bring back those I have helped wrong, so that they could see this valley the way they dreamed it should be."

"We're ready to leave," said Smoky. "Mind showin' us the way outta here."

Lippert limped over and offered his hand to Smoky. "I want to thank yuh for everythin', Smith." He sniffed and rubbed his nose, as he turned to Dug. "I ain't as mean as yuh mentioned I was this mornin'."

"Mebbe I was wrong," grinned Dug.

"Well, everythin's all right," grinned Smoky, "but, Lippert, it seems kinda funny to me that you'd leave all this work of yores to a lawyer."

**K**ING LIPPERT looked around the room, his face grim. It was something that he didn't want to talk about—to admit. Finally he said:

"This is something that a man in my position keeps to himself, but I reckon I might as well tell it. I was raised a long ways from a school—grew up there. I can't read nor write, except to sign my name. I had to depend on the honesty of that lawyer."

"That's all right," said Dug awkwardly. "Ain't none of us so awful bright. Yuh find lotsa folks thataway. What's that old sayin'—somethin' about folks who live in glass houses shouldn't do somethin'—I don't remember what it was."

"Throw stones," said Smoky soberly.

"Huh?" grunted Dug. "Throw stones? What at, Smoky?"

"I dunno—glass houses, I reckon. Well folks, we'd better be movin'."

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*A Sixty-four Dollar Question — Who Can Figure Out  
What a Chinaman Will Do?*



## THE HUNGRY MANDARIN

By WALTER C. BROWN

*Author of "The Haunted Pigeons," "Seven Frightened Mandarins," etc.*

**I**T WAS Sergeant O'Hara of the Chinatown Squad who first called him "the Hungry Mandarin." His name, it appeared later, was Yuan Tah, a man of mystery whose unheralded arrival in the Yellow Quarter had created a nine days' curiosity among his slant-eyed compatriots. In the beginning nothing more was

known about Yuan Tah than was visible to the naked eye. He was fat—enormously fat. And he was wealthy—it was apparent from his lordly manner of living that his purse was as well filled as his stomach. Also Yuan Tah had a legendary appetite worthy of both bulging paunch and swollen purse. Every night the Hungry Mandarin dined



in solitary splendor at the Little Shanghai Restaurant on Mulberry Lane, and as word spread about the truly epic proportions of his appetite, the Chinese restaurant was crowded to capacity by curious yellow men each night at the hour of rice.

Now the quality of the cooking at the Little Shanghai was worthy of all this added patronage, but Soon Yet, the proprietor, was well aware that these extra customers came primarily to watch the slant-eyed gourmand at table, as though it were a performance in the Old China Playhouse, half a block away.

Not, indeed, that the Happy Mandarin courted public attention to his gastronomic feats. No vulgar or baseborn eye was ever permitted to watch him ply hornspoon and ivory chopsticks. As soon as he was escorted to his reserved booth, Yuan Tah always signaled to his waiter, whereupon a four-panel dragon-screen was set up around his table to insure him privacy.

But the curious Sons of Han continued to crowd into the Little Shanghai, fascinated by Yuan Tah's epic appetite and lordly manner of dining, staring intently at the dragon-screen and making low-voiced bets as to the exact number of dishes that would be comprised in Yuan Tah's dinner.

"Who is this mandarin of mystery?" the yellow men whispered among themselves. "Whence does he come, and why does he tarry within our midst? He speaks to no one, holding himself aloof as a stone lion and silent as a Ming tomb."

And Sergeant O'Hara, with a somewhat different choice of words, was asking himself these same questions. O'Hara had dropped in one night at the Little Shanghai for a look-see at this slant-eyed stranger whose gargantuan appetite was so talked about, and had returned there again and again, driven by a vague but persistent curiosity.

"What's the big idea, Sarge?" Detective Faraday, his assistant, asked. "All you talk about lately is this Hungry Mandarin, as you call him. And every night you're over at the Little Shanghai, watching him eat."

"It's quite a thing to watch, Faraday," O'Hara replied. "You've never seen anything like it. Last night, for instance, Yuan Tah's menu ran like this: ong dong soup, a whole Canton duck with side dishes

of pork fat and pickled fish, five vegetables, half a dozen pots of royal jasmine tea, a big bowl of leechee nuts, and a bottle of tiger-bone wine."

Faraday grinned. "Well, there's no law against a big appetite, is there?"

Sergeant O'Hara frowned at the large-scale map of Chinatown hanging on his office wall. "Faraday, there's something queer about that fat Chink. Every time I see him it rings a little buzzer in my brain. I can't quite put my finger on it, but it's there, all right."

"Another one of your famous hunches, eh, Sarge?" the detective chuckled. "Well, if you ask me, I'd say the whole thing is a publicity stunt to draw a little extra business to the Little Shanghai. All the Chinks flock there to watch the Hungry Mandarin put on his act—Soon Yet makes a nice extra profit, and his high-hat stooge gets paid off with free meals."

O'Hara shook his head. "That was my first idea about it, Faraday. In fact, I put it pointblank to Soon Yet, but he assured me he'd never laid eyes on Yuan Tah before, and I believe he was telling the truth."

"Well, what do you expect to do about it?" Faraday asked.

"Watch—and wait," O'Hara declared. "There's an old Chinese saying: 'Time holds the key to every lock.'"

SO Sergeant O'Hara watched the Hungry Mandarin—and waited. Yuan Tah had taken lodgings in Lantern Court, and rumor declared they were furnished in a luxurious style worthy of a true white-button mandarin. But Yuan continued aloof and solitary in his habits.

"How are you making out with your Hungry Mandarin, Sarge?" Faraday asked. "Do you still think you've got a hot hunch?"

O'Hara shrugged. "I'm still keeping my eye on him. Apparently he never leaves his lodgings except for his evening meal at the Little Shanghai, or for a game of fan-tan at Mark Sin's House of Chance in Paradise Court."

"Yes, I've heard rumors about those games," Faraday declared. "All-night sessions in Mark Sin's private office—at a dollar a point. The Chink is just as high-hat in his gambling as he is at his eating."

"I think I'll have a little talk with Mark Sin," O'Hara announced.

"A lot of good that'll do you," Faraday predicted. "You don't suppose Mark Sin would be stupid enough to spill anything about this Number One customer, do you?"

But the next day Sergeant O'Hara stationed himself near the Plum Blossom Joss House on Orange Street, knowing that Mark Sin came there daily at the hour of high sun to burn a packet of paper prayers at the shrine of Liu Hai, the Money God. And presently Mark Sin came bobbing along on felt-soled slippers.

"Hello, Mark," O'Hara said, stepping out of his doorway as the moon-faced gambler was starting up the brownstone steps of the joss house.

"*Ala wab*, Sah-jin," Mark Sin replied, with a polite bow.

"I want a word with you," O'Hara said, "about your friend Yuan Tah."

"Yuan Tah?" Mark Sin echoed slowly, as if he had never heard the name before. "Know nothing, Sah-jin."

"That's strange," O'Hara said evenly, pulling a small notebook from his pocket and flipping over the pages. "According to my records, Yuan Tah visited your house in Paradise Court on the night of the 8th—10th—11th—14th—"

Mark Sin bowed before the inevitable. "It is true, Sah-jin. Yuan Tah sometimes honors my unworthy house with his presence. We meet together to discuss the poems of Li Po."

"That's a new name for fan-tan!" O'Hara said drily.

The slant-eyed gambler gave a bland smile. "*Hoyal* Is it expected that a man shall bear witness against himself, Sah-jin? Is it not known to all that games of chance are forbidden by the Rice Face Law?"

Sergeant O'Hara gave him a level look. "Mark, we speak here as strangers," he said, which is the Chinatown formula for saying "This is strictly off the record."

"*Wah!*" Mark Sin replied. "Now we may speak with open words as plain as black writing upon rice paper. What do you seek to know about Yuan Tah?"

"I want to know who he is," O'Hara said, "and where he's from, and what he's doing here."

"These are questions easily answered,"

Mark Sin declared. "Yuan Tah is a wealthy silk merchant from a distant city. He has come to our streets in search of a much-cherished daughter named An-ling who has run away with a worthless, rascally clerk called Wang Kai."

"What makes him think they came here?" O'Hara asked.

"I do not know," Mark Sin answered. "Yuan Tah travels from city to city, seeking them. They will be hard to find, because An-ling helped herself with a liberal hand to her father's cash before their secret flight. Also she has cut off her length of hair and dressed herself in man's attire. These matters will soon be known to all, Sah-jin, for Yuan Tah is preparing a painted notice to be posted in a public place. He will offer a reward of five hundred Rice Face dollars for any news concerning their whereabouts."

"Why didn't he turn the whole matter over to the police in the first place?" O'Hara asked. "If he had, notice would have gone out to every Chinatown in the country within an hour after their flight."

MARK SIN shrugged. "Yuan Tah does not understand the Rice Face Law, Sah-jin. Also he does not like to make talk with strangers. He suffers from a lameness of tongue, and he does not wish that others should laugh and make jokes about his slowness of speech."

"Tell him to come in and see me at the Precinct, Mark," O'Hara said. "Tell him we'll do everything we can to help him trace his daughter."

"It is advice I have already given," the gambler replied. "I tell you Yuan Tah that you are Number One friend to all Sons of Han, but he shake his head and say '*Pu yao*—not want.' It is family matter, Sah-jin."

So Sergeant O'Hara went away, turning over Mark Sin's story in his mind. If Yuan Tah had an impediment of speech, it would explain much of his aloof silence and haughty isolation.

And within a day or two Yuan Tah's painted notice did indeed appear on the south wall of Long Jon's Tea House on Mulberry Lane, which had long served as Chinatown's official bulletin board. When O'Hara went to Long Jon's to see it for

himself, he found a circle of chattering yellow men gathered around the notice, eagerly discussing this latest development in the story of Yuan Tah, the Mysterious.

Yuan Tah's notice was written down in dual scripts—in the vernacular *pai hua*, and in scholarly mandarin. Within an hour Sergeant O'Hara had a typed translation of the notice from John Lum, the court interpreter. The details set forth in Yuan Tah's notice were exactly as related by Mark Sin, except that a detailed description of the runaway couple had been added.

"Well, Sarge, there goes your mystery," Faraday said. "That was one hunch of yours that didn't pan out."

"Oh, I don't know," O'Hara said slowly. "When I get a hunch, Faraday, it dies hard."

Faraday grinned. "Maybe you think the story about a runaway daughter is phony, huh?"

"Well, it sounds all right," O'Hara admitted, "but I still feel there's something queer about Yuan Tah. Look, Faraday—he sleeps all day, and he's up all night. He never goes anywhere except to the Little Shanghai and to Mark Sin's fan-tan game. That's a damned peculiar way to hunt for a missing daughter."

"You're forgetting the notice," Faraday pointed out. "That a five-hundred-dollar re-

ward'll save Yuan Tah a lot of leg work. If Yuan's daughter and that clerk are hiding out anywhere in our Chinatown, they'll be turned up quick enough. Five hundred bucks is a lot of money down here."

"On the other hand," O'Hara said quietly, "it doesn't cost much to offer five hundred dollars reward for news of a missing daughter—if the daughter doesn't exist."

Faraday looked at him. "But why should he play a game of ring-around-the-rosy?"

"Maybe it's because he's noticed me tailing him around," O'Hara said. "Maybe he wants to sidetrack my interest in him."

Faraday shook his head. "You're a hard loser, Sarge."

O'Hara was silent a moment, drumming his fingers on the desk. "Faraday, did you ever get a good look at Yuan Tah?"

The detective said, "Only that one night we saw him waddling across Lantern Court. It was too dark for me to see much, except that he was plenty fat. I never go to the Little Shanghai—you know I don't like Chinese chow."

"Well, come along and have dinner with me there tonight," O'Hara proposed. "Then you can have a good look-see at Yuan Tah."

"Okay," Faraday shrugged. "I guess I can stand Chink grub for one night."

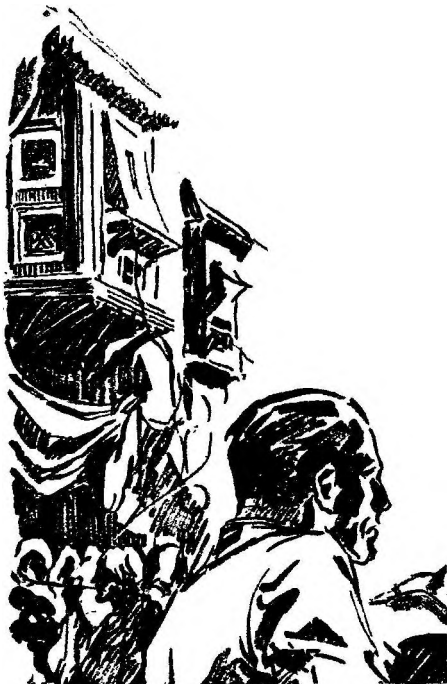
"You may be surprised," O'Hara smiled. "The Little Shanghai isn't one of those fake chop suey joints. After you've packed away one of Soon Yet's dinners you may change your mind about Chinese cooking."

**D**ARKNESS came early that evening from a sullen, overcast sky. A spattering of raindrops greeted them as they left the Precinct and started for Mulberry Lane, Chinatown's principal thoroughfare.

Arrived at the Little Shanghai, Sergeant O'Hara picked out a table for two against the south wall. The opposite wall was lined with high-backed booths. The booth at the far end of the row had a hanging Chinese lantern of yellow silk and a low-curtained window looking out on a quiet sideyard garden.

"That, Faraday, is Yuan Tah's private roost," O'Hara explained. "It's reserved for him every night—with a special waiter assigned to him alone. He dines in style, all right."

They were no sooner seated than paunchy



old Soon Yet, the proprietor, appeared at their table, bowing and smiling.

"*Ala wah*, Sah-jin," Soon Yet beamed. "You bring friend tonight? He also is Blue Coat Man, yiss?"

"Detective Faraday, my Number One assistant," O'Hara introduced. "He says he doesn't like Chinese cooking. It's up to you to change his mind, Soon Yet."

The slant-eyed proprietor chuckled. "Can do, Sah-jin. Tonight is very fine duck, fix Canton style. If your friend not say '*Hao!*' when he finish eating, I give my cook a Number One beating with split bamboo."

"Okay," O'Hara said. "We'll start with *ong dong*. Then *sub kum* and *yet-ca mein* with the duck. Heavy on the soya sauce, Soon Yet. Two pots of *lung ching*. Any of that *maygolo* left?"

"For you, Sah-jin—yiss!" Soon Yet replied.

Faraday grinned. "This is all Greek to me, Sarge. It sounds like you've been taking lessons from the Hungry Mandarin."

O'Hara glanced toward the empty booth reserved for the Mandarin. "Yuan Tah's a little late tonight, isn't he?" he remarked to Soon Yet.

"He will arrive, Sah-jin," the proprietor declared confidently. "And he will be much please tonight, for I have prepare a special feast dish for him—a Number One turtle."

Beaming with pride, Soon Yet extended his hands to indicate the size of the turtle. "I cook this *cb'en* slow in his shell, so his flesh will be soft and tender. I heap him high with bamboo sprouts and bean shoots and young water chestnuts, and I serve him with special sauce made of plum wine. *Hola!* It make my mouth water just to speak of it."

Faraday shook his head. "You mean to say that Yuan Tah will eat a turtle that size all by himself?"

"*Hai!*" Soon Yet grinned. "Yuan Tah is a person of superior appetite. Had I a dozen such patrons, my fortune would soon be made."

Soon Yet waddled off with their order, his triple chins swaying, his padded slippers thudding heavily against the floor, so that boards which were silent under all other feet squeaked and crackled in protest.

"Your friend Soon Yet is a pretty hefty specimen himself," Faraday remarked. "If

Yuan Tah is any fatter than that, he must be something for a sideshow."

"You'll see for yourself," O'Hara said. "I imagine he must outscale Soon Yet by a good fifteen or twenty pounds." He glanced around at the other tables. "It's not as crowded in here tonight as usual."

"No wonder," Faraday replied, nodding toward the streaming windows. "Listen to that rain beating down now. If that keeps up, I guess we won't get a look at the Mandarin tonight."

"He hasn't missed a night so far, rain or not," O'Hara replied, and turned his head as the front door opened. "Speak of the devil, Faraday—here's Yuan Tah coming in now."

Faraday glanced at the bulbous Oriental framed in the gilded doorway and whistled quietly through his teeth. "Good Lord! You were right, Sarge—he *is* fatter than Soon Yet! A regular Moby Dick, in a Chinese edition."

Soon Yet came rushing forward to greet his Number One guest, bowing and smiling and uttering flowery phrases of welcome as he relieved Yuan Tah of a dripping umbrella. Then he turned and ushered the silent Mandarin to his reserved booth, hissing a fierce "Make way! Make way!" to the scurrying waiters.

In stately silence Yuan Tah moved through the crowded room, bobbing along like a monstrous round cork, his majestic girth covered by a dark blue quilted *shaam*. Looking neither to left nor right, he kept his hands tucked inside his sleeves, his moonface adorned with a pair of heavily rimmed glasses seemingly held in place by the protruding pouches of his fat cheeks.

With great formality Soon Yet seated Yuan in the booth, then beckoned sharply to the hovering waiter, who immediately placed a four-panel dragon-screen around the table.

Faraday noticed the peculiarly intent look with which Sergeant O'Hara followed each detail of this ceremony. "Still working on your hunch, Sarge?" he asked.

O'Hara gave him an abstracted glance. "There's something about that Chink—Every time I set eyes on him I get the same queer feeling of something wrong about him, something that doesn't add up. What's your impression, Faraday?"

The detective shrugged. "He looks all right to me, Sarge. Just a big fat, Chink, that's all."

Their waiter arrived with a laden tray. Faraday stared doubtfully at the unfamiliar concoctions under the steaming lids, but upon O'Hara's urging filled his plate and began to eat.

"How do you like it?" O'Hara asked.

"Not bad," Faraday admitted. "This duck is a tasty dish, but I'll be doggoned if I ever thought I'd be eating stewed acorns."

"Those are Chinese water-chestnuts," O'Hara said. "And this sauce that Soon Yet uses is from a recipe supposed to be five thousand years old."

As they ate, they watched the serving of Yuan Tah's dinner—a seemingly endless parade of covered dishes vanishing behind the dragon screen. Lastly came an enormous platter, doubtlessly bearing the prized turtle, after which the slant-eyed waiter stationed himself at a respectful distance from the screen, forbidden to intrude upon the lordly Yuan Tah's gastronomic exercises unless summoned by a handclap.

"Fat as he is, I don't see how he packs away all that food," Faraday remarked.

"He doesn't," O'Hara replied. "I've talked to the waiter who serves him. Yuan eats plenty, but a lot of the food goes back to the kitchen. These stories about his enormous appetite are a little bit exaggerated."

"But he pays for all the food, even if he doesn't eat it," Faraday pointed out. "He must be pretty well fixed to support a fancy appetite like that."

"I guess he is," O'Hara agreed. "Playing fan-tan with Mark Sin is an expensive hobby, too."

Having finished the main portion of their own dinner, their waiter cleared the table and brought them green glazed pots of *lung ching* tea and a bowl of leeches nuts.

Waiting for the scalding hot tea to cool, they cracked the brittle shells of the spicy brown leeches, glancing idly around at the other tables, where Soon Yet's slant-eyed patrons were eating and chattering about the latest war bulletins and laughing silkily over sly Oriental jokes. In a booth directly across the room two gray-bearded merchants sat over a game of *Ching gong*, as motionless and grave as a pair of wrinkled Buddhas.

Then Soon Yet returned to their table with a round clay flagon from which he poured two careful measures of a pungently fragrant liquor into thin porcelain cups.

"This is *maygolo*—aniseed brandy," O'Hara explained. "The real, imported article, from Shensi in North China. Soon Yet has only a few bottles left."

Faraday sipped a little of the aromatic liquor, nodded his head, and leaned back comfortably, helping himself to salted melon seeds. "I wonder how the Mandarin's making out with his turtle?"

"Want to stick around and watch him make his exit?" O'Hara asked.

"Sure," Faraday agreed. "It's a good show—like something you'd read in a book."

Then the Little Shanghai's door opened again, letting in the sound of slashing rain. Six Chinamen entered hastily, shaking water from their round black hats, and there was a sudden stir and buzz of excited whispers on all sides.

Soon Yet bustled forward in what was obviously pleased excitement, leading this newly arrived party to the table of honor in the center of the room. O'Hara and Faraday stared with interest, too, for five of the yellow men wore the massive jade rings that marked them as tong chieftains.

"A gathering of the tong *tu-chuns*," Faraday whispered. "But who's the sixth man—that gray-haired Chink?"

"He's a stranger to me," O'Hara declared. "But he must be pretty important, to be hobnobbing with our tong chiefs. I don't believe I ever saw all five of them gathered in public before."

Moy Kee, chieftain of the Tsin Tiens, Chinatown's most powerful tong, acted as spokesman for the party, bidding Soon Yet supply them with the finest dinner his kitchens could produce.

"*Wah! Wah!*" Soon Yet replied, backing away with a series of profound kowtows, then rushing off to take personal charge of the service for these high-ranking guests. The Number One dinner ordered by Moy Kee, however, was destined never to be completed.

The tong chiefs and their gray-haired guest were no more than halfway through the meal when the Little Shanghai's door opened to admit a wiry, thin-faced Oriental wearing a bright yellow *shaam* and a small

black skullcap. The newcomer halted just inside the door, and something menacing in his rigid posture and taut silence drew everyone's eye.

But one man at least in the Little Shanghai recognized the narrow-eyed stranger, and knew what his sudden appearance foreboded. The gray-haired Chinaman at the tong chiefs' table sprang to his feet, shouting excitedly as he pointed to the man in the doorway.

The lean-faced Oriental flipped back the sleeve of his yellow *shaam* as his hand came up, taking deliberate aim with a black-barreled pistol, and the frantic yelps of the Little Shanghai's panic-stricken patrons was smothered by the crack of the gun, spitting bullets with deadly precision.

The gray-haired Chinaman at the table of honor reeled backward, riddled with bullets, grasped blindly at the open-mouthed and round-eyed Moy Kee for support, then doubled over and pitched headlong to the floor.

**T**URNING swiftly on his heel, the slant-eyed gunman stepped back across the threshold, closed the door quietly behind him, and vanished into the streaming night—all within a matter of seconds, and as neatly, as swiftly, as if the scene had been rehearsed a hundred times.

Shouting and shoving, O'Hara and Faraday fought their way forward through the milling crowd. At first sight of the gun in the silent assassins' hand they had whipped out their own weapons, but the wild surge of panic-stricken yellow men had penned them in, making it impossible to shoot, even when O'Hara had jumped up on a chair.

Faraday was the first to battle his way through the shrill-voiced pandemonium. He sprang to the door and raced out into the pelting darkness of Mulberry Lane in pur-

suit of the vanished gunman, while O'Hara elbowed his way through the close-packed circle surrounding the stricken Chinaman.

The yellow man was dying—O'Hara saw that much at a glance. Bleeding from half a dozen wounds, he lay with his head on the crouching Moy Kee's knee, eyes closed, his breathing labored and rattling.

"Who is he?" O'Hara demanded, and Moy Kee stammered excitedly that the name of his dying guest was Chang Kai, a great and much respected tong official from a distant Western city.

"Do you know the man who shot him?" O'Hara asked.

"I never see him before," Moy Kee declared, "but I think his name is Tsang Poh."

As if mention of that name had rallied the last remnants of his waning strength, Chang Kai opened his eyes.

Sergeant O'Hara knelt beside him. "Chang, can you tell us who shot you? Was it Tsang Poh?"

Chang Kai nodded, making a feeble gesture toward the gilded doorway. "Tsang—Poh!" he whispered hoarsely.

"Why?" O'Hara pursued. "Tell us why?"

"Moy Kee—know!" the dying Chang gasped. Then he gave a wracking cough, choked, and sagged back limply into final unconsciousness.

O'Hara looked at Moy Kee, and the tong chief hastened to pour out all the details in his possession. Chang Kai, the dead man, had been traveling about from one Chinatown to another on a relentless manhunt, searching for traces of this Tsang Poh, a thrice-cursed thief who had been posing as treasurer of the Chinese War Orphans Fund, making large cash collections in half a dozen cities before his swindling imposture had been discovered—

"Did Chang know that this Tsang Poh was hiding in our district?" O'Hara queried.

"I do not think so," Moy Kee replied.

"If Chang Kai had knowledge of such Number One fact, surely he would have spoken of it at our secret meeting today."

Just then Detective Faraday returned, hatless and dripping wet, from his fruitless pursuit along Mulberry Lane. "He made a clean getaway, Sarge. Not a trace. We'd better phone the Precinct and turn in a general alarm—quick."

Sergeant O'Hara made a sudden, brusque



gesture. "Wait, Faraday! Hold on a minute. I have an idea there's more to this affair than meets the eye—"

"What do you mean, Sarge?" Faraday queried, puzzled. "Murder's plain enough, isn't it?"

"Yes—but why was there a murder?" O'Hara countered. "The dead man, Chang Kai, was hunting for the gunman—Tsang Poh. But apparently Chang had no idea that Tsang Poh was anywhere around here. Why, then, did Tsang Poh come in here and start shooting? Why did the hunted man turn into the hunter—without waiting to be cornered? Why didn't he just cut and run while he had the chance?"

Faraday shook his head. "That's a sixty-four-dollar question, Sarge. Who can figure out what a Chinaman will do?"

O'HARA straightened up, his face mask-like as his glance traveled from the dead Chang lying on the floor to the gilded doorway through which the slant-eyed gunman had fled, and thence to the rain-pelted windows.

"Did you notice that yellow *shaam* he was wearing, Faraday?" O'Hara asked suddenly. "Tsang Poh came out of the rain, yet there were only a few streaks of water showing on his *shaam*. That proves he wasn't out in it very long—"

"It's not where he came from, Sarge—it's where he's going that counts," Faraday said. "If we get the dragnet out quick, maybe we can pick him up before he gets rid of that bright yellow *shaam*."

"Maybe we can pick him up without a dragnet," O'Hara replied in a curiously decisive tone, and beckoning Faraday to follow, he strode down the length of the restaurant, past the long row of booths until he came to the Hungry Mandarin's secluded nook at the far end. A sweep of his arm knocked the dragon-screen aside—

Yuan Tah, the Hungry Mandarin, was sitting stolidly behind his food-littered table, ivory chopsticks in hand. He glanced up in haughty surprise at this abrupt intrusion, his fat cheeks and heavily rimmed glasses giving his face the look of an angry, slant-eyed owl.

"What means this?" Yuan Tah demanded, speaking in a slow and peculiarly blurred voice.

"I'm Sergeant O'Hara of the Chinatown Squad," was the brisk reply. "There's been a murder, and it's my duty to question all eye-witnesses."

The Hungry Mandarin leaned back. "My name is Yuan Tah," he said in his limping voice. "I live Number Fifteen Lantern Court. But I am not a witness, Ta-jen. While I eat, I hear sound of shooting, but I do not leave my table. I have seen nothing."

"So you kept on eating, right through a murder!" O'Hara snapped. He put both hands on the table and leaned forward, smiling grimly. "Well, I hope you enjoyed your dinner, because you'll never eat another one like it! You're going to jail, Yuan! You're under arrest for the murder of Chang Kai!"

Yuan Tah blinked at him, drawing a hissing breath. "Ta-jen makes joke, yiss?" he stammered.

O'Hara's voice hardened. "You might as well drop your bluff, Yuan. I know your real name. *You are Tsang Poh!*"

"Tsang Poh!" the startled Faraday exclaimed. "Hey, Sarge—you're away off the beam! Tsang Poh was the Chink with the gun—the skinny guy in the yellow *shaam*. Yuan here has a blue *shaam*, and he's fat enough to make three like the other—"

"He's Tsang Poh, just the same," O'Hara declared firmly. "If you don't believe it—watch!"

His open hand swept out and caught Yuan Tah squarely across his fat face—a double slap, to left and right. The blows were not hard ones, but they wrought an amazing change in Yuan Tah's appearance. His owlish glasses tumbled off, and as his head bobbed back he broke into a sudden spasm of strangled coughing that doubled him over.

"Spit it out! Spit it out!" O'Hara commanded, seizing Yuan Tah's head with both hands, trying to force the yellow man to open his jaws.

Red faced and bulging-eyed from the strain, Yuan finally opened his mouth and coughed out two curved pads of oiled silk filled with soft cotton.

"Well, I'll be damned!" Faraday exclaimed. "His cheeks were padded!"

"And that's only part of the padding!" O'Hara growled, catching hold of Yuan Tah's collar and wrenching at it until the



*shaam* ripped wide open. And stripped of his cunningly puffed out robe, lined with layer upon layer of quilted padding, the monstrously fat Mandarin stood revealed as a lean, wiry Oriental in a bright yellow *shaam*!

"Jumping Judas! It is Tsang Poh!" Faraday burst out, while O'Hara held fast to the writhing, snarling yellow man.

"*Wang pu tau!*" the slant-eyed masquerader cursed, snatching out his hidden gun. But O'Hara's quick fist crashed against his chin and the yellow man slid to the floor, lost temporarily to all further interest in the proceedings.

"Whew!" Faraday exclaimed. "Things have been happening too fast for me!"

"Well, the story goes like this," O'Hara said. "Tsang Poh knew that the Chinese would be after him like bloodhounds to get back that stolen War Fund money, so he built up his fat mandarin disguise. This trick robe and the cheek pads changed his whole appearance. The robe could be slipped on and off as easy as an overcoat, but the cheek pads must have been mighty uncomfortable. They made him mumble when he talked, and he had to take them out while he ate. That's why he always had a screen set up around his table."

"It fitted right in with the rest of his mandarin act," Faraday said. "He's a damned smart Chink."

"And a very fast thinker," O'Hara added. "He must have been pretty panicky when he looked out there a little while ago and saw Chang Kai sitting at a table. I guess he was afraid to risk walking out past Chang, even in his disguise. So there he was, marooned behind his screen. But it didn't

take him long to figure a way out. He knew the waiter wouldn't come in unless he clapped his hands. And there was a window in the booth, opening out into a side-yard—"

"Now I get it!" Faraday declared. "He slipped out of his padded robe and climbed out through the window to do his killing as Tsang Poh."

"That's right," O'Hara said. "The side-yard has a covered alleyway leading to the street. It's raining—the streets are empty. He simply opened the restaurant door, emptied his gun at Chang, jumped back into the alley, and then climbed back into the booth. A neat, slick job of murder, with the dragon-screen making a ready-made alibi for him."

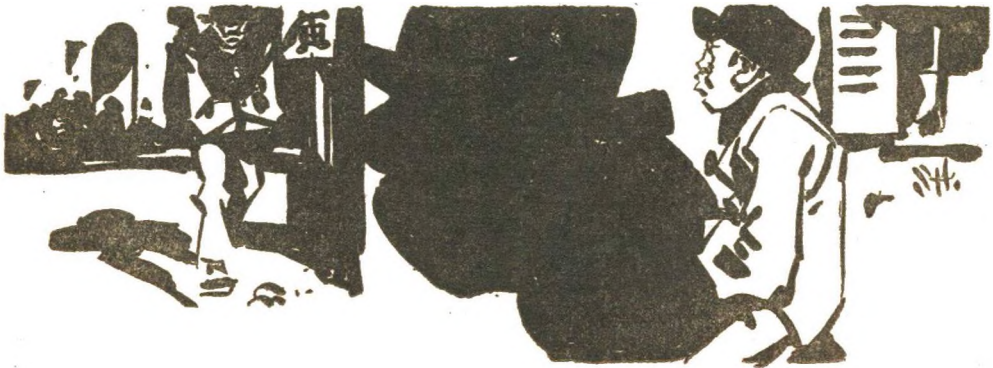
Sergeant O'Hara bent down and picked up something lying on the floor under the table—a round black skullcap.

"Here we are—the lask link. Of course, I didn't work all this out like I'm telling it to you now.

"It came to me backwards. But the details all fitted into place the moment I discovered the key clue—that Yuan Tah wasn't really a fat man."

"You've got a damned sharp pair of eyes, Sarge!" Faraday congratulated.

Sergeant O'Hara grinned. "It wasn't sharp eyes, Faraday—it was my ears that told me Yuan Tah was a phony. Remember that hunch I kept telling you about? Well, Yuan looked like a fat mandarin, all right, but tonight it dawned on me all of a sudden that although he was apparently even heavier than old Soon Yet, when he walked across the floor not a single board ever creaked under his weight!"





..... *a Lot of Folks Have Died  
Because They Knew Too Much*

## DANGEROUS GROUND

By HAPSBURG LIEBE

**I**N THAT early-evening card game in the rear of the Red Ace Saloon sat T. Brady Armbruster, Shoot-'em-up Tate, Big Jimpson, and a burly drinking miner whom nobody knew. This stranger's mouth ran loud and mean. As young Pistol Ball Sams remarked later, he was hell-bent for trouble. Yet he alone of the four was unarmed. The climax came when he filled a straight with a crudely palmed king, called Jimpson the very worst kind of prevaricator and reached with both hands for the hundred-dollar pot.

The other players had friends among the onlookers. Two guns barked and the lights went out. There was an echoing blast from the table. The bartender, swearing, produced another lamp. Sheriff Tom Edge rushed in, found the miner crumpled on the floor and sent for the doctor. The hundred-dollar pot had vanished. Likewise, the men who had shot the lights out were gone.

The officer asked questions, sniffed gun muzzles. Then he arrested Big Jimpson and found the hundred dollars in Jimpson's pocket. The big cowboy flared, "That's my money! I had the next best hand to the stranger's crooked straight!"

"What he called you was a mouthful, I know," the sheriff said, "but he was unarmed, and you—"

"I didn't shoot him!" Jimpson cried hotly.

Young Pistol Ball Sams cut in, "Big's gun smellin' of new smoke don't mean a thing, Sheriff. He shot at a rabbit on the way to town, hour ago. I was ridin' with him, and seen it!"

"The shooting must have been done by one of the other players, since the flash was over the table," the lawman replied, "and neither Armbruster's nor Tate's guns had been fired lately. Not that I blame you, kid, for trying to help your sidekick," and forthwith Tom Edge took the big cowboy off to his jail.

They made an odd pair, this slim and scrawny Sams and the almost huge Jimpson. For long they had ridden cattle range together. Sams had come of a wild set, but there'd been no criminals in it. His father in qucer humor had named him for a fast pet horse—Pistol Ball—when he was toddling around playing with wooden guns. In making of himself a fine, quick shot he'd felt that he was living up to his name.

T. Brady Armbruster looked and dressed like a professional gambler. But he wasn't one. His line was more remunerative, and often more dangerous. At present he had a room over the Red Ace. Just beginning to undress for bed that night, he was, when the door eased open and Pistol Ball Sams eased in.

"Look, Armbruster," said the slim newcomer, low-voiced. "You was settin' next

to Big Jimpson in that game, so you know it wasn't him who shot the jigger. I want you to tell this at Big's trial. Will you?"

There was craft in T. Brady's lean face and narrowed eyes. He muttered, "The doc says the jigger won't live the night through. Who you think did it, kid?"

"Either you or Shoot-'em-up Tate," frankly answered young Sams. "I've inquired around, and I learnt that you and Tate had a run-in with the strange miner at the liveryman's before dark. He banged your heads together, and you two didn't dare do any shootin' there in front of witnesses, him not wearin' any gun. Sure was hell-bent for trouble. But you and Tate are in the clear, and so—"

"How could we do that and not have a gun that smelled?"

Sams shrugged. "I don't know. I'm so bothered that my head won't work right. But I do know that Big never would drill a unarmed man. How about you helpin' him out?"

Armbruster had taken off his black hat, his black coat, his shoulder holster and its short, ivory-handled .41 hookbill. He hung the gun rig on a bedpost without looking at it. Then:

"They'll have Jimpson's preliminary trial tomorrow, kid, and I'd better not be here, for what I'll have to tell would send Big to higher court where they'd sentence him to hang. The one chance your sidekick has got is for me not testify tomorrow."

Instinctively Pistol Ball Sams' gun hand dropped to the butt of his old range six-shooter. He was pale under his tan.

"What will you have to tell, Armbruster?"

T. Brady clipped, "Wouldn't try to scare me, would you?"

Sams knew that man of iron and ice. He just didn't scare worth a cent. Sams said nothing. Armbruster smiled, and spoke in a voice that was almost soft:

"What you want to do is keep me away from town tomorrow, kid. *Bueno*—I'm agreeable. Suppose we sneak out and get our horses and take a nice ride, coming back in a couple days?"

In Pistol Ball's mind there was room for but a single thought—the welfare of his big cowboy crony. He answered quickly:

"*Bueno*. Let's go."

Armbruster put his shoulder gun rig back on, slipped into his coat, caught up his hat and blew the light out. The two men left the building by way of the dark rear stairs. A few minutes later, they were riding off westward.

The night was black. They rode slowly, after having turned southward and into rugged terrain, making scarcely five miles in an hour's time. Sams had had a chance to do some thinking. T. Brady wasn't taking a ride like this for nothing. There was purpose in it, and any purpose of Armbruster's was apt to be shady to say the very least.

"Mind tellin' me where we're headed, Armbruster?"

"Why, no, kid, I don't mind. We're headed for Shoot-'em-up Tate's place. He's there by now, likely. It's over in the Dry Santos country."

"I know that country," Pistol Ball said—"Big Jimpson and me rode range for old Charley Burnam along the Rio Santos before it went dry and he had to sell off his herds—but I sure don't know where Tate's place is. He's a bad egg, Armbruster. What we goin' there for?"

T. Brady swore. "Wanted me out of town, didn't you? Sure to give your sidekick a chance. Well, you got what you wanted," he said, with cold finality.

Young Sams didn't like that. He thought of turning back. Only the fact that Big Jimpson was in such a tight spot kept him riding on through the darkness with Armbruster.

**I**N a range of rocky hills Armbruster lost his bearings. It was well past midnight when he and Sams reined to a halt in front of a little, old log house near a spring and a worked-out windless mine, at the head of a short box canyon.

"Tate's place, kid," the older man muttered. He whistled and a sleepy voice answered.

"Put your nag up and come in, Brady."

The two put their horses with Tate's in a pole corral behind the cabin, took off bridles and saddles and carried them inside. The lank and wiry Tate had lighted a tallowdip on a small table and sat beside it smoking.

"Hi, Pistol," he growled. "What you doin' here, kid?"

"Hi, Shoot-em-up," the kid threw back.

Indicating T. Brady: "This hombre in black clothes can mebbe tell you what I'm doin' here. I sure cain't."

"Pleasure trip," Armbruster said, winking boldly at Tate. "Throw us out couple blankets, *amigo*. When we've had some shuteye we'll feel more like working things up."

The load on his mind notwithstanding, Pistol Ball Sams slept well. Broad daylight had come when he woke and sat up. He rose at the sounds of voices, peered through the rear window and saw Tate and Armbruster standing off beyond the little corral.

"Hell," Armbruster was saying, "that young jigger is the best shot in the state!"

"Look, pardner," and Tate's voice, also, had risen a peg—"up to now I've kept outa trouble 'ceptin' jest wildcat stuff, and I done it by not trustin' anybody I wasn't sure of. I—say, Brady, there's the kid at the window."

Sams opened the back door and walked out. His grin was narrow as he addressed the pair. "Cur'osity killed a cat, they tell me. I'm no cat, but I'm cur'ous all the same. What's in the wind about me, anyhow?"

The pair exchanged glances. Armbruster said, "I'm not calling names, kid; get me? *Bueno*. Then listen:

"There are those who claim that the stick-up game, properly handled, pays big. Seems that the lone wolf is at a disadvantage; that four are too many, two not enough, and three just right. Two of the three ought to be smart as hell. The third could be a scrawny kid who, posing as a simple cowboy, could go anywhere without suspicion and get the lay of things in advance—very important. And now, Pistol, suppose you talk while we listen."

Pistol Ball got that easily. As for making himself one of a trio of stickups, not any, thank you. But he had to keep Armbruster out of town that day. Better stall along, he decided.

"In not callin' names, was it on account you thought I might blab if I didn't throw in?"

"Knowing too much, positively knowing it," T. Brady said, "might be bad for you. A lot of folks have died because they knew too much."

His eyes were hard and narrow. So were Shoot-'em-up Tate's. Tate said, "Mebbe you wouldn't have a chance to blab, kid."

Sams could see that he stood on dangerous ground here. He figured that he could get the best of one of them in gunplay, but not both. Shoot-'em-up hadn't been so nick-named for nothing. T. Brady with his fast ivory-handled .41 hookbill was just as deadly. Simple matter to dump him into the old mine hole under the windlass and kick a little dirt in on him!

"I sure wouldn't tell about anything I'd had a part in," he said, and his grin was deceptive. "What comes first?"

"Old Charley Burnam," Armbruster said bluntly. "You worked for him, and know him. When the Santos dried up, he sold his herds for around twenty thousand cash, and didn't put the cash in any bank so far as I've been able to find out. As evidence that he didn't, he keeps two of his old range riders there with him; it's to guard against his being robbed, of course. Burnam has got an iron safe, hasn't he?"

Sams stared. So that was it—the main thing, anyway—the Burnam *dinero*. Sams happened to know that Sheriff Tom Edge had bawled old Charley out for keeping so much money in his house. Sams swore to himself. He was in a spot that promised to be tougher, even, than the spot Big Jimpson was in!

"I never noticed any safe when I was there," he said, trying hard to sound casual.

"All the better if he ain't got one," Tate said.

Armbruster agreed. He produced a fat wallet and from it took a hundred-dollar bill. "Ride down to pay the old coot a visit, kid, and after a little while you can ask him to change this bill for you and in that way find out where his *dinero* cache is. When you've found out, you can amble into the liveoak grove below the house, and find us there and tell us. Then you can go back and get your horse and go where you please, and we'll see you later and give you your part. Get it, Pistol Ball?"

"Sure," Pistol Ball answered. "But—"

"And if you want to cash your chips," rapped Shoot-'em-up Tate, "just you try some funny business!"

"But they'll reco'nize you in them black clothes, won't they, Armbruster, even if you wear a mask?" young Sams muttered.

But there was no discouraging T. Brady. He said, "I'll take care of that," and tucked



the hundred-dollar bill into Sams' shirt-pocket. "I'm sure you won't be loco enough to try funny business, *bijo*. Now get your rig, catch out your horse and ride, straight west. Tate is short of grub, so you'll have to pick up something to eat at Burnam's."

Break old Charley's bread, thought Pistol Ball, then help to rob him. He had known killers who wouldn't have done that. He got his rig, caught out his horse and rode, straight west.

Burnam's range was so dry that his mount kicked up a trail of dust where lush grass had been. Only liveoaks and a few palo verdes around ranch headquarters showed the color of green. The sun was well up when he stepped from his saddle at the gallery steps in front of the sun-blasted frame house.

He called. Old Charley, tall and gaunt, full-bearded and very gray, came at once. Remembering Burnam's failing eyesight, the newcomer said, "It's Sams, Charley," and walked up to the gallery to shake hands.

"Sure glad to see you, cowboy. The two boys I kept found some yeller in the river bed a few miles down, and I'd have been by myself all day if you hadn't popped in. Seems odd to see you without Big Jimpson. I reckon he's all right?"

"Big is in jail on a killin' charge, and he never done it any more'n you did," Sams said, speaking fast.

He went on, told everything. Burnam swore when he knew. He, also, spoke in haste. "I didn't put that money in a bank because banks fail, sometimes; besides, I meant to buy another outfit right away, and have about closed a deal for the Sunflower over on Bent Creek. What you think we better do, Pistol Ball? Get away from here with my money, or stay and fight Tate and this Armbruster?"

"Stick here," Sams said. "They'll spot us if we run, and overtake us where we'll have no cover. Don't be mistook, Charley; they're bad; for a hunk o' cash the size o' yours they'd murder a dozen men. Your two boys close enough to hear shootin'?"

"Don't count on it. Wind's wrong. I can't see to shoot, kid, and your work will be cut out for you. Lucky you're the fine shot you are. No wonder Armbruster wanted you. The wonder is, his thinking you'd fall so easy, eh?"

"Don't know about that," the little cowboy said. "Anyhow, he's figured it was better to take a chance with me than to try torturin' you to make you tell where your *dinero* was hid—old men always hide their *dinero*—and he knew I'd rode for you. He musta known your boys worked the dry river bed in the daytime; it was Tate that found that out, I guess. Now I'll put my hoss up."

He stepped back into his saddle and then headed for one of the corrals at the rear. When he returned on foot, Burnam was piling furniture against the front door. They propped a chair under the outer kitchen door and put the weight of a table on it. Then Sams noted that some of the windows were open.

"To shoot through?" he asked.

Old Charley nodded. "Here's my gun-belt, son. Buckle her on your left. Right-hand holster, but you can manage."

Sams grinned. "Little man with two big guns. But mebbe I won't look so funny after the fireworks starts. Charley, I keep thinkin' about my sidekick, Big Jimpson. It just had to be either Shoot-'em-up Tate or Armbruster who done the killin', but why didn't his gun smell? Could Sheriff Edge been wrong about that?"

"Not likely," Burnam answered.

He dropped into a living-room rocker with an old shotgun across his knees, and with gnarled fingers began combing his almost white beard worriedly. Sams stood at a window looking to east and south through openings in the liveoak grove. Before long his eye picked up a rising thin haze of dust.

"Here they come, old-timer. You keep tab on the west and north windows. That old double-barrel is no good at any distance, but close up with the birdshot bunched it'll cut a man's head off."

Burnam rose and went clumping into the kitchen.

Armbruster and Tate dismounted in the thickest of the grove to wait for Pistol Ball Sams. Half an hour passed. It must have been the closed front door, with nobody around outside, that tipped the would-be robbers off. Soon then the faithfully watching young Sams spied a tall, lean figure in nondescript clothing—none of it black—stealing toward the house in the cover of the liveoaks.

As a disguise it was clever enough. In

addition, Armbruster wore a faded bandanna mask. After a minute or so, Sams knelt under his front window with a gun-barrel ready across the sill and barked:

"Want to come the rest o' the way with your paws up, polecat, or ruther make a fight of it?"

T. Brady ducked in behind a treecole. A little excited, unthinking, Burnam ran into the living room. Pistol Ball jerked out, "Back, Charley—might be a trick—"

Armbruster threw a .41 bullet that interrupted Sams and stung his face with splinters from the windowsill. Old Charley turned back and in the dining-room doorway collided with Shoot-'em-up Tate. It *was* a trick. Tate had stolen unseen up the river bed and had just come through a west window. Before old Charley could do anything at all the long barrel of the newcomer's six-shooter swung against his temple and drove him into a limp pile on the floor.

"See how you like this, damn kid!" rapped Tate.

He fired at the beginning of the sentence. Sams dropped barely in time. He fired back so quickly that he wasn't half sure of his aim, rolled a yard in the cover of boiling blue smoke and sent a bullet through the thin wall just to the left of the dining-room doorway. There was the thump of a falling body, and an oath that became a moan.

"Yeah, and how you like that," Sams cried, "you—"

Dimly he had seen Brady Armbruster, .41 hookbill ready in his right hand, slip into the smoky living room by way of a front window. Armbruster had a glimpse of the quickly moving Sams and opened up. Sams too opened up. Smoke was so thick now that neither could see anything of the other. Even the gun flashes were not distinct. They shot at what they could see of these. Each time he let a gun-hammer fall, Sams stepped away from the flash.

WITH a single live cartridge left in the second—Burnam's—six-shooter, and with blood streaming from an arm wound and a long gash in his scalp, Pistol Ball Sams knelt and began reloading as rapidly as his now uncertain fingers would let him. Suddenly he realized that silence had fallen over the ranchhouse, deathly silence. He kept wiping blood from his eyes while he waited for the smoke to clear.

And then he saw, and felt weak and tired.

Nothing mattered now. Nothing, that is, unless old Charley—unless old . . . He didn't know it when Burnam's two boys came galloping to investigate the shooting.

Sams came to, hours later, in the doctor's office in town. He occupied a big chair, propped back. His head and one arm were bandaged. With him, beside the doctor, were Sheriff Tom Edge, Charley Burnam, and Big Jimpson his sidekick. The always conscientious old Charley bent over him to say:

"Everything's all right, son, and you haven't got the least thing to worry about. Men must kill, when it's to keep from being killed and to save somebody else. I'm buying the Sunflower Ranch, and I'm expecting you and Jimpson to help me run it. Eh?"

"Sure." Pistol Ball's head finished clearing. He grinned at Big, and Big grinned at him.

Jimpson said, "You're one great little pardner. Hadn't been for you and that fight over on Dry Santos, we never woulda known that Armbruster had two forty-one hookbill guns so's he could give Tom Edge the wrong one to sniff the night the miner was shot!"

"Correct," said the sheriff. "The doc had taken the bullet out of the miner, but we didn't think to weigh it against a forty-four slug—only .03 difference—until we found that Brady Armbruster had two forty-one guns!"



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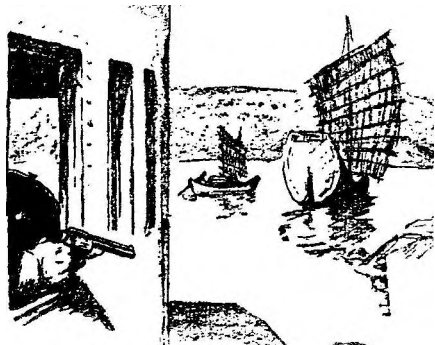
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## POWER OF LESBA

By CHARLES TENNEY JACKSON

**M**AJOR AYLSHIRE eyed the chunk of ice swiftly vanishing in the West Indian sun, which the steward of Jeremy's little Out Island schooner had left on the creaky veranda floor of the Resident Commissioner's bungalow. He sat back in his old palm-weave chair, kicked off his grass slippers and opened his faded dressing gown. Captain Bill Jett shoved the ice to the shadows.

The commissioner's white brows contracted with his smile.

"Thank you. Haven't seen a bit of ice in ten weeks. Now, fever, what? We'd better start early wardin' it off. Gin-tonic first and then—" He eyed the package Bill Jett laid on the floor. "Ha, I'd say it's Scotch, me lad! We'll make a mornin' of it, and no business intrudin'."

"Yes, there is." The American's lean dark face grinned tightly. "Twelve black work boys who'd been cutting this road across your ghastly island can't simply vanish in

thin air. I'm over here to fetch them back to Jamaica. Government House ordered the work stopped, no need to go on with that little landin' strip on the north shore with the U-boats about out of the Caribbean. "Where's that gang?"

The commissioner was building his fever cure in two tall glasses. He glanced past Captain Jett who'd been acting agent for the American contractors, and shrugged. "My lad, how'd I know? I don't stir about in this sun. My houseboy said the work camp was deserted—now he's nipped off himself, the coffee things unwashed. Ha!"

"I'd better wrap that ice in some matting," Jett grunted. "I'll hold Jeremy's schooner here until I find that gang. You may have to put me up overnight, Major."

"Oh, certainly — with two bottles of Scotch and a hundred weight of ice. I say we won't consider anything distressin' to-day."

Jett looked past the rickety plank wharf. Jeremy's dirty trade boat was a blot against

the glitter of green shoals and the dark blue channel beyond. Empty sea, brooding silence. One white gull down the curve of pinkish coral sand. The other way, through the wide doors of the bungalow's hall, he saw the cactus-clad ridge of Timego, and over it the towered wing of Gannet Great House, gaunt and windowless, deserted, relic of days when Colonial planters ruined themselves with sisal, sugar, pineapples, finished by hurricanes that had stripped the north shore fields to their rock bones. The surveyors had slashed a strip from Timego's wharf, but the gang that had been cutting the roadway past the ancient house had stopped by the stone cattle pen walls.

Jett suddenly thought of something. "The gang quit, even before I get here to order them to quit. Who told them to?"

"Distressin'," Aylshire smiled. "You Yanks are odd. We'll take up an inquiry after lunch, what? Now let's defy fever a bit."

Jett tinkled ice and gin, and thought of something else. "Say, Gannett wouldn't be back, would he? He was released from Quarry Rock Prison last week after three years for that embezzlement thing in Port Antonio. I heard he was wild when he heard that a road was to be driven over his worthless lands. I'd think he'd want it—bait for more suckers in his vast island development schemes."

"Imagine he's through as a promoter. His place has been shut up, deserted for years. Creepy sort of old castle, really. Scotch next?"

"Straight—hit that fever again." Jett drank slowly. "Why the devil do you stick it for your headquarters on Timego? I'd say your jurisdiction gives you plenty better spots. This is the worst."

The commissioner shrugged. "Love quiet. Detestin' business none can get to me here. I do believe there are complaints. But here you come botherin' in. Leave your problems at dockside."

"Twelve men missin'," Jett grunted. "Come to think of it, some years back, Timego had a similar case of more importance maybe. Chap named Starr, wasn't he? Some business partner of Mr. Gannett, the promoter of island developments. Long before your time though, wasn't it? Starr simply vanished. Of course you've heard of it."

The old major's twinkling blue eyes narrowed to a furtive study; then he relaxed to his drink. "Oh, yes! Fact is I knew Starr. But not on Timego. Canadian chap—I put him up at the Planters' Club in Port Antonio. Decent sort, quite."

"And vanished on Timego. Or lost over-side on a Grande Cayman turtle boat trying to get home. Under a sort of cloud, wasn't he?"

The commissioner seemed dryly uninterested. "Heard he'd lost a bit of money. Imagine anyone dealin' with Gannett would. M' lad, your liquor's not bad. My gin was nearly out. I was thinkin' of two shillin' rum when Jeremy put you on our quiet little beach."

"Too quiet. I'm lookin' about today for that work gang. Jeremy went ashore early. Maybe he has some word. I want to know."

HE GOT up and walked down the bungalow steps to the dazzle of the shell beach. Old Aylshire watched the American cunningly and did not stir. Ben Held, the steward and deckman, was asleep atop the engine house when Jett called to him. The little black man was frightened.

The Jamaica skipper had not returned, Held stuttered. This was a bad place and Held didn't want to leave the boat. He looked at the curve of the empty shore, the cactus slopes and the scrub pines of the low ridges inland. "Man go deh an' neve' come back. Where he hide? No place to go, sir! He bad—ol' *Obeah* island, dis one. I heard so. Long time ago Mam Josy say it all bad."

"Voodoo queen of the Cockpit Hills in Jamaica, eh? Well, she got three years for practicin' her swindlin' stuff on you folks, didn't she? Got too strong for the constabulary with it."

"She out now," Ben Held quavered. "Gone back to Ocho Rios, an' call fo' Papa Lesba to take vengeance. Not good, sir."

Jett rummaged more cigarettes from his hot dirty cabin. Then back on the beach, he called up to the commissioner.

"I'm goin' up to the end of the road cut and the work camp."

"I say," Aylshire protested. "No white man stirs in the sun from ten to four. And your precious ice is meltin' fast."

"Business first," Jett grinned. "See you at

lunch. Goat mutton, of course. Or have you a chicken? Your houseboy back yet?"

Major Aylshire was fumbling testily with his gown. "I say, it's madness stirrin' about now. But wait, I'm nippin' along with you. Might be interestin' back there."

Jett was amazed. The commissioner hadn't been known to travel fifty yards from the official residence back in the bush in years it was said. Jett thought of that as he waited. The old man didn't want the American spying about alone perhaps? The major came out in time, sun helmet, rumpled clean whites and swagger stick. Majesty of the Law must be in evidence if there was a native about to observe it. He followed Jett still grumbling. The road survey was cut through Spanish bayonet and cactus in a narrow ravine. The heat was stifling once the sea was out of sight.

The thatched huts of the workers were off the trail, empty, absolutely devoid of life. Not even a dog whimpered. Jett went past into the jungle cut around a slope, and there he saw the end. To the left ancient cattle-pen walls, tumbled rock straggling up a ridge. Over the broken walls the rotting veranda rails and the brick pillars of Gannett Great House showed through the heat haze. To the north, over the bush one saw the hurricane-washed bones of what had been sugar lands a century or more ago. Jett even traced the survey line by faded tattered flags to the flat where a landing field had never been started. Not even a grass shack, not a figure in sight. One saw all Timego from here, a ruined skeleton of an island. Jett turned at a mutter.

Aylshire was staring at the squat stone tower jutting from a wing of the ancient house. Much older, that tower; even the luckless proprietors before Gannett had nothing but legends of it. The major mopped his brow. Jett had never seen him so disturbed.

"I say, far enough. Beastly heat. Jolly old ruin, what? Let's be nippin' back to our drinks. Ice won't wait, you know."

"I'm pushin' along the survey to that north flat. Must be some sign of twelve men. If they put off with some turtler there'd be some marks of it in the cove. Tracks, trash left behind."

"You're mad, m' boy. Mad as any Yank. You won't return? Well, I'm toddlin'. Mind,

lunch at one. Ah—chicken and yams—that is, if my boy's returned. Ah, I had one chicken remainin' yesterday, quite."

Jett laughed. He went on to the end of the cutting and looked back. The Resident Commissioner was staring up at the gaunt window-broken facade of Gannett House under the weather-worn portico. Then he went slowly on, his white helmet moving above the bush. Jett went on but before he dipped down the slope to the cactus wall, he looked seaward. Something glittered beyond the last sand reef.

Jett watched it lift against the green shoals. "Launch—a neat one, brass and white paint. The old channel to the north cove's been silted up; the engineers came in from this side to look over that strip. And they wouldn't be here again with the job written off."

The big launch seemed empty under the aft awning. Jett scanned the bare beach, the mangrove fringe and the scrub fields. Then he turned back from the end of the brush cutting below the broken wall of the Gannett yard. The marks of the last machetes were upon the limbs where the workers had abruptly stopped. And on a skinned mangrove dangled a little doll. Coconut husk body, a gay rag skirt and eyes of red painted shell. Jett grunted; he'd seen the like before in the barren Cockpit Hills of Jamaica, in Haiti and Cuban Oriente, the wild east hills. And he knew its import.

"So that's it. A *ounga*, an *Obeah* warnin' to halt, go no further, and don't inquire into what's beyond. Some damned voodoo doctor—but mighty few natives on this reef. So he came over from—" Jett turned swiftly to scan the north shore. But from the end of the cut he couldn't see that launch. But no Jamaica natives would have a craft of that sort. Who was that big shot *Obeah* woman who'd just been released from Jamaica prison for practicin' her stuff in the hills? Aylshire had mentioned her; and Jett remembered more.

"Dombas and Papa Lesba, Mam Josy's old black god pals—boy, this is it—the old girl stopped the job right here. What for? And where's the work gang?" He grinned wearily and turned back past Gannett Great House and then eyed the dusty trail. The Resident Commissioner had tried to keep Jett from investigating the affair and

why? Old Aylshire was the only white man on Timego apparently. Jett followed the tracks in the dust; an old trail over the ridge.

"Barefoot men have traveled it," Jett mused. "Both ways—and it crosses the old drive to Gannett House to the one-time slave quarters." He turned aside and peered into these heavy stone huts that had stood for a century and more. Empty, the dust unstirred on the rock floors. From the jungle-grown curve of road he watched the house, then went directly to it, under the side veranda to stand at the worn brick pillars which supported the main building. Sand drift and dead weeds, with rickety wooden stairs leading up to what must be a kitchen. No footprints here. He went around a square stone structure under the middle of the house, likely enough a cooling storeroom such as he'd seen in other island houses of pre-ice days. Then he went to the front and silently up the broad stairs to the veranda.

Then Jett was surprised. The big oak, and iron-bound door was slowly opening. A stout, graying man in rumpled white was eyeing him, smoking calmly. Hard level blue eyes; a business type anywhere even if rather seedy.

"Mr. Gannett?" Jett said.

"Yes. Want anything here? I saw you about."

"I was. Looking for some rousties I was sent to round up and fetch back to Jamaica. They've jumped the job—where?"

Gannett smiled thinly. "I wouldn't know. Came over from Montego Bay myself yesterday." He waved his arm vaguely toward the boat distant in the sun-glitter. "Came to see what sort of mess my place is in. You'd know I've been absent—"

He laughed now and Jett grinned back. "Heard so. Well, not my affair. But twelve black men missing on a sandy open island with no hiding place—and why would they want one? Abandoned their camp and the road job—simply vanished. Queer, eh?"

"I'd say so. That road was a silly project though."

"That's agreed now; it was one of those war things which are being wound up. That was my business here, Gannett."

"Come in," said Gannett slowly. "Bit of a drink."

The great central hall had a winding

staircase with high windows looking to the sea. Heavy, dusty furniture of a century gone; not much of it but likely priceless mahogany antiques now.

Gannett turned into a dim dining room, the huge wooden shutters half opened, a bar of sunlight on the floor. Jett eyed that floor and Gannett watched him. No barefoot tracks in the dust.

Dust on the long table was unstirred except where Gannett's bottle of Scotch and a single glass stood. Gannett rummaged for another. He turned shortly. "Water? Nothing but catchment water."

"If you please. I'm used to rainwater and old at that."

Gannett shrugged and went to a pantry, and kitchen beyond. Jett didn't want water but he wanted the watchful Gannett away for a minute. Jett saw nothing—and then he heard.

A soft shuffle, a sort of tapping. Far, faint, rather a cadence to it.

Gannett came back with a tarnished pewter pitcher. He motioned to a faded tapestry-backed chair. Jett sat down.

"Lot of work to do, cleaning up, I'd say. No help on your place?"

"Not yet. I fetched one boy but he stayed with the boat. Hands will be hard to get, what with war wages and all. You Yanks are a bit upsetting to these Out Islands. Some quite deserted now." Gannett sipped Scotch slowly. "You're stopping at the commissioner's I suppose. Nobody for hire over there?"

Jett grinned. "Ought to be twelve, stout black fellas. Now, you wouldn't know a thing of them, Mr. Gannett?"

Gannett smiled but his mouth tightened. "I see that's in your mind, Mister. Suppose you look around. Upstairs, down — all about."

HE DIDN'T suppose Jett would take him up. Not quite the proper thing for a guest sitting at a man's table with drinks. But Jett grinned alertly. "Say, thanks. I'd like to. Heard such yarns about this house—yarns of days long before you ever bought the land. That little tower is the highest thing on the island, isn't it?"

"Come on up." Gannett waved his hand toward the front stairs. "Or rather you go. My wind's a bit thick after two years on

Quarry Rock, though I had an easy berth in the commissary. Still, jail is jail."

Jett hesitated. He heard that faint sound and couldn't locate it. Up or down. Gannett wanted him up. He smiled and swung up the broad curve of bare stairs. There was the same gaunt disorder in the upper hall. But no sign that Gannett had slept in any of the high-walled bedrooms, nor that any human step recently had touched the floors.

Jett went hurriedly, and rather noisily down the hall, and then turned stealthily back. He leaned from the upper balustrade, listening, watching. He could glimpse the dining room and Gannett wasn't there. Jett went down a step or two. Gannett was in the dim kitchen beyond and seemed to be bending over a spot of complete darkness. Jett came on down, and when he reached the dining room door Gannett stood within, smoking calmly. That faint tapping noise had ceased.

"Well?" Gannett smiled. "Satisfied?"

"Hardly. But neither you nor I can help it, can we? I could do with another drink, Gannett, before I go. Highball, we Americans say. Your catchment water has an oak taste I rather like."

"Oh, yes! Cisterns have wooden channels, and haven't been cleared out in years. Like all the old hill houses; and it's best not to inquire. I'll try to freshen yours."

He went back with the pitcher, and Jett followed. He looked past his host and chuckled. "Man, this place was built to stay built!"

The cavernous kitchen was different. Primitive, huge-slabbed walls and floor. The fireplace a gaping hole with rusted spikes and cranes, incrustated soot. Gannett answered dryly.

"Right enough. Square sort of blockhouse originally, I fancy. Built before the first planters took over and put the house around it. Dated from Morgan's time likely. I wouldn't know, being the last of many owners. Interesting, eh?"

Jett put his glass on a ledge by the chimney side. Under it was another gaping black hole. It might have been an ash chute used by the slaves of Morgan's pirates. Gannett turned toward the corridor that led to the dining room. He called back.

"We could stand another drink, couldn't

we? I'd show you more odd things in the left wing. Don't understand it all myself."

Jett was eyeing that hole. Thought he saw a bit of wood and fairly new. Gannett went on and turned. His guest had vanished.

A scurry of damp old ash crust arose over Jett's head as he backed swiftly down a short ladder in the chute. Some new wood shavings clung to his hair. But his feet were on smooth rock as he listened. He intended to call up that he had foolishly fallen into the hole when Gannett came back hastily to inquire.

"Gannett surely saw or heard me. He won't like it, but—"

He listened. Gannett neither came back nor spoke. Jett looked up at the dim room above. He thought a shadow moved there but there was utter silence. Gannett would know it was no accident. And did nothing, said nothing.

"Don't like that exactly," Jett muttered. "Silly play on my part. But it's as I thought. Noises I heard were below the house. Gannett knew. Does he?"

HE'D heard another sound. A crunching slow sound. Iron against stone. Someone above had shoved a cover or trapdoor into that hole above the ladder. The dim light space was gone. Jett didn't climb to investigate. He'd taken the chance to come down here to find something else. Gannett might have trapped him temporarily but there must be another way out. This passage led under Gannett House to where other men were hidden surely.

Jett groped to a wall, felt ahead with his foot. "Only excuse I got is what I started to do. Find twelve missing black boys and ship them home on Jeremy's schooner. But I might be wrong here. Case of trespass, man—but Gannett won't file charges!"

He grinned in the dark and groped on. A narrow stone passage to the left at a rough-hewn corner. He felt away along this, counting his steps to figure distance. Twenty, thirty, a slight down slope. Another turn to the left. He stopped and reasoned. He must be out from under the house, under the side yard toward the ancient stone fence skirting the new road cut. In that direction surely.

He took a step, and a light flashed in his

face. A very small flash held steadily upon him. Then a surprised mutter.

"Well," Jett grunted, "turn that thing on yourself. Come out of that corner—"

"Ain't Gannett! Man, what you do in here?"

"Gannett sent me along. Gannett said—"

"Mr. Gannett, he do? No!" That soft native voice was rising in alarm. "I know you, sir! Captain Jett, American man!"

Jett took a stride to the light. He reached for it and the other man turned hastily. "Come on, sir! You can't be here!"

"Here I am. See here, are you one of the boys Jeremy came for? What's all this? Give me that light and explain!"

But the boy kept ahead protesting scaredly. "You wait, sir! This no good thing. Jeremy, he here, too. You wait here, now!"

He retreated, and the light went off. That had Jett helpless. He had to feel for the wall again. Now in utter silence.

Jett thought, this fellow knows me. Then I've been watched all day. Gannett—from Gannett's windows. Why would Gannett hide those men away in his underground cellars? Lie about them, have them working here?

For he'd heard that sound again, picks or shovels on rock. But after the boy with the light had vanished the noises stopped. Jett felt along the wall. Then there was no wall; he must be in a wider place, a room. He crossed cautiously and found another wall. Then a corner to another passage. At the end was a faint glow wavering, as if from moving distant lanterns. Then suddenly laughter, shrill, wild, some voices in half-frightened hysteria. Jett had heard that before.

"Rum," he muttered. "Wait, I'm gettin' some clue. That *ounga* at the road end, stoppin' 'em. Some *Obeah* doctor in this—and Gannett started it. What's his racket?"

Somebody groped behind him. Then Gannett spoke softly. "You went rather strong, Jett, giving me the slip down here. I had to follow you—you'll be in a bad spot. Devilish awkward—an American."

"I've seen stuff like this in the Cockpit Hills. Listen to that! Great big boomin' voice givin' orders! That'll be Mam Josy, the voodoo queen, who just got out of jail a week before you did. Right? You sent

her here, maybe fetched her—to stop that road cut past your house. Right?"

Gannett put an unseen arm on his. "Better have a care—someone's coming, and for you, man. You can't interfere with them."

A lantern, high-held above men's heads, showed them coming. Four black boys opened out and surrounded Bill Jett, staring at him uncertainly. One shouted back.

"Mr. Gannett, he come, too!"

Gannett shoved past them. "Wait here, Jett. I advise you to stand quiet. You've been damnedly foolish all along."

"I'll see it through," Jett muttered.

The black men didn't touch him as Gannett faded on out of the lantern light. There was silence a moment and then low voices. Then the old woman's angry shout cut through all else.

"Yo' keep on 'at work! Hear me, yo—all yo' finish 'at job!"

Some man shouted words Jett didn't get; and suddenly the four men crowded into Jett. "You come along, man. We no hurt but you go as we say!"



Jett whirled and shot a hand to the nearest face. Then they closed on him, shoving and shouting. They had his arms, husky black men smelling of sweat and rum, and they ran him down the passage to where he saw what seemed the end of a mine working. Men standing to gouge and pick broken rock head-high about them. He got just a brief glimpse, for his captors hurried him to the left into other darkness. One was fumbling ahead; and back of him came a shouting uproar responding to the old woman's commands.

"Lesba! Power o' Papa Lesba! Dombas say do, an' we do!"

"Lesba," Jett grunted. "Heard of the chap. Voodoo god, and black Josy his priestess. Yes, heard yarns about 'em!"

They weren't listening. Shilling rum and black magic were bracing up their fears of white law and order; *Obeah* gave them escape back to primal jungle pleasures and superstitions. But they had to work, and that's what puzzled Jett. Hurried work in



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the secret underground chambers of Gannett House. He'd had but a brief glimpse of the party. Tools and bottles about. A red fire burning and smoky lanterns on the walls. Old Mam Josy's vast brown face contorted savagely as Gannett seemed pleading with her.

A WOODEN door in the rock opened and Jett was shoved through. He swung back fighting and it closed against his head. He rubbed it, stunned for a moment, and then saw Jeremy in the dim light.

The schooner skipper was squatted by a smoky lantern on the stone floor. Jett reeled over to him. Just now he began to feel that he had been punched hard along that passage.

"Got you too, man? What's this about? That old she-devil, Mam Josy, just out of jail, like Gannett, and over here at his place?"

"I was uneasy at my boat, sir, and went out to see a man I thought I recognized as one of your work gang. They grabbed me and dragged me along and down here. That's about all I know."

"Gannett knew? They brought you into his house?"

"No, into a rock hole and then a passage that must be part of the old-time water drains. Then in this room, sir."

Jett looked about. No windows. But some eight feet high on the wall was a square wooden door. There had been a ladder to it long ago from the marks below. By the door through which they had been shoved was a heavy bolt bar; and Jett went to drop it into place. Now no one could get to them that way.

"Get up," Jett muttered. "Not wastin' a minute here if I can help it. Give me a boost to that trap in the wall. It's got two big hooks on this side so it must open out."

The lank Maroon skipper obeyed. Jett's weight swung him about as the American got a foot to his knee and then to his shoulder. But Jett's fingers came to the big rusted hooks. It took time and all his strength to move them, then get a hand past the dry rotted wood, but he fought for an opening. Then he shoved. Jeremy reeled out from under his feet but Jett had his shoulders through. His head butted into musty rotten canvas. He crawled up in utter



darkness. But in this upper chamber he heard the digging sounds plainer. To his left and below.

"I'll reach a hand for you, Jeremy. They are cutting a way into this place. We've got to find out why—and first."

He dragged Jeremy through the hole. They crept a yard in darkness over dusty slabs. The air had the smell of ancient death. But they heard live men tapping rock. Jett touched his companion.

"They aren't in this hole yet but they're diggin' through. My lost work gang! Who set them to it? Not Gannett?"

"No," whispered Jeremy. "He couldn't hire them for this job with any money. Old Josy, sir—the power of *Obeah*. That's why she's here."

"Then Gannett fetched her. Met her in Quarry Rock Prison likely. Well, the old she-devil is no fool. She's made voodoo cults a good thing. Gannett paid her all right—or promised to. Gannett needed pick and shovel men to break into this black pit. Can't see why—unless some old passage from under his house had been blocked!"

"Blocked! That's it! Some rockfall long ago blocked it. And if that new road had been cut through the ridge outside Mr. Gannett's pen wall it would have laid this hole bare to the light, sir!"

"Good guess," Jett muttered. "We're near or under the survey line. That damned *ounga* was first used to scare the boys away. Then Mam Josy enticed them to Gannett's job—he had to get here first."

That digging was plainer, from the left where Jett figured the wall of the ancient wing of Gannett Great House must be.

Jeremy was uneasy. "We better climb back down to that other room, sir. Mr. Gannett either didn't know that high trap-door led to this chamber or he didn't think we could reach it. He couldn't have done it himself. But if they find us here, sir—"

"On your feet. I'm trying a match and look about. They aren't through the rock ahead of us yet. Have a look ourselves."

The light sputtered up. A rough square chamber with the marks of slave tools two centuries gone on the stone. Jett stumbled over iron in the dust. The match went out. He fumbled at his feet.

Something of crumbling wood and iron bands and mouldering canvas. "You hold

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the matches, Jeremy. Two or three if you can. Or I'll light this rag—twist it to a torch. I've found a gun!"

"Gun?" Jeremy lit the stiff dry cloth. Then gasped. Jett was holding a rusty iron tube; there was dull brass and mottled wood.

"A flintlock. Damn it, here's a dozen that have been rolled in sailcloth. There are old sea chests, Jeremy. Canvas, old riggin' coils, boat gear—stuff stored long before planter days I'd say. But Gannett didn't want it disturbed. Gannett knew of this hole—"

Jeremy gasped and fell back from a tumble of bound bales which he'd examined. Dropped the light and stood shaking.

"What's the matter? Where's the matches?" Can't you speak?"

"I saw—" Jeremy whispered, "a man, A dead man. I pulled the cloth from him. Horrible, sir!"

"Hell, no! Nothing about a skeleton to worry a live man. Where?"

He lit the match and then another twist of canvas. The flare smoldered, up, down, then burned high and clear. Behind some small boat booms and gear piled waist high there was a dead man half-uncovered. Dried skin patches over bones and skull. Jett held the flare close and steady. The matted rotten shirt-neck didn't date along with flintlock muskets. Jett stepped back wiping his fingers. The flare went out. They stood in utter dark. The muffled sounds of pick and shovel were clearer. Jett felt for his companion. Jeremy flinched at the touch. Jett laughed softly.

"No ghost, m'boy! That body was hidden here not ten years back I'd say. Gannett knew! Gannett couldn't have it found by any road gang that might cut through the top of this hole? Why not? Gannett put the dead man here! You recall Starr, his vanished partner and victim of promotion schemes, Jeremy? The old mystery of Starr?"

"I knew Mr. Starr," Jeremy quavered. "Well, sir."

"Light another flare. Take a close look at that face!"

"No!" Jeremy gasped and turned. "Not me. Not now! Besides, listen to that, sir. Something gave way; they broke through somewhere!"

A heavy crash of stone, then a shrill yell. High-voiced Jamaica boys shoving

back from a broken barrier wall. Shadowy figures against dim moving light. Jett shoved back himself and dropped the cloth he'd been about to ignite. He stumbled against Jeremy who was fumbling for that hole by which they had entered. It couldn't be found in the dark, their hands clutched stacked seamen's gear and wooden chests. Anyhow Jett wasn't seeking escape now. He got an arm about Jeremy's shoulder.

"Listen—no use going back to that dungeon cell. We're here—and ahead of Gannett. Gannett won't want that gang to discover what we've found out. Wait, an entrance was all he wanted of 'em. You'll see, Jeremy. Gannett and Mam Josy'll stop 'em right here. Buck up, man!"

"If Gannett killed Starr long ago, then he'll kill you and me for finding out, sir! Captain Jett, Mam Josy controls those Jamaica boys; they'll do as she says. Even murder—power of *Obeah*, sir!"

"Can't get away with it. Hold steady, I hear her shouting!"

They saw a vast shadow on the passage wall beyond the broken rock, vaster than the workers who gave way for the striding woman. Gannett was behind her with a small flashlight; Gannett was shouting angrily also. Then the two halted.

"That's enough boys," Gannett's voice was steady. "You did as I directed. The passage wall had crumbled in here six years ago, and I couldn't clear it. You've done well and you'll be well paid. I'll see to that and Mam Josy also. You minded her handsomely, boys."

"Power of Lesba!" roared the old woman. "I say so, do I? I say where to dig, and Lesba, he guide you work! I say it!"

"What we dig?" muttered a voice. "To find gold—silver?"

Gannett snarled suddenly, impatiently.

"Stuff and nonsense! It's an old store-room. Plantation tools and gear I must have to start the fields back in operation—when I can get workers. I'll have a dozen of you boys over here at fine wages—when the war permits. You'll be satisfied with your wages now and I'll see you back in Jamaica before the week-end. You can all go back to the house now. There'll be rum and meat—"

"Gold!" shouted the doubter. "I believe me so! Mam Josy tell us, come work in secret. Go home in secret. What for we

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do? Tell me that, man! Rum can wait—"

The group stirred and grumbled. Gannett was behind them scolding, his flash wavered. Old Josy's bulk jostled the black boys. "You hear me? You go back now! Mr. Gannett and me is in charge now. Power of Papa Lesba say so!"

Jett had listened. He was feeling for that rusted musket at his feet. The black boys were grumbling; the power of *Obeah* wasn't as great as the power of gold perhaps. But they feared Mam Josy. East Jamaica hills were full of tales of the secret doings of Mam Josy's followers. Now the Jamaica boys hesitated, argued, and some crowded to the broken rock barrier peering across at the darkness.

Jett got up with the rusted gun. Get to that hole and brain first man who climbed through! Smash a way out and confront Gannett with his discovery. Smash the flintlock stock into Josy's broad face if she screeched again about Papa Lesba and Dombas! He felt back for Jeremy.

"Get one of these relics, boy. Come on—time to settle it. Wait! Get some cloth—light a flare, march beside me. Power o' Lesba, hey? Hop to it, Jeremy! Let that gang see us comin'!"

Jeremy groaned hopelessly, and obeyed. His burning rags dropped embers as he came—and the red light struck Captain Bill Jett's lean grim face and the corroded metal of the flintlock.

THEY turned across the barrier to back just as the first rebel against Mam Josy's rule was crawling over it. Other boys behind were yelling with mingled fright and exultation. Behind them the *Obeah* queen howled curses and pummelled their backs. Gannett had been shoved aside, but now he'd dragged a pistol from his shirt. Some of them saw that and stopped. Then the ones at the barrier howled a louder fright.

Bill Jett's gaunt grim face and his ancient weapon barred the way. That face was grinning, grimacing horribly in the broken light of Jeremy's falling fire. The mystery chamber was all shifting shadows behind them. Ghosts of Morgan's buccaneers seemed to be marching through. The hill boys were screaming; they all saw the apparitions now, and they turned. Three hundred pounds of fat *Obeah* queen went down under that



charging retreat. Gannett's puffy bulk was shoved ahead, gun and all, until he also went down under rushing bare feet. His light and gun were lost. When he got to his feet Mam Josy had also struggled up and had one view into Gannett's secret room. Dark faces distorted in the light of dying embers. Rusty weapons dim but moving.

"Power o' Dombas, help me! Power o'—"

Then she collided with Gannett who hadn't seen anything but black Jamaica boys crashing over him. He went down again and he stayed down. Bill Jett went scrambling through and he was standing over Gannett, striking matches when Jeremy also fled from the ancient room of death. Jett grabbed his arm.

"Hold up, Gannett's flash and gun are somewhere about. There by the wall, Jeremy. Here the beggers yell! The old lady's leadin' the pack now I think—throwin' her weight on 'em! Good old pal!"

Jeremy turned the flash down on Gannett's pink dishevelled face. Fleck of blood on his temple. He twitched slightly.

"Get his leg," said Jett. "I'll lift and we'll heave him along. We can go out any way those guys did, and at the rate they were travelin' it'd take 'em a week to cover the distance back. They want sunshine and fresh air, and so do I. Drag the big shot along, Jeremy. We got plenty business to turn up yet outside."

They turned corners of narrow stone passages, then up short stairs and past huge dusty wine tuns, empty and cobwebbed. Another turn into a broader corridor and then into Gannett Great House's cavernous kitchen. Jett recognized that and he laid the master down.

"Spot o' rum wouldn't be bad." He looked through to the vast dininghall, its massive table and sideboard. Flash of silver and glass. Jett grinned and started that way.

"Hi, Jeremy! There's Scotch—in fact my own glass where I set it down not four hours ago when I took the notion to explore that ash chute in Gannett's kitchen. Gannett? In a minute we'll put some cord on him; the old boy might do away with himself or something, for he knows he can't escape from Timego. Scotch, Jeremy—with some of Gannett's best rainwater from his piratical roof."

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They drank, and drank some more. Jeremy sat down feverishly.

"Bit thick this morning, wasn't it, sir? Wonder how Ben Held is faring with my schooner across at South Cove? And the Commissioner and—and—"

"I'll be takin' Gannett's Scotch along. Fix Gannett and we'll leave. I want to know Major Aylshire's views on this—he was so anxious for me not to bother about *Obeah* or anything."

Jeremy grinned. "Well, sir, Commissioner Aylshire represents the King and Law hereabout, and one way to get on and get things done is not to bother island people too much about their beliefs, customs—all that. Good policy, I've heard. Fetching the Scotch, sir?"

**THEY** did. It was five o'clock when they topped the ridge between Gannett Great House and the Resident's bungalow.

Commissioner Aylshire waved from his chair and bottle as Jett came up the steps. Even Jett's bruised face didn't bother him though his eyes narrowed. He even beat Jett to explanations.

"I say, you did a bit of something! Those road fellows came nippin' down the hill awhile back and never stopped until they were safe aboard Jeremy's schooner. Amazing—though you Yanks do get action. M'lad, the ice still holds out. Jeremy will join us?"

Jeremy shoved on for his schooner in some agitation. Jett sat down. "Was that old *Obeah* woman, Mam Josy, with 'em? No matter, the Law'll have her back at Quarry Rock, and a bit worse this time. And I'm thinkin' Gannett will hang—for the murder of Starr at last."

Aylshire's jaw dropped; he was capable of surprise. "You mean it? You found—evidence?"

"Starr himself. Gannett used Mam Josy to lure that gang into the job he couldn't do himself. Get Starr's body and dispose of it for sure this time before his secret store-room was really looked into. Jeremy and I beat him to it; and we have him secured." Jett turned on the Commissioner. "As the Colony's representative here the rest is yours—papers and procedure. You'll have to work a bit, I fear. I'll mix a tonic to start



us, eh?" Jett grinned and went on determinedly. "And one thing—I want to know your reasons for not wanting me to explore about this derelict island? Even why you chose it for your jurisdiction headquarters at this time?"

Major Aylshire took a slow drink. "Starr," he mused. "Starr was my friend. Government House gave up the investigation years ago but I thought the mystery was on Timego. Thought I might get some clue in time. With Gannett back I really hoped something might turn up. Then you came over, bothered about your black gang. I didn't connect that with Gannett however. Ha, took power of old black gods interferin', did it?"

"Hell, no!" Jett grinned. "It took me, gettin' hot and bothered about those missin' men. Even with Mam Josy coachin' Papa Lesba and Dombas didn't get to first base. But why the devil didn't you want me interferin'?"

The Major fished for the last ice in the canvas and stirred it into the water pitcher. "You Yanks and your beastly hustle to get first things first; I feared you'd put Gannett in such a state of mind that I never could—er cultivate him leisurely, and perhaps get a bit of clue about Starr. Always thought he did for Starr to prevent some swindlin' exposure. However, I'm not Scotland Yard. Doubtless would have bungled it. But now—thanks to Yanks!"

"Better stick to your Scotch, Major. Jeremy and I'll be puttin' back to Jamaica right this hour. I'll be back, however, with the Out Island patrol or constabulary chaps tomorrow mornin'. Early. What can I fetch over for you?"

"Good bit of ice. Might add another bottle of Scotch. It'll likely take us some long hours discussin' this affair. Better be prepared, what?"

"Your case is complete. However, I'll fetch the ice to prepare it."

The Commissioner mused a bit. "Right. But you know, m' lad, I still insist the power of jolly old Lesba had a bit to do with breakin' the case. Gannett and Mam Josy called him in, didn't they?"

"Pinch hitter, Major. But he struck out!"

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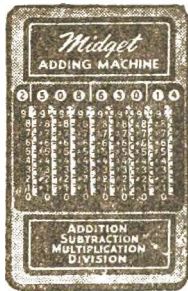
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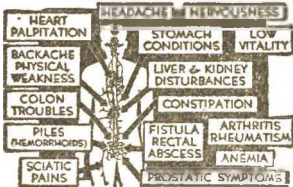
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# THE SHOOTER'S CORNER

Conducted by  
**PETE KUHLOFF**

### Measuring Bullet Velocity

HOW the heck is the speed of a bullet determined? This question is one quite frequently asked your gun editor. Perhaps other readers have contemplated this problem—anyway here's a little dope on the subject.

The method generally used by the amateur ballisticians is that of synchronized discs, that is, discs mounted on a drive shaft at a predetermined distance apart and turned at a known constant speed. A vertical index line is drawn from the center to the upper edge of each disc so that when mounted on the shaft they (the index lines) remain one behind the other.

The gun is then set up so that the axis of the bore is parallel to the line of axis of the shaft, and so the bullet will pass through the discs somewhere at the outer edges.

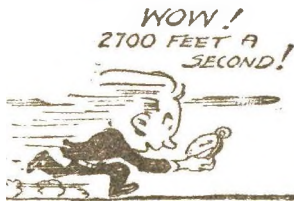
The discs are started revolving and the gun is fired so the bullet penetrates the first disc at the index line. The distance that the second bullet hole lags behind the bullet hole in the first disc is measured and inasmuch as the speed of rotation and the distance between the discs are known, the average speed at which the bullet traveled from the first disc to the second one can be "figured."

Of course the successful use of a chronograph of this type depends on the certainty that the discs are revolving at the same speed and that they are definitely turning at a specific speed, also absolute accuracy in measuring the distance between the two perforations. Incidentally the muzzle of the gun must be kept far enough from the instru-

ment to avoid wreckage from the muzzle blast.

Probably the oldest type of device used for measuring the velocity or striking force of a projectile is the Ballistic Pendulum. A bullet is fired against a pendulum and the force of the blow drives it backward. The distance of the swing is measured. So, knowing the mass of the pendulum and the distance it moved, the force with which the bullet struck can be calculated. That is, knowing the weight of the bullet and the force with which it struck it is possible to accurately figure the velocity at which the bullet was traveling when it reached the pendulum. As a matter of information the pendulum is not a chronograph inasmuch as it does not measure the time of flight between two points.

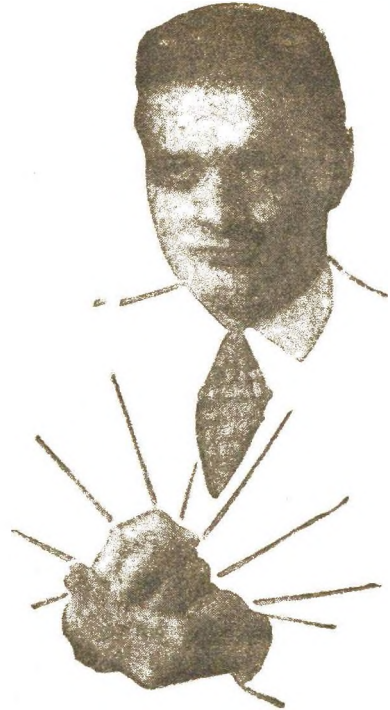
Also there are several methods of measuring velocity by the use of electricity—namely by the use of "make and break" circuit devices, and by induction.



In the "make and break" instrument two electric circuits are used. The first circuit is established which runs through a wire or screen placed in front of the muzzle of the gun far enough to avoid the muzzle blast. This circuit activates an electric magnet which in turn holds up a metal rod around which a copper or zinc sleeve is placed to record the drop of the rod when the circuit is broken.

Another circuit runs through a circuit breaker built into the second screen and activates a second magnet which supports a weight. This weight is released as the bullet passes through screen number two and breaks the circuit. A trigger is tripped by the falling weight which releases a spring activated knife edge which marks the drop of the copper or zinc covered rod.

Now here is the way it works—the gun is fired (of course the trigger has been recocked)—the bullet breaks the first circuit, the magnet drops the recorder rod and it falls past the knife edge. The bullet con-



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times and breaks the second circuit which drops the weight on the trigger releasing the knife which marks the fall of the rod. Thus knowing the rate of fall of the rod it is possible to compute the length of time the rod fell before the knife marked it by measuring the distance from the zero mark to the register mark. This time interval is the same as the time required for the bullet to travel from the muzzle circuit break to the back-stop circuit break. The time required for the bullet to travel this known distance has been determined by the falling rod so it is an easy matter for the ballisticians to dope the average velocity between these two points.

The basic principle of the induction type of chronograph is quite simple. A magnetized bullet is fired through a coil of wire which generates an electromotive force which is utilized for operating a timing or recording device.

These coils (solenoids) are placed at predetermined distances and each is hooked up with a recording instrument. The magnetized bullet is fired through the series of coils and the impulse is recorded on a strip of paper which has been marked off into time intervals, thus a visual record is available showing the length of time the bullet required to pass from one coil to the next through the complete series, catch on?

### *Keeping the Noodle Protected*

THE first hunting cap I had was one made of rabbit fur. A thoughtful uncle made it out of the skins of rabbits which I had killed. Needless to say I was a very young lad at the time. Well sir, I wore that piece of head-gear practically all the time, night and day, until it finally "gave up the ghost" after several years of continuous use. I can remember wearing it while hunting when the thermometer registered well over 100 and not being the least uncomfortable—except for a steady stream of perspiration.

Since that time I have used many hunting

caps or hats and have never been completely satisfied. Most hunters seem to think that any old hat is okay for use in the field. Perhaps these fellows are right—but I want something that will not only keep the rain out of my eyes but also keep it from trickling down my neck not to mention that it should be of such color as to be a protection against being shot for a deer. Also I want my ears warm (at least not freezing) when hunting in very cold weather. Last fall I was out when it was 30° below and, brother, that's too cold a piece of weather for a city hot-house plant to be messing around in without a lotta protection.

Remember when the long-billed khaki cap with a reversible red top first came out? The khaki side was supposed to protect against rain and the red side against other hunters' bullets. I don't know what procedure was to be followed when both problems were present. The mistake I made was getting one of these caps in the same size as my regular hat. After it was soaked with rain a couple of times I couldn't get it on. In fact, I've never seen a hunting cap or hat that didn't shrink at least a couple of sizes after a period of wearing in all weather conditions.

With this cap I still had a wet neck, so I started looking around for a "deer stalker's cap." You know, the double billed affair similar to the well-known Sherlock Holmes' cap. I finally located one, two sizes too large and promptly bought it. It kept my neck dry but I had trouble with the ear flaps, and also I took a lot of kidding from my friends. Speaking of shrinking, it was the champ of shrinkers. It lasted two seasons before I gave it to a small nephew.

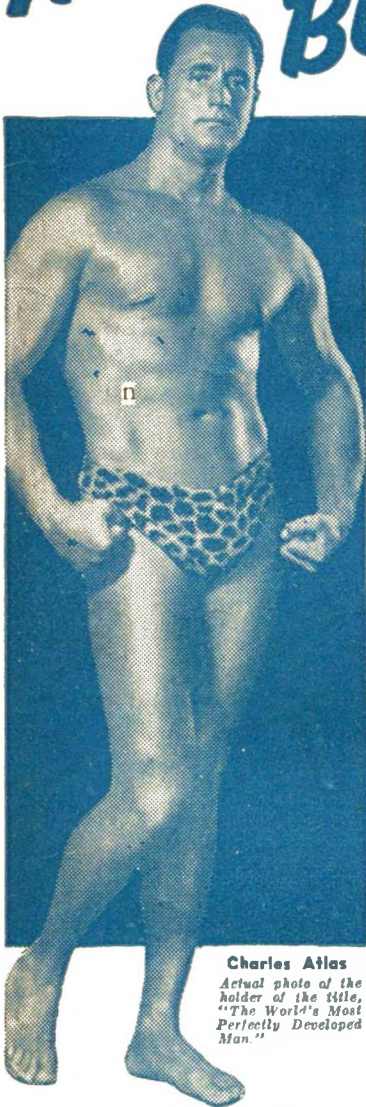
Next I had a cap made of red wool. It was made similar to the ordinary fur cap with turn-down bill and ear flaps, no complaints on this job as far as size is concerned as it was made three sizes too large.

I have always been more or less inclined toward a regular felt hat. The only drawback being the color (I certainly don't want to be mistaken for a deer). What I wanted was a red one—and not long ago I bought one in the largest size obtainable. It has a good brim which keeps rain out all around and it is really RED. I had to soak it in hot water to get it up off my ears—but think it's going to be just the ticket.





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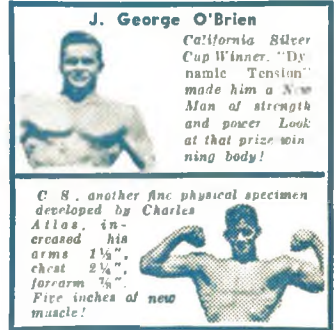


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