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THE ISLE OF SILENCE

by

L. Patrick Greene

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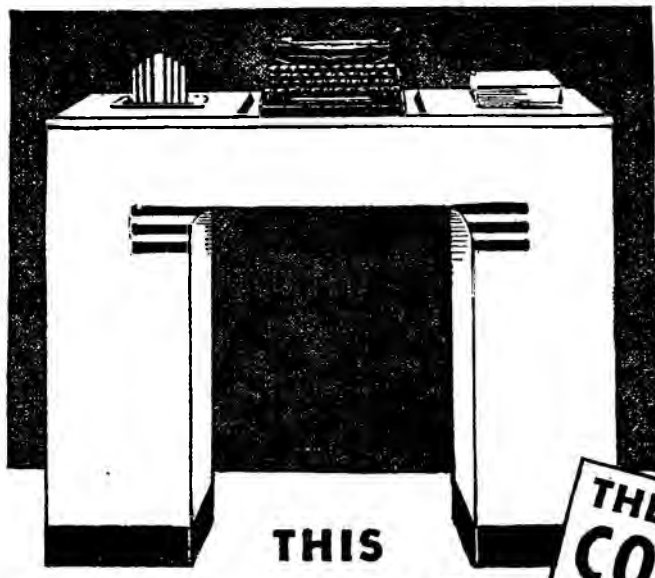

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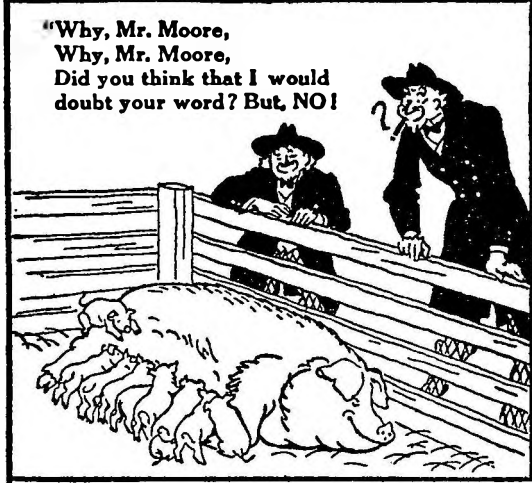

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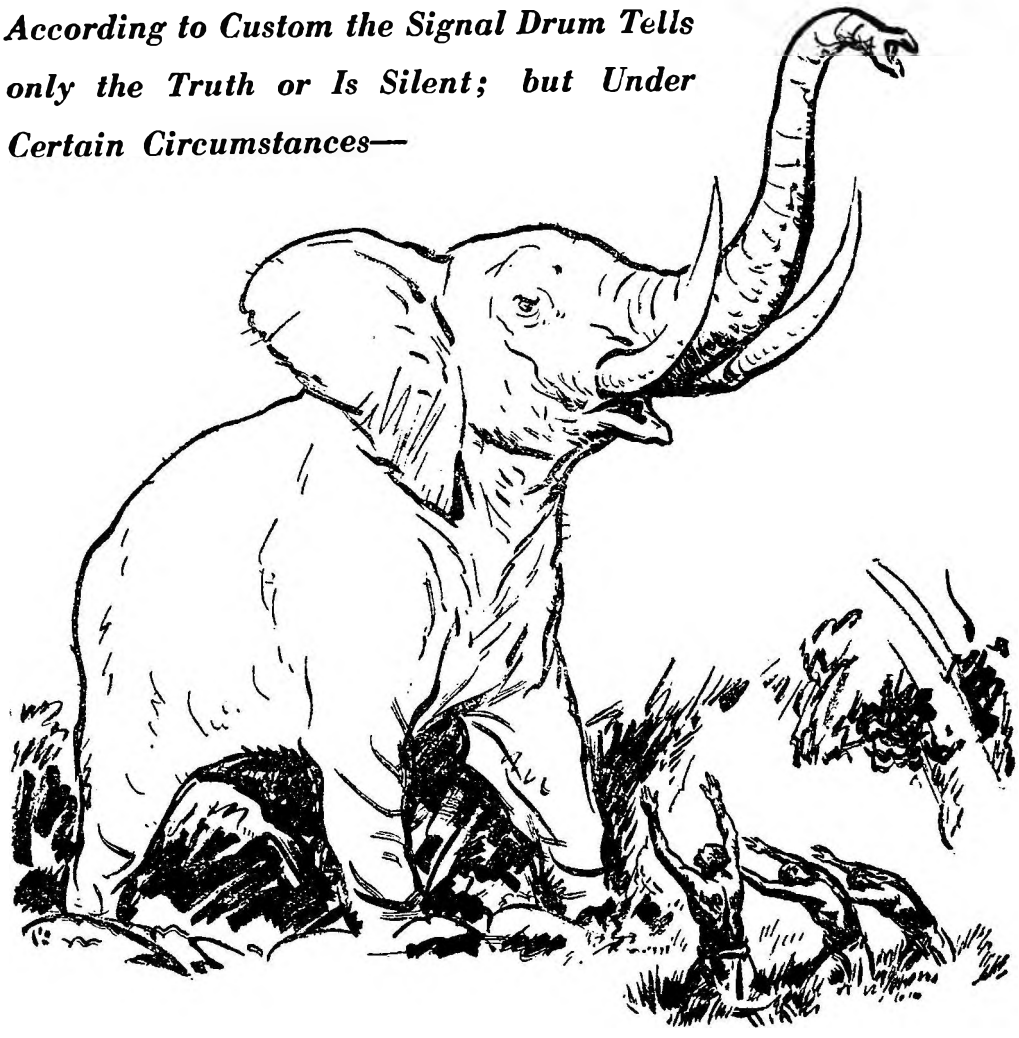


THE ISLE OF SILENCE

By L. PATRICK GREENE

Author of "Bread Upon the Waters," and Many Other Stories of South Africa and of the Major

THERE was the peace of high noon in the Congo jungle; a peace that was enforced by the dank, greenhouse heat of sub-tropical Africa. The beasts of prey and the grass eaters rested, completely relaxed, relying entirely on an inner sense to warn them of danger. Even the everlasting drone of insects dropped to a lower pitch as if the flying pests had been lulled into a state of near somnolence by the monotony of their own singing.

The heat and the hour also triumphed at the Major's camp. He slept soundly in a net hammock, slung between two trees several feet from the ground. The towel about his middle served to soak up the sweat which streamed down his powerful,

sun-tanned torso. Apart from the towel, he was naked. A white, fine meshed mosquito net shrouded the hammock, protecting the Major from the hungry hordes of insects which otherwise would have disturbed his sleep and filled his blood with their poison.

Jim, the Hottentot, whose life was devoted to the Major's service, squatted on his haunches nearby. In his right hand he held a stout cord. The other end of the cord was attached to a cleverly contrived "punkah" of thickly leaved branches. A pull on the cord would set the punkah swaying back and forth over the white man, creating the semblance of a cooling breeze. At first Jim had kept the punkah going continually, sweeping regularly back and forth. But gradually sleep had overtaken him—though at spasmodic intervals —and in a purely consciousless reaction he tugged at the cord.

And all about the tree-shaded jungle clearing sprawled some fifty native carriers. They slept with their heads pillowed on their loads, snoring stertorously. Their wholesale surrender to sleep was not so much indicative of physical exhaustion as of a happy contentment with their lot; it also demonstrated their complete confidence in the ability of the white man they served to protect them from all dangers—whether that danger might come from man, beast or evil jungle spirits.

As for the Hottentot and his Baas—their complete surrender to sleep was so profound that it even dulled the animal-like instinct they had developed during a lifetime of danger; it was a sixth sense on which they had so often been compelled to rely in the past.

They had not meant to make this surrender to sleep. They were experienced campaigners in a land where carelessness so often means death. And it was the very essence of foolhardy carelessness to sleep, having set no watch, in that place. That would have been true even had there been no indication of possible danger.

But for once sleep had beaten them both.

THE first phase of their sleep had been feigned, and for this reason. For the past two weeks they had been followed by another party led by two white men. There were a number of uniformed natives in that party and a multitude of bearers. They had followed the Major cleverly and mysteriously. Cleverly, inasmuch as neither the Major or Jim had been able to get in direct touch with them. Mysteriously, inasmuch as there seemed to be no logical reason for them to dog the Major's journeyings — visiting the native villages he visited, halting when he halted, trekking when he trekked; they even followed his whimsical detours. And when, on one occasion, he back-trekked during a whole forenoon they copied his example so that for a time the followers were followed.

All of which, as the Major explained to Jim, was proof that they were up to some deeply mysterious game. It also proved, he said, that the man in charge of the followers possessed a hunting skill which was at least equal to that of his own and Jim's.

The Hottentot would not agree to that.

"At least, Baas," he said, "we know they are following us, but I do not think they know we know."

So today, at noon, the Major determined to find the answer to all the riddles propounded by the presence of the following party. He was brought to this decision by the knowledge that, overnight, the following party had considerably lessened the distance between them.

"I think they are closing in to strike, Baas," Jim said. "If that is their wish, they will catch up with us at the noon-day outspan."

"Then this morning we will trek very fast, Jim," the Major had replied with a chuckle, "for when those others reach our outspan I want them to find us asleep. At least, we will *seem* to be asleep."

So Jim had led the morning trek at an unusually fast pace, gaining a little on the pursuers. And then, after a frugal midday meal the Major had set the stage of a camp completely given over to sleep; the setting was also designed to create the impression that the man in charge—the Major —was a fool and totally unsuspicious that other men, probably hostile, were following him.

There had been no need to instruct the carriers how to play their parts. They could sleep anywhere and at any time—always given the fact that they were in the service of a white man they trusted and respectively admired. Given permission to sleep, they slept. They asked no questions. What need?

But the Major and Jim both had parts to play. Not knowing how soon an advance scout of the following party might be spying upon them, they played their parts only too well, drifting easily, naturally, from a feigned sleep into one which was very real and intensely earnest.

WHEN at last two uniformed natives came cautiously to the edge of the clearing they looked at each other in wondering amazement, as if unable to believe the evidence of their eyes. Evidently they suspected that the sleeping encampment disguised a cunning trap, for presently they disappeared—suddenly and silently. A few minutes later they came to the edge of the clearing again, but at a point some distance from the spot where they had first appeared. Again they closely and suspiciously scrutinized the disposition of the sleepers—then they disappeared again.

From three other points of vantage they viewed the Major's camp, then while one remained to watch from a place of concealment, the other back-tracked swiftly through the jungle.

Five, ten minutes passed. Then more uniformed natives came to the clearing and with them was a white man; he too wore the uniform of the Belgian force. He was a short, fat paunched man with a black, bushy mustache. His brown eyes, magni-

fied by the strong-lensed glasses he wore, looked mild and benevolent. But for his ill-fitting uniform he might have passed for some provincial shopkeeper—or a learned savant. Certainly he looked out of place, ludicrously out of place, in this land of violent and sudden death.

Evidently he, too, was puzzled by the sight of the sleeping, unguarded men. And he, too, suspected a trap.

The suddenness with which he disappeared, seeming to melt into a bush shadow, and the celerity with which he appeared at the opposite side of the clearing, proved that appearances count for very little—especially in Africa. Obviously he was an experienced and accomplished hunter. There could be no doubt of that.

He made a complete survey of the place then, posting his men at strategic points about the clearing, he drew his revolver and escorted by a burly native sergeant he walked slowly up to the mosquito net shrouded hammock. For all his clumsily booted feet, his tread was almost as silent as that of the bare-footed native who accompanied him.

That was the moment—and the moment was too late—that Jim awoke!

"Baas!" he cried desperately and he sprang to his feet, ready to fight if his Baas gave the word—no matter how great the odds.

The Major also awoke. With him, as it had been in Jim's case, there was no intermediate stage. From profound sleep he awoke to full alertness. He sat up with a violence which set the hammock swinging giddily. He seemed to be groping with the mosquito net—and ineffectively, for the hammock swung over, pitching him to the ground.

BUT when he rose, holding the towel about his middle with his left hand, a monocle gleamed in his eye and in his right hand was a revolver.

"You will see, sir," the Belgian said in an almost apologetic voice, "that I have you covered. Sergeant Bimbi here has your servant covered and my men"—his free hand gestured airily toward the armed soldiers who had trained their rifles on the still-sleeping carriers—"are capably taking care of the rest."

"Yes, I see," the Major admitted in a slow drawl.

"Then you will also see how foolish it would be to offer any resistance?"

"Quite," the Major agreed. "And none is offered. My word, no." As he spoke the Major lowered his revolver. "But I say, you know, it's a wonder I didn't shoot you. I mean, the way you broke in on a chappy's slumbers—why I might have done anything. Deuced bad form, if you ask me. If I'd killed you, you'd only have had yourself to blame."

"Believe me, I should not have been backward in blaming myself," the Belgian replied with a chuckle. "But I think I was in no danger. You were very fast asleep."

"Didn't take me long to wake, though, did it?" the Major asked in a tone of injured pride. "But I say, look here; I'm no end glad to see you, an' all that. Strangers meetin' in the jungle an' so forth. You must forgive me if I was a bit peevish at first. But when a chap's sleep is disturbed—However, let's forget all that. Permit me to introduce myself. I am—"

"Aubrey St. John Major," the other countered swiftly. "Generally called 'the Major'."

"Oh! You know me, eh?"

"At least," the Belgian amended, "I've heard of you."

"Well. 'Pon my soul! That just shows what fame is! I say, though, I hope you've heard nothing but good about me. I mean, there are so many libelous stories in circulation concerning me. If half of them were true I'd be too good for the land above the—er bright blue skies. And the other half makes me out to be too evil, even, for —well, for the other place. Whereas, you know, I'm a perfectly normal sort of chappy—"

"Well as to that—" the Belgian began slowly, but the Major continued with a swift rush of words:

"'Pon my soul! You have the advantage of me — in more ways than one! Should I know you?"

THE Belgian shook his head.

"Oh, but I will," the Major exclaimed. "And you know, we've rather reversed the—er—classic Stanley-Livingstone meeting. You should have greeted me with, 'The Major, I presume.' Or something like that. But never mind about names, dear old commandant sir. Permit me to offer you a thousand and one apologies for receiving you in such an unceremonious—to say the least!—uniform. 'Pon my soul, I out-rival dear old gruntin', grumblin' Gunga Din. But you *did* catch me napping. However, I hasten to make amends. Oh, rather. If you will pardon me while I don a few raiments—"

"No, Major," the Belgian said sharply as the Major turned away. "There is no need. The dressing can wait."

"But my dear old soul," the Major expostulated, "it isn't done. I mean, I'm practically in a state of complete nudity and—"

"Your modesty is touching, Major. But I—I am not modest. So remain where you are, and as you are."

"But think of the mosquitoes and whatnots feasting on my tender skin. 'Pon my word, this is outrageous."

"It is," the Belgian agreed. "But what would you? I have heard so much about you—therefore I take no chances. For the moment you are under arrest."

"But this is monstrous," the Major gasped. "On what charge? Why—"

The Belgian shrugged his shoulders.

"I obey orders, Monsieur Major."

"I—I will write to the papers about it," the Major exclaimed indignantly. "I will have questions asked in Parliament! I'll sue you for damages."

"Doubtless you will do all those things. Doubtless, too, you are in the right and I very much in the wrong. But, I repeat, I am a soldier and a soldier obeys orders. So now talk to your Hottentot—and I understand his speech. Talk also to your carriers. It would be sad—for them—if they caused me any trouble."

The Major looked at him thoughtfully then at Jim who was getting angrily restive at the attitude of the native sergeant who was standing guard over him.

"Softly, softly, Jim. This is a mistake. Presently the matter will be explained. At least, this white man is not evil."

"That I can see," Jim retorted. "But I'd rather deal with an evil man than with a good one who mistakenly follows a false trail. Be on guard, Baas."

The Major nodded and the Hottentot squatted placidly on his haunches, confident that his Baas would be able to handle the situation.

AND then the Major spoke to the carriers who had awakened and were stealthily grouping together with the evident intention of making a concerted rush on the soldiers. They grinned acknowledgement of their white man's orders and sat down beside their packs.

"That is wise," the Belgian approved softly. "And now, Major, if you don't mind, I must disarm you."

"Oh. I don't mind!" the Major exclaimed bitterly. "I only hope that you are enjoying yourself." With an ironic bow he handed his revolver to the Belgian.

"But no," the commandant said with a

laugh. "It is not so much your revolver I want, Major. I'm not afraid of your using *it* in an attempt to turn the tables. That is not your way."

"Then what do you want?" the Major asked peevishly.

"Your monocle. Simply your monocle."

"Oh I say!" the Major protested feebly. "You must be joking. I mean to say, I can't possibly let you have my monocle. Why, if you take it I'll be abso-bloomin'-lutely stripped bare. No, old chap, there's a limit—"

"Your monocle, Major—please!" the Belgian repeated firmly.

The Major sighed, shrugged his shoulders and handed over his monocle with a comical gesture of despair.

"I think you must have a touch of the sun, or something," he said. "And you know I'm as blind as a bally old bat without my—er—window."

"Not you, Major," the Belgian said with a laugh. "Your monocle is not a window. It is a—how do you English say it? It is a blind. That is good, yes? I make the pun in English. Yes. Your monocle is a blind. The real you hides behind it. It prevents others from seeing into your mind."

THE Major looked at the Belgian with renewed interest.

"You're a most discerning sort of chappy," he drawled.

The other spread his hands expressively.

"I do what I can—but in this I deserve little credit. We have a very complete dossier of you in our files, Major."

"Oh?"

"But yes. And it contains many warning notes about your ability to camouflage your undoubtedly great physical and mental abilities. In particular is mention made of the affect your monocle has on your personality. And so—I have disarmed you."

"Oh!" the Major exclaimed again.

"Precisely. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that I have brought the real you into the open."

The Belgian did not exaggerate. Deprived of his monocle, the Major no longer looked an inane nincompoop. No one could now doubt the intelligence which shone in his steel-gray eyes—they had appeared to be an innocent baby blue when he was wearing the monocle. But even more extraordinary was the fact that he now looked his full stature—and that was well over six foot. Before he had seemed fleshy jowelled and paunch, with flabby muscles. By removing the monocle, one would have said, he had undergone a subtle process which had hardened him physically and mentally. Some of that hardness crept into his voice when he said:

"And now what? Must I be eaten alive by mosquitoes to make a—er—Belgian holiday?"

"No. And I apologize for your momentary discomfort. But I always like to know the full worth of a possible opponent. Now I think I know yours, and I doubt if full justice is done you in the dossier. Now, if you give me your parole, you may dress."

"Parole! Then you insist on carrying out this farce of arresting me?"

"Let us say that you are to be detained for a little while."

"And you will accept my parole?"

"But of a certainty. It is most definitely stated in your dossier that your word is your bond."

"Circumstances may cut through the bond," the Major warned.

"I will see that those circumstances do not arise," the Belgian replied gravely. "Then you agree? That is good. Here is your revolver and your monocle."

The Major accepted them and gave an order to Jim who—his every movement closely watched by the native sergeant—opened a steel uniform case and carried it to his Baas. From it the Major selected some clothing and dressed himself with meticulous care. His sun-helmet was dazzlingly white, so too was his semi-uniform

coat and riding breeches. His brown, knee-high boots were polished to a mirror-like perfection and golden spurs glittered in their heels. Merely clean clothes would have looked odd in that steaming jungle; in addition the Major's were perfectly pressed and of that exaggerated cut affected by some musical comedy stars and young social effetes who watch polo rather than play it. The monocle which masked his right eye with a blob of vacuity completed the illusion that here was a helpless, know-nothing dude.

"I'm glad," the Belgian said with a laugh, "that I have seen you without your disguise. Even so, your present appearance almost tempts me to take you at your, how do you put it, face valuation. But do not count on that, I beg you, Monsieur Major. I am resolute in the face of temptation. And now, for a moment, you will excuse me? I hear the rest of my party approaching. I must join them—but my soldiers, you see, will remain on guard."

"There is no need," the Major drawled. "I gave my parole."

"Yes, I know. And I accepted it. But you will pardon me. I know—it is so stated many times in your dossier—that you are a man of infinite resource and sagacity. As our friends down South would say, you are *verdoemte slim.* You are jungle wise and reputed to be as full of tricks as is an egg of meat. Yet I caught you asleep! That gives me to think. A greenhorn, a most inexperienced traveler, the man you appear to be, might have slept in an unguarded camp. So I think you are not the man you appear to be, therefore you probably knew you were being followed; you probably knew we would close in on you today. And so—you set a trap. So I, a little fearing some trick which would —how do you put it—break through the bond of your word, I accept your parole. But my men keep a good watch."

With that the Belgian hurried to join the white man who, accompanied by another detachment of native soldiers and a horde of carriers halted at the other end of the clearing.

The white man, a tall, loose-limbed, lantern jawed man well past middle age glared angrily at the Major who was posturing affectedly.

"Do you mean to tell me," he exclaimed when the Belgian joined him, "that's the desperate criminal we've been following all this time? Why, he's a soft dude. I bet he hasn't enough guts to say 'Boo!' to a goose, or enough sense to come in out of the rain."

THE Belgian shrugged his shoulders.

"No, Monsieur. I agree he does not look like a desperate criminal. Nor is he one. But he *is* the Major, and the Major is all the things that were stated in that dossier I gave you to read. He has a reputation, that one."

"You're sure he is the Major?"

"There is not a doubt of it, Monsieur Hardiman."

Hardiman looked across at the Major with renewed interest.

"So that's the Major, eh? Guess I was too quick to jump to conclusions. And I've reached the age where I ought to know better. What's more, I allowed myself to be influenced by appearances. But there's some excuse for that. Why, although I

read that dossier until I nearly know it by heart, I still find it hard to believe that that chap over there isn't the biggest fool I've ever seen. It's hard to believe he's one of the cleverest illicit diamond buyers in the country and has made a laughing

stock of every police officer who has tried to trap him."

"*Was* an illicit diamond buyer, Monsieur Hardiman," the Belgian amended quietly. "It is said that he gave up that game some years ago. And he was never allied with the underworld scum of the diamond fields. He was on the side of justice rather than against it."

"That's nothing but sentimental bosh, Commandant. Once an I.D.B. always an I.D.B. And an illicit diamond buyer is one of the lowest type of criminals, and the fact that the Major often acted as an informer against other I.D.B.'s doesn't make him any more worthy in my opinion."

THE commandant shrugged his shoulders. He did not bother to correct Hardiman's grossly incorrect estimation of the Major's character.

"But what's this?" Hardiman now demanded angrily. "Why haven't you disarmed him?"

"I have. I have his parole."

"The parole of an I.D.B.!" Hardiman scoffed. "What is that worth? Precisely nothing. I order you to—"

"Monsieur Hardiman," the Belgian interrupted in a cold, curt voice, "I have been given my instructions. Nowhere in those instructions does it say that I am under your command. You were about to *suggest*, Monsieur Hardiman?"

"Oh, don't quibble," Hardiman said testily. "I suppose the fellow's innocent until we can prove him guilty."

"And that, I think, is going to be very difficult—if not impossible. Then it is your desire that I proceed?"

Hardiman nodded.

The commandant returned to the Major.

"I say," that man drawled, "aren't you goin' to introduce me to your civilian friend?"

"Later," the Belgian replied evasively, "if that is still your desire. But first we have less pleasant things to do. I will be frank. You are suspected of illicit diamond buying. Therefore, I am going to search you and all your kit."

"Search away, my dear fellow," the Major said airily. "I like being searched. It's a hobby of mine and I've been searched by all the best police officers of the country—but never before by a Belgian. Of course you won't find any illicitly purchased diamonds. But that is your—er—pigeon. I suppose—you see I'd like to save you trouble—it is no use assuring you that I haven't been doing any illicit diamond buying?"

The commandant shook his head.

"For myself, I would be charmed to accept your assurance. But in this matter I am merely the instrument of my civilian companion. He is Monsieur Hardiman—a director of the company owning the diamond mining monopoly here and in the adjoining Portuguese territories."

"Oh!" the Major exclaimed.

"Exactly, monsieur. And you see, we know that some one has been doing a great deal of illicit diamond buying throughout these regions. And that some one has cleverly avoided all our attempts to trap him, or even to come in contact with him. Not only that, but this same mysterious someone has been guilty of many other nefarious crimes—"

"Such as?" the Major interrupted quietly.

"Ivory poaching, slave trading and—oh! He has been guilty of crimes unspeakable."

"You are hardly complimentary, dear old Commandant, honored sir. And not, I think, very intelligent. You say you have a very complete dossier of—er—my past activities. Does the reading of it give you grounds for supposing that I am capable of slave trading? Not to mention crimes of—er, you said unspeakable?—evil?"

The Belgian shrugged his shoulders.

"Myself, I am convinced that you are not the man we want. And yet, this jungle of Africa does strange things to a man's

morals. So now I will make the search. You still have no objections?"

"None," the Major laughed. "What's more, if I can help in any way—"

"Thank you. I do not need your assistance. I and my men are well experienced in the art of searching. If you have anything to find—we will find it. So, now I proceed."

Two hours later the search came to an end and the Major — who had been searched so many times in the past—was forced to admit that the Belgian had made good his boast. Never before had the Major been the subject of a search so well planned and so efficiently carried out.

After he himself had been searched the Major sat in his deck chair and, save that he occasionally offered idiotic advice, he seemed to be quite uninterested in the Belgian's activities. Jim, the Hottentot, squatted on the ground beside him; and Jim seemed to be solely concerned with the flat, inch thick disc he was polishing with an oil soaked rag. He explained once, when the Belgian asked him what he was making, that it was to be the seat of a stool which would support his Baas. And when the Belgian, surprised at its lightness, asked him what wood it was, he confessed a complete ignorance. "But I toughened it in the red embers of a fire," he said, and he grinned at his Baas.

At last the Belgian came to the Major and admitted defeat.

"You win, Monsieur Major," he said.

"Oh come, dear old Commandant," the Major bantered. "Don't give up so easily. Think of all the places in the jungle I might have hidden a handful or so of stones—or several bushel of stones for that matter.

"The fact that you have found nothing here proves exactly nothing. You will recall—the dossier surely apprised you of the fact—that I am a downy bird and not likely to be caught by—er—chaff. Nor am I likely to be caught unawares by a large party so closely dogging my footsteps —as yours did. And diamonds—they are such small things. It would have been so easy for me to hide them. And I might have done it any time during the past two weeks."

The Belgian nodded.

"Yes. I have considered that. But, somehow, I don't think you did."

"How right you are, dear old sir."

"And you knew you were being followed?"

"Of course. And—" the Major looked thoughtfully at Jim who was bent industriously over his task—"made plans accordingly. However, sleep and *you* took us by surprise. That was careless of me." He looked ruefully at the litter of opened packs. "I'll have to camp here for the night—your chaps have made a mess. If you an' Mr.—er—Hardiman care to join me at dinner tonight, I shall be charmed."

"For myself, I accept and I will convey your invitation to M. Hardiman."

The Belgian clicked his heels together and bowed ceremoniously. Then he joined his companion who, all this time, had been impatiently watching the search from the other end of the clearing.

BY SUNDOWN the clearing had the appearance of a military camp — or rather of two military camps, for there was an unseen barrier of prejudice and distrust between the Major's men and those of the Belgian's. And of the two camps, the Major's was the more orderly.

The sun had set when Hardiman and the Belgian made their way to where the Major's bell tent had been erected. He greeted them with a courtesy which partly dispelled Hardiman's ill humor and after they had disposed of a "sundowner" they sat down to a marvelously cooked meal.

Later, when they were drinking their coffee the Major said quietly:

"Tell me something about this chap you're after."

"Wish we could," Hardiman exploded, all his ill humor returning. "But we know

nothing—save that he travels with a big party of carriers, just as you do."

"I hope you're not still thinking that I'm the man?" the Major questioned.

"No," Hardiman replied dubiously. "And yet, if you're not the man—"

"Monsieur Hardiman means," the Belgian put in swiftly, "that you are the only man we have been able to trace. What is more, your wanderings through the jungle have touched points we believe to have been visited by this infamous rogue. But you are not that man. We are convinced of that, eh, Monsieur Hardiman?"

"I suppose so," Hardiman agreed grudgingly. "But it is odd, you must admit, Major. We go to a native village where we know this swine has been—"

"How do you know?" The question was curt, incisive.

"He leaves his mark, Major. I have seen that mark on the naked backs of old men, women and children. The mark left by a sjambok wielded by a brutal man, Monsieur."

"I see," the Major said thoughtfully. "Go on, Hardiman; you were saying?"

"We visit these villages and the natives deny knowledge of any white man save one—and that one is indisputably you."

THE Major held out his hands, wrists close together.

"What further proof do you want, dear old Commandant," he drawled. "Better put on the handcuffs. I must be a very dangerous man."

"No, Monsieur Major. That is no proof. And—this is not a subject for joking."

The Major bowed to the reproof.

"You see," the Belgian continued, "the natives in the villages you have visited speak of you in the highest terms. They were indignant when it was suggested that you ill-treated them. Again, we have seen evidence of this man's evil brutality in villages you have *not* visited."

"Of what other crimes is this man guilty?"

"He has been stealing diamonds—" Hardiman snapped.

"I said 'crimes'," the Major interrupted. "Stealing diamonds—that is scarcely more than a political offense. I have no sympathy for the troubles of a diamond monopoly, Hardiman."

"You may condone illicit diamond buying," the Belgian said quietly, "but not, I think, the methods of this unknown. In order to gain his ends he beats, he tortures, he kills."

The Major looked puzzled.

"You say he is a white man, traveling with many carriers—and yet you cannot locate him. I do not understand. You say he has visited many villages I visited. Then he must have gone to them *after* me and, therefore, must be somewhere in this vicinity."

"It does not follow that his visits followed yours—"

"But they must have, my dear old Commandant. Otherwise I should have known of the evil he has done. But I saw nothing. Heard nothing."

"Therein lies our difficulty, Monsieur Major. The people do not speak of it. Their lips are closed. They try to hide their wounds and cover the truth with lies. But I know my people. I have lived in this district nearly a quarter of a century. I see that men and women are missing from the villages—but no one can explain where they have gone. They deny that they have gone. I have removed the covering from the backs of beaten people and have seen the wounds made by a sjambok—and they deny that evil has befallen them. *Mon Dieu,* they even deny the existence of the wounds! And all this to me! It is not strange then that they hide from you their troubles.

"I confess that I am beaten. I have now come to the end of my district. Beyond lies territory not in my country's control. I must turn back. Perhaps this monster is just beyond the border. I do not know. Perhaps—and this is my hope

—he has returned to the hell which gave him birth."

"And you know nothing else about him?"

"I can give you a list of his crimes—but that is not what you mean. No. You want to know his name—as if names mattered!—his appearance, his nationality. I can tell you nothing. It is as if the country had been visited by an evil spirit, invisible, without form."

"He's played havoc with our diamond industry, I can tell you that," Hardiman said bitterly.

"Oh, diamonds!" The commandant's tone was contemptuous and the Major silently applauded him. "I think of my people—of the women he beat, of the men he pressed into slavery, of beasts wantonly killed. Diamonds, bah! They do not count."

"They do," Hardiman said stubbornly. "The money we pay for the monopoly helps to develop this country. Well—we have failed. For all the good this trip has done we might as well have chased a will-o'-the-wisp. Tomorrow we trek back for headquarters and I must report failure to my co-directors and to your superiors." He looked thoughtfully at the Major, then cried impulsively, "Will you help us, Major? Catch this I.D.B. swine for us and you can name your own reward."

"You're generous, dear sir," the Major murmured. "And I suppose you're acting on the old—er—adage about setting a thief to catch a thief. Can't say I'm interested—or flattered."

"Bring this man to justice—man's or the good God's — and you will bring back laughter to people who now mourn."

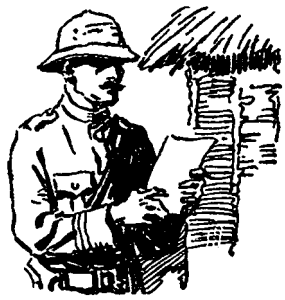
"But," the Major protested, "how can I succeed where you have failed? I have even less to go on than you had."

"You are the Major," the Belgian said confidently. "You can do it. I have the confidence you can succeed. You can act as a free lance unhampered by ties of duties and international formalities."

The Major nodded.

"Very well. I will do my best." He held up his hand, silencing their expressions of gratitude and relief. "It's a bit too early to talk about victory, dear chaps. We'll celebrate when the—er—fox is in the bed. You spoke of a reward, Hardiman?"

"Yes. And ready to stand by my offer. Anything in reason."



"What is reason? I hope you're not hedging, dear old sir. But don't be alarmed. I won't ask for the half of your bally—er—kingdom. I don't want it. Now suppose I have the colossal luck to catch this mysterious criminal, what happens to the diamonds which may be found in his possession?"

"We'll buy them from you at market price, Major."

The Major nodded.

"Fair enough. I'll be satisfied with that—oh, and one other thing. Must have everything open and above board, what? Now I have in my possession six diamonds. They came to me quite honestly, I assure you. They were discovered by an old friend of mine—yes, he had all the necessary permits—who has since died. I would like to retain those stones in order to give them to his family on my return south."

THE Belgian looked chagrined and studiously avoided meeting Hardiman's accusing glance.

"Do you mean to tell me that you have diamonds here in your possession, Major!" he exclaimed. "You are joking. I searched very thoroughly."

"You did. But I have made rather a hobby of hiding things, Commandant, so don't reproach yourself. Well, Hardiman —what do you say?"

And this time Hardiman was very tactful.

"What can I say? You assert that you are legally in possession of the diamonds. That, surely, answers your own question."

The Major bowed.

"I do not think I could possibly have overlooked even one small diamond," the Belgian insisted. "And you say there are six! You are joking."

"No," the Major laughed. "But I am *verdoemte slim.* Jim! Bring the stool seat you were polishing while the men searched."

THE Hottentot brought the flat disc to his Baas

"I think you had this in your hands during the search," the Major said banteringly to the commandant.

"I did," the Belgian admitted, "and wondered what wood it was."

"It is not wood. It is the well known staff of life. It is bread of Jim's mixing and baking. But, as bread, it is one of Jim's few failures. But we must excuse him. You see he mixed the dough under the eyes of men who were searching for diamonds. That was over two months ago. The bread proved overbaked and quite uneatable—but we kept it as a momento. And for good reason, as you will admit."

As he spoke the Major slowly crumbled the disc of bread between his strong fingers and from it extracted six diamonds which had been secreted in the dough at the time of mixing.

"To think I had it in my hands," the Belgian exclaimed with a laugh. "So one lives and learns. I shall know better next time. But this no matter. The diamonds are yours—legally yours. The matter is forgotten. Now—how do you plan to go about your task of hunting down this unspeakable monster who troubles my people?"

"I do not know," the Major admitted. "Perhaps these—" he looked thoughtfully at the diamonds he held on the palm of his hands—"may prove a bait to trap him."

Hardiman sighed.

"You are faced by an almost impossible task, Major. We can tell you nothing about the man. He may be a man with a dual personality. He may be some mild appearing little missionary or traveling trader who runs amok at times. We don't know. We can't even give you a clue as to his whereabouts. It'll be as bad as looking for a needle in a haystack."

"Oh well," the Major said with a laugh, "that is not so difficult as it sounds. I believe if a man sat hard enough and long enough on a haystack the needle would eventually prick him. I propose to do something like that. And now, if you'll excuse me, I must turn in. Want to make an early start tomorrow."

"And where are you going, Monsieur? What will you do?"

The Major shrugged his shoulders.

"Going to look for a bally haystack and when I find it—I'm going to sit on it. Hard."

IN THE dark hours of the following morning the Major broke camp. The silence of the carriers as they made ready for the trek was a striking demonstration of the cheerful, unquestioning loyalty they gave to the white man they served and so highly esteemed. There was no grumbling, though they were roused from a deep sleep in order to pack. There was no confusion, though they worked in a darkness fitfully broken by the gleam of campfires. They left the place, their fast unbroken, as silently as ghosts. Their departure was observed only by two or three sleepy-eyed sentries at the Belgian's camp.

By sun-up they were several miles distant from the clearing and two hours later they made a temporary halt within shout-

ing distance of a small jungle village. There they broke their fast. And there, while they ate, the Major and Jim discussed the problem which had beset them.

"Au-a, Baas!" Jim exclaimed. "This bone you have taken has little meat on it. There is no trail for us to follow."

"And yet, Jim, it should not be difficult to follow the trail of an evil man who travels with many carriers—some of them slaves."

"In the veld land of the south it would be easy, Baas. From a great distance we could see his shadow. His voice would be thrown back to our ears by the people of the kraals. But here—all is shadow. *Wo-we!* An *impi* could hide beside the trail and we not know of its presence. Besides, you say the people will not speak."

"So the Belgian said."

"And he is a true man, Baas."

"Undoubtedly."

"And the other white man, Baas?"

"His only thought is of the diamonds he has lost. But at least he does not lie. He does not seek to put us on a false trail."

"Au-a! We are on no trail at all, Baas," the Hottentot said lugubriously. "Better that we forget this *indaba,* Baas. It is not our play."

The Major shook his head.

"We are set a puzzle, Jim. Such a puzzle as we have not before encountered. It will be a whet-stone to our wit. Besides—"

Jim laughed softly.

"Besides," he mocked, "I know you, Baas. Besides, you would say, consider the evil that has been done and may yet be done. So-a! We will look for the maker of that evil in order to put an end to it—or it to us. Now where do we start?"

"Suppose, Jim," the Major said slowly, "that there was a rogue elephant walking through the jungle, claiming this water-hole and that feeding ground, as his own. Then suppose another rogue elephant poached on the first one's preserves. Then what?"

The Hottentot grinned.

"The first would seek out the intruder and much of the jungle would be laid waste before their fight was finished. Perhaps they would kill each other. What is in your mind, Baas?"

"I am going to be a rogue elephant, Jim."

THE Hottentot stared incredulously at his Baas then, as understanding came to him, he laughed.

"It may work, Baas—if you can play the part of a rogue. That will not be an easy task for you."

"Too easy, Jim," the Major retorted rather sadly. "Your people expect harsh treatment from white men. I have only to *appear* to give them the treatment they expect."

Jim nodded.

"That is true, Baas," he admitted. "But we must be careful. Your plan is two-edged. If you lose the respect of these jungle people, exchanging it for fear, you may loose death upon us."

"Then we must keep their hate and fear within bounds, Jim. I will find a way."

"Undoubtedly. The Baas always finds a way."

"But only with your help, Jim," the Major said quickly.

And then both men laughed a little self-consciously, as they always did on those rare occasions when they gave expression to their mutual regard.

Then Jim said, first indicating the happy carriers with an outward thrust of his lips:

"And how about them, Baas. Do we take them into our counsel?"

The Major shook his head.

"There are too many of them. They could not play the game as it must be played. They must think I am the man I appear to be. And that part of our plan will not be easy."

Jim groaned.

"Au-a, Baas," he exclaimed ruefully.

"Here then is an end for a time to happy journeyings and laughter. Now comes wailing, and tears and fear. And fear often speeds a spear to its mark. I hate this jungle country."

"And I have no love for it, Jim. But now we start. Come."

They went to the carriers who looked up, grinning a welcome.

The Major spoke to them curtly, finding fault with the way they had trekked that morning, criticizing them in a manner which antagonized them.

They moved uneasily. They looked at him and each other, hands over their gaping mouths. They were like little children who had been harshly and unjustly treated by a parent from whom they had learned to expect nothing but tenderness.

When the Major left them to visit the nearby village, the carriers were silent for a little while. Then one laughed, breaking the spell of fear. So great was their relief that their laughter was almost hysterical and they indulged in much good humored horse-play.

"Of course," they reasoned, "our man was playing a game with us. That is all."

Meanwhile the Major and Jim had arrived at the village. Making their way through the opening in the encircling stockade, they roughly thrust out of their way the women and children who swarmed out to greet them—for though the Major was a stranger to this village, the people had received drum messages concerning him and they were ready to pay him homage.

The headman came to him with a flowery speech of adulation, but the Major silenced him with a grossly insulting gesture accompanied by an even more insulting phrase. He then demanded ivory.

"But we have no ivory, white man," the native stammered. "We have no guns, and it is forbidden to kill elephants in the old way. Nor for some long time have there been elephants hereabouts."

"You lie, old one," the Major said. "Now I will search, and if I find that you have hidden ivory from me, there will be heavy beatings."

He and Jim then searched the village, entering the huts, creating senseless disorder wherever they went. They even threatened to search a hut set apart for certain "woman mysteries" where men are forbidden to enter. The women folk shrilly protested and timidly grouped themselves before the opening, barring his way. Seeming to be intimidated by this the Major gave up the search and turning again to the headman asked him if he had any diamonds, but it was obvious that the old man did not understand what he was talking about.

"It is stones, I want, old fool!" the Major shouted. "Stones like these." And he showed the headman the six diamonds he carried in his pocket.

The native looked at them uncomprehendingly. They seemed to him to be worthless lumps of stone and he was bewildered at the white man's attitude.

At length the Major and Jim left the village and returned to their carriers. Half an hour later they were on trek again.

The carriers marched in their normal good spirits, sure in their minds that their white man—and the Hottentot, his servant—was playing a game with them. They, too, they assured each other, could play a game—and did, ignoring the insults and threats which were shouted at them through the long day's trek. They did not protest, only laughed, when the afternoon trek was continued until the sun had set and there was no time to make proper camp before darkness fell.

Inward laughter eased their tired bodies and closed their ears to a continuance of the threats. They ate their fill, then composed themselves for sleep—save those appointed to keep the night's first watch.

AND then the signal drum at the village the Major had visited that morning began to speak. Its notes were low, like

the voice of a man, a fearful man, relating the story of a great evil which had visited him.

The pulsating throb of the drum beat against the ears of the carriers. Some awoke instantly, others awoke only after

passing through the terrors of an evil nightmare. In a very little while all were listening to the message the drum repeated over and over again; it was a message of warning. It told of an evil white man running amok through the jungle.

The carriers whispered together. They denied to themselves and each other that the message referred to their white man. Then one recalled the way in which the Major had behaved all through that day.

"What," they asked each other in alarm, "what if the jest is in earnest?"

It was an unhappy thought, but one they could not hold for long; the need of sleep was upon them.

The Major and Jim also heard the message of the drum. They also heard that message relayed by the signal drums at other villages and knew that the message's journey would not cease until it had reached the uttermost fringes of the jungle.

The Hottentot chuckled softly.

"We have thrown a stone into a pool, Baas. The ripples will not cease until they reach the banks. But will our stone-throwing bring to the surface the *schelm* which hides in the dark depths of the pool?"

IN THE early afternoon of that same day, some two hundred miles to the north, Slaver Sark shot a young cow elephant in calf. It was a senseless killing, for her dwarf tusks had little commercial value; nor could the killing be excused on the ground of getting meat for the cook pot.

Sark laughed coarsely as the cow dropped to his shot and his laughter was sychophantically echoed by the two gun-boys who accompanied him.

"Cut her up, boys," Sark ordered. He spoke the vernacular fluently. His voice was softly effeminate. "We will fill their bellies tonight and put an end to their wailings of hunger and tabus."

He leaned lazily against the trunk of a tree, cradling the rifle in the crook of his right arm. From his cartridge belt, a sjambok hung.

He was a giant of a man, standing over six and a half feet, and powerfully muscled. A coarse black beard covered his face and his small, bloodshot eyes, set close together, were overhung by bushy brows meeting at the top of his short, pulpy nose. His mouth was big, the lips almost negroid. In moments of repose, as now, his mouth gaped open, disclosing jagged, discolored teeth, and his tongue lolled out over his lower lip. He looked then like a half-wit—but a half-wit possessed of a devilish cunning.

As he watched the natives working with their razor-sharp knives on the carcass of the elephant, Sark removed his helmet and fanned himself. His low forehead slanted sharply backward. His bullet-shaped head was completely destitute of hair; its shining, sweating nakedness looked almost obscene.

"That is enough," he ordered presently.

The natives wrapped leaves about the hunks of meat they had cut from the carcass, making two big bales of them which they tied up with lengths of fibre-like twine. They put the bales on their heads, grunting a little at the weight, and looked expectantly at their employer.

"Come!" he said, and he led the way through the jungle at a fast pace.

Half an hour or so later they came to the sandy shore of a small jungle lake and there they carefully stored the meat behind

the rock on which the white man seated himself.

THEN they sat down beside him and listened avidly to his soft-voiced obscenities, laughing at the monstrous thing he was planning to do.

Shortly before sundown a doleful procession came to the place in charge of four "boss-boys," each of whom carried and used—indiscriminating—salt and blood toughened sjamboks. Many of the men and women in that heavily burdened procession of carriers were yoked together by forked sticks and chains—an entirely unnecessary precaution, for their spirits were utterly broken and not one would have dared to attempt an escape.

The boss-boys knew their work. They knew, too, how best to win the approval of Sark. With curses, kicks and blows they urged the fear dumb natives to the routine tasks of making camp. Working in gangs, it was soon done. Six fires were soon blazing and on each fire a big stew pot half filled with water was placed.

From the food bales which had been placed before him, Sark issued a scanty ration of meal which would later be stirred into the boiling water.

The carriers gathered silently about the cook pots—ten, and a boss-boy, at each pot—waiting with dull-eyed apathy. They had no real desire for food, but the habit of living was strong and they would eat, ravenously, unquestioningly, when the time came. Then they would sleep and, for a little time, forget their misery.

Presently the last vestige of sunset's afterglow faded from the sky and darkness fell.

AND then Sark spoke, his soft voice cutting through the darkness, penetrating like a surgeon's knife into the natives' consciousness. His tone and the matter of his speech was that of an indulgent father, yet his hearers shivered as if they were exposed to a cold wind.

"I am a tender and merciful man," he began. "You know that, for you have been with me—how long? Who can say? Again, what does time matter to people who are bound—as you are bound!—to my service." He laughed softly as he rubbed his huge hands together. "It may be that at times I have seemed a little harsh—but that is a proof of my love for you, for a wise father corrects the children he loves. And you—" he laughed again—"bear upon your backs many proofs of that love. Now you know that I am neither blind nor deaf. I hear and see; nothing is hidden from me. In the darkness I can see you. I can hear the whispers of sleepy children in a far distant hut. That is part of the tabu which protects me from all things.

"Say now, what is my name?"

They murmured their reply.

"You have no name."

"Then what is my appearance?"

"You have no appearance. You are not. No man has ever seen you. No man *can* see you!"

"How right you are, my children," Sark said mockingly. "But let me see if you have learned your lesson. Where am I?"

They chorused their reply.

"We do not know. We cannot say. No man can say—because you are not."

"But now you hear a voice. Who speaks to you?"

"We hear no voice. No one speaks to us."

Sark's chuckle at that was like the moronical tittering of a hyena.

"It is well. See that you do not forget or do anything to break the tabu which is laid upon me.

"Now I say again; I am merciful and my heart is very tender. I have heard you cry for meat and have wept because I could not get the meat you desired. And, lacking meat, you have become very weak so that your loads and the day's journey have been too much for you.

"But rejoice. Today the spirits sped the bullet from my gun straight to its mark.

Tonight there is meat for all. Tomorrow there will be yet more meat and you will feel the strength come back to you."

The whispering of his hearers expressed fearful thanks—and doubts. They dared not believe, he had mocked them so often.

Sark spoke next to the boss-boys and in response to his orders they stood in a line before him. To each one he gave a large hunk of meat to be sliced up and added to the corn mush which was stewing in the pots.

This they did and the furtive whispers of the carriers changed to a happy, excited clamor as the scent of meat stung their nostrils. Some laughed, some shouted words of thanks, but they phrased their gratitude as if they were addressing a disembodied spirit. Their custom and their hunger would not allow them to wait longer than was necessary to warm the meat through and in a very short space of time they were feeding gluttonishly. They ate until they could eat no more and then, feeling the contentment which comes from good feasting after days of fasting, they sang softly and laughed, completely forgetting the evils they had experienced and the evils which were yet before them. Presently, surrendering to bodily fatigue, they curled up closely about the fire and slept. Only Sark and the two gun-bearers who had accompanied him on the afternoon hunt, remained awake. At times their almost hysterical, giggling laughter rose above the snores of the sleepers.

The stars marched along their appointed trails with the ageing of the night; a tree hyrax screamed. The placid waters of the lake were rippled by the passing of a vagrant breeze; a fifteen foot python looped itself upon a branch overhanging a place where certain bucks were accustomed to drink.

Sark rose to his feet and gave one of his companions a playful flick with the lash of his sjambok. The other one laughed until he received a harder blow. Then only Sark laughed.

"Come," he said. "It is time to awaken them."

The two natives forgot their own pain as they tested the suppleness of their own sjamboks.

Then the beat of a signal drum sent out a message from some distant village.

Sark sat down again and listened intently.

The message came to an end. There was a short pause, then the message of warning was repeated:

An evil white man walked through the jungle. A white man who searched for ivory and strange stones on which he set a high value. A white man, accompanied by many carriers, walked through the jungle bringing evil to all who crossed his path.

Sark's anger rose; yet he was not the man to whom the message referred. None dared speak of his goings and comings. Therefore some other white man was poaching in the territory he had reserved to himself. Some other white man would find diamonds and ivory which should be his. Some other white man would force the people of the village into his service, to sell them as slaves once they had served his purpose. Some other white man—

GREED and a sense of frustration fed Sark's rage. His face, lighted by the red glow of the nearest fire, was contorted by hideous grimaces and the muscles of his arms flexed as his hands tightened about his sjambok. In his imagination, his hands were already closing about the neck of the stranger who dared to encroach upon his territory and emulated his evil deeds of violence.

"It's some swine of a traveling trader," he muttered. "He must be taught a lesson."

He questioned the two natives about the message which was now being relayed by the signal drum at a more distant village. They could tell him little more than he already knew; no more, indeed, than the fact

that the stranger was now somewhere to the south of them.

"I know that, fools!" he stormed. "For the village from which we first heard the message is to the south of the one which now speaks. But is the man now at that village—or is he still further south?"

They could not answer that, for the vocabulary of the drum code is a very short one and the messages are, of a necessity, very brief and a great deal depends upon the imagination and wit of the listener for a correct interpretation.

"I'll find him," Sark said. "No matter where he is, I'll find him. Now, let us awaken the sleepers."

Their awakening was a cruel one; the lash of sjamboks shattered sleep; cries of pain — instantly hushed to frightened whimpers—told of the evil Sark and his satellites had loosed on the jungle.

Their task accomplished, Sark and the two natives retired to the rocks. They breathed hard, still in the grip of the sadistic emotion which had possessed them.

The others—the carriers and the boss-boys—looked toward them and waited in fearful silence to hear what fresh torture Sark had in store for them. His mad, high-pitched laughter was far from reassuring.

They had not long to wait for presently, pointing a mocking finger at them, he gasped:

"Dogs—nay, less than dogs! Not content with over-eating, you crowd the night with your snores, keeping sleep from me. But perhaps I misjudge you. Perhaps the sounds I thought were snores were really groans of despair and repentence. Say now. Is not your punishment upon you? Can't you feel the pangs of death gnawing at your vitals. You offal, you eaters of elephant flesh!"

He laughed at their gasps of horror and their wails of fearful protest.

"What," he shouted. "Do you think that I lie to you? Fools! For days you have wearied me with complaints of hunger—but you would not eat the food I provided for you. You even refused to cut up its flesh—despite the payment of blows. No, you said—how many times—you were of the elephant clan. You were blood brothers, you said, to the elephant—and brother does not eat brother. It is tabu. I give you back your words.

"Now listen! Today I shot a cow elephant and it was her flesh I gave you tonight. Laugh, you swine, laugh!"

But they could not laugh. A fearful sickness shook them. They were bathed with a cold sweat and the fear which emanated from them silenced Slaver Sark's laughter.

Disgruntled, feeling that his joke had fallen somewhat flat, he rolled himself up in his blankets. Five minutes later he was fast asleep.

SLAVER SARK'S awakening the following morning was belated. He swore when he noted that the sun was already high above the horizon and he angrily shouted a series of orders. Then he sat up, yawned and knuckled the sleep from his eyes, wondering vaguely as he did so at the unusual quiet.

He shouted again for his morning coffee, inwardly resolving to punish the boss-boys for their sloth; he licked his thick lips in

anticipation of the pleasure that would give him.

Then he took his hands away from his eyes and for the first time consciously took in the surrounding scene. But wrath created by the thought that his boss-boys had overslept now paled into significance compared to the greater passion which now possessed him when he saw that the camp was deserted save for the

prostrate forms of his two gun-boys and one boss-boy. The others had vanished. So, too, had the loads they had carried.

He jumped to his feet and ran from one to the other of the prostrate forms, shouting questions, kicking them in a berserk fury.

After a little while he managed to get some control of himself. He saw then that the three natives were bound and gagged. He cut them loose and questioned them, yet scarcely listened to their stammering replies. There was no need. Sark was fully wise to the ways of the jungle and the people who lived in its shadow-filled recesses.

He knew the explanation. His joke had recoiled upon his own head. He had forced the carriers and three of his boss-boys—all of whom, as he had known, belonged to the elephant clan—to eat elephant flesh. In effect, he had made cannibals of them and the horror of the thing they had done, the breaking—though unwittingly — of a centuries' old tabu had killed their fear of Sark. What is more, it had united the boss-boys with the members of their clan. But for that the carriers' escape would have been impossible.

First the three mutinous boss-boys had quietly over-powered and bound the other three. Then—the litter of chains and yokes proved this—they had released as many as they could of the carriers and had led a headlong flight from the place.

This, according to the three who remained, had been about midnight.

Sark scowlingly noted the position of the sun.

"They have had eight hours start," he said, "but we will catch them."

"It is not wise to follow them," one of the natives protested uneasily. "They will ambush and kill us."

Sark laughed at that.

"But it is true, Boss," one of the gun-bearers agreed. "You made them break the tabu of their clan. Because of that they have only two desires; to make their peace with their brothers, the elephants, and——"

"And?" Sark prompted when the other stopped.

"And to kill the man who forced them to break the tabu."

SARK laughed.

"I did not force them to eat," he retorted. "It was their hunger and greed. But for that, perhaps, they would have recognized the meat and need not have eaten. Now prepare skoff. Before tomorrow's sunset I will have them in my hand again. You will see."

While one of the natives lighted a fire and prepared the morning meal, Sark made three large bales of some of the gear the deserters had left behind. The rest he hid in a deep hole which the other two natives scooped out of the soft sandy beach of the lake shore.

"Wu!" one of them said. "I do not like this. Our white man acted the part of a fool last night. It is an evil thing to break a tabu—and we are not without guilt. So now we, who are head boss-boys, must carry loads as if we were slaves. I am getting weary of this service."

"Softly, softly," the other whispered warningly. "He has keen ears and a strong tabu guards him."

"Oh that!" the speaker looked around uneasily. "But how if, by forcing others to break their tabu, his own is broken? And suppose those elephant people, thinking only of their own broken tabu, go to the government men?"

"Wu! It would go hard with our boss were they to do that, for once the tabu was broken where could he go and be safe? The signal drums would betray his whereabouts to the government men and before long, I think, he would be hanged."

"I can find no tears for him. But how about ourselves? I do not want to hang. Neither do you. No. I think it would be best if we made our peace with the men of the government. If we whisper in their

ears that such and such a man was the one who burned Sikani's village to the ground, and killed the white man at the diamond place, and— If we speak to them, I say of this man and tell where he may be found they will reward us. And that is better than hanging."

They stopped their labors and looked meaningly at each other. But when Sark shouted abuse at them, calling them lazy dogs, they replied humbly and worked with zealous speed.

Half an hour later Sark led the three heavily laden natives on the trail of the deserters.

IT WAS an easy trail to follow for, bound by their common fear, the fugitives had kept close together in the darkness, forcing their way through the tangled undergrowth; their course was as wildly unreasoning as that of a stampeding herd of elephants.

As the hours passed, however, the trail became more purposeful, heading steadily south. Further proof that wisdom had come to them with calmer thinking, was the fact that the trail was littered for a time with stuff they had discarded—trade goods, tusks and cases of ammunition.

Each fresh discovery of a discarded load halted Sark long enough to hide it safely. And each halt increased his spleen.

He did not halt for the night until darkness hid the trail from him and then he was forced to make camp unaided, for the three natives, unaccustomed to carrying loads were completely exhausted. No sooner had he called a halt than they dropped their loads and slumped down beside them; his threats and curses failed to rouse them from their coma.

Sark prepared his own food and ate an enormous meal. Then he sat by the campfire fully content with the day's trek. He knew that he had gained two or three hours on the fugitives who had been obliged to adjust their pace to that of the weakest woman amongst them. By noon tomorrow, he told himself now, he'd have caught up with them and he had no doubt of his ability to bring them cringing to heel. The tabu he had so cunningly invented was his assurance of that.

The booming of a signal drum broke in on his reveries. It came from the south and repeated the story of an evil white man who was bringing misery to the villages of the jungle which he visited in search of diamonds.

Sark cursed. He had forgotten that other man—but he would not forget again. He was almost glad now that his carriers had deserted.

Certainly he looked upon the fact that they were heading south as a happy omen; they were leading him to meet the man with whom he was resolved to deal as a poacher should be dealt with.

Sark was on trek again by the next day's sun up. But it was still two hours short of noon when he met his first serious check. This was at a small clearing where the fugitives had camped overnight. From that clearing led three separate trails. One headed east, another west; the third continued due south. Evidently the men had split up into three parties and it was equally evident to Sark that two-thirds of the fugitives were going to escape him.

This knowledge provoked him to a senseless exhibition of rage against the three who were with him, and when he finally continued the trek, following the trail leading south, one of the natives remained behind, staring sightlessly into the full blaze of the noon day sun.

His pace from there on was much slower. Checks were frequent — and each check marked the place where two or more of the main body had taken courses heading east or west. And as the numbers of those still heading southward lessened, the difficulties of following their spoor increased.

Once again darkness ended Sark's trek.

That night, too, the signal drum spoke again, giving greater details of evil.

Sark rubbed his hands together enthusi-

astically as he discussed the drum message with the two natives.

"He is heading north," he exulted. "In a few days we will meet, but he will have no word of my coming. He does not know, even, that I exist. So, we will take him by surprise.

"And his carriers shall be mine. All his goods shall be mine. But first—always excepting diamonds — you shall choose for yourselves from his possessions as much as you can carry."

The eyes of the natives gleamed with greed as they thanked him profusely. They knew they could trust his word—always supposing he could best this stranger of whom the signal drums spoke. And they had no real doubt of that. The tabu loaded the dice heavily in Sark's favor. He would strike with the unexpected swiftness of summer lightning. They looked at each other and smiled covertly. They would lose nothing by remaining loyal to him a little while longer.

FOUR days had passed since the Major had set out in search of the man whose operations had brought misery to the people of the jungle villages. Now that he knew what to look for he found—at almost every village he visited—abundant proof that the Belgian commandant had not exaggerated the man's capacity for evil cruelty; he had seen for himself evidence of atrocities at which the Belgian had only hinted. Nor had the Belgian allowed his imagination to run away with him regarding the attitude of the people concerning their woes and the man responsible for them.

He and Jim questioned the natives of each village—questioned them *en masse* and singly—without discovering a single clue as to the man's identity or whereabouts; and they were past masters in the art of cross-examination of unwilling native witnesses. But here they failed. Neither fear of punishment or hope of reward could open the lips of the people they questioned. They denied everything. They even denied the existence of the stripes and mutilations which scarred their bodies.

The signal drums, too, were silent regarding the movements or character of the unknown, though they nightly boomed out their warning concerning the Major himself.

That part of his plan, at least, had been successful—too successful—Jim now said dolefully.

They were trekking across the marshy tract of ground surrounding a large village. The carriers looked cowed and they trekked in sullen silence. Several of them were securely roped together.

"This is a dangerous game we play, Baas," Jim said. "I think the carriers will try to desert again tonight."

"We must see that they don't."

"And perhaps they will again try to kill you."

"And yet, Jim, it is only an outward show that they are treated badly. Maybe we trek further and faster between sunrising and sunset—but to make up for that I have increased their food ration. We threaten them often, but not once has a blow marked their bodies."

"I think it would be safer if we did more than threaten, Baas. Better that they carry the mark of your sjambok on their bodies than the weight of your murder on their memories."

"It will not come to that, Jim. We will be on guard."

"We cannot guard against all the people of the jungle, Baas. Now take this village—when last we visited it all in it were our friends. But now we will have to be on guard against them, too. Even the drink the smallest urchin brings to us may have poison in it."

"Then we must not drink, Jim."

"You laugh, Baas. But this seeking to make enemies is a new game—and one I do not like."

"We only play it for a purpose, Jim. You know that. We are only setting an appearance of evil as a bait to snare evil."

Jim sniffed expressively and, stepping a little to the right of the winding path they were following, quickly sank over knee deep in a slimy pot hole.

He commented, almost casually, as he struggled to free himself:

"Those who use a bog for a trap, Baas, are in danger of being themselves embogged."

The Major gave him a hand and hauled him out.

"As long as we don't sink more than knee deep, Jim, we are safe." He looked ahead, noting their nearness to the village which was built on a rising island site in the midst of the marsh. The place seemed to be deserted.

"It looks as if they had taken to their heels, Jim," he said. "Maybe we have played our part too well."

"That is my dread, Baas. But it is more like that they are waiting—in ambush for us, Baas."

"Then let us show them what manner of men we are."

AT THAT, he and Jim ran up and down the line of carriers, shouting angrily. Their sjamboks swished through the air—threatening now this man, now that.

Wailing fear-filled complaints and groans for mercy, protesting that they were almost overcome by weariness, the carriers broke into a jog trot.

But the Major and Jim continued to bully them and so, presenting the appearance of a gang of ill-used slaves hardly driven by their merciless masters, they came to the entrance of the stake palisade which surrounded the village.

And there, outside the palisade, the carriers dropped their loads and slumped down beside them—dumb, spiritless and broken.

Drawing his revolver the Major cautiously passed through the gap in the stockade; Jim, carrying a rifle at the ready, closely followed him.

Scowling ferociously they went forward, passing between long rows of well built huts. But the doors of the huts were closed and no sound of life came to the Major's ears.

At last they came to the centre of the village where stood the hut of the chief and those of his wives. And still no one appeared.

Fully alert, their muscles tensed to meet any eventuality, the two men looked at each other questioningly.

"I mistrust closed doors, Baas," Jim said. "They hide evil."

As he spoke a child's happy laugh sounded from a nearby hut.

It was such a marked contrast to Jim's gloom-filled voice that the Major could not restrain his own mirth. He laughed until the tears rolled down his face. Jim joined him. Mirth doubled them up. They could have been disarmed by a little child; indeed, a little child had disarmed them.

And now, as if their laughter were an Open Sesame the village came to life. The hut doors were thrown open and the people of the village—men, women and children—swarmed out to welcome the Major and Jim. The men were unarmed; the women shouted extravagant compliments and—for he was a very modest man—the Major was glad of the cover the children gave him as they ran eagerly toward him. Those who could not get near him, clustered about the Hottentot, clinging to his bowed but sturdy legs.

It was useless for the two men to scowl and threaten nameless things. Happy laughter defeated them, making a mock of their play-acting.

Jim was the first to make a full surrender.

"We are beaten, Baas," he cried with a

grin. And he turned himself into a beast of burden for the pleasure of the children.

MOLINDI, the chief of the village, a portly but dignified gray-beard, came forward and paid homage to the Major.

"*Wu*, white man!" he said. "What riddle is this you have set us? Is there not evil enough abroad that you must seek to add to our fear?"

"And have I brought fear to you?" The Major asked pointedly.

"No. Not you. You could not. But for three nights we listened to the drum talk. For three days we talked in fearful whispers of the evil which was advancing on us—never supposing that you were that evil!" The chief laughed as if in self contempt at so foolish a thought. He continued:

"Yesterday I resolved to lead my warriors out to meet the evil man who was advancing upon us. Truly, I was determined to deal with him as we would have done in the old days, before the white man's law bound us so that we can no longer protect ourselves.

"And as I planned, so we did. And as we planned—I set an ambush into which you walked unknowingly. But when I saw that the evil man was you—I did not spring the trap! *Wu!* But death was very close to you!

"We did not understand—and so we followed you, secretly. We surrounded your camp at night. We saw how you dealt with those fools who tried to kill you. An evil man would have killed—and with some justice. He would have beaten others until the blood ran. But you and your black dog—though you threatened much—used only the lash of your tongues. *Wo-we!* But that was sufficient.

"So then we remembered that the drums had not told of evil committed, but only of evil threatened. And it came to us then that, for some reason which is hidden from us, you were playing a game. What is this game you play, white man?"

THE Major did not answer. He was looking at the carriers who had entered the village and were now advancing sheepishly toward him. He smiled, and they broke into a run shouting excitedly that they had known from the first that he was only playing a part.

He did not contradict them or remind them of last night's attempt to kill him. Instead, he dismissed them with words of praise to the routine tasks of camp making. They sang happily as they hastened to obey. They were no longer tired.

"What is this game you play, white man?" the chief asked again.

"It is part of a tabu I make," the Major replied casually.

Molindi started.

"What tabu is this?" he asked.

"One to destroy evil."

"Evil to destroy evil! That is a strange tabu. And what is this evil you seek to destroy?"

"You know of none?" the Major countered.

"None," Molindi said in a dull voice.

The Major called a boy to him—his name was Mobi; he was the chief's grandson. His naked back was scored with the lash of a sjambok.

"I see nothing," the chief said, averting his eyes.

The Major turned the boy round and knelt down so that their faces were on a level.

"Who beat you, boy?" he asked.

"No one, lord," the boy replied.

"Your back is scarred," the Major insisted.

"The white man jests," the boy said doggedly and wriggling from the Major's hold he ran off to join in the play of his comrades.

The Major turned accusingly to the chief.

"What folly is this? You see your people beaten, others are enslaved—and your eyes are closed. Why do you hide the truth from me? Am I not your friend?"

"Truly."

"Then tell me the name of the man who has brought this evil to you?"

"I do not know, white man," Molindi said tonelessly.

"Perhaps you do not know his name," the Major continued encouragingly. "Then tell me what manner of man he is. Is he a white man? Is he big or small? Fat or thin?"

"I do not know."

"Then where is he now? Why are the signal drums silent about his whereabouts? Why——?"

But it was all to no purpose and for a moment the Major came very close to losing his temper.

"Fool!" he exclaimed angrily. "If you will not speak to a friend, will you, I wonder, if I question you with a sjambok?"

"How can I answer when you question about things which are not?" Molindi replied.

THE Major considered for a moment then pointing to a nearby hut he said:

"What is that?"

"A hut, white man," Molindi replied after mentally examining the question to make sure it contained no trap.

"True. It is a hut. But now I tell you it is not a hut. I tell nothing is there—nothing. What then?"

"The hut remains, white man, for all to see."

"Without doubt," the Major exclaimed triumphantly. "And even if you and all the people of the village denied its presence—it would still be there. Deny, if you will, the marshland which surrounds this village, but it remains to trap those who do not know of its existence."

"But it is not there to those who do not know of its existence," Molindi said.

"Then they fall into it," the Major commented dryly.

"And having fallen into it," the chief concluded blandly, enjoying this oral splitting of hairs, "they know of its existence."

"Yes," the Major agreed quietly, "and they warn their friends of its being."

"They would not," Molindi objected, "they would not if a tabu closed their mouths."

"Oh! So that is the way of it? I should have known. I think I did know."

"What do you say?" Molindi asked uneasily.

"Nothing," the Major replied. "I did not speak. Now listen, Molindi. If you knew the evil man—who is *not!*—were coming again to visit your village—what would you do?"

Molindi shrugged his shoulders.

"No man may know. He comes and he goes—"

"Yes?" the Major prompted. But Molindi would say no more. He put his hand to his mouth as if fearing he had already said too much.

The Major nodded casually.

"I shall stay here," he said, "until the evil again visits you. As I think it will. And Molindi?"

"Yes, lord?"

"You are truly my friend?"

"You know, lord, that is so."

"Then you must help me to strengthen the tabu I am making."

"What I can do, I will."

"Then come. Let us go to the hut where the talking drum is kept and I will tell you what is in my mind."

AN HOUR later Molindi's signal drum sent out a long message. It told the other villages of the jungle that justice had overtaken the evil white man. His carriers had deserted and he had crawled to Molindi's village, dying with fever. Molindi's people, the message continued, had retrieved all the white man's gear and were now only waiting for his death before dividing it among themselves.

It was a message which brought Molindi's people swarming about the drum hut; they gasped with relief when the Major came out to them—his health un-

impaired, his kindly friendship for them unchanged. Jim and the carriers also came to the place at a run—Jim to discover more of his Baas' plans, the carriers to deny that they had deserted!

But the relief of the people was mingled with doubting dismay, for it is not the custom to use the signal drum to relay false information; it tells the truth—or is silent.

The Major reassured them:

"It is all part of a strong tabu I am making," he said. "It is a good tabu. A tabu to destroy evil."

Then, changing his usual custom, he instructed the carriers to make camp *inside* the village.

"Wo-we, Baas!" Jim exclaimed. "This time you have thrown a big boulder into the pool. Do you think it will bring the *schelm,* for whom we search, to the surface?"

The Major nodded.

"I think so. Vultures and hyenas always scent out the wounded buck. Their greed always brings them to a dying buck—even thought they have but recently fed. I do not think we will have long to wait."

"One thing troubles me, Baas. Maybe, because of his evil power, Molindi's people will fight on the side of this man."

The Major nodded.

"I have given some thought to that, we will deal with it when the time comes."

"What fools we are, Baas," Jim said with a laugh. "Why do we risk our lives to save people who fight against themselves?"

"I think, Jim," the Major said slowly, "that it is beyond their power to help themselves. A tabu holds them—"

IT WAS noon the following day when Slaver Sark came in sight of the Hottentot who was keeping a lookout from behind the cover of the palisade.

There was no doubt in Jim's mind that this was the man for whom his Baas waited. Despite the distance he was still from the village — having only just emerged from the jungle which fringed the marshland—Sark presented an ominous, threatening appearance.

Jim called the Major and together the two watched the man scout along the fringe of the marsh until he came to one of the trails which gave dry, secure footing.

"He looks like a fairy story ogre," the Major murmured in English as he focussed his field glass on the man. Then to Jim he said:

"He must be very sure of himself—he comes alone."

"Wo-we!" Jim exclaimed wonderingly. "He is a giant, Baas. I think that even you would be as helpless as a child if he wrapped his arms about you. Do you think his strength is his tabu?"

The Major shook his head.

"No, it is something wiser than that. It is a tabu which blinds the people so that they cannot see him or the evil he does."

He called to Molindi who was standing by.

"Who is that man?" he asked.

Molindi looked, then quickly averted his face, but not before the Major had seen the fear and hate which filled the chief's eyes.

"There is no one," Molindi said tonelessly.

"No," the Major agreed sadly. "There is no one. The tabu is too strong. But do not forget the tabu I made. That also is strong."

"I will not forget. My people will not forget."

"Then where am I now?"

"You are in my hut, lord. Fever has taken your strength."

"Where are my carriers?"

"Who knows, lord? They ran away and left you to die."

"And I am evil?"

"Yes," Molindi replied. "For that is part of your tabu."

Jim chuckled as the chief moved away.

"Who but my Baas would think of fight-

ing evil with the appearance of evil, a tabu with yet another one. And so, the end of the game approaches."

They were silent for a while, watching the approach of the black-bearded giant across the marshland.

The children who had been playing outside the village now sat huddled together. One or two whimpered—none spoke, none looked across the marshland or remarked on the approach of the white man. A woman picked up her baby and ran with it to a hut, shutting and barricading the door behind her. And from that hut came the sound of muffled weeping. The other women sat about listlessly. The men folk pretended to be occupied by their routine tasks.

"They are like the tree people hypnotized by the contortions of a python," the Major commented.

He and Jim then moved silently to another post of vantage—where they could see and not be seen. It was the Major's intention to keep the white man covered from the moment he came within revolver range.

With an assured, arrogant tread, Slaver Sark crested the rise. He was so sure of himself that his revolver remained in its holster and his rifle was slung across his shoulder. But in his hand he carried a sjambok.

"Wu!" Jim whispered earnestly. "Better shoot now, Baas. He is all evil—and he has the strength, I think, of a bull gorilla. Perhaps one bullet will not stop him. Shoot now. I am afraid of him. He may catch us in the trap we set for him."

For a moment the Major was tempted to act on Jim's advice but his code would not permit him to kill in cold blood—though he well knew this man had deserved death a hundred times.

SARK came to the village, scattering the children with blows of his sjambok. The men did not go to their protection. The women remained silent, motionless. Fear bound them.

Laughing, Sark entered the village and shouted loudly for Molindi.

The chief came to him, trembling violently.

"Where is this evil white man of whom your drum spoke?" Sark demanded.

"In my hut, lord. The fever is with him. I think he will die."

"Assuredly he will die," Sark said softly. "Where are his carriers?"

"I do not know. They ran away."

"That is sad—for I need carriers. Mine ran away—it was the working of a tabu. And my gun-boys—this morning the fools whispered together against me. So I killed them. So see what a sad case I am in with no one to fend for me." He laughed softly. "But it is no matter. This is a big village. You have too many young men and women. You will have less when I leave tomorrow. You will be glad to give me your people?"

Molindi's reply "Yes, lord," was little more than a sigh.

"And they will be glad to march with me," Sark mocked. "They know how merciful and generous I am. And now—to make sure you have not forgotten the tabu—tell me: who am I?"

"We do not know. We have not seen you. You are not here."

"What will your signal drum say of me when I have departed?"

"How can it speak of that which is not, lord?"

"That is good. Now I will go and deal with the white man. Later we two will talk again."

"Hands up!" the Major said curtly, stepping out from behind the shelter of a hut.

Sark wheeled with a savage oath, drawing his revolver with incredible speed. He fired and the Major staggered, his left hand to his side. He felt as if he had received a violent kick where the heavy bullet had grazed his ribs. But he laughed and the laughter caused Sark to hesitate a fraction of a second before firing a second shot—and that hesitation defeated him. The Major fired first then pitched headlong to the ground. Even so, Sark's second shot whined very close to his head. His own shot smashed Sark's wrist and with a pain-filled bellow of rage the giant let his revolver drop from his nerveless grip. As he stooped to pick up the revolver with his left hand, Jim, thinking his Baas was dead, rushed up and using his rifle as a club he crashed it down on Sark's head. It was a tremendous blow, delivered with the full measure of Jim's strength.

Sark lurched forward two or three reeling paces then he straightened, turned and rushed insanely at the Hottentot, reaching for him with his left hand. He mouthed inarticulate imprecations, his eyes blazed, he was a giant gone mad. His helmet had fallen off and his bald head was streaked with blood which flowed from the wound made by Jim's blow.

AND Jim could only stare at him in awe-struck wonder, believing that the man must have supernatural powers, for no normal man, he thought, could have lived after such a blow. Superstitious fear held Jim motionless, incapable of self-protection. He made no attempt to avoid Sark's left arm which reached out and caught him by the throat. The powerful fingers of that hand—they almost encircled Jim's neck—began to contract. Still Jim could not struggle. If this were death, he did not greatly care. Life would be empty without the Baas.

The blood drummed madly in his ears, his eyes bulged from their sockets, his vision was veiled, it seemed, by a red mist.

Sark laughed. To Jim that laugh sounded like the murmuring roar of a distant water-wall. His knees sagged. But for the support of Sark's squeezing hand he would have fallen.

And then he heard his Baas' voice.

"Hold on, Jim. I am coming."

He fought back through the gathering mists of unconsciousness. For a fraction of a second his vision cleared and he saw his Baas rise to his feet. He struggled to release himself from the strangling grip, but the effort had been too long delayed. His efforts were as vain as those made by a web-snared fly when it sees the spider approaching to make an end.

He gurgled—it was meant for a "Farewell" to his Baas—and then the darkness of unconsciousness enfolded him.

That same instant Sark released his hold on the Hottentot who dropped with a thud to the ground, and turned to meet the Major's attack. He towered above that man, almost dwarfing him.

His left hand shot out again, seeking his favorite hold. But the Major parried it and at the same time his left fist thudded hard into the giant's belly. Sark gasped. He doubled up a little and his unprotected chin made a mark the Major could not miss. The blow was perfectly timed and delivered with all the weight of the Major's powerful shoulders behind it. Sark went down like a pole-axed bullock.

Molindi's people had been watching the conflict—yet seeming not to watch it—with dull-eyed apathy. But Sark's fall removed the fear which had held them and opened their eyes. Believing that the man was dead they surged eagerly forward. Some ran to the fallen slaver, some crowded about the Major, praising him extravagantly, calling him "The Deliverer."

He silenced them and said curtly:

"The white man is not dead. He lives to pay for the evil he has committed. Bind him fast."

Then he pushed aside those who surrounded him and went to Jim.

"*Au-a*, Baas," the Hottentot croaked as

he struggled to his feet and massaged his bruised throat. "I thought it was the end. You were a long time coming."

"A heart-beat is as long as a year when death is as near as it was to you, Jim," the Major replied. "But now, listen to the laughter of these people. The evil is ended."

"That is good, Baas. And you are not hurt?"

"The bullet grazed my ribs, Jim. That is all."

And then he turned, wondering at the sudden silence.

He saw then that Sark had recovered consciousness and was endeavoring to free himself from the ropes with which the people had hastily bound him.

"Undo me, you swine," he bellowed, and if the Major had not acted promptly some of the people would have obeyed him.

"Have you forgotten the tabu?" the Major shouted. "This man is not. You cannot see him. You cannot hear him. Get to your huts."

It was a clever adapting of Sark's tabu and the people retreated slowly to their huts, moving as if their legs were caught in the drag of a magnetic field.

Ignoring the man's curses the Major bent over Sark and made the ropes more secure. As an added precaution he thrust a gag into his mouth.

"Wu!" Jim exclaimed softly as he looked down at Sark's wrath-contorted face. "I think the blow I gave him has driven him mad."

"No. I think he was always mad, Jim —from the hour of his birth. Cunning and a giant's strength was given to make up to him a little for the madness."

Jim nodded.

"That blow I gave him would have killed a common man, Baas."

"His helmet softened the blow a little, Jim. And so he lives to hang for his crimes. It would not have been just had death come to him in the heat of a fight."

Calling his carriers the Major ordered them to carry Sark to an empty hut and, when that was done, he dressed Sark's head wound and bullet-shattered wrist. Then he looked to his own hurt.

"Wo-we, Baas," Jim exclaimed in relieved tones. "Your tabu is very strong. Once again it has protected you from death —why the bullet scarcely broke the flesh. Now what, Baas?"

"Tomorrow we trek for the post of the Belgian commandant, taking this evil man with us."

The rest of that day Jim and the carriers kept a close guard over the hut where Sark was imprisoned. But the Major roamed idly about the village, talking to the people. He noted with satisfaction that their confidence was slowly returning to them. But still laughter did not come easily to them and frequently their eyes were shadowed with fear whenever they glanced to the hut where Sark was. The yoke he had placed upon them was not to be thrown off so quickly.

At sundown Jim called to the Major.

"I think the white man is dying, Baas."

The Major went into the hut. Sark's eyes were closed and he breathed stertorously. The Major removed the gag and felt his pulse.

When he left the hut he said, answering Jim's question:

"I do not know. Perhaps the blow you gave him did more harm than I supposed. On the other hand—he may be shamming. So we will take no chances but keep guard all night."

A WATCH was set. A watch kept. Four carriers took up their post at the entrance to the hut and at every second hour they were relieved by four others. Frequently during the night the hut was visited by the Major or Jim. Each inspection found the guards alert and Sark either asleep or muttering as if in a delirium. But scarcely for one moment did the captive cease to strain at the ropes which bound him; he gnawed at the raw

hide with the savage desperation of a snared hyena.

In the darkest hour which precedes the dawn, by which time a slight measure of success had rewarded his endeavors, a woman crept silently to the rear of the hut. She carried a sharp knife in her hand and with it she silently cut her way through the reed wall of the hut.

She crept to Sark's side and bent over him. She muttered softly in the voice of one crazed with sorrow:

"I cannot see you. I break no tabu. Can you hear me? You carried away my man. You beat my son—so that he died. My little daughter—*ai-e*, she was very young—she too died because of your treatment of her. And now I come to make an end."

Her left hand was on Sark's chest, feeling for the place where her knife must enter. She found a soft spot between the ribs and on it lightly rested the point of her knife. Her two hands then shifted their grip to the knife's hilt.

A big hand suddenly closed on hers. Another gripped her throat.

Sark's outburst of delirious laughter covered the woman's dying sound. He waited a little while, listening. Then he acted. His previous exertions had already given his hands a little more than a six inch play. Now he had a knife, the rest was easy.

Ten minutes later he had made good his escape and was racing with a cat-like surefootedness along one of the paths leading across the marsh.

His escape was not discovered until the sun's rising.

The Major wasted no time investigating the manner of his escape. Nor did he seek to apportion blame. Instead, he concentrated on the man's recapture. He appealed to Molindi, begging that man to send a drum message to the other villages—but his appeals were in vain. The tabu was working again with all its old force and nothing he could say or do could break down the people's acceptance of a hopeless fate.

An hour later, accompanied by Jim and two carriers who were expert jungle hunters, he followed the big man's spoor which, once the marsh land was passed, headed due east.

"He is making for the nearest border, Jim," the Major commented.

"He is unarmed and wounded, Baas. He cannot escape. But, even so, I think we would be wise to leave him to the jungle's vengeance."

The Major shook his head.

"No. He is strong and very cunning. Perhaps his tabu will prove too strong for the people. We must follow until we catch up with him."

"And then, Baas?"

"And then, Jim, I shall shoot him on sight."

"So the Baas gains wisdom," Jim applauded softly.

FOR three days they kept to the fugitive's spoor, traveling at top speed, stopping for food and sleep only when that was absolutely necessary. But they did not gain on him; they scarcely held their own.

They visited villages he had visited, but could get no information from the people. If they were to be believed, no one had passed that way.

On the fourth day they came to a small fishing village on the bank of a tremendous river. They were greeted by an age-enfeebled headman—the other inhabitants of the place ran to the shelter of their huts.

"You come too late, white man," the

headman said. "The evil man has gone beyond your reach."

"At least," the Major commented, "his tabu does not close your mouth. Which way did he go?"

The native pointed across the river to the jungle which seemed to rise up out of the water.

"He is there, white man."

"Take us across," the Major urged. "Quickly, man."

The native shook his head.

"We have no canoes. Come. I will show you."

He led the way down to where the canoes were kept. Huge boulders had been dropped on them, smashing through their bottoms.

"The distance is further than you think, white man," the native continued, answering the Major's unspoken thought. "In places the current runs very swift—and there are crocodiles. You cannot swim across."

"No," the Major agreed reluctantly. "But why did you help him escape? You know he is evil and the tabu does not bind you, it would seem."

"The tabu *did* bind us. But we also have our tabus," the native replied cryptically. "Besides—what would you have us do? He is a white man — and very strong. He smashed all our canoes—all save one. We dared not stop him. He forced my son to paddle him over to that place.

"*Au-a!* From the shore here we watched. We saw my son beach the canoe. We saw the white man scramble out. And then, as my son turned to paddle back the white man stabbed him with a spear. My son fell into the water—and was no more. The canoe—doubtless by this time it has been swept over the falls and smashed to pieces on the rocks below."

The Major's eyes hardened at this story of yet another senseless killing.

"Is there no other village near?" he demanded.

"None within a two days' trek, white man. At least, none where you can get a canoe—if that is your desire."

"Then we will make a dug-out," the Major decided and he looked around for a convenient tree to fell.

"There is no need, white man," the native said softly.

"There is every need," the Major replied in a stern voice. "For the killing of your son alone, that evil white man must be brought to justice."

"That has already been done. Listen, white man. Look again across the river. What do you see?"

"I see the thickly wooded banks of the opposite shore," the Major replied impatiently. "Why do you jest?"

"I do not jest," the native replied and he chuckled softly. "But as you think you see, so did the man of evil sense. Listen yet again. We are men of the Elephant Clan; you have heard of us? You know that the killing of elephants and the eating of elephant meat is tabu to us. To break that tabu is great evil. But that man—I spit on his memory!—he forced some of our brothers to eat what is forbidden, and he laughed at their terror."

"It was an evil deed," the Major said gravely. "But what is this to me, now."

"Patience, white man. The story is soon told. That man came here to us and demanded our aid—he did not recognize those among us whom he had forced to break our tabu. And so we obeyed him, pretending a great fear. And, indeed, that fear was not all pretense. He was a man of great evil. And so, as I have said, after he had broken all the other canoes so that no one could pursue him, my son took him to the safety he saw with his own eyes.

"Nay, have patience a little longer, white man," the old man said supplicatingly as the Major turned away and ordered the carriers to fell a tree. "You think my son took him across the river. That is not so. That—" he pointed to the distant, wooded shore—"is no more than a stretch

as wide as this. In time of flood it is covered with water to the depth of a tall man. At times of drouth—as now—it is the home of snakes and mating crocodiles. *Wu!* It is truth I speak. From it there is no escape. Say now, has not justice caught up with that man?"

THE Major nodded. He did not speak but sat down on one of the broken canoes and stared over the swiftly rushing water. Jim came and squatted beside him while the carriers made camp a little way off.

The natives came from their huts and stood beside their headman, staring across to the island.

After a little while the tiny figure of a man was seen scampering about. They heard him shout—appeals for help, curses and meaningless obscenities—his voice carrying over the rush of water.

The Major stirred uneasily.

"There is nothing you can do, Baas—unless you shoot him."

The Major shook his head and reached for his rifle.

As he did so the man ran back into the cover of the undergrowth. A few moments later darkness fell.

For a little while longer they heard the man's frenzied shouts and then, very suddenly, they ceased.

"It is well, Baas," Jim said grimly. "I think the crocodiles will keep his tabu. Question them—and they will not speak of him. *Aua-a!* By the time the morrow's sun rises, they will have forgotten that he ever was." He continued in aggrieved tones, "I have just thought, Baas; we forgot to search him for diamonds when he was our prisoner. So we come out of this game empty-handed."

The Major did not answer. There were times when Jim's callous acceptance of grim tragedy shocked him. He was silent for a long time, then the songs of the village natives roused him. In the face of their happiness—it would be duplicated in so many other jungle villages—he could no longer be concerned about the final and absolute silence which had engulfed the man who had made silence a tabu to further his own evil ends.

Three Shots Mean the Same Thing in Any Man's Language

WOLVES OF TABU LAND

By C. F. KEARNS

Author of "South From Flaring River," "The Fabulous Finn," etc.

THE radiant banners of the aurora bobbed and pulsed so that even in the valley it was only twilight as young Colin Cameron plodded to his brush shelter in the thicker timber. Some sixth sense warned him when he saw the glow of firelogs dim, but not dim enough, for he had left them ten hours before. The fire had been replenished recently and Colin hesitated, poised for flight like any wild animal. He had thought himself alone in an empty land. But ere he could whirl or dive for the cover of the nearest tree a mocking challenge rode hard across the sub-Arctic night.

"Don't run, trapper. Come right in. We've been waiting."

Waiting! His carbine was with his bedroll, with his food. Run! He would not run far, after climbing the sheering mountains and scrambling through the timbered draws since long before dawn. His packsack was weighty with a dozen frozen martens. He was hungry and tired. And yet—a menace sneered in that derisive voice. A white man's voice in a section of the Mackenzie Mountains where no trappers' cabins existed—to his knowledge—for a hundred miles in any direction, nor a white settlement within three times that distance.

Colin shook his axe loose and shifted the pack to one shoulder as he came resolutely forward. A lean—privation lean—youth, barely over middle height with corded strength in his thick chest and sloping shoulders. Only his eyes were visible through the wolverine fur of his parka hood and these were bleakly indomitable. The eyes of a North-born white man who could out-Indian even a Mackenzie Mountain nomad—and no more spartan race has ever been cradled to cope with an inhospitable locale.

Colin was thinking fast, all the two score paces to the fire, where one man heaped thin kindling sticks on the red embers and another stood watching him. Grim thoughts. The Indians had known something when they shunned this desolate place of baffling valleys among the frozen ranges. A tabu land, and with reason. A reason that began with murder and continued in mystery. Colin had been advised to keep away from the gap of Red Pass and the twisted, broken and piled-on-edge terrain that lay beyond. But a man got careless when he was alone. He was regretting that carelessness with every grudging step.

Flames leaped. Sticks crackled. A man laughed. A burly, bearded man in caribou hides, with a rifle in his hands. The other man straightened from feeding the fire, his parka hood back. A half-breed, youngish, and of a size with Colin, with a dark, expressionless face.

"Well," jeered the big man, with relish, "let's get acquainted. *Drop that axe!*" The rifle muzzle covered Colin's chest. *"Quick!* You got a mean eye. Drop it or I'll——"

Colin let the axe fall. The wolves had bared their teeth. Two-legged wolves in caribou parkas and pants, and smoke-tanned moccasins. A feral, unkempt pair with their prey at bay—and helpless.

"Hell with you!" Colin's thoughts took words. His speech startled him. It was as if a stranger had spoken. "Hold a gun on me, will you? Tough guy, eh? What kind of a holdup is this, anyhow? I haven't talked to another man for two months and——"

"You ain't liable to talk to anybody for longer than that if you make any breaks," the big man growled. "Shuck that parka hood so we can see what kind of an animal you are."

He was all wolf. For a moment Colin regretted that he had let the axe drop, that he had not charged savagely in, risking everything in a slashing attack. But even as he dragged the stiff canvas back with both mittened hands he knew he had been discreet. This pair were too ready, too watchful.

THE sack dropped and he faced them. Knew that his big nose and jutting chin, his immature beard and mustache, were limned in the firelight. He stood defiantly erect, his hot eyes flashing from one to the other, and taking no comfort from either.

Harsh men. Sturdy enough to wander the frozen outlands in the winter time. Their equipment was behind them, two packsacks and snowshoes. The big man's dark beard was streaked with gray. So much Colin could see in the parka's opening. But the man's eyes fascinated him. They were wolf's eyes; baleful, distrustful, wary.

A black wolf, Colin decided bitterly. No mercy in him. His tone grated, showing surprise.

"A kid! Just a damn young punk. And we wasted two days following him, Joe."

"Kid! I'm twenty-three and I been trapping since I could walk."

Colin kicked off his snowshoes, reached for the black pail pendant from the cooking pole and set it in the snow at his feet. He stripped off his mitts, plucked a piece of the hot meat forth by his finger tips, waved it a few times in the frigid air, and proceeded to eat hungrily. The alien pair watched him in silence.

He paused at the second bite. "You fellows eat yet?"

"Sure," said the half-breed, Joe. "We roasted a good feed of them sheep ribs. Go ahead. We had lots." His tone was impersonal, without enmity. Colin felt a slight lifting of his apprehension. Maybe—

When he had finished, had drunk of the thin broth and refilled the pail with snow, he hung it over the fire again.

"Where you birds from? You live in this country?"

"Anywhere between the Mackenzie and the Yukon," boasted the big man, naming the two mighty streams of the north, "but this here Red Pass country is private, see? Nobody comes in here. How much fur you got?"

Colin moved and sat between them, on the heap of spruce bows topped by the skin of a white mountain sheep. "I got forty-three martens hanging up on the tree above us, all dry, and another dozen in my pack that I got to thaw out and skin. This is a good country. It's lousy with marten and there are some lynx. I haven't been after them much but I got nine. Three in marten traps—them cats get a claw caught and they just sit down and quit—and six I got in snares. I haven't been bothering about them much. They are too bulky to pack. Not like the martens." He turned his head from the half-breed to the big man. "Lots of room here for all of us to trap. Hey?" He tried to say it offhand.

"There isn't room enough for anybody else and Rod Daykin," the big man told him, a thin grin splitting his whiskers. "We'll save you the trouble of packing them furs out, kid. We don't need any partners, and nobody butts in on us. See?"

ROD DAYKIN! Colin knew the sinking emptiness of lost hope. Completely lost. For Rod Daykin was the name of the man who had murdered the trader and his helper at Red Pass Lake, on the other side of the mountains—the civilized side—twelve years before. To Rod Daykin was credited the killing of the policeman who had come to investigate the long silence from the trading post. No one had seen Rod Daykin in all those years, yet two trappers—lured by the promise of a harvest in an untrapped country—had crossed the gap of Red Pass, and had never returned. Colin knew now why the Indians—who do not talk much to white men—had avoided this place.

Rod Daykin still lived! The police would like to know that definite fact. But who would tell them? When Daykin said he would save Colin the trouble of packing out his furs, that wasn't all he meant.

He meant that Colin would continue to live as long as it suited the purposes of Rod Daykin.

"Yeah," said Colin, fighting with himself to speak calmly and thinking desperately. He must keep this man interested. "That's what you think. Believe you me, if we have the luck I been having, it will take more than the three of us to pack them skins out."

"Harr!" spat Daykin. "A packsack full of martens don't weigh much, eh? But we don't figure on packing them out, kid. You know that river back over that baldface hump? Don't look much now, eh? But in May and June that's a real river.

We make a skin boat and we go down that river fast, to the Mackinzie. You've heard of the Gravel River Indians and their skin boats. Well, that's where I learned the trick. It takes a skin boat to run white water."

The Gravel River was away north, emptying into the Mackenzie near the Hudson's Bay Post at Fort Norman. Colin shook his head:

"You won't do that no more, Daykin."

"Why not?"

"Because they are wise to you. Every trading post in the North has been warned. Every Mountie is on the lookout. They are watching every boat-river that runs into the Mackenzie. They got planes now, to get them around quick. You won't go down to the Mackenzie in any skin boat, not down the Red Pass River you won't."

"No?" Daykin sneered. "You know so much. I suppose you think I'll walk into a post and do my trading. Huh! Is that what you think?"

"No," said Colin, drawing a natural inference, "but I know this. I know Joe here has been doing your trading lately and they are wise to him. The next time he steps into a store anywhere in this country—anywhere for a couple of thousand miles north or south, even in the Yukon or Alaska or down in B. C.—he's going to find himself looking up the muzzle of a gun and some storekeeper is going to collect the reward."

"Collect!" Daykin snarled, brandishing his rifle. "And what do you suppose would be happening all that time?"

"Radios," explained Colin quietly. "They all got radios now. Sending sets, I mean. They ain't much bigger than an ordinary radio and they can talk all over the map. You let Joe here show up anywhere in the country and the next thing you know the Mounties will be closing in like a bunch of hornets to a chunk of fresh meat.

"They will come by fast boats and airplanes and they got a lot of extra men and guides that know their way around too. Fellows like me. See?"

DAYKIN scowled at him and for the first time Colin read doubt in the lupine eyes. He took heart.

"You got to get a new guy to do your trading for you," he said flatly. "Some bird like me—that ain't known and suspicioned by every storekeeper or fur-buyer in the country."

Daykin grinned skeptically.

"Let you go, eh? That what you're figuring on? You're lying, Kid. Nobody knows I'm still alive. Nobody knows where Rod Daykin lives. Huh! I live where I build my fire at night."

"Yah!" Colin jeered. "See any green in my eye? Let me go? That's the least of my worries. I'm in no hurry. I figured to stay here till spring anyhow. I figured to make me a clean-up—or—the wolves would get a skimpy feed, picking my bones. Ain't meat enough on 'em anyhow to make good soup."

He had the feral Daykin puzzled. The half-breed spoke up diffidently, as if he had no standing in the debate.

"He means that he stays with us and traps all winter. Then in the summer he will take our skins and trade them for an outfit for us. And then we let him go."

Daykin snapped. "That what you mean, Kid?"

"Naw," Colin threw back scornfully. "Where do you get that stuff? If we trap together this winter I'm not putting my head in a knot for nothing. If I run with you birds once I got to keep on doing it. Nope. We go shares. I take a half share and you take a half share between you."

"What would you do with a half share," demanded Daykin, "which we don't intend to give you? A half share! You got nerve, Kid."

"What would I do? Look: I know something, see? The price of furs is away up. Martens are touching the roof. They are liable to go as high as they did in Nine-

teen, when they were averaging ninety and a hundred dollars apiece. Martens are money right now. So are lynx. They're sixty to seventy-five apiece. Prime stuff, naturally. I figured I could come in here and clean up. I'd cache my lynxes and pack out the martens. I ought to be able to waddle away with a hundred and fifty to two hundred martens. Say I get top price for them—somewhere around fifteen thousand dollars. Hey! That's money, gents.

"Know what I do? I beat it for Edmonton and I order me a whole store, groceries, clothes, hardware, everything. See? To come up on the summer steamer and land it right up the Red Pass River at the big flat, just before the river starts into these mountains, just below the last white water. And when the steamer gets there I'm all waiting with three or four men to help me and we got the store built and winter wood cut and we are all set to do business before the freezeup. Man, a store there will be just the same as a gold mine. I got it all figured out. I been figuring it for two—three years."

"Where you going to get your trade?" demanded Daykin again, but his eyes showed that he was following Colin's plan closely, weighing it, as if he could see an ultimate advantage to himself. "Nobody comes into this country."

"They'll come," opined Colin cheerfully, lying back with his hands behind his neck. "They'll come quick, when they find out I spent a winter in here. The Injuns will come back, and some whites too. Doggone, look! This is a fine country, this Red Pass country and my store will be right at the gate. There's moose in the valleys, and caribou on the hills. There's white sheep—all the white sheep a man wants. That's what I been living on. There's rabbits. There's fish in the rivers and a man could dry enough in the fall to last all winter. And there's fur. Man, oh man—there's fur! Don't tell me I'm crazy. I'm a smart guy, that's what I am."

"Yes," admitted Daykin, and malice was in his words. Malice and jealousy and the cruel inherent venom of the man himself. "You're smart, Kid. You're damned smart. You're one of the few white men that have talked to Rod Daykin in the last ten, twelve years and you been living now already longer than most of them. You ain't building no trading store on the big flats below the Red Pass to these mountains, Kid."

"I better build it," Colin Cameron said between his teeth, while the hair on his scalp crawled. "I better build it if you want to get any white man's stuff in the spring. I better build it if you want to keep on living yourself, Daykin. You can't keep living in this country unless you got somebody to help you. Somebody new. The police are wise to the way you been getting along so far. Yeah, the police and everyone else."

"You're lying," growled Daykin. "If you knew so much why did you come in here alone—in the winter time?"

"Why?" Colin chuckled. "Because I figured on seeing you first if you showed up. If I'd a took my gun along today you wouldn't be sitting by my fire right now with a gun on me. But I didn't see no tracks and I got careless. Gun is a nuisance to pack when you're trapping."

"You wouldn't be sitting here, you mean." Again the cold implacable grin showed among the whiskers, the lips oddly red and plain. "We come over Red Pass, too. I make the circle every so often. Got to come back and look, seems like. We tracked you and when we found you'd left your gun—"

"Maybe he is such a good trapper he could do some trapping for us," suggested the half-breed suddenly. "He could do the trapping and we could put up a cabin and dry the skins." At Daykin's impatient negative snort he barely paused. "Sure. He don't run away. We take his axe. He don't live long without a fire at night. He don't pack no grub with him. Sure.

Let him trap. Then, maybe, after we got all the furs we need——"

DAYKIN looked sideways at their prisoner. Colin tried to appear nonchalant, tried to act as if every fibre of his active being was not in protest against the inaction of waiting while these wolf men decided the simple matter of whether he was to live a little while longer or to die quickly. He was under no delusion. His argument was a specious one and born of expediency. He was thinking if Daykin definitely rejected the idea he would spring on the big man and die fighting. Gouge and kick and strike furiously in a grisly battle that could have but one end.

Daykin laughed, a malevolent chuckle, but Colin relaxed. The wolves would play with their prey. He was reprieved.

"Ha," gloated the big man. "That's sense, Joe. We make a squaw out of him. He traps and cooks and brings wood. Sure. But the first time he picks up an axe, or makes a break for a gun—he quits living."

Colin slept that night with a noose around the top of his sleeping bag and another rawhide thong around his body above the knees. He had a peep hole to breath through in the folds of the down-filled robe but he was otherwise helpless. The wolf men each had one end of a thong and his slightest move would rouse them. They were, he knew, as restless as wild animals and as instantly alert. He lay perfectly still, not stirring even when they took turns to replenish the fire.

In the morning Daykin twitched his head thong. "Get up, Squaw. You work today, packing poles. Don't let me see you reach for an axe."

The cabin was a crude A shaped structure of logs and poles, notched roughly to fit. A ridgepole was jammed in limb-crotches of two trees seven paces apart, and light poles laid slanting against it, with the small ends overlapping. Another ridge pole on the opposite sides of the trunks, left an opening of about a foot. Similar poles were laid against this but were trimmed off flush. One end was walled up solidly by thicker logs to the peak, and the entrance was built up to a height of three feet. Above the low wall hung Colin's canvas fly for a door.

Primitive, unlighted, but habitable. It was better than sleeping with only a wind-screen at their backs. They scraped out the powdery snow with their snowshoes, laid a thick carpet of spruce bows and built a fire in the centre. The smoke escaped through the crack between the ridge-poles as well as much of the heat. They remedied this somewhat by stuffing most of the crack with green bows.

It took two days of hard work and Colin toiled terrifically under the wary tutelage of his captors who allowed him to do more than his share of the lifting and carrying although they did not spare themselves in the axe work. Daykin's rifle was slung to his back and Colin's unloaded weapon hung high on a tree. At all times he was continually under the surveillance of one of them.

"You can go out and trap," Daykin told him the third morning. "We got a little more fixing to do here. "You go out and trap and you better make a good job of it. Let's see what you can do with this dozen steel traps you got." Contemptuous amusement lay in his eyes, in his tone.

"Hey," objected Colin, trying to hide the hope that jumped within him. "Give me my axe. Give me my knife. How can I set traps without an axe? Or at least a knife."

"You better learn to set 'em," grinned Daykin bleakly. "Give you an axe, hey—you bush coyote? And have you high-tail out of here! You're lucky we trust you enough to let you out of our sight. Listen; you start out with nothing, see? No axe, no knife, no matches. You pick up your fur and you bring it in. If you want run-poles for them martens I'll cut you some and you can pack them out. I

don't even give you no meat for bait. When you come back you can tell us how much you need. But you better not need much."

"I'm a trapper, damn you," Colin gritted back and his hope faded to almost nothing. "I came in here to make a clean-up and I'm going to make it. Hey, don't I even take a lunch?"

"Lunch!" Daykin chuckled, but the half-breed stood silently by. "No, you don't take no lunch. Hurry up with that chunk of meat because you got to take your clothes off. Take 'em off—right down to your skin. You ain't going to take nothing with you, that a man needs."

Colin undressed and dressed again while Daykin went over every bit of his clothing, underwear and all. When Colin shivered into his parka he knew that his pockets were bare of even the small purse he carried. Daykin had that.

"Give him the packsack, Joe," instructed Daykin. "Just the empty packsack. He can fill it up with fur." He chuckled again.

COLIN pulled on his mitts and took the packsack from the stolid Joe. He lifted the canvas flap and threw a leg over the logs.

"Think you got me stumped, eh?" he told them defiantly. "Man, I can catch martens even if I have to climb trees to get 'em by hand."

He thrust his toes into the snowshoe harness and heard Daykin's grating laugh. And for the first minute, as he trudged into the predawn gloom, his backbone jerked, anticipating the rifle bullet that he more than half expected.

A hundred yards away he drew a relieved breath and started to run. It was against all reason that they expected him to actually trap. They were playing with him. And when a wild beast plays with a helpless victim the end is only a matter of time. Short time.

"Giving me a chance," Colin thought bitterly. "A chance! They know I got to come back. That I can't run away without an axe, or grub or matches. Not even a knife. Wouldn't give me meat for bait. Afraid I'd eat it. Guess they know the in-

sides of the sheep I killed have already been eaten up by the wolves or the wolverines. Yeah. But what they don't know is about that lynx that I hung up in a tree because he was too heavy to carry. I still got an ace in the whole—if the wolverines haven't beat me to it."

He ran for half a mile, following his own trail, plain because no new snow had fallen. And the lynx was still where he had wedged it in a sapling. Frozen ice hard.

"It's meat," whispered Colin, lifting it down almost reverently. "It's meat. I ain't ate raw lynx before, but I got to start. I got to head for the flat lands of the Mackenzie, sixty miles or more right over them mountains past camp. And I got to circle the camp so they can't see to shoot me if they hear me—or see me. Aw—it won't be full light for an hour yet. I got to start." He spread the sack open and groped within, from sheer force of habit. "Not a thing in—not—"

He stripped off his mitt and his bare feverish fingers scraped the bottom. He raised his hand against the sky and words died on his breath.

He held a small block of Chinese matches—the old style matches that are still sold in remote stores and which lone men in the wilds swear by, because they

can be dried—and a cheap, two-bladed pocket knife.

A lump came in his throat as he shoved the treasure into his pocket, feeling his fingers stiffening. He pulled on his mitten, jammed the frozen carcass of the lynx into the sack, swung it to his shoulders and started on a trot back through the timber, avoiding his own trail. The snow was powder dry, knee-deep, but he ran easily, for his pulses beat in jubilant tempo.

"That Joe!" he thought gratefully. "That Joe ain't wolf at all. He knew I would make a break for it. He couldn't give me my own knife because Daykin would be wise and maybe kill him. But he done the best he could. He dropped this jackknife and some matches in the pack as he handed it to me. Maybe, some day, Joe, I pay you back—if I ever get by you birds."

He circled the camp, keeping on the outside fringe of the timber which forced him to go up the side of the hill, for the camp was in the valley. Daylight found him well past it and he abandoned stealth. If they elected to follow him, if Daykin tired of his joke, which he probably would, they would be on his trail now. It was more than likely that Daykin thought he would run. And a black wolf prefers to chase its prey.

He ran fast—for a man on snowshoes. But he knew his pursuers would have the advantage of his partially beaten path to follow. They should make better time than he could.

Colin gritted his teeth. They would have to run fast. They would have to run damn fast to get within rifle shot of him. Hell with them. They couldn't catch him.

Two hours traveling brought him to the banks of the frozen Red Pass River. He kept to the upper side, the same side he had come in to the country. Open water showed in odd places, for the river was fast.

He saw where a caribou had crossed and he paused, panting.

The caribou's track made something very clear.

He chewed his lower lip reflectively, then, remembering, held his mitten over his moisted lip lest it be frosted for his thoughtlessness. There was water over the ice, under the snow, and such crossings were dangerous for a man. Just too dangerous.

But they were just as dangerous for anyone following him. A prudent man—even a wolf man—would lose time seeking a safer way.

Colin stepped out for the river bank. He broke off a light, dry spruce limb and he felt his way cautiously. When the end of the stick came up soggy at the tip he redoubled his caution, slipping off his snowshoes so that they just hung by the toe thongs. When he felt the slushiness underneath he shook his feet wholly free.

With the end of the stick he scraped a hole on the ice, big enough to accommodate his moccasined foot. He watched it fill with water, slowly seeping to the depth of four or five inches, while the snow turned leaden at its edges. He stirred the frigid slush to a thin soup and then, quickly and deliberately, he placed his right moccasin flat in the water, on the ice, and instantly withdrew it. He used his stick to balance himself while he held the foot in the air, one minute, two minutes.

When he cautiously lowered his foot to the snowshoe again and edged his toes under the loop of the harness it was as if he wore a metal boot. His foot, as high as the ankle bone, was incased in a shell of ice. His socks, the inner side of the moccasin, were dry.

He repeated the operation with his left foot.

He started forward again, carefully, still using the stick. To his relief the water was no deeper than the ice crust on his moccasins. His snowshoes were lead weights before he was across the wet patch in the centre of the river.

He stood his wet snowshoes upright to

freeze and jumped above the knee-high snow, clashing his heels together. The ice cracked and loosed. He beat his snowshoes free of their crystal plating by banging them together and tapped the ice fragments from his moccasins. He wriggled his toes experimentally. His feet were still dry.

"Hah!" It was a chancy trick. "Lots of guys tried that stunt once too often and froze their feet. This is the second time I been lucky. Maybe—aw—maybe these birds lose some time here. And time is all I need."

A thin hope. Daykin was wise to all the tricks, likely some wrinkles that Colin didn't know as well. But still—

THE short, far North day was spent and it was still only early afternoon when the toll of furious traveling told. He felt himself stagger, and a moment later he did it again. He looked anxiously for firewood, and found a dead but standing balsam. Time to stop and get a fire going. High time.

He broke the pendulous crackling branches hurriedly, scraped the snow from the tree base with his webs and built a hasty fire. He hacked a hindquarter from the frozen lynx with the jackknife, bored a hole into the icy flesh and hung it on a stick over the blaze. He watched the fur singe to nothingness, saw the moisture drip and fought hard to keep from sleep. Twice he nodded and twice the meat fell on top of the fire. He retrieved it both times and shook himself awake.

No time to sleep. He must travel and keep on traveling, but a hungry man could not travel far on snowshoes in the fierce, strength-snatching sub-zero temperature. And food was strength. When the outside of the meat was charred and blacked he gnawed it off until the still raw and frozen flesh beneath was bared, then he held it to the flames again. Finally he finished the quarter.

Strength flowed in his veins, his knotted muscles loosened. He set off through the closing dusk, with the knifing wind from the northwest behind and his general direction was east, to the flatlands beyond the twisted ranges.

He lost sense of time, until the dim moon cast wan twilight through the thick snow clouds. Snow was due. He prayed it would snow. The cold would relent and his trail would be hidden in a heavy downfall.

He plodded steadily until he weaved as he walked and the effort to lift his feet over down timber was a task almost impossible. At last he fell against a slanting deadfall whose top leaned against a tangle of broken timber at the base of a black bluff. He fell against it, his arm and shoulders across the trunk, his head lolling beyond.

"Never—never keep going when you're tired," Colin muttered sleepily. "That's—that's what kills guys on the trail. Never—ah—

Somewhere, vaguely, a wolf howled. Far off. He heard the faint cry indifferently. Four-legged wolves. Aw—it didn't matter. All a man needed was a fire—a fire to—

But the rifle shot made him lift his head. A rifle shot, not close. In the time a man could draw in a quick breath came another report. And another. Colin stood on his own two feet again and let the packsack drop. He stumbled forward when the weight left his back, unbalanced.

Wolf—fire—rifle. The three words jumbled and chased each other around. It was funny. He blinked and everything stayed dark. He was dreaming maybe. But he stumbled against a hard branch of the fallen tree and it broke with a crack like a rifle shot. Dry wood!

Wearily he gathered dry branches, bewigged with moss pendants, scraped the snow painfully away from the base of the stump where the trunk had twisted off and found the splintered shell was rotten inside the dry bark. He squatted with his kin-

dling before him, laid a mitten on his knees, took the knife out of his pocket, opened it, and put the mitt on again. Bare flesh could freeze too fast.

When he had painfully shaved up the broken splinters, laid a little moss on them and shredded some bark between his fingers on the top, he risked a match, baring his hand to strike it on his canvas parka.

The thin flame spluttered. He cupped it in his chilling palm and luck rode with him. A shaving caught.

It was when he had lurched to his feet to get more wood, so that the stump might burn, that he heard the three shots again. Clear-spaced and distinct, upriver, whence he had come.

The stump blazed. He roasted another ham of the lynx. Roasted it carefully, not burning it, slashing it with his knife so that the heat might penetrate more quickly. Between times he lay outstretched, with the packsack and his snowshoes beneath him, curled in a ball, his head resting on his arm, close to the fire; and he slept.

He slept in cat naps, in fitful jerks and starts; a minute, five minutes at a time. He had no knowledge of how the time passed but the meat was cooked when he stiffly stood up. It was black and burned on one side, but it was cooked through.

He was rested. He chewed roasted meat and felt confidence again. More confidence with every swallow. Three shots. Three shots twice. Why should his pursuers fire three shots. Twice. Evenly spaced. They were not shooting for meat.

"Three shots. Somebody wants help. Wants it bad. Somebody got wet feet and something tells me its Joe. If it ain't Joe I should give a damn. If it is Joe—"

He disembowled the partly thawed lynx, cut off the head, and stuffed the remainder in his pack. He looked regretfully at the blazing stump. A man could sleep safely in its warmth, even a man without blankets.

"I better not be a plain damn fool," groaned Colin Cameron, looking down the valley where the Red Pass River threaded the impassible canyons to the spacious lands beyond the mountains. "I got some climbing to do. I got to climb around those bluffs." Behind him the danger trail lay. His own trail in the snow, that the wolf men followed. "I'm a fool," he whispered to himself, half-apologetically, "but I ain't the kind of a crawling animal that can leave a man alone to die. Not no man that hollers for help as loud as a gun can shoot. Three shots means the same thing in any man's language."

He headed upriver again.

IT WAS easier going on the back track. For two hours he traveled steadily until he saw the distant glow of a fire among the timber. Here he stopped and took the remnant of the lynx out of the packsack and hung it in a tree. He might still need that meat. The knife he opened and thrust into his right sleeve with the blade touching the heel of his bare palm under the mitten.

Daykin was waiting with the rifle ready when he strode into the circle of firelight. There was no need for him to feign fatigue. He swayed as he gasped one word:

"Grub."

Daykin's merciless grin showed. Starved eh? Come back to eat, did you? Huh. You ain't wasting our grub."

Colin squatted on his empty packsack by the blaze. Joe lay with his legs to the blaze and one foot was bare. Colin knew why. Knew now it was Joe who had called for help. Had called Daykin from the chase.

"Froze it," Joe said briefly, and pain marked the brief explanation.

"Yeah," growled Daykin harshly. "You was foxy, Kid. I had more sense. I went upstream until I found a dry crossing. Joe ain't bright. Now—he'll wish he was. I'd a-run you down if he hadn't shot to fetch me back."

"You should of built a fire and taken

that moccasin off right away," scolded Colin. "You ought to know that, Joe. Aw—shucks. We'll pack you back to camp and fix you up."

"I did," groaned Joe. "But it was too late. It's froze bad. It's—"

"You bet it's froze bad," said Daykin grimly as he looked at Colin with a new interest. "It was pretty near froze solid when I got back. It ain't thawed right yet. And a foot froze like that ain't much good any more. Nor the man that wears it." No sympathy, no softness in his tone. The stolid Joe gazed blankly at Colin. "Ahrr!" Daykin lifted his upper lips above his clenched teeth. "I don't travel with a man that wets his feet. I think I'll shoot you both."

Colin rose stiffly and took up the black pail that stood in the ashes. It was a quarter full of water. He drank deep and refilled it with snow.

"You won't shoot me because you need me," he snapped; "you need me until you see how things go with Joe. See. Give me a chunk of that meat you got."

Daykin stared at him for a long moment, then groped in the bag at his feet. He tossed Colin a piece of frozen, cooked, wild mutton as large as his two fists. Colin seized it.

When he had eaten he said briskly:

"We hit for camp. Gimmie that axe, Daykin, and I cut Joe a peg leg. See? Then you can break trail and he can lean on me and that way we get along. See?"

"You're giving orders?" grunted Daykin. "Why you—"

"I'm giving orders," agreed Colin confidently. "Somebody's got to do something. I never left a guy to freeze in the snow yet." He stood up and took the axe from a wood chunk, and Daykin's sulky eyes followed him uncertainly.

Colin cut a forked sapling, trimmed it to six foot length, cut one side of the fork off square at the height of Joe's bent knee. He fitted the crude crutch to the half-breed who balanced on one foot, while Colin padded the knee rest with his wadded packsack. Joe placed the knee of his frosted foot on the crutch while Colin lashed knee and thigh against the wood with Joe's spare snowshoe thongs.

"There! Grab it tight and you hobble along slow. It's a long hike but we got to get you to the cabin where we can fix that foot. We—"

"Bah!" snorted Daykin. "Why put him to all that trouble. We throw up a lean-to here and we hunt for meat. We—"

Colin was standing slightly behind Joe with the axe upright in the snow at his feet. The wolf men traveled light. One axe and some meat. Colin's hand snapped down.

"Is that so!" The axe glinted in the firelight as he swung it mightily, a one-handed backward sweep that hurled it overhead into the night behind them. "Is that so?" he snarled at the open-mouthed Daykin. "Listen." They strained a second or two. "See? You didn't hear it fall. It's gone. Under a yard of loose snow. You won't find it. None of us will find it if we look for a week. It's going to snow again. It'll snow before you get half that snow sifted and you can't sift snow and hunt meat. Huh—you tough guy with a gun! Now what are you going to do? Aw—come on. We're all tough guys and we're going to make that cabin or bust. We got to make the cabin."

"I'll kill you," promised Daykin. "I'll kill you slow. I'll torture you—you—"

"Sure," said Colin at the conclusion of the blasphemous outburst. "Sure—but we'll get Joe to the cabin first and give him a chance. And that's a lot better chance than I had a couple of hours ago."

THEY made the cabin some time late the following night, what hour they neither knew nor cared. Daykin had long since left them, taking both rifles, for Colin stayed wtih the half-breed who was only semi-conscious through the combination of fatigue and pain. He had questioned Colin —once.

"You came back, hey? You lie to Daykin. Hey? You hear me shoot?"

"Yeah," said Colin. "You give me a break, Joe. A good break. I heard you fire them three shots. I guessed you was calling Daykin. I guessed you needed help. I figured somebody got their feet wet. I hoped it was Daykin, because you ain't such a bad guy, Joe. But he was taking no chances. Aw—we'll fix you up."

"No," said Joe sadly. "This is my finish. You're all right now, Kid. Daykin needs a new partner now. I don't care. He took my sister for his squaw but she died. I don't care now. I don't like Daykin, but I'm scared of him."

"Hell," said Colin, "I ain't scared of him! I'll fix that foot of yours, Joe. Don't you worry."

Joe didn't believe him, and Colin didn't believe himself when the cabin came in sight.

The fire was blazing and the tin pails were full of boiling meat. Daykin aroused from under his sleeping robe at their entrance. Both men were at the ultimate end of their endurance.

Contemptuously he settled back, dozing.

Colin fed Joe. Fed him sips of thin broth, and tasted sparingly himself. He added his own robe to Joe's bed and bared Joe's frozen foot. The injured man moaned softly and Colin knew that lesser men would have screamed. The flesh had been frozen to the bone.

But a lesser man than Joe would have never made the trip back.

Some time later Daykin lifted himself on an elbow, stared at Colin dozing by the fire, and got up. As he reached for the cooking pail Colin said softly:

"That foot's got to come off."

Daykin drank the hot liquid. He speared a piece of meat on his knife, making a brutal answer.

"Any fool knows that. Except you. Well, Joe was a good partner, but too damn finicky. You better be more reasonable, Kid. Maybe I'll let you live."

"It's got to come off," said Colin again. "Joe is too good a guy to sluff off like that. We take that foot off above the ankle and—aw—he's a young man yet. Hey?"

DAYKIN patted the rifle in the crook of his left arm, furthest from Colin, significantly. "No need to suffer."

Callous, and casual. The law of the wild. The survival of the fittest. The wolf pack kills the weaklings, the sick and the injured. This also Colin knew. He had expected no other answer.

"Yeah," he grunted, reaching for the second bubbling pail. "I guess maybe you're right. But—"

With a movement as incredibly swift as a marten pouncing on a squirrel he whirled and hurled the boiling contents of the three-quart pail into Daykin's ruthless face, into his pitiless eyes. Before Daykin's convulsive clutch at the rifle in the hollow of his arm could swing the muzzle, Colin leaped.

His knee struck the squatting big man's stomach, his left hand grasped the thick beard and snapped Daykin's head upwards and back. Daykin toppled and Colin was on top of him, his body flat so that the wolf man's two feet could not hurl him off, his right hand was at Daykin's bared throat—and his right hand held the open jackknife.

"You move," grated Colin, the point

drawing blood freely. "You make one move—and die."

"I'm blind!" screamed Daykin. "I'm blind! I—my neck. My neck!"

"You ain't blind," snarled Colin. "You got too much hair on your face. "Drop that gun or—your neck breaks."

He wriggled his body sideways, clear of Daykin, still gripping the beard. He dropped the knife, snatched the fallen rifle and released his hold. Swiftly, still crouching, but moving back so that a space of two steps separated them. Daykin rolled over on his side and came shakily to his knees, pawing at his eyes; cursing and mewing in a very frenzy of tortured ferocity.

Colin waited until Daykin looked at him.

"You ain't blind!" He saw cunning show in the lurid eyes and knew the water had not scalded them. Daykin had shut them instinctively. "Your face is some scalded, but what with that parka hood and them whiskers you won't blister much. Listen—you wolf. Where's my gun?"

"In a tree—outside—unloaded."

"Okay. Throw some wood on that fire. I want light."

Daykin sullenly complied.

"Peel off your duds. Right down to the pelt. I want everything you got. Cartridges, knife. Everything. Quick now. I ain't fooling. Put 'em in my packsack."

He relented when Daykin was down to his wollen, grimy underwear.

"You ain't so tough. You don't wear deer skin next to your hide. That's enough. Put on them clothes. And I want them two or three white flour sacks I had in my stuff. You dig 'em out and then put on those pails full of clean water."

The big man was startled. "Hell—you ain't going to—"

"Ain't I?" snapped Colin. "You bet your life, Mister. Joe's foot comes off and I'm the man to do it. You boil up them sacks in one pail and clean water in the other. Then you drag up that big chunk close to the fire and you shave off the top some so it's smooth. And then you put a razor edge on that axe. Here's your stone back. And you work quick now, fella, because I'm watching you close, even when you step outside to get that snow. And a bullet beats an axe, damn you, big as you are."

Daykin performed the tasks under the muzzle of the gun and at no time did Colin take his finger from the trigger or vary the muzzle from the big man's body. At last he said:

"Shift Joe a little closer to the fire and put that foot on the log."

The half-breed woke up and groaned. He raised himself to an elbow and looked at his bare foot. It was puffed and greenish black to the ankle bone. He groaned and fell back.

"No use, Kid," he was almost whimpering with anguish, "I'm finished. Kill him, too, or you won't get out of here."

"He's suffering so much he won't feel it," whispered Colin. "That foot is getting gangrene in it now. We snip it off a couple of inches above the ankle and then we take the hot—"

Daykin clasped his stomach. He bent his head and his shoulders heaved. "No." He shuddered, turning his eyes away, "I can't do that. I—I'm no butcher. I—aw—shoot him now and you and me go partners, like you said. He can't live. No man can live up here with his leg off. You know that."

"Partners, with you!" gritted Colin. "Not me. I came up here to make a stake. Listen—you yellow piece of animal. You cold-blooded bushwhacker. You ain't got no nerve. Lay down on your face and cross your hands on your back. I got to tie you up so you won't interfere with me. G'wan now."

Daykin's turbulence had evaporated. Meekly he submitted. When his wrists had been lashed behind him and his ankles also, Colin shifted him to a sitting position.

"Sit there and watch a man with nerve—and learn something."

He shook the half-breed into fuller consciousness.

"Listen Joe. You got to be tough. See? You got to be tough for now. You and me, fella, we got a lot of unfinished business. We got to get out of this country by summer with a load of skins and, boy, it's a long time to summer yet."

Joe groaned. "Kill him, Kid, then you blow. I—I—no use."

"I'm going to tie you up," said Colin slowly. "Then I'm going to take that foot off. It's going to hurt like hell, but I got to do it. I won't cauterize the stump with hot pitch, but still it's going to hurt. You want a piece of wood to chew on, Joe?"

The half-breed was crazed with pain, half delirious. He shook his head. "No use, Kid."

When Colin had lashed Joe's arms to his side, had bent his sound leg and lashed it calf to thigh, he said to Daykin:

"You got to help. I'm going to flop you across Joe so he don't roll away while I'm fixing him up. I'm putting a tourniquet on the leg and I'm skinning back a flap of skin all the way around. Then I'm going to sew it all up nice and clean with this needle and thread you swiped off me. Savvy? It should work. I sterilize everything in boiling water. Even the axe. Joe will holler like hell when I do that skinning, but I'm fast and then one clip with the axe does it. One husky clip in the right place and I can drive pins with the edge of an axe. It'll work. Hey?"

Daykin shivered, like a man about to be acutely ill.

"Sure it will," Colin barked. "Let's go."

IT WAS the noon of a dull winter's day when Colin wakened, and a weak cry roused him. He sprang up and the fire was glowing embers. He threw fresh fuel on and took down a simmering pail. Joe was querulously awake. Colin held a tin cup to his white lips.

Presently he said:

"You're tied up, Joe. And you ain't got a frozen foot any more. You ain't got no gangrene. You got a splint on that leg. Four of them all around it, so you won't touch it against anything. I used a tourniquet and you didn't lose much blood. Not too much. I made a neat job, too. It's going to hurt you like hell for awhile, but you got to tough it out. See?"

Joe licked his lips. "No use, Kid. I can't—"

"Shut up," said Colin. "I'm going to untie you now. You're tougher than Daykin. He's in his bag, sleeping but tied up. I got to keep him tied up while I do some more things. Doggone, I don't know what to do with him. Aw—we'll figure something out. Shucks, we got lots of time."

He cut the thongs and massaged Joe's limbs and body with gentle roughness. He fed him another cup of broth. He was relieved to see a brighter glint in the sick man's eye. He squatted, facing Joe.

"You get better quick and then you can help watch him. There's lots of meat right handy here. We can—"

Terror glowed in Joe's eyes a split second before a thunderbolt hit Colin's back and crushed him flat, before two tremendous hands encircled his neck and a savage growling bruised his eardrums. The growling of a bare-fanged wolf at his throat.

"Now I've got you. And now, tough Kid, there ain't room for you and me in this country. Not for me nor any one-legged guys either."

Colin's breath was shut off. Dark lights danced before his eyes. A knee was on his spine and his head was being forced inexorably back. The black lights changed to dark circles and somewhere in the last vestige of his consciousness he heard the utter end of everything.

But his face was blistering and when he tried to struggle his fingers were scorched by flames. He rolled halfway feebly. Nothing was real. A voice was praying: "Kid! Kid! You're—you're—speak to me, Kid!"

It was Joe, sitting bolt upright, his face frantic with pain and despair. Colin focussed his blurring eyes on him as the half-breed slumped backwards, the rifle falling across his chest.

COLIN raised himself on all fours and stared at Daykin's supine body. It was a shot he had heard! He remembered he had set the rifle against his pack beside Joe. Or had he? Maybe he had kicked it so Joe could reach it while they were fighting. It didn't matter. He crawled to Joe and removed the gun. He put his hand gently on Joe's chest, looked into Joe's eyes:

"Listen, Joe:

"We're partners. You lay there and get well. I'm nurse. In two or three weeks you'll be well enough to watch camp and so on while I do the trapping. I'm going to trap like nobody's business. And when I get through I'm going to buy that trading post and you're going to work for me. You savvy furs and all that stuff. Hey?"

"Aw"—Joe's voice was plaintive. "A man can't get out of here with one leg."

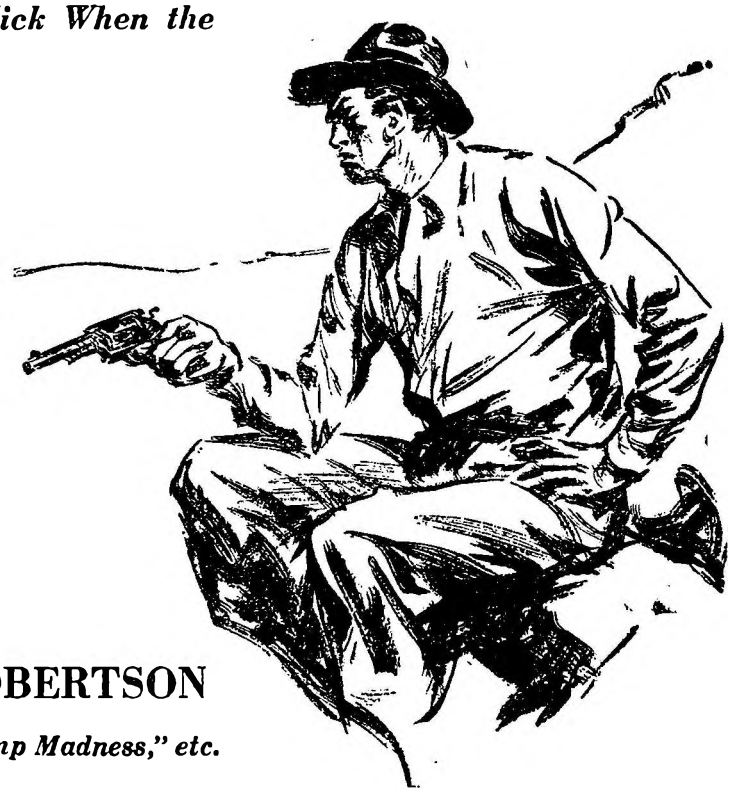
"Shut up. I bet you we get twenty thousand dollars worth of them martens and when summer comes and you are well, we make you a peg leg and we build one of those skin boats and we go down the river just like Injuns. Shucks—we'll get you a real cork foot in Edmonton. Sure. I got to have a man like you, Joe, to look after the store—a real good tough guy. Hey."

Joe made a gallant effort to smile. "You're pretty tough yourself."

"You're doggone right I am," agreed Colin, heartily.

Gamblers Can't Kick When the High Hand Wins

A SIX-GUN BEATS JACKS



By O. A. ROBERTSON

Author of "Sheep Camp Madness," etc.

BRONCO HANK WILLIAMS admitted to himself that he had about reached the end of his rope. He needed a doctor, but he had not reached the stage where he was willing to surrender his liberty, the price he would be compelled to pay for medical attention.

The bullet had not shattered the bone. He had made sure of that by standing up in his stirrups. He had even ridden a short distance standing in one stirrup on the injured leg in an effort to shock and numb the unendurable pain, but that was many hours ago while the wound was fresh and before the leg had had time to stiffen. Since then drying blood had plastered his leg to his overalls, and in turn plastered the overalls to the saddle. He was grateful for even that measure of support to the aching limb, and was careful not to break the contact. But already he had been twenty hours in the saddle, and it was beyond physical endurance for either horse or rider to continue much longer.

Bronco wished that he had more money in his possession. That was the trouble, he told himself, with this kind of life. A man on the dodge had to have friends whom he could depend on. And friends cost money. Experience had taught him that boughten friendships were frequently as loyal and enduring as any other.

New friends were inclined to expect cash on the barrel. Owing to upset plans, Bronco was, as usual, almost without funds, and the country into which he was heading had not seen him for many years. That argued favorably in one respect. He could move about somewhat freely without being recognized, if he could move. But that was exactly what he was not able to do.

Once dismounted, and he dreaded even the thought of that, he would not be able to remount. He would have to appeal for aid at some isolated ranch where he might possibly hang out for a day or so under the flimsy pretext of having shot himself. People in outlying districts are much given

to playing the good Samaritan and frequently hold less reverence for the letter of the law than for their own code of hospitality. And it had been many hours now since he had seen any of the familiar posters offering five hundred dollars reward for the apprehension or arrest of one Bronco Henry Williams.

Hours ago he had come to a little creek and observed where it splashed and gurgled over a four foot fall. Riding in under the fall he had caught water in his rolled up hat brim, slaked his thirst, and temporarily cooled the feverish wound.

Since the first several hours after escaping from the posse, Bronco had not traveled fast, but he had managed to keep to a more or less straight line, and many miles now lay behind him. During the night he had crossed one wide, thickly populated valley, but during the daylight hours he had kept well to the hills. Now the hills were playing out and another section of ranches confronted him, with the somewhat sizable town of Banner in the far distance.

AS THE foothills grew lower he altered his course sharply to the left. There was no use trying to skirt that string of farms and ranches extending farther than the eye could reach in either direction, but there was no profit in ramming square into the center of them either, and depriving himself of a line of retreat if the occasion required, and opportunity afforded. It was hard to keep his hungry and weary horse moving at right angles from the inviting green of the distant ranches. Then, crossing a low, flat-topped ridge that sloped gently away toward the valley floor, he came so abruptly upon what he sought that for a moment he blinked and shook his head to assure himself that he was not dreaming.

Below, on the head of a little creek, nestled the shack, makeshift corrals, and outbuildings of one of the country's innumerable and poverty stricken nesters. Nesters were usually shiftless, and seldom held in high esteem by prosperous and respected ranchers, but Bronco had often found them much to his liking. Many whom he had known, no more than half outlaws themselves, were not averse to basking in his reflected notoriety and sharing in his ill-gotten gains.

A fence barred his way, but a little farther along he encountered a gate which he was able to open without dismounting. As he approached, a woman, tagged by three small children, two boys and a girl, emerged from the vicinity of the outbuildings and Bronco intercepted them halfway to the house.

"Howdy, ma'am," he greeted and attempted the very awkward gesture, for him, of raising his hat. "Is the man of the place about?"

"No, he isn't," the woman answered pleasantly. "He went to town this morning and hasn't got back. Is there something you wished to see him about?"

"Uncle Dan died and left my daddy a lot of money," the youngest child, a boy of perhaps six, announced solemnly.

"Hush, Tommy," the woman said, and then laughed frankly at her own embarrassment. Bronco had the good grace to smile in sympathetic understanding.

"That'll be fine for you, won't it, Tommy?" he queried. .

"Mom says it won't last long," Tommy stated with dismal finality.

The oldest child, a girl of perhaps ten, promptly hustled him into the house from whence there presently issued a wail of distress.

"Not only that I was looking for a place to stop," Bronco said, "I shot myself in the leg this morning, and I've come about as far as I can. If I get off my horse now I'm pretty sure I won't be able to get back on, and he's about all in, too. We've been riding a long time."

"Oh!" The woman said and stepped around to the other side of the horse. "Oh, my goodness," she said again as she

observed the blood-soaked leg of Bronco's overalls. "Can't I help you off?"

"I guess you could help me off, lady, but I don't know about getting me back on again."

"We must get you into the house," she said warmly. "I'll go right into town and get the doctor, if you think you can get along with just the kids to wait on you. We haven't any near neighbors. Wait, we have a pair of crutches in the house, do you think you could use them?"

"I think so," Bronco said. "And don't bother about the doctor. The bone ain't broke. If I can rest up for a few days, I'll be all right. I don't want to bother you, but if there's some place you can stow me away where I'll be out of the road, I'll try not to be too much of a nuisance."

THE woman looked thoughtful for a moment. She had a keen, intelligent face. Somehow, Bronco had the feeling that he ought to know her, even though it had been many years since he had been in the vicinity of Banner. He watched her curiously. A great deal depended upon her decision about the doctor. He didn't flatter himself that she was fooled by his thin story about having shot himself.

"We have a spare bed in that shack yonder where my husband's brother sleeps when he happens to be here. Perhaps you'd be more comfortable there than in the house."

"That'll be dandy," Bronco said and following the woman rode his horse as close to the door as possible, while the remaining boy scampered into the house for the crutches.

Lifting himself on his hands while the woman removed his foot from the stirrup, Bronco managed to get his other leg over the horse's back and let himself down without bending the injured member. With the aid of the crutches he was able to navigate himself inside.

The shack was a low, single room affair, furnished only with bed, table and chair, but it was neat and clean. The bed was ready for occupancy.

"I'll get hot water, and bandages and things," the woman said. "And Jack will help you get ready for bed. If you need me, just call."

"That'll be fine," Bronco said, and smiled at the boy. "Jack and I'll get along great. I'm pretty good at dressing wounds myself, and Jack looks like a regular doctor. He'll likely have me out of here in time to help milk the cows in the morning."

The boy blushed in appreciation of the compliment, and went to work with a will helping Bronco divest himself of his boots and blood-soaked trousers. When his mother returned ten minutes later with a pan and pitcher of hot water, bandages and a bottle of lysol he met her at the door and took the things from her hands.

With his wound bathed, bandaged, and antisepticized, Bronco pointed out that there was nothing more that a doctor could have done. The bullet had drilled through the muscle of the upper leg, but it had not flattened and the hole was neat and clean. He was able to move about with the aid of the crutches, and by having a rope suspended from the rafters over the bed he was able to get up and down unaided. His first supper and breakfast was brought to him in bed, but thereafter he managed to take his meals with the family. But he knew that it would be many days before he would again be able to mount a horse.

The attitude of Mrs. Weston, which Bronco had soon learned was the woman's name, was decidedly pleasing, if puzzling. She was reservedly cordial, and asked no questions. Of her husband she said little, although little Tommy was more informative.

BEFORE Bronco had been on the place three days the children had come to accept him as a permanent fixture. He was a little puzzled at first by Tommy's

reiterated prideful characterization of his absent parent as a "no-good-guy," until it gradually dawned upon him that the youngster had accepted somebody else's appellation of Weston as praise of the highest order.

Bronco had gone to bed when he heard Weston arrive, but the man did not pay his respects to the self-invited guest until the family was astir the next morning.

Weston was a well set up, rather handsome man with a thin face and a pleasing manner which Bronco surmised was the result of early training rather than from any ingrained trait of character.

"My wife told me we had a visitor," he said in a voice entirely impersonal. "How are you making out?"

"Okay," Bronco said and decided that the fewer lies he told to this sharp-eyed, keen-faced fellow the fewer lies he would be caught in. "I expect I'm pretty much of a nuisance to Mrs. Weston, but I'm doin' fine, myself."

"Think nothing of it," Weston said hospitably. "My wife would rather have someone around than not. The kids are playing that you're Jesse James and that they're hiding you up and taking care of you. They're getting quite a kick out of it."

"I reckon Jesse James might have found a situation of this kind pretty much to his liking, at that," Bronco agreed. "But lately Tommy has been shootin' at me with a stick gun. I don't know what to make of that."

"Maybe, Tommy thinks he's Bob Ford," Weston laughed.

Weston was not fooled. Bronco knew that. It was doubtful if the fellow suspected that his guest was the notorious Bronco Hank Williams, but he would probably take steps to find out.

"Breakfast will be ready in a few minutes," Weston said. "I'll have to tend the horses, but I'll see you later." He stood by while Bronco hauled himself to his feet, without offering assistance, and then went out. Bronco took note that he had mentioned nothing about tending the half dozen milch cows from which, so far as he could determine, the family derived its only income. Tommy's designation of his dad, Bronco decided, was entirely accurate; but he was forced to admit that the fellow achieved it with something of a flourish.

"My dad's a gambler," Tommy informed Bronco, later in the morning. Then added pridefully, "He used to be rich."

"He wasn't either," Gracie disputed, and Bronco commented to himself that if Tommy grew up to become "no-good-guy" like his father it would not be through lack of discipline applied by his sister. "Mamma used to have lots of money," she informed Bronco, "but Daddy gambled it all away. Mamma's name used to be Waverly. Did you ever know Grandpa Waverly?"

BRONCO HANK gave an involuntary start. It was funny how a single word could sometimes ignite a whole train of recollections in a man's memory. Now he knew where he had seen Grace Weston before.

Many years ago, long before he had started his career as an outlaw, he had spent a whole summer riding for the Waverly outfit near Banner. Jim Waverly had not been called Grandpa then, but his only daughter, then not much older than this younger Gracie, had formed a great attachment for the stalwart young bronc stomper, Hank Williams. Sometimes, Bronco remembered, her ardent young affections had been a little embarrassing, yet it was one of the few pleasurable memories he had been able to cherish during his checkered career.

When he looked at his gaunt, weather-beaten features in the mirror he could see little resemblance to that Hank Williams of twenty years ago, but he wondered if Grace Weston could have recognized him. He wished, too, that he could know

whether or not she still remembered the case she had once had upon him.

"We're rich again now," Tommy's childish treble brought him gently back to the present. "Uncle Dan Weston died an' leff us five thousan' dollars."

"We ain't got it yet, an' Mom says Daddy'll gamble it all away before it can do us any good," Gracie said gloomily. Bronco had noticed before that the child was wise beyond her years.

They had had breakfast and Bronco was hobbling about on his crutches and enjoying the sunshine when Weston accosted him.

"I'll be going into town again in a day or two, I guess," he said. "If there's anything you want, I'll be glad to bring it out."

"If it ain't too much trouble, I wish you'd bring me a couple of shirts and a change of underwear," Bronco said. "I believe I'm wearing yours now."

"Yes, I found that out," Weston retorted, and stood waiting.

Bronco had a little silver in his pocket and seventy dollars in his wallet, a twenty dollar bill and a fifty. He hesitated only a moment, then forked over the fifty. He had sized his man up enough to be sure that he would never see any part of it again, unless it was the amount of his purchases; but experience had taught him that friendship from any source could be valuable, and he could not afford to be niggardly in bidding for it.

Weston accepted the bill with the overdone lack of interest, behind which the typical tinhorn gambler might seek to hide his emotions upon being dealt an ace in the hole.

But for all that his step was noticeably brisker a few minutes later.

"I haven't got the change with me," he said, as he pocketed the money, "I'll have to bring it to you from town."

"It's okay," Bronco told him, "and if you happen to need any part of it, don't be afraid to spend it."

Weston had said he might be going into town in a day or two, but in less than an hour he was on his way.

IT WAS more than a week before Weston returned. When he did he remained only a couple of days, and when he departed again he had Bronco's only remaining twenty in his pocket. Evidently the expected legacy had not yet arrived, but Weston assured him that he would soon be in funds, at which time the loan would promptly be repaid.

Bronco's leg was healing nicely and the wound gradually losing its soreness. Though he was not yet able to bend his knee enough to milk the cows, he was able to get around and help some with the other chores. Several times chance riders dropped by and stopped to pass a neighborly time of day with Mrs. Weston, and once two of them had stayed for dinner. Each time Bronco had retired to his bunk and avoided contact. He was sure that his presence had become known, even before little Tommy let it be known that he had been talked about.

"Are you an old friend of Mamma's?" Tommy asked on the occasion when the two riders had stopped for dinner. Mrs. Weston had tactfully sent Bronco's meal out to him by Gracie, and Tommy had tagged along.

"I reckon I am," Bronco sought to avoid as much as possible a direct answer. "I hope I'm kinda getting to be an old friend of all of you. Why?"

"Mamma told Buck Kearns and Sid Holly that you was," Tommy said.

"I'll say she's been a mighty good friend," Bronco said, knowing that anything he said to the kids would promptly be relayed to their mother.

"Are you an outlaw?" Tommy asked.

"Oh, no, nothing like that. Does your mother think I am?"

It was Gracie who answered breathlessly. "Oh, no. But Daddy said you might be. Daddy said you might even be Bronco Hank Williams, but Mamma said

that was foolish because she used to know Bronco Hank Williams, who used to work for Grandpa Waverly, and she said if you was Bronco Hank Williams she guessed she'd know it if anybody did."

In two weeks Bronco's wound had healed enough that he was able to do most of the chores unaided, and he even made a couple of trips into the timber with the ranch team and wagon after wood which he later chopped into stove lengths for the kitchen range. But he allowed another week to elapse before venturing to put himself in the saddle.

Weston had been home once since departing with Bronco's last green-back, but he had stayed only overnight, and since then Mrs. Weston had shown increasing strain and anxiety. Bronco knew as well as if he had actually seen the transaction that the hoped for legacy had arrived. It was not until he was saddled up and facing the uncomfortable moment of leave taking, that Mrs. Weston put into words so much as a hint of her anxiety.

"If there's anything I can ever do to repay you," Bronco was saying as he stood awkwardly fumbling his hat, embarassed by the kid's open distress at the parting of the ways, and the woman's frankly expressed regret.

She saved him further embarrassment by cutting him short.

"No," she said. "I don't want you to go away feeling that you owe us anything. It has always been a Waverly tradition never to accept pay for hospitality, and you've been more than welcome. But I do want you to hunt up Bill when you get to town and collect what money you've let him have. I know you've let him have money upon at least two occasions. He'll have it now, if you can get to him before those gamblers get it away from him, but I'm afraid he won't have it long."

"Oh, that's all right," Bronco started to argue. "It was no more than it would have cost me if I'd gone to a hospital, and it's certainly been a lot more pleasant here." He wanted to say he would have much preferred to have given the money to her so that she and the kids could have got the benefit, but decided that casting aspersions on her husband, no-good-guy that he was, would be in rather poor taste.

"It isn't that." The woman showed the spirit which all along Bronco had sensed she possessed. "It's bad enough for Bill to gamble away everything we have, but I'll not have him stoop to being a petty grafter. If you value my esteem at all, I want you to collar him and make him pay back the money you let him have."

Bronco knew he had been given a tough assignment, but he nodded and promised readily enough. There was no danger that Weston would volunteer the information that the promise had not been kept.

THE town of Banner had grown considerably since Bronco had been there before. Nestling close against the foot of a high, abrupt range of mountains it supported, or was supported by, not only a large ranch and range section, but also railroad shops of a sort. The railroad, sweeping up the valley, continued on for a few miles, and then doubled back to wind its way along the side of the mountain by means of several switchbacks until it passed over the top directly west of the town. It was said that one missing the train could, if well mounted, intercept it again where it went over the pass. Bronco could not see where this fact could ever be to his benefit, but it was upon such facts as these that he kept himself posted.

Actuated by lack of funds he obtained permission from the livery man where he stabled his horse to sleep in the barn, and then proceeded to get the lay of the land. Here he again encountered the reward notices, but the minions of the law had never secured a photograph of the man wanted, and the description was pleasingly vague. If he eyed others first and restrained from circulating too freely, there

was no more than the normal danger of being recognized. From his retreat in the livery stable loft he was able to go and come without his movements being observed.

He arrived in the middle of the afternoon, and by making discreet inquiry learned that Bill Weston was in a hotel room sleeping off the strain of an all night poker session. In fact inquiry was hardly necessary. The blooded poker game which had been raging for several nights was the general topic of conversation in almost every group.

Bronco retired to his hay loft to mull over the problem of recuperating his own diminished finances. Two alternatives presented themselves. He might touch up Bill Weston for a small sum, or sell his horse for cash and then steal another with which to take himself to other and more promising pastures. He was still pondering when the train came in a little before midnight, and a few minutes later with the help of a newly attached pusher engine left on its tortuous way to the top of the pass.

FOR a long time Bronco lay awake watching the flash of the headlights as they appeared and disappeared in and out of the heads of canyons and around intervening ridges until they finally reached the top, and the light of the pusher engine came sweeping back down with the speed and abandon of a drunken and blasphemous lightning bug.

Bronco looked at his watch after the engine had roared into the roundhouse, and after that he lay for a long time thinking.

Bronco failed to get an interview with Weston the next day, but from other sources he learned that the man was still gambling desperately, and many were the words of condemnation heaped upon his head.

"He went through a hundred thousand dollar outfit that belonged to his wife and it looks like that might have learned him something," one disgruntled citizen expressed himself profanely. "But now that he falls into a little money himself he blows it in the same way."

"Poker isn't a game with such fellows as that, it's a disease," some one else chimed in. "But he's in too deep to quit now. He'd just as well shoot the works while he's at it, and then blow his brains out. He'll be cleaned before morning. They'll really be puttin' on the pressure tonight, and he's just in the mood to go for it."

Bronco evinced enough interest to learn that the game was being held in an upstairs room. He asked no further questions, but by the nature of the establishment he knew that the room would have to be in the rear. Later he passed along the alley and observed that three windows opened on that end above a lean-to shed built against the back of the building. He meandered back to the barn and napped throughout the rest of the day.

At just what hour the game again got under way he did not know, but when he passed down the alley at eleven o'clock he observed a sliver of light showing beneath the edge of the drawn blind of one of the windows. The others he observed with satisfaction were darkened and apparently unoccupied.

HE HAD eaten supper some time before. He carefully sized up the various saddle horses tied along the hitch-rails.

A long-legged gray suited his fancy, but he noted a bay and a buckskin as second and third choice in case the gray might be ridden away before it came time for him to claim his selection. Then he returned to his hay loft bed, taking pains to have that action observed by the stable attendant. Here he knew was a chance for a slight slip-up, but against that he carried his blankets to a spot that would not readily be observed. The midnight train was

whistling to a stop when he carefully let himself out unseen by the stable man.

The gray horse was still there. Bronco mounted and rode down the street for a short distance and then entered the alley running back of the saloon.

The train had come to a stop, but Bronco waited until it was again under way, with the pusher engine puffing sturdily behind.

Tying the horse, he removed his boots and tied them securely to the saddle. He had already turned his coat and trousers inside out. Then mounting a barrel he climbed catlike to the roof of the shed and stole silently across it to the lighted window.

For a moment he stopped to make sure his mask was in place and that there was no tell-tale marks of identification about his person. Though the window had been raised, the blind was too closely drawn for him to see inside, but the sound of poker chips and scraps of conversation told him he was at the right place.

"Make it a jackpot and a hundred bucks to ante," he recognized the usually well modulated, but now harsh voice of Bill Weston.

"Okay, a jackpot she is," came another voice, followed by a general murmur of assent.

There was the sound of cards being shuffled and dealt, and then another voice, cool and composed. "Jacks, or better, to open. Anybody got openers?"

Ensued a moment of silence. Then, "All right, sweeten the pot, everybody who wants to stay, and we'll deal 'em again, if nobody has got openers."

"I have," Bronco Hank announced grimly, as with gun leveled he hurled the blind aside and lunged through the window. "Keep your seats, gentlemen, and loosers push. You're got with the goods."

There was a concerted gasp of surprise, but for the space of time that it took Bronco to take two quick strides no one moved. Then Bill Weston, seated with his back to the window, started to turn his head, and the man opposite leaned back and started to open a drawer under the table. Bronco's free hand swung in a short arch from the hip and landed squarely on the point of Weston's jaw and the man's head struck the floor as he pitched sidewise from his chair. Bronco's gun coming to rest point blank, halted the man across the table with the drawer half open. In it was revealed several large packages of bills and a gun. Slowly the men's hands rose, and as though to get a still better altitude they all came to their feet. At the outlaw's next command they moved over and faced the wall with their hands still elevated.

QUICKLY Bronco extracted the money and gun from the half opened drawer and stuffed the money inside his shirt together with the stacks of currency which reposed upon the table. It was a warm night and the players had been sitting in their shirt sleeves. Their coats hung on the backs of their chairs, but Bronco did not take time to rifle the pockets other than to assure himself that there were no other fire-arms than the one he had taken from the drawer. He backed softly to the window, then scooted down the slanting roof and dropped to the ground. A yell of alarm sounded as he swung into the saddle and pounded down the alley.

He had almost a mile of level going before starting the steep ascent to where the railroad, doubling back, finally crossed over the top of the mountain, and he let the gray horse out to a dead run. There was no possibility of concealing the direction he had taken, but he had selected his mount carefully, and with the benefit of long experience.

He had observed the night before that it had taken the train something like twenty-five minutes to reach the top where the pusher engine had been cut loose.

But the gray was fast, and the train

had to travel at least three times as far as he did, and all the way up a steep grade. He pushed the gray perhaps harder than he ever had any animal in his life, but he could hear the puffing of the two engines distressingly close before he saw the summit directly above him.

He leaped to the ground, tied the bridle reins around the saddle horn, and reached a cut bank along the track just as the rear end of the train rumbled past on its last sharp ascent.

HE crouched in the shadows a moment while the pusher engine passed, then made a leap and straddled the unused coupling block behind the coal tender. Only a minute later the train was out where it no longer needed assistance. The pusher was cut loose with the train still in motion, and as it backed out on the Y and started back to Banner its headlights momentarily picked up a party of horsemen laboriously making their way up the grade.

Bronco chuckled. Long before they could reach the top the train would be roaring down the other side. The posse would find the gray horse, and know very well that the bandit had made his getaway on the train.

As the pusher engine slowed for the roundhouse Bronco let go and rolled to the bottom of a short embankment. Picking himself up he turned his coat and trousers right side out again and made his way back to the now deserted livery stable. He climbed to the loft, and cupping a match in his hat looked at his watch. It showed a quarter of one.

He had been to the top of the mountain and back quicker, he reckoned, than anyone had ever been before.

Not long afterward he heard voices, and horses treading the floor below. He decided to waste no time in establishing an alibi. Removing his shirt and rumpling a little fresh hay in his hair, he tucked one pants leg into his boot, leaving the other out, and climbed sleepily down the ladder.

Several saddled horses were moving about trying to find stalls for themselves, while a group of men stood in the lighted doorway talking. The stable attendant was just hurrying in.

"Did you catch him?" the hostler asked in the tone of one hopeful of exciting news.

"Catch hell!" one of the returning possemen returned disgustedly. "I'm going to catch me a drink. Take care of my mustang, will you? The hombre took to the high croppin's. The last we seen of him he was leaping from peak to peak, and from crag to crag, like a wild mountain goat."

"If Borg Johnson thinks I'm goin' to kill my horse chasin' after his damned outlaws he's crazy besides havin' hysterics," said another posseman. "Come on, boys, let's rustle a drink, while they're still on the house."

"What's all the excitement?" Bronco strolled forward, and asked sleepily of the stableman as the others were about to depart.

"Good gosh, ain't you heard? Did you sleep through all that excitement? Somebody stuck up the poker game."

"You don't say!" Bronco stifled a yawn. "I heard a hell of a commotion, but I didn't know it was a stick-up. When did it happen?"

"A half hour, or an hour ago." Perhaps the stableman felt that this tramp cowhand wasn't much of an audience, but, even so, he found satisfaction in being able to impart exciting news. The others had gone on. "Some hombre climbed through an upstairs window and stuck up the poker game. It was a big game, too. Borg Johnson, and another professional, Hap Goddard, were takin' Bill Weston for his roll. The stick-up got away with all of that and a lot more besides."

"Anybody recognize him?" Bronco asked.

"No, they can't even agree on how big

he was, and he was masked so nobody saw his face."

"Anybody hurt? Was there any shooting?"

"No, no shootin'; but Bill Weston got knocked colder than a wedge."

"How come?" Bronco asked.

"The feller just slugged him. I guess he thought Bill was goin' for a gun or somethin'."

"Well, now that I know what it's all about, I guess I'd just as well go back to the hay." Bronco Hank Williams really did feel sleepy.

"Now would be a good time to be down town," the stableman hinted helpfully. "Free drinks are circulatin' pretty promiscuously."

"Nope, I don't think I'd better," Bronco declined. "After a couple of free drinks, I might get liberal and buy one, and I can't afford it. Don't let anyone take my horse. I think I'll start riding the chuck line in the morning."

Bronco knew that circulation in town, at best, had better be limited, and he did have a badly bruised left hand as a mark of identification.

It was more than an hour later, and many people had come and gone when the stable attendant climbed to the loft and rooted Bronco out of the hay to impart further news. The oulaw had put into execution the ruse which, it seemed, many people had thought of before. After sticking up the joint he had intercepted and climbed aboard the train at the top of the switch-back. All that was left for the officers to do now was to wire ahead and have the train searched, but by now it had already passed through several stations, at any one of which the outlaw might have got off of his own accord. Considering the time of the stick up, with the fact that the bandit had stolen a horse on which to make his getaway and which he had abandoned after intercepting the train, local opinion was unanimous that he had arrived in Banner on the same train on which he had ridden out in safety.

"IT WAS like this," Bronco attempted to justify, not himself, but Mrs. Weston in accepting what in a sense was really her own. "They were all gamblers, and gamblers can't kick when the high hand wins. It was a jackpot when I sat in. None of 'em had openers, but a six-gun beats jacks any old time. Just you see to it that Bill doesn't get his hands on the swag and we'll be sitting pretty."

"You can trust me to see to that—for the sake of the children," Mrs. Weston stated firmly, although there were tears in her eyes. She followed Bronco out to his horse. They looked deep into each other's eyes as they clasped hands.

"Good-by—Bronco," she said softly.

"Good-by—Gracie."

A minute later Bronco was riding into the direction from whence he had come. There was a pleasant feel of crisp, green currency in his pocket. He had known better than to offer Mrs. Weston a cent more than the five thousand dollars her husband had inherited.

Back at the yard gate where Mrs. Weston was still standing to get her emotions under control before facing her children, little Tommy stepped past her and pointed at the back of the disappearing Bronco.

"Mamma," he said, prompted by some childish impulse which no adult is ever able to fathom, "he's a real no-good-guy, ain't he?"

"Yes, Tommy," Mrs. Weston answered, "he is really and truly a no-good-guy." Suddenly covering her face with her apron she ran hurriedly into the house.

When It's a Case of Treasure Trove—All the Men of all the Seven Seas Come Flocking

FRENCHMAN'S GOLD

By R. V. GERY

Author of
"The Dutchman Meets the Devil," "The Dutchman Takes a Walk," etc.

I

STEVE BONNER, jackleg airman from the Kansas prairies, improbably flipping around the Southwestern Pacific, had never heard of the Frenchman, and still less of his gold.

He was a lean, tanned, snub-nosed organism, this Steve, with a cheery grin, a lack of concern for the morrow, and an ancient, battered, third-hand seaplane that carried him, miraculously, from island to island, ferrying goods, people, or messages --anything that would earn him pay. An odd customer to meet, riding the skies down in the Black Belt of Melanesia, but that is an odd locality anyway, where anything may happen and most things do; even Frenchmen like the one Steve Bonner encountered.

He was flying at four thousand feet in the middle of the afternoon, with weather clear and fine and visibility perfect, when the timing-gear of his venerable power-plant began acting up on him. The popping, backfiring, and general fracas among the machinery told Steve that it had happened again—another of his only too frequent set-downs—and he prudently reached out, cut the ignition, and looked for a landing-place below.

There was certainly no lack of dry ground. He was in the middle of a perfect maze of coral; islands, reefs, and lagoons lay out in the sunshine like a map, with the light wind ruffling the surface of the water and playing a rustling game in the tops of the palms. Steve cursed genially, thinking of the hours of finicky work with a spanner ahead of him, and let the plane's nose drop toward the nearest lagoon. It was wide and long, and at one end there appeared to be a sandy beach, almost overshadowed by the crowding trees.

Ten minutes later he was down, skittering along the smooth surface toward the little crescent of shore, and still muttering affectionate ribaldry to his engine's address.

And then all at once he stopped, peering, for there was a man awaiting him, there on the crisp white sand.

He was a big fellow, too, and striking in his appearance, with an enormous plastron of red beard cascading down over his chest, and a bright crimson cummerbund encircling his middle. He replied to Steve's wave of the hand by a quick, impatient

movement of one of his own, and as the seaplane's pontoons took the shore he advanced toward it.

"Trouble?" he called in a powerful bass. "Heard you floundering around, up top there—"

Steve disembarked with a few descriptive and adhesive phrases and introduced himself. The man shook hands, beaming at him out of a pair of very remarkable black eyes.

"Vickery here," he announced. "So you're one of these air pilots, eh? Interesting, that—first time I've had the pleasure of meeting one in the flesh. And that's what you trust your neck in?" His penetrating gaze took in the crippled plane. "Damned if I would, that's all!"

HE HAD an extraordinary fashion of jerking questions and statements out of the forest of his ginger beard, and his queerly incongruous eyes were certainly over-bright — bright as polished agate. Steve Bonner, taking him in, figured that here was probably some kind of nut—these seas were full of them, anyway—but a minor nut, sensible in most ways. He had a definite air about him, as if he knew what time of day it was all right; there was

nothing woozy in his sharp manner. Steve grinned at his last remark.

"Matter of taste, I guess," he hazarded. "All the same, there's times when I get thinking it's a mug's game. This is one of them."

He dragged out his tool-kit and inspected the hot engine with a grimace. Vickery continued his own keen-eyed absorption of the scene.

"Much the matter?" he inquired suddenly.

Steve shook his head. "Two-three hours fooling around," he said. "More, maybe. You never know, with this kind of so-and-so coffee-grinder."

The red-bearded man seemed amused. "Love your work, don't you?" he said with a touch of sarcasm. "I'd always heard you pilots ate and slept with your machines. Doesn't seem to be so, after all."

Steve glanced at him, but the mildly entertained expression had gone from his face and he was tugging thoughtfully at his beard. Yeah? Steve thought. Funny guy, hunh? He fell to work on the crippled engine, whistling. Vickery stood with his big hands thrust into his jacket pockets, looking at him. By and by he spoke again.

"What's your range?" he shot out. "I mean, how far will this thing fly?"

"Five-six hundred miles," Steve replied shortly. "If she holds up, that is—"

He continued to wrestle with the timing-gear, swearing briefly now and again as his fingers touched hot metal. Vickery remained where he was, poised and silent —watchful, Steve thought all at once. He was an odd creature, this huge-shouldered man— Suddenly Steve felt uncomfortable with him standing there behind him. He raised his head and turned round slowly.

"You figure this is interesting?" he said. "Engines and so on. And yet you wouldn't come up? How's that, brother?"

It was more to break that curious little tension than anything else that he had moved—but at once he saw what it was that had called him. Vickery was still on the sand there, his white-clad form outlined against the trees' dark green. But there was something behind him.

It was only a flash, the merest glimpse among the foliage—the glimpse of a face. Steve had the lightning impression that it was a young, oval face, and the still more suggestive notion that it was a woman's. But whether it was or no, whatever it was, it was grimacing at him; a grimace of fear, and horror, and quite certainly warning. That photographic glint between the heavy leaves registered with a thud on Steve's consciousness.

It registered too forcibly for Steve's immediate convenience, because, in spite of himself, he betrayed its impact. The man called Vickery was watching him, and now he grunted suddenly, as if making up his mind. A hand left his pocket, and there was a flat gun in it.

"Yes," he said softly. "It's interesting, Bonner—very interesting—"

He was smiling confidently, the white teeth showing among the copper hairs of his beard. Steve felt a wave of fury sweep over him at sight of those mocking black eyes and jumped at him. Vickery stepped aside, still smiling, and brought the pistol-barrel up in a quick, semi-circular sweep that took Steve flush on the temple. He crumpled, and went out like a light, there on the water-washed sand, with Vickery standing over him. The big man stood for an instant looking down — and then he whirled round, staring at the trees, with all the good-humor gone from his face. There was nothing to be seen there, but Vickery was muttering to himself as he bent over

Steve again—and the mutterings boded extremely ill to somebody.

II

STEVE BONNER came to himself in semi-darkness with a splitting ache in his head and a general notion that he had been in collision with a truck.

He lay quite still for a few moments, allowing his whirling senses to come to a standstill, and remembering—with a shock of enormous surprise—the chain of events that had brought him here. The place seemed to be some kind of a shed or outhouse, roughly knocked together of split palm-trunks, so that the daylight filtered into it through a dozen chinks and cracks. Steve observed that it was still daylight, and the sun was shining. It followed, therefore, that he had not been here long.

He staggered to his feet, supporting himself with a hand on the wall, and reconnoitered cautiously. Outside, he could see nothing except a piece of the lagoon and the corner of the beach. There were no sounds, either; the place was silent, and to all seeming deserted.

Steve began to work up a temper again. This was a form of amusement to which he was not in the last reconciled—although, in his years of barnstorming around the islands he had seen his fair share of violence and hard knocks. But there had been something about that long person with the whiskers that annoyed him—a large, smiling contempt, a certainty of himself, an airy superiority—

"Stuffed shirt!" Steve muttered angrily, and began to beat on the door and yell abuse.

He got no further than the first choice bundle of epithets, for the latch clicked, and the big red beard thrust itself into view. Vickery seemed to have been waiting outside — he also seemed to be as amused as ever.

"My dear fellow!" he protested. "Don't make such a damnable racket. It's not necessary, I assure you. I'm here, quite at your service."

Steve dished him up a few more compliments, red-hot on a platter, but Vickery only laughed.

"My dear chap!" was all he said. And then his manner altered like a flash, and the hand went to his pocket again.

"Be quiet!" he rasped. "I'll stand just so much and no more, and that's fair warning, Bonner. You're in what you Yanks call a spot, in case you don't know it, and privately I'd say chances of your getting out were pretty poor. So you just chew on that a while, my beauty!"

Steve glowered. "Talk sense!" he snapped. "You gone crazy?"

Vickery had turned to the door again, however, and now he raised his voice.

"Come on in," he said to someone unseen. "He's navigating now—"

They had been waiting there too, by the look of it, and they were an unpleasant surprise to Steve Bonner, this pair. Vickery, with his false good-humor, might possibly have been an eccentric, or even a madman—but there was nothing mad about these two. One of them was a wizen, twisted little fellow with a terrier's grin and a mouthful of broken teeth. He spat crudely at sight of Steve.

"Well, strike me saucy!" he exclaimed, in the broadest dialect of London River. "'E ain't much to look at, now, is 'e, for a bloomin' airman? Thought they was all perishin' 'eroes, so I did. This cove's nothin' to write 'ome about."

STEVE felt wicked words surging within him again, but suppressed them as the second man's personality broke on him, because this one was a curiosity in this place and these surroundings. He was a long, stoop-shouldered creature like a crane, with a crane's beak of a nose and big horn-rimmed glasses cocked askew on it before blindish, peering eyes. Steve got the impression, somehow, that here was a man of books, a scholar—and yet there

was a great deal more than that in his demeanor. He shuffled forward, rubbing thin, bony hands together, and subjected Steve to a close examination along the sides of his monstrous nose.

"Young man," he said all at once in a shrill, piping voice, "you are prepare', *hein,* to see somezings—somezings great, wonderful, *magnifique—*"

He was twitching with a peculiar kind of nervousness, Steve observed, and his broken French-English came from him spasmodically, as if he were ridden with some excitement. Vickery broke in on his ravings.

"Now, now," he chuckled, "easy, Paul, easy! Don't scare the gentleman, or he'll think there's something not just so about us, maybe—and we wouldn't have that for the world, I'm sure. We've to keep on the right side of Mr. Bonner, don't forget. He's going to be useful."

Steve had listened to this odd introduction with barely controlled impatience, but now he exploded.

"See here," he broke out, "let's get this straight. I don't know who you guys are or what you want—but you can count me out of it, whatever it is. I'm not playing, get me?"

Vickery appeared not to have heard him, for he proceeded, still with his maddening air of geniality.

"This," he said, indicating the cockney, "is Slade, Joe Slade to his acquaintances. He's something of a rounder, maybe, but he's proud of it—eh, Joe?—and between you and me he's quite tough. I wouldn't get across Joe if I were you, Mr. Bonner. And this," he turned to the birdlike Frenchman, "is our noble friend De Putron—he's a count, if it means a thing to you, but don't you flatter yourself he's what he looks like, because he isn't. Gentlemen, let me present Mr.—er, Stephen Bonner, of the United States. Mr. Bonner!"

His manner was an insufferable parody of a radio announcer's, and Steve turned crimson.

"Damn you—" he began.

Vickery put up a hand. "Oh, no," he said. "I wouldn't, Bonner — I really wouldn't. Y'know, there's not a thing to prevent me blowing a hole in you this minute, and then disposing of that plane of yours out there. Nobody'd be a sixpence the wiser, and—by the Lord Harry, my young friend, another word out of you and I'll do it!"

HE HAD the gun out again, and his big, booming voice had jumped an octave with the last sentence. Steve took the hint. This wasn't any situation to be monkeying around with, he felt, because that big red beard wagged as if it meant business and the paw that engulfed the automatic had a suggestive familiarity with such things.

Besides, he was desperately curious now —there was that face he had glimpsed out there among the trees. Steve discovered himself immensely intrigued all at once over that face.

"Oh, okay!" he said, relaxing. "Let's have it. What's the racket, gentlemen?"

Vickery grinned. "Thought you would," he observed. "But do be a bit careful, my dear chap—that tongue of yours will get you into trouble again, unless you're on the lookout. Now you can just listen to me—"

Slade, the venomous, twisted little Englishman, broke out suddenly.

"Don't you be a bloomin' fool, Tom!" he protested. "'E's a Yank, a lousy Yank, and if you don't know what that lot are, well, I do, that's all. Stoush 'im, says I!"

He stood straddle-legged, regarding Steve with concentrated malignity, but Vickery merely laughed at him and waved a hand.

"Lay off, lay off!" he said with crisp decision. "You Joe, that's enough of it. Bonner's our guest, remember — if he's good, that's to say—and we'll treat him as such. After all, Joe, you fat-witted cuckoo, he's going to be useful, isn't he?"

Slade grimaced, but the so-called count with the glasses took up the running.

"Useful!" he said, with his little whinny of high-pitched laughter. *"Pardieu, oui*—yes, he is to be useful, zis animal, eh? Or—'ow is it you say, monsieur the animal?—or else!"

Vickery chuckled. "Come on, Bonner," he said. "Never mind them—they're just a couple of cut-ups that like amusing themselves. We'll have a drink and then talk this business over. It's all quite simple, really."

III

SIMPLE or not, Steve Bonner found the next half hour interesting.

There was a house among the crowding palms, one of the usual type of South Seas bungalow, only far better kept, and luxurious in its appointments. On its wide veranda there was a table set, with wicker chairs and bright cushions, and books and magazines strewn about in careless profusion.

Vickery indicated a seat to Steve and began performing with bottles, siphons, and ice in the corner.

"By the way," he said after a moment, "I do hope that crack I had to give you, my dear chap—sorry and all that—I do hope it's not causing you any inconvenience. Would you like a little bromide, perhaps, instead of this?"

Steve grinned at him. His head was still more than a trifle inclined to lightness and he had a magnificent ache somewhere inside it, but not for the world would he have confessed to either shortcoming.

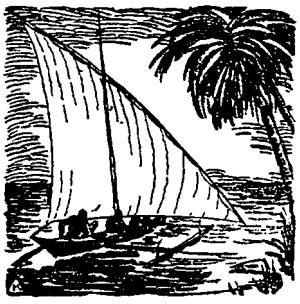
"Don't mind me," he said, reaching for the glass. "I'm not that easy put away. I've a tough skull—"

Vickery came and dropped his long body into a chair at Steve's side.

"Oh, tough?" he said. "I wouldn't put too much value on that tough business, if I were you, Bonner. It won't get you very far here. Now, listen— First off, here's a poser for you. Did you ever hear of a man by the name of Laperouse?"

He shot the question out over the rim of his glass, watching Steve out of those enigmatic, twinkling black eyes. Steve stared at him for an instant.

"La— Not that I remember," he said doubtfully. "Who is he anyway?"



De Putron, the tense, nervous man, almost sprang out of his seat with emotion.

"He say who *is* he!" he spluttered. *"Dieu de Dieu*—you hear that? He wish to know, name of a dog, who *is* he—Jean-François Galaup, Sieur de Laperouse, Admiral of France! He is dead, monsieur—dead these hundred-fifty years—"

"Yeah?" said Steve. "Okay, he's dead. Well, what about him?"

Vickery took a pull at his drink and deliberately set down the glass. "Here's what about him, Bonner," he said. "You've heard of Captain Cook, I reckon—all right, this Laperouse was a sort of French Cook, explorer, navigator, good deal of a fighter as well. He gave the English navy a few things to think about, in early days in the Pacific, just about the time they were beginning to grab everything in sight. And then he vanished—"

"Vanished?" Steve queried. "What d'ye mean—sank, or something?"

"That was the tale," said Vickery. "He left Botany Bay (Sydney, New South Wales to you) one morning in 1790, and that was the last of him and his crew. Forty years or so later, somebody came across some wreckage down around the

Santa Cruz and the Duffs across the way there—and that was Laperouse it seemed. Walked into a nest of the potpie boys there, the maneaters, and there was an end of him. At least, that's what the books said—"

De Putron cackled suddenly, and said something in caustic French about book-writers. Vickery grinned at him.

"All right, Paul," he said. "I'm coming to it. Paul's a crank, Bonner, just on this one subject. He don't believe that was Laperouse's wreckage they found. Anyway, wreckage was all they did find, and there's been no trace of gear, fittings or anything else—nor any word among the blacks that might mean a French admiral. Paul thought that wasn't the true tale of the old boy's finish; and oddly enough, Paul was right."

EVENING was falling and the shadows beginning to creep across the lagoon A little wind stole over the water and whispered among the palm-leaves overhead, and Steve Bonner, practical American, found himself nervous all at once. There had been an intensity in Vickery's last words that told of excitement, and even the bitter little cockney, Slade, was leaning forward agape.

"Go on," Steve said. "I suppose you guys have come across him—is that it?"

Vickery rose and went into the house. He returned in a moment with an object in his hand. "Take a look at that," he said.

Steve blinked at it. It was a short sword, or what was left of one—a highly ornamented, gold-chased little hilt, with things like ornamental arrowheads engraved on it, and a mere sliver of rusted blade.

"What is it?" he asked. Vickery smiled.

"Proof," he said. "That's an eighteenth-century French naval sword, Bonner, and there wasn't anybody in these seas then who'd be apt to carry one, except Laperouse himself. Paul here spotted where he finished up—and it's odd, because the old boy seems to have been quite a lad. He wasn't only an explorer, it seems—there was a touch of the Jolly Roger about him somewhere. Either he stopped a Dutchman up yonder, or looted an island, because he's got stuff aboard him that'd knock your eye out. And we're the only people that know a thing about it—and this is Australian waters!"

A light broke on Steve. "Sure," he said. "I get you. The old treasure-trove lay, eh? But why slug me over the bean about it? I'm not interfering, am I?"

"No, and yer won't!" cut in Slade. "So don't you go gettin' no funny ideas, Yank, see—"

Vickery waved him down. "Less of it, Joe!" he said pleasantly. "You want to know why you got slugged across the bean, as you put it, Bonner. All right, I'll tell you, my dear chap — you're important, that's why. You're going to fly the stuff out for us in that very convenient machine of yours out there. The damned Aussie police are getting curious. We don't propose to—er, cough up to that lot."

Steve grinned. "Hell!" he said. "Why didn't you say so, first off? Certainly I'll freight the stuff out for you—if the price is right. What's your offer?"

HE SPOKE coolly and crisply, as if this was a most ordinary piece of business, but he was tinglingly alert again all of a sudden. He had seen, framed in the window's dim oblong, that strained, oval face looking at him once more, and somehow it filled him with a determination to see what this very queer business really meant. It had been there for just an instant and then vanished again, but Steve had the indefinable impression again that he was being warned. Vickery's next words did little to reassure him.

"Offer?" he said. "My dear fellow, isn't there a little misunderstanding here? You don't imagine, surely, there's anything of a—well, financial nature for you in this deal? You do what you're told, Bonner,

and you'll be allowed to live, maybe; but that's all, I assure you. Try and remember where you are, my good Yank!"

There was a little silence again, broken only by a muttered "Stoush ther bleeder!" from Slade, and the rumble of surf on a distant reef. Steve felt the tension once more, and with it got the notion that he wanted, more than anything else in the world, to smash this big, sneering Vickery — to take that maddening, confident smile off his ginger-whiskered face once for all.

"All right," he said evenly. "As long as we know. You've got me, gentlemen, I guess, and there's nothing much I can do about it—"

Vickery exploded into an immense guffaw, slapping his thighs.

"Now that's what I call sense," he said. "I thought you'd see it, Bonner. You be good, and chances are you'll be all right yet— And now we'll have another drink on it and a mouthful to eat. Oh, Clair!"

He bellowed back suddenly over his shoulder, and there was a movement inside the house. She came to the door and stood there, a pale, glimmering figure in white.

"Yes, Tom?" she said in what was little more than a whisper. "What is it?"

Vickery flung his orders at her, almost without looking round. "And there'll be one extra," he added. "Company, my dear —so see it's properly served for once in a way, won't you?"

He addressed her as if he were speaking to a waitress in a Sydney honkytonk, and she flinched at every word.

"Yes, Tom," she said, and drifted away.

That supper, around the lamp in the screened, shadowy living-room, was a strange meal for Steve Bonner. The three man reached to the food characteristically —Vickery growing more genial and expansive after his smooth fashion, Slade guzzling shamelessly, and the Frenchman talking interminably of Laperouse and forgotten days here in the Pacific. Steve paid little attention to him or to Vickery's booming trivialities; he was altogether absorbed in a new problem—that of the girl.

SHE did not sit to eat with them, which was in itself startling enough. Of the three men, De Putron was the only one to show her the slightest courtesy—in his absent-minded way, a reflex probably from times when he might indeed have been of the French nobility. Slade confined himself to his plate mostly, but now and again he shot a beady, red-black glance in her direction that told tales; and Vickery, at the table's head, merely ordered her about like a serving-maid. It was not until the meal was three-quarters through that Steve, with a shock, caught a glimpse of the thin gold band on her finger, and began to get a notion of how the land lay.

Vickery pushed his plate away at last. "Now," he said, "let's look into this, Bonner. How much can that affair of yours carry at a load?"

Steve thought for a moment. "Depends on how far you want to go," he said. "A thousand pounds is about my limit—"

Vickery dragged out cigars and handed them round while the girl cleared the dishes and vanished into the kitchen.

"Yes," he said. "A thousand pounds, eh? And there's a passenger as well, to be sure. Just to see everything's all right. Slade, it'll be you, I think—you're lightest. Say eight-fifty pounds, then, pay-load. How's that, Paul?"

The Frenchman shrugged. "I would say," he observed, blinking, "that there is more than zat—much more. But we shall see, eh? Tomorrow we can commence, *non?* Ze sooner ze better, wiz zese *diable* police, *hein?*"

Vickery nodded and turned to Steve with a smile. "Well, there you are, Bonner," he said. "The trip's a short two hundred miles, and you'll have to take Joe here and as much of the stuff as you can. Joe'll tell you what to do with it—and see you back here without any monkey busi-

ness. We've got gas on the premises, so you needn't worry about that end of it. Anything else?"

He might have been discussing the most ordinary commercial transaction, except for that suggestive bulge in his right-hand coat pocket, and the steady, malignant glower of Joe Slade. Steve fell into his mood.

"No," he said. "Seems to be okay, all right. Where is the—er, stuff, by the way?"

Vickery rose, stretching. "You'd be surprised," he said laconically, and passed out into the back of the house. "Four in the morning, Joe," he called over his shoulder to Slade. "We'll have to get busy!"

The door closed behind him, and Slade snickered. "'Oo wouldn't be a bloomin' married man?" he remarked. "C'm'on, Yank—you come along o' me an' we'll doss down together. I'm in charge o' you, I am, and don't yer forget it, or I'll bust yer little neck, so help me. C'm'on, Froggy—we'll leave them two 'appy love-birds alone. Wouldn't interfere with 'em for the world, oh lor' love us, no!"

He strutted out into the dark, driving Steve Bonner before him.

IV

STEVE, locked securely in the same leaky shed as before, passed an unpleasant seven hours.

He was undergoing what was a completely new experience for his Middle-Western, assured self—the sensation of physical force, of compulsion. Nobody had ever stuck him up before, marched him about, locked him in, used the "or else" threat to him, and the novelty was a blisteringly uncomfortable one. Yet there was something stronger than irritation that kept him wakeful, chin in hands; two things, in fact.

One was his still increasing curiosity about this whole lay-out and its meaning. The other, to which he would never have dreamt of confessing, was Vickery's wife.

Steve had never, in all his wanderings, gone for the women—Sydneyside or up the islands here, they were all one to him, dynamite, an affair wise men left strictly

alone. But this pale, scared, shrinking girl—she wasn't any more—was a different matter, and he found himself, a good deal to his consternation, thinking about her and the smiling, soft-spoken Vickery up in the house there, and going hot all over about that situation. It was another very novel state of mind for Steve Bonner and he cursed profanely at himself for a fool.

Outside, right across his doorway, Joe Slade snored, with now and again a wakeful grumble and a half-choke. Steve wondered where he belonged in this set-up, and what was the mystery of Laperouse's treasure to be solved at dawn. He was still on that subject, sleepless and gummy-eyed, when Vickery's heavy footstep sounded, and Slade, growling reluctantly, scrambled to his feet.

"Slip down to the boat," Vickery said. "De Putron's there—I'll be along in a minute."

He clicked the key in the padlock and threw the door open, an immense figure against the still starlit sky. Steve peered at him for a moment uncertainly, before he recognized what it was he carried under one arm. It was a light diver's helmet—the kind of equipment used for shallow water work, and save for a pair of heavy lead-soled shoes and canvas drawers he was naked.

"Better come along," he said easily. "May want all the hands we've got, time we're finished."

Steve obeyed without a word, and they moved down a path to the beach. A quarter-mile along it, just at the root of a spit of coral jutting into the lagoon, there was a whaleboat waiting, with Slade amidships over a hand-pump, and De Putron fidgeting about on the sand. Vickery nudged Steve aboard, and they pushed off, skirting the coral.

"I suppose you're a bit curious," Vickery said humorously. "Well, there's no harm in telling you now. Laperouse seems to have run aground here—inside the lagoon—and probably got himself chopped by the blacks. His stuff's here though, all right, under twenty feet of water, and we let it stay there until you were good enough to happen along. No sense in giving the damned Aussies anything to go on."

"You've seen it?" queried Steve, interested in spite of himself.

Vickery took up the shining helmet. "What d'ye think, my dear chap?" he said. "I spent a good many hours down there, with a cold chisel and a crowbar, opening his strong-boxes, and it's lucky he'd iron ones. Oh, the stuff's there right enough, plenty of it. Easy, Joe, we're about right."

SLADE had been pulling gently at the oars, but now he ceased and the whaleboat slid to a stop on the quiet water. Vickery took a rapid glance about him, as if verifying a position from the barely visible trees ashore. Then he grunted and slipped the helmet over his big head, tucking the beard inside with care. Slade tightened the connections and tested the pump; the big man dropped over the whaler's stern and in a moment was on the bottom.

It was a queer, unearthly sight, Steve found, watching him moving around down there, his helmet and limbs living, gleaming outlines of phosphorescence, and the train of bubbles rising to the surface like a string of luminous pearls. Slade grunted at the hand-pump, and De Putron stared down into the depths as if fascinated, but nobody said a word for a long while.

Then the line was tugged, twice and violently. De Putron loosed a prodigious sigh.

"He is there!" he said shakily. "Now we see what we see, *messicurs*—the treasure of that old one, *hein?*"

He was trembling with excitement, and with his pointed nose and enormous spectacles, half-seen in the diffused light, he looked like some odd figment of an artist's imagination, leaning over the boat's side. Slade cackled with laughter, bending over the pump.

"Yus, you'll see it, Froggy," he observed. "All in good time, Mister—all in good time."

HE continued with his steady movements until Steve Bonner wondered what might be going on down there in the depths among the decayed bones of Laperouse's old vessel and De Putron tore at his sparse hair in suspense. Then it came—a rapid tug-tug-tug of the rope again, and Slade gave a raucous, excited little crow of triumph.

"'E's got it!" he said. "Go on—up with 'im, the two of yer. Don't go standin' around all day, be crimes!"

They swung on to the rope, Steve and the Frenchman, and in a few moments the round top of Vickery's helmet appeared. He reached out and grasped the short ladder hanging over the stern, and hauled himself up it one-handed. In the other fist he carried a stout bag and dropped it over the gunwale on to the flooring. De Putron pounced on it with a gasp, pulling a torch from his pocket—

A single flash was enough to show even Steve Bonner that the old navigator—if this spoil was his—had done well by himself somewhere.

They were gold coins of various patterns and sizes, blackened a good deal by exposure to salt water, but unmistakable enough by their very weight. Vickery had

managed to heave a couple of hundred of them from the sea-bottom—but he was panting with his exertions as he removed the helmet and stood dripping and looking down at them.

"How's that, gentlemen?" he breathed. "There's half a ton down there by the feel of it. And look at this, Paul—"

He picked out an object from the pile of discs and held it in the light of the torch. De Putron grabbed it with a hysterical French oath and began frantically rubbing at it with the skirts of his linen coat. It was an ornament of some kind, a hasped affair on a fragment of chain—and it was set with stones. They gaped at it in silence as the Frenchman's quivering fingers cleared it of slime. He looked up, blinking through the thick round lenses of his spectacles, and the Adam's apple in his stringy gullet jerked up and down like a plunger.

"Diamonds!" he said in a throttled voice. "*Mordieu*—diamonds!"

Vickery made a queer little noise that might have been anything from surprise to gratification, Steve figured. He was still staring down at the trinket in De Putron's hand when Vickery spoke, softly and incisively behind him.

"All right, Joe!" he said. "Now's your time—"

It happened so suddenly, with such shocking, dramatic speed that Steve Bonner stood paralyzed. De Putron was in the very act of calling down strange saints and deities to witness the miracle when Slade struck. The knife-handle protruded from the Frenchman's defenseless back, and he coughed once. Then he fell sprawling among the coins, and dawn, high and far-off in the pure sky, looked compassionately down on the murder.

V

STEVE BONNER staggered, and sat down on a thwart, feeling sick and dizzy. Vickery took no manner of notice of him, but picked up the rolling torch and bent over De Putron with it for a moment.

"Neat, Joe," he said admiringly. "Very pretty indeed. And now let's—er, dispose of him. Some of our friends, the sharks, outside there'll be glad enough to oblige, I'm sure—"

He pointed to the lagoon's smooth levels, mist-clouded and pearly, and took an oar. Slade pulled bow, and the whaler with its lugubrious burden moved quietly out from the reef. Vickery threw Steve a glance full of amused toleration.

"Sorry, my dear fellow," he said, "but one couldn't very well warn you. That's the worst of this kind of thing—it's apt to be distressingly crude now and again. And old Paul here had about exhausted his usefulness, after all."

He was swinging easily at the oar as he spoke, his tremendous shoulder-muscles a-ripple under the tanned skin. Steve said nothing; he was still dumb with the impact of that lightning-stroke, and there was a chill, bitter sensation in the pit of his stomach, the beginning of a surge of cold fury. He watched Vickery and Slade row rapidly out into the center of the lagoon and dump De Putron unceremoniously overboard. Slade retrieved his knife with a sour grin and a wink.

"Never know when this 'ere sort of darnin'-needle's goin' to come in handy," he remarked. Vickery dropped back to his seat again.

"Come on, pull!" he said. "It'll be broad daylight in an hour and we better get a full load up by then. Just in case the Aussies happen to butt in—"

IT WAS more than an hour of straining, sweating work, and the sun had already crawled up over the eastern horizon, a red, mist-veiled ball, before Vickery was content. He lugged off his helmet again and looked at the pile of stained metal on the floor-boards.

"Something like a third of it there," he said. "That'll do for a beginning, I fancy. Eh, Bonner?"

It was the first time he had addressed Steve for a long while, and by now the latter had got over his first shock, though his whole being still writhed inwardly. He glanced at the heap and nodded.

"Yeah, I guess," he said. "I got to fix that timing yet, though, don't forget. May take quite a while."

Vickery waved a hand. "Plenty of time," he said airily. "We'll cache this lot, and you can put the morning to it. But first there's breakfast—I don't know about you, but I'm deuced peckish!"

That was another meal Steve Bonner remembered for a long while afterwards. It was waiting for them when they went up to the house, and De Putron's empty place fairly shouted to the skies. But not a word was said, though Steve saw the girl catch her breath and clear the plates in a hurry. Steve himself merely picked at his food, but Vickery and the cockney ate like wolves. Steve wondered for the twentieth time what they might be thinking of, what plots and plans were taking shape inside their busy skulls. There was another killing there, for certain; Steve gathered himself together and swore by his gods that there was once where Vickery was not going to have his way.

The big man seemed to be perfectly aware of Steve's thoughts, for he was smiling broadly as he rose from the table.

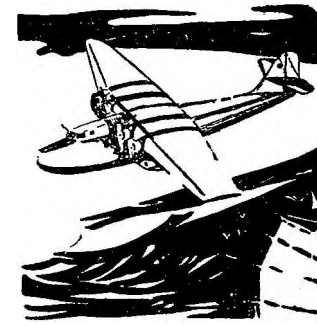
"Now," he said, "if you'll kindly take that dilly-dilly-duck look off your face, Bonner, and pay attention, we'll get to business."

He got out a map and spread it on the table, stabbing at it with a big forefinger.

"Here's us," he said shortly. "Right in the middle of the Australian mandate, as I said. Damned inconvenient, with their patrols — they're an officious bunch, the Aussies. But there's a way out now."

He slid his finger southward over the map's surface, where a red line zigzagged among dotted islands.

"That's our friends the French across there," he announced. "They're a different kind of a hairpin—live and let live, and all that, and they don't ask too many questions, bless 'em. We'll fly the stuff out there — Joe knows where; it'll take about three trips, I suppose. And then," he showed his teeth in another of his mordant grins, "then we'll be happy ever after!"



"Yus—an' chance it!" commented Slade, picking his teeth. "Some of us."

VICKERY turned on him. "Now, now!" he remonstrated. "Not so much of it, Joe. There's no need to get coarse—I'm sure everything will work out nicely. Mr. Bonner's not a fool, and we shan't have any trouble at all with him. I'll just take him down to the plane now—and you, Joe, can be packing. This way, Bonner; take a cigar and make yourself at home. Everything'll be quite all right, you'll see."

He ushered Steve out, still talking in his falsely amiable, sardonic fashion. Steve went; he was thinking furiously now, trying to analyze a sideways glance he had caught from the girl. She had been in the kitchen, and invisible to Vickery and Slade, and she had tried to tell Steve something—to get an urgent, desperate message across to him—as surely as the conversational Vickery was now at his elbow, prodding him.

Steve went about his task in a daze, while Vickery sat and watched him, mockingly.

"Not very communicative, eh?" he chaffed. "Don't let it get you down, my dear fellow—I really wouldn't if I were

you. These things happen to the best of us."

He was lounging on the sand, playing with his pistol, and never for an instant taking his flickering black eyes off Steve. The sun had risen high in the heaven, but there was a little breeze to temper it—a perfect flying day Steve reflected. He began to think about the journey ahead of him and to figure out ways and means of dealing with Joe Slade.

By and by the cockney came leisurely poling the whaleboat along the shallows, with the gold done up in a tight canvas bundle. Steve had got the plane's engine running again and was testing it in little spurts and races that scared the seabirds off the lagoon and made the old fabric tremble. Slade ran the whaler ashore alongside him.

"Crimes!" he observed in mock terror. "You ain't 'alf got a sweet music-box there, 'ave yer, cully? And 'ow long d'yer reckon it's goin' to take us, on this 'ere little joy-ride of ours?"

Steve had his calculations ready. "Three hours," he said curtly. "And I'll have to fill up before we start."

Vickery hauled himself to his feet, with a quick look at the sun.

"That's so, of course," he said. "All right, Joe, give us a hand—we'll hump the cans down here while our friend finishes tinkering. And then you'd better get away, if you're going to be back by dark. I don't suppose this is any country for flying blind."

He went off up the beach, with Slade at his heels, and Steve was left alone. He continued to work deftly for a few minutes, frowning at his thoughts—and then he climbed into the driver's seat to fiddle aimlessly with the throttle, awaiting Vickery's return. Something under the leather cushion attracted his attention—something hard, that had not been there yesterday. He thrust a hand down and brought it up with the object in it. It was a flat little automatic; a .32 only, nickel-plated and shining—but deadly enough for all that, a close-quarters killer.

STEVE sat gaping at it with dropped jaw for a moment. Then he nodded, for the explanation of that intent look of the girl's came to him. She must have stolen out in the dawn, while they were busied with the treasure, and left it there—

A way out, a way of escape. Steve turned hot and cold with the thing in his hands. He would keep this for Joe Slade's benefit, somewhere out over the sea. That low-browed, slinking little murderer was due for a surprise.

There was a great clanking and bumping up in the trees, and Steve hastily replaced the gun as the cockney appeared. He was lugging a wheeled affair after him —some species of ramshackle trolley— with gasoline cans on it, and he was in a vile temper.

"'Ere!" he yelled aggrievedly. "Come out o' that an' 'elp pull this blasted thing! Wodjer think I am—a ruddy dray-'orse?"

Steve climbed out grinning, and went to his assistance, man-handling the trolley down the beach. It was monstrously heavy and Slade was perspiring in rivers. He paused to catch his breath.

"Gawd's truth!" he spat. "Wodjer think o' that, now? 'Is Nibs, there, an' bust 'im for a ginger-whiskered so-an-so, finds 'e's got urgent business up at the 'ouse, soon's it comes to doin' a bit o' sweatin'. Urgent business my—!"

He stopped, twisting his head round and listening. There was a sound came through the trees—a sound that made Steve's blood run cold and the little hairs prickle on the back of his neck. Someone was crying up there in the house; it needed no second guess to tell who it was. Slade chuckled suddenly.

"So that's it!" he said. "'Avin' another crack at beatin' up the missus. Nice feller, 'e is—"

But Steve lost the end of it, for he had ripped out a curse and gone plunging

up the path. He was barehanded, for the little gun was behind him in the plane still —but there was a singing in his ears and his pulses hammered like pile-drivers—and it was thus that he raced round a corner and head-on into Vickery.

The big man was coming down the path with long strides, whistling and cracking his knuckles; but at sight of Steve he had his gun out in an instant and the good-humor left him.

Something wrong, Bonner?" he inquired. "I don't think so—you'd better get back to the plane there, and be quick about it."

"You damned hound!" Steve choked. "Let her alone, d'ye hear? Or I'll—"

He broke off, because even to his red-hot mind it was obvious that Vickery's finger, for all his assumed coolness, was fairly twitching on the trigger. Slowly he let his hands fall to his sides and it became an eyeing match. Vickery jerked the pistol-barrel.

"Get on!" he said gently. "Don't you be a bloody fool, Bonner!"

Steve whirled round on his heel and marched back to the plane. He climbed aboard without a word and stowed the canvas-bound gold parcels in the floor-boards.

Slade helped him fill the tanks, with Vickery smiling hatefully in the background, arms folded, and the pistol still dangling from one hand. Then he returned to the cockpit and the feel of that comforting lump of metal under the cushions.

"All right," he said briefly. "Let's go."

Slade had been whispering and nodding to Vickery, and now he came down the sand and hauled himself into the little cabin. For the first time he, too, carried a gun, and touched Steve with its cold barrel on the nape.

"Let 'er rip, cully!" he said playfully. "An' don't forget you got this little feller a-whisperin' in your ear. I wouldn't annoy 'im—not if I was you. 'E's poison, this cove is!"

VI

IT WAS mid-afternoon, and the ancient plane had put most of a hundred miles behind her before Steve spotted the island-group marked on Vickery's chart.

It was characteristic of this nook of Melanesia, a volcanic outcrop in place of the coral, steep-to, and clothed with green halfway up its sides. Slade poked Steve with the gun-muzzle and pointed downwards.

In ten minutes they were ashore and Slade was dragging the heavy bag over the side.

"Gotta hurry, eh?" he grinned. "Hump yerself, matey—"

He had the pistol thrust into his belt, and Steve could have shot him then and there. But an idea, a scheme, had been slowly crystallizing in his brain for hours now, and he let the gun under the seat stay where it was. Joe Slade was suddenly precious to him, precious beyond rubies. He chuckled inwardly as he helped the cockney dispose of the package of gold.

He was still chuckling, much later, when the little plane's nose dipped once more to the lagoon. The sun had dropped just below the horizon, and the smooth surface was mysterious with shadows, ghostlike under the rising mist. Steve taxied skilfully ashore to find Vickery waiting, a tall pillar of a figure in the dusk.

"All right?" he called to Slade. "No trouble, eh?"

Slade spat and put his pistol away. "Trouble?" he queried comically. "Wodjer mean, trouble? 'im and me, we're just like that—ain't we, Yank?"

He held up two fingers and winked dissolutely at Steve, out already with the plane's mooring. Vickery seemed to have recovered his old fraudulent composure and his gun was no longer in evidence. Steve's stomach turned over at sight of him, but the big man was friendly enough.

"Oh, he's sensible, now and then," he

observed. "Might save his hide yet, you never know. If he's careful, that is—"

THERE was the thinly veiled, half-contemptuous menace again, but Steve let it slide off him now. He had other matters filling his mind as they went up to the house—matters that astonished even himself. He had not figured it possible that Steve Bonner, jackleg airman out of Kansas, could entertain such chilly, uncomfortable notions of assassination.

In the lamp-lit room there was another meal, and now Vickery proved to be in a contrary, teasing humor. His wit, biting and offensive, flickered and stabbed, so that Joe Slade grew sulky and vicious as a mongrel cur, and even Slade had his troubles keeping his temper. He had intercepted another glance from the girl, a glance that held puzzlement and a beseeching question and plenty beside—there were bruises visible that made things go momentarily black for him—and he wanted a word with her; a single instant's talk.

Impossible, under Vickery's eye; but Steve waited patiently for the breaks. Something was due to happen, with the red-beard in his present mood.

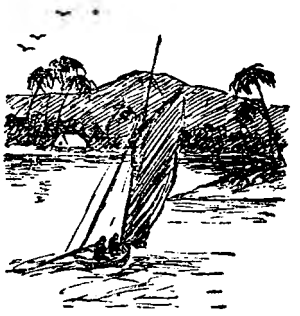
It happened with startling suddenness. Vickery went on, riding Slade with the poisoned spur of his tongue, and the cockney exploded all at once. He kicked his chair aside and was on his feet, clutching the knife.

"Gawd's truth!" he growled. "I'll fix yer, yer silly *barnshoot*—"

Steve drew back, wondering if, after all, this affair was about to settle itself—but he had reckoned without Vickery, it seemed. The big man moved like a streak of light; he shot out his immense fist and knocked the knife spinning out of Slade's hand. Then he laid general hold on him and dragged him squirming and cursing across the supper-table into his octopus embrace.

"Joe," he said, "a little cool-off won't do you any harm, my boy!"

Shaking all over with laughter, he picked Slade up and strode off into the veranda. His heavy footsteps were audible for a moment pounding down the steps and away toward the path. Steve whirled round hastily; the girl was there, looking at him, hand to mouth.



"Did you find it?" she said in a tense whisper—and then, in a kind of wail, "Why did you come back? They're going to kill you—"

Steve grinned at her. "Not on your life!" he said reassuringly. "Matter of fact, sister, it's the other way on. They don't figure I'm armed." He paused a moment thoughtfully. "But there's this, though: how d'you feel about it? He's your husband, after all. Want him attended to?"

SHE stood looking at him for a moment, and the bruises on her neck and arms were shockingly clear in the lamplight. Outside, there was the sudden pad of footsteps again and she ducked back into the shadows of the kitchen, but Steve had got his answer. If ever relief and the beginnings of hope shone in a face, it had been there.

Vickery entered, whistling softly and full of little quirks and smiles, to find Steve still sitting at the table. He dropped into his own chair and poured himself a drink.

"That little rat!" he chuckled. "Well, he's a drowned rat now all right. I pitched him in the lagoon—"

He sat at the table head, smoking, sipping his drink, and from time to time

breaking into reminiscent cackles of laughter. Steve, with his pistol still cached out there in the plane, fretted inwardly at the chance that must be let go by because this enemy at any rate was relaxed, he figured, and off his guard. Vickery began talking lightly of this and that, with never a glance backward toward the veranda. Steve found himself half-admiring his cool self-possession—for Slade would be out there in the darkness, raging, beyond a doubt.

Half an hour passed thus, and Steve summed up his plans. Tomorrow at dawn there would be the diving business out at the reef again; but this time it was his solid intention to be armed and ready. He had concentrated on that moment since the afternoon's flight—the time when Slade and Vickery would certainly be separate for a little space. Steve dramatized that occasion confidently. So that he did not observe Vickery's black eyes on him and their sudden sharp twinkle as he heaved himself round.

"Got it all settled, Bonner?" he inquired softly. "Pretty little scheme, isn't it? Only, my dear fellow, you've forgotten something."

Steve sat thunderstruck, swallowing. The merriment was still in Vickery's broad face, and he was shaking all over with it as he put his hand in his pocket.

"You damned fool!" he said, and opened his great palm, with the little nickel-plated automatic lying in it.

VII

STEVE was numb, unable to say a word. There was a snicker from the doorway, and Slade entered, swaggering and grinning; he was dry as a bone, and full of malicious triumph.

"Ah?" he said. "Funny cove, eh? Thought you was goin' to do the dirty, did yer? Well, come again, matey—come again. You gotter be a damn sight wider awake before you pulls any little monkeyshines like that 'ereabouts!"

Vickery slipped the gun back into his pocket again, and affected deep thought, running his fingers through his orange beard.

"Y'know, my dear fellow," he rumbled, "I don't know what to do about this—upon my word, I don't. You defeat me, really. Here you get the chance of saving your silly skin, just by doing what you're told and being amiable about it—and what happens? Why, you and my lovely wife put your heads together to do me in—don't waste your breath trying to keep her out of it, by the way, because I'm perfectly well aware how you got that pistol. And now I've to deal with you, I suppose—the pair of you. It's an infernal nuisance just now, I assure you—"

He sighed heavily, wagging his great head in mock despair. Steve found his tongue, thickly, to croak defiance.

"Go ahead," he said. "Take it out on me, though—I put Mrs. Vickery up to it."

He continued to shake his head. "You're a poor liar," he remarked. "Eh, Clair? What's your angle on all this, my dear? Our young friend's being heroic, isn't he?"

She had come right into the room now and was leaning against the wall, supporting herself with outspread hands. Her dark-rimmed eyes were like saucers, fixed on Vickery and watching for his next movement—dull and dead, with that newborn flicker of hope extinguished in them. Vickery stared at her dispassionately for a moment and then turned back to Steve.

"The lady's a little upset," he observed. "Conscience, perhaps I'll talk to her later. But I'm damned if I know what I'm going to do with you, Bonner. It's all very difficult."

HE WAS obviously enjoying himself, playing cat-and-mouse with his victims. Steve waited dully for him to leap into action and make an end, and Slade's evil, gap-toothed face across the table grew

misty and far away. Only Clair Vickery's chalk-white oval seemed fixed, like a tragic mask pinned to the wall. Steve heard the thumping of his own heart—

And then he froze, for he heard something else. From somewhere to seaward, out on the still lagoon, there came the steady mutter of an engine. Slade heard it, too, for he leaped to his feet with a curse.

"The coppers!" he spat out. "The bleedin' Aussies—"

Vickery never moved. A momentary frown appeared on his wide forehead, and his eyes roved quietly from Steve to his wife and back again.

"Yes," he said. "I wouldn't be surprised if you weren't right, Joe. Dashed unconventional time to come calling, what? And they'll see Bonner's plane, of course. So he's got to stay where he is—and lie like a little gentleman. Got that, Bonner? You're here on a friendly visit—and De Putron's gone to Malaita, if they ask—and you never heard a whisper of Laperouse, eh? Better be getting a tale ready because if they don't believe you, it's not you that's going to die. I give you my word on that, anyhow!"

He was looking directly at his wife, and there was no mistaking his meaning, or his intentions. Steve felt himself beaten—checkmated in a single move, by an expert. He nodded.

"Okay," he said. "You win. We'll settle this later—"

Vickery grinned. "Oh dear me, yes!" he murmured. And to his wife, "To bed, my angel. You're tired—too tired to receive the gentlemen. I'll make your apologies."

She went, fumbling her way blindly along the wall, as if she were nearly dropping from strain. Vickery quite composedly poured himself another drink; he had not stirred from where he sat.

"Joe," he said, "you go down the beach and act innocent. And as for you, Bonner," the edge crept into his voice again, "don't you forget—you've got Clair's life on the tip of your tongue. Just handle yourself accordingly, because I mean it."

"Damn you!" said Steve, and left it at that.

Thus, it was a pair of very friendly souls that the Australians discovered, sitting over the remains of their evening meal. Vickery glanced round at the footsteps on the veranda, with a most effective start of surprise.

"Well, upon my word!" he exclaimed, rising. "Where did you spring from, gentlemen? We never heard you— Sit down and take a little something, do. You're working late, surely?"

The policemen — there were three of them, and they were typically hard-boiled cases—took his nonchalant invitation full on the button. They explained, at some length, that there had been rumors—that they had instructions—that there was a question of treasure-trove and so forth; and Vickery merely stared at them. Finally he leaned back and burst into a gale of laughter.

"My dear fellows!" he said. "Somebody's been stringing you. I've heard plenty of tales about old Laperouse but this is a new variety. Where'd you get your information from, if I might ask?"

THEY boggled at that, although they were plainly staggered by his manner. After a while, over long and powerful drinks, they hinted, almost diffidently, that their orders involved a search, and the sergeant produced a warrant. Vickery skimmed it over with a lift of the eyebrows.

"Dear me!" he observed. "Very well, gentlemen—anything you say, to be sure. I may have a word with the Administrator later, but in the meantime, make yourselves at home. No, I won't come with you; better not, all things considered. Slade here'll show you anything you need—and Mr. Bonner and I'll wait here till you're—er, satisfied."

He sat stiffly, the picture of polite annoyance, until they had gone out; and then his features relaxed into an expression of pure devilment.

"How's that?" he whispered to Steve. "Always take the high hand with the law, my boy—they don't know what to make of it!"

He fell to twirling his glass gently between his fingers and manufacturing small talk for the benefit of any listener. Steve, in spite of himself, had no course but to respond; for there was a lurking look in Vickery's eyes, and from where he sat he commanded his wife's door. For an hour Steve sat and perspired—and then the Australians returned. The sergeant saluted at the doorway.

"We'll be going, sir," he said huffily. "Seems there's been a mistake, somewhere."

Vickery grunted and dismissed them. He sat for a while listening to the beat of their launch's engine, heading for the gap in the lagoon. Then he began to laugh, and this time there was no play-acting in his mirth. He held his ribs and howled, while Slade looked on, transfixed.

"Well, strike me!" he remarked fervently. "I seen some things in my time, but that's the ruddy limit. So help me it is. And now," he licked his lips, "wot's goin' to be done to little Willie 'ere? It's about time 'e took 'is little pill, I'd say."

Vickery recovered himself abruptly. "Joe," he said, "you're just about half-baked, and the rest's not sensible. I suppose you don't think those fellows'll go back to their damned headquarters, eh? And report, eh? And get sent back here with a flea in their ear, eh? Why, you damned lunatic, we'll have the whole outfit down on us in a couple of days. And yet you want to give our friend here the bullet? Not I—he's much too valuable—for a while!"

Slade gaped, scratching his head. "Yus," he agreed doubtfully. "There would be that, too. But you watch him, see—'e's a skrimshanker, and 'e'll be up to somethin', sure pop!"

Vickery drew meditatively on his cigar. "Oh, I think not," he said placidly. "He's an American gentleman, Joe—and he happens to be about half in love with that wife of mine already. He'll be good, Joseph, for just as long as we want him. It's a very neat little situation, come to think of it. Yes, it's distinctly got its points! Eh, Mr. Bonner?"

VIII

STEVE sat on an upturned barrel in the dark, chewing his nails.

They had returned him to the musty shed, both of them in high good-humor and full of themselves, and left him there behind a strong cross-bar and a padlock the size of a dinner-plate. Vickery, after a few remarks in his best sardonic style, had gone off to the house again, and Slade, reminding Steve to be good and say his little prayers, had fallen asleep as before, his snores resounding to high heaven. It was two in the morning by Steve's wrist-watch—and he was still blankly wondering what came next.

There seemed to be no answer to that mocking query. He could, to be sure, refuse to pilot the plane—consign the pair of them to ultimate hell—but Vickery had one instant, effective reply to that. Steve toyed drearily with the idea of crashing Slade, somewhere on tomorrow's trip, and dismissed that as impractical, story-book, and getting nowhere with the main problem, which was—he admitted without a flush now—Clair Vickery.

He told himself for the hundredth time that she meant nothing to him, and for the hundredth time knew himself for a faker, a self-deceiver, kidding along. He had to get clear, and get her clear as well, or never look at himself again.

"Hell!" Steve muttered, getting up and pacing the uneven floor, his brow corrugated in thought.

Something stirred in the dark — not Slade, but inside the building — and he froze. It moved again, rustling along by the wall among barrels and packages; a rat, Steve figured. The islands were full of them, traveling mysteriously from beach to beach, garbage-hunters, looters of warehouses. Steve watched him for a moment, idly; he could see his eyes, green pin-pricks in the dark.

Something had attracted him, for he moved directly, as if sure of his ground, and Steve heard the sound of subdued nibbling. He had something to eat down there, this visitor—something tasty, by his steady feeding. Steve, curiously, went over into the corner to see what this attraction might be, and the rat vanished with a scurry. Steve thrust a hand down to explore.

NEXT second he had frozen again, stiff and pop-eyed in the darkness. The rat and its feast were forgotten—for his brain was leaping ahead, frenziedly, away out of this into the open. His fingers had closed on an article familiar to him as Friday. It was a common, cheap, rusty blowtorch, and as Steve grabbed it he felt the heart-warming cluck and gurgle of the fluid within it.

Steve fumbled shakily in his pockets, and swore with frenzied relief as he encountered what he sought—a few matches, snuggled in the seams. He sat down heavily on his barrel and let his mechanic's hands give him news of his prize. A minute and he was grinning delightedly, for the thing worked. He sniffed luxuriously at the gasoline-odor and began to figure.

It was three by his watch now, and Slade still snored and rootled outside the door. In a while there would be a repetition of yesterday morning; Vickery would come down from the house to awaken him, and the diving session would start again. Steve frowned, groping for the answer to his problem, and snapped his fingers as it occurred to him. He began to bang on the door furiously and yell at the top of his voice.

Slade woke up, in a villainous temper. "'Ere!" he fumed. "Wot the 'ell's all this? Keep quiet, can't yer?"

Steve replied with a swift and vivid sketch of Slade, his appearance, manners, and morals, couched in terms that would have made a bucko mate blush. They failed to amuse Slade, however.

"Wot's that?" he demanded. "Gettin' nasty, eh? You watch out, Yank, or you'll get somethin' you ain't lookin' for. I'll fix you—"

"Yeah?" Steve howled. "You an' who else, you louse, you silly swine, you jumped-up—"

He descended into the abysmal depths, to the words and expressions that burn and cleave and adhere, to the statements and animadversions that even a smile cannot excuse. Slade lost his temper after a while and returned the language in kind, while Steve, inwardly consumed, rattled the door and swore luridly what he would do if he got out. It developed into a remarkable uproar, and in no time at all had Vickery on the scene.

"Now, now!" he said testily. "What the devil's going on here?"

Steve opened up again, rending and tearing, full of threats and magnificence. Vickery cocked his head on one side and looked at Slade.

"Quite annoyed, eh?" Steve heard him say. "All right, let him be. He'll soon get tired of that. Come on, we'll go down to the reef. If he's not behaving when we come back, I'll attend to him. Just check that padlock, will you?"

Slade obeyed, while Steve, on the other side of the panels, gave him a final exhibition of abuse. Then their footsteps died away and Steve fell back panting.

"Okay!" he gasped. "Just a bit, fellows—"

NEVERTHELESS, it was quite a while before he lit the torch, cautiously and muffling its roar with an empty box. Once under way, the task was easy—he cut a neat, semi-circular hole in the wall at ground level, prayed fervently that nobody would see the wisp of smoke that went up, and slipped through it. A moment, and he was darting for the house.

The place was in darkness and Vickery's room locked. Steve scratched on the door and listened; there was a movement within, and a stifled cry as he whispered his name. She came quickly across the room, and he could hear her breathing fast and hard.

"Easy!" he muttered. "Where's the key?"

"He—he's got it," she said. Steve cursed and made up his mind.

"Stand clear!" he said, and ripped the lock free with a thrust of his shoulder. She fell against him, half-fainting, but Steve shook her into consciousness again.

"Listen," he said. "Get some clothes on, kid—we're going out of this. Hurry!"

He thrust her back into the room again, and turned to look about him. There were no arms to be seen and Clair only shook her head dumbly in answer to his questions. She was almost stiff with fright and shock and Steve finally had to pick her up bodily. Half-bent double under her clinging weight, he moved out into the darkness.

It was a while before dawn yet, but the mists had begun to rise from the lagoon, and the beach and water were veiled in their thin mantle. Steve's plane, looking twice its size in that eerie medium, still lay nosing the sand; he crept up to it, worked the cabin door loose, and thrust Clair bodily inside. Then he shoved the floats free and reached over to the throttle. A sudden, frenzied exclamation tore itself from him.

"The damned twister!"

Vickery—there was no doubt of the hand—had been before him at the plane. He had simply unscrewed the little lever and taken it away. Without it, the pilot was helpless as if there had been no engine in front of him; Steve remembered with a tight grin Vickery's pretense at knowing nothing of mechanics.

"Oh yeah?" he muttered. "Oh yeah, big boy?"

He glanced into the cabin. Clair was sitting in the rear seat, her eyes closed, her head fallen forward—out, for the time being, Steve told himself. He bent his head, listening for sounds in the clinging, muffling mist, and in a moment he caught them, the faint creak and rattle of Slade's hand-pump. Vickery was down under, groping among the bones of Laperouse's old vessel—

Steve looked at his bare hands, caught up the first weapon that dropped into them, a twelve-inch Stillson, and was away along the shore like a ghost. Slade's pump continued to beat out its rhythm out there by the jutting horn of coral; the cockney sucked his teeth and now and again whistled a lugubrious tune. His mind was full of the gold that already lay heaped at his feet, of London River and the brightly lit pubs there, of music-halls and unlimited swillings in liquor, and girls—

SO THAT he never saw, or heard, the shape that came edging along the coral behind him. He never saw Steve look at the back of his skull across the little gulf of lapping, gurgling lagoon water between boat and reef. Or Steve's mouth tighten again into that grin, and his hand go back, poised for a throw.

Joe Slade never saw any of this—and then he didn't see much at all, except blinding stars and suns and galaxies ex-

ploding before his eyes. The twelve-inch wrench hit him square across the base of the skull, with a soft, crackling thump that said finish; and Joe Slade dropped over the pump-handle like a limp sack. Steve was in the boat before his relaxed form had time to slide to the floor.

He caught the pump-handle and worked it for an instant, pushing the cockney aside. Then he reached down, jerked the pistol out of Slade's waistbelt and cocked it. And then, finally, he stopped pumping and sat there, waiting, waiting—

Not for long. There came an agitated tug on the line, and another and another, as Vickery on the sea-bottom felt the air-flow cease inside his helmet. Steve rose to his feet, with the gun on a thwart before him, and took a purchase on the line. Slowly he heaved it in.

The top of Vickery's helmet broke surface, but his hands had been visible before that, scrabbling hurriedly at the rungs of the ladder. Steve grinned palely at them, for they were the hands of someone very uncomfortable indeed—someone half-suffocating and in a panic. He took a careful half-hitch with the line around the thwart, picked up the gun, and stood back. Vickery's fingers clawed hastily at the helmet-screws, loosening them.

And then they stopped. Steve saw his face, a white blur through the heavy glass window, staring at him. His huge chest rose and fell, sucking in air. Steve pointed the gun at him.

"Take it off!" he called. "And don't touch that ladder—"

Vickery swept the polished metal from his head and it dropped with a swirl at his side. His beard hung down over his breast, matted and dripping, afloat in the water. His mouth opened and shut, as if he were trying to say something, and his dark eyes were pits of shadow. There was an instant's silence, while he took in the situation.

"Ah?" he said. "You, eh, Bonner? Now how in the devil did all this happen?"

"Where's that throttle-lever?" Steve demanded.

Vickery actually chuckled, and Steve almost admired him then and there for that defiant gesture.

"Where's my wife?" he countered. "My charming wife, Bonner? You've got her, of course. It looks to me as if we might bargain, almost. I'll listen to your proposition."

Magnificent, Steve admitted, in its cool assurance, although he could see the rope cutting painfully into Vickery's flesh, and his teeth were chattering like castanets. Steve kept the gun trained straight at the big golden head.

"No proposition," he said. "You're beyond that, Vickery—try it on the police. I want that lever—"

AGAIN there was the silence, a staring-match. Steve found himself growing irritated, indefinably, because Vickery in the water there was still his old self—large, jocose, contemptuous. He was imposing his personality on Steve—and was there, or was there not, some kind of a dragging, mesmeric quality about those deep-set, glowing eyes. Steve felt himself going—

"Let's see your hands!" he called sharply. "Up with 'em!"

A second, a split second, too late. Vickery's hands had been down under water at his belt. His long right arm flashed suddenly, up and out of the water, and something flew glittering and dripping, directly at Steve's face. It slashed him across the eyebrows, and he tottered—but not before his finger on the trigger had twitched convulsively, and the shot gone banging and echoing in the mist across the still lagoon.

Steve hauled himself to his feet, wondering if this, after all, were blindness. There was a veil before his eyes, dimming them; he passed a bare arm across his brow, and brought it away red and smeared. The knife lay at his feet—Slade's vicious toadsticker Vickery had taken down

for the sharks; it had gashed him deep, clear to the frontal bone, and Steve could feel the salt water already bite and tingle in the wound.

He shook his head, and it cleared. The rope, Vickery's rope, hung down over the stern, straight and stiff now; Steve blinked at it for an instant, and then crept aft, the gun held out before him. He grasped the tight hemp and drew it slowly up, until its burden appeared momentarily on the surface. Then he let go; there was no need for a second look at that.

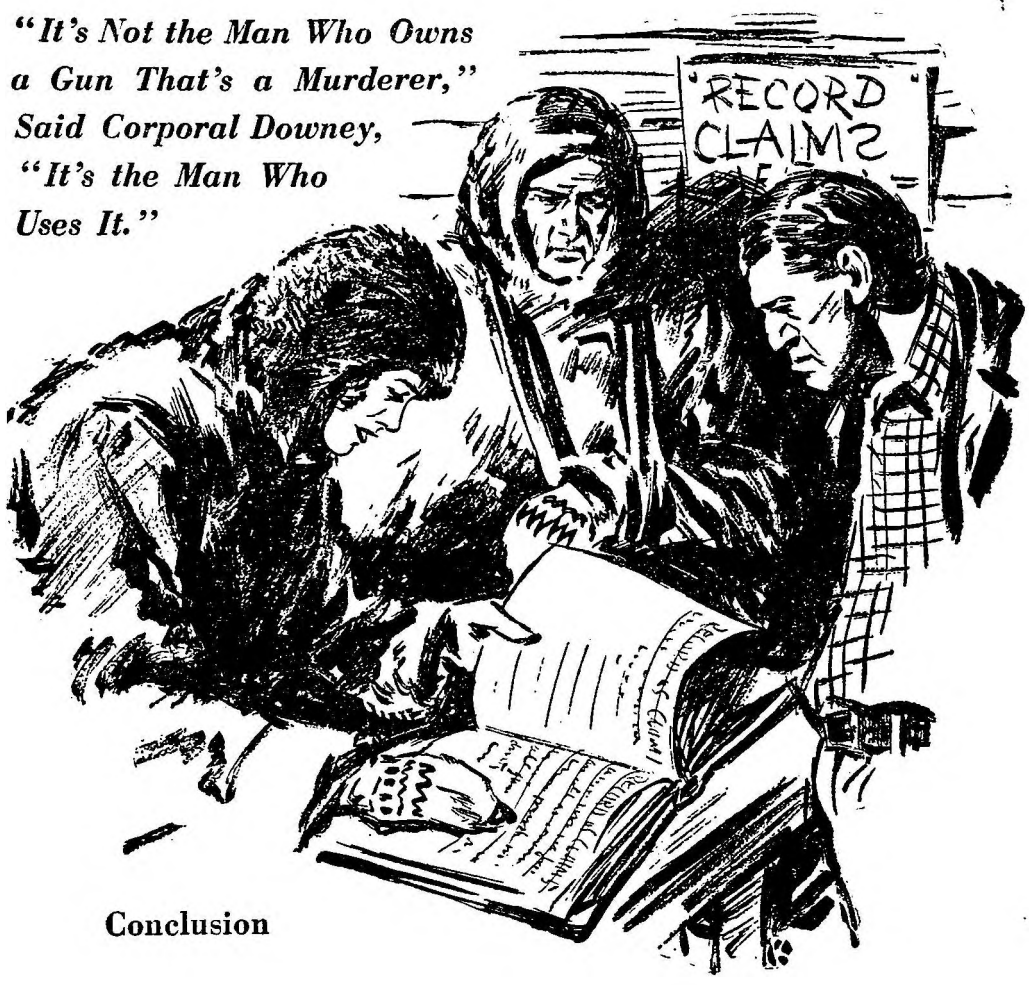
He stood upright, swaying with the movements of the boat. His feet were ankle-deep in something, and he peered downward to see what it was; the round, blackened discs of the old Frenchman's treasure, lying in confusion on the floorboards, with Slade an unlovely shape in the middle of them. Steve grinned lopsidedly, for there was a certain sardonic humor about treasure just now. He stooped, and took something off the stern seat; it was the little plated metal gadget he had been looking for, the thing that had finally killed Vickery and finished Slade. He slipped it into his pocket, and turned at the sound of his name.

She had crept along the jagged coral, and was huddled there, not ten yards distant, looking at him. Her face was still that pallid oval, and her voice just a whisper. But Steve Bonner forgot the blood running into his eyes, and the boat's present crew, and the Frenchman's gold rolling under foot.

He glanced up, where the dawn was lifting, pink and gold in the sky, and waved a bare arm at Clair.

"Coming!" he cried, and plunged overside.

"It's Not the Man Who Owns a Gun That's a Murderer," Said Corporal Downey, "It's the Man Who Uses It."



Conclusion

EDGE OF BEYOND

By JAMES B. HENDRYX

Author of Many Famous Stories of the Land of the Strong Cold

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE DAWSON PATROL

THE Dawson Patrol, consisting of Sergeant Delhanty and Constable Blake, broke through to The Edge, and that evening, with routine matters cleaned up, the sergeant glanced across the desk at Corporal Downey:

"You've got a pair of swindlers here that we'll be taking back with us," he said. "Couple named Dryden. As far as we can find out the woman's reputation was okay till she quit the hospital where she was a nurse, to marry Dryden. He posed as a claim broker and speculator; as a matter of fact, he's a gambler and con man. He worked several swindles up around White Horse under the name of Hauser,

and several more in Dawson under the name of Dryden. It seems that the woman acts as a sort of come-on—boosting his game with a word dropped here and there to make it look good. The inspector says if she'll talk—help us cinch a case against Dryden—I can promise that we won't press charges against her."

"She can't testify against him—if they're really married," reminded Downey.

"They're married, all right. I looked that up. And of course she wouldn't be allowed to take the witness stand against him. But if she'll cooperate with us—tell us what she knows about the inside of several deals he made in Dawson, we can go ahead and work up a case without her actual testimony in court. It's a long shot, and personally I haven't got much faith in it. It's been my experience that it's damn seldom you can make a woman come across with anything on her husband. Sometimes it's love—and sometimes it's fear. But generally they won't talk. As the inspector said, though, it's worth a try."

Downey grinned. "Yeah, an' this time, maybe it'll work. Fact is, Dryden an' his wife have split up. They tried to pull a fast one on a young fellow named Drewry, but they had some kind of a row, an' she spilt the beans. Dryden turned Drewry's money back a few days ago. When he started to get ugly about it, she shut him up damn quick by remindin' him that if she started talkin' she could tell plenty."

"Fine!" exclaimed Delhanty. "That row sure is a break for us! Where'll we find Dryden?"

"He'll be hangin' around either the Nugget or the Igloo. They lived in a shack down on Number Twenty Below, till they busted up. Then Dryden moved in with Grubstake Walters, an' Hank Blossom had the woman's stuff moved up into a shack next to the Igloo so she could nurse a chechako that stood around an' let a tree fall on him."

"Guess we better go pick him up right now," Delhanty said. "Everyone in camp knows by this time that we got through from Dawson, and it might be that Dryden'll get nervous an' pull out. We can talk to the woman after we arrest him."

"Seen Dryden this evenin'?" Downey asked, as he and Sergeant Delhanty faced Hank Blossom across the bar of the Igloo Saloon, with drinks between them.

BLOSSOM grinned. "Not this evenin', nor no other evenin' sence Jack Drewry worked him over the other night. It might be he's hangin' around the Nugget, or mebby you'll find him acrost the crick in Grubstake Walters' shack."

A half hour later the two officers returned to the saloon. "No one over to the Nugget's seen him fer several days," Downey said, as Hank shoved out the bottle and glasses. "An' there's no sleds or dogs at Walters' place, an' no blankets on the bunks. At the store McTavish says he ain't seen neither Dryden nor Walters fer five, six days—not since Walters come in one mornin' an' bought grub enough fer a thirty-day, two-man stampedin' trip. He loaded it onto his sled an' Dryden's."

"I don't believe they hit for the big river," Delhanty said. "We sure as hell didn't meet anyone on the trail."

Blossom shook his head. "Nope. Chances is, if them two's pulled out they went the other way."

"The other way!" exclaimed Downey. "You mean across the divide?"

"Yeah. You was in here the night Drewry come back fer them supplies an' heard him tell how old man Beloit was laid up. An' you heard him accuse Dryden of tryin' to trail Beloit to his claim, an' then tryin' to choke the location out of Beloit's girl—an' you see Drewry give him a damn good workin' over on account of it. An' likewise you seen Dryden hand Drewry over the eighteen thousan' he damn near done him out of. Well—a man like Dryden ain't goin' to take the like of that without strikin' back. Chances is, he

got Walters to throw in with him an' hit out fer the country beyond."

"But Walters was afraid of that country," said Downey. "Tollifson offered to grubstake him for a trip acrost the divide, an' he turned him down."

"Yeah, but that meant goin' over there alone," Blossom replied. "Walters, he was afraid of them devils er ghosts, er whatever it was them crazy men gabbled about seein' over there. There's plenty of men that's afraid of seein' a ghost when they're alone—but when someone else is along they ain't afraid. What I mean, Dryden prob'ly talked him into goin' along—prob'ly promised him plenty."

"I don't believe Dryden's got such a hell of a lot," observed Downey.

"McTavish said that this Walters paid for that grub with dust," reminded the sergeant. "He said he was surprised that he had that much."

"No more an' he didn't," said Blossom. "Dryden's dust paid fer that grub. He's got somewheres around fifteen hundred ounces here in the safe, besides the poke he had on him. It ain't that Dryden would promise to pay Walters nothin' out of what he's got—it's what he expects to git. He prob'ly promised him a split."

"Expects to get?" asked the sergeant.

"Shore—over in the country beyond. There's Drewry—he's got eighteen thousan' dollars on him in bills; an' old Beloit's got a proposition over there somewheres that might be worth a million. Anyways, we all know it's plenty good."

"And you think Dryden's crossed the divide to make a play for the whole works, eh?"

"Why the hell wouldn't he? With old Beloit crippled, they've only got Drewry an' the girl to worry about—an' no witnesses. Believe me, there's men gone in there that ain't never been heard from agin, jest in the common run of luck. But take the run of luck an' add a man like Dryden, that's got no more heart in him than a snake, an' brains enough to cover up whatever evidence was left—an' there ain't one chanct in a million that anyone would ever know what come off over there."

"I guess that means a trip across the divide," said the sergeant.

"Yeah," Downey agreed, "a trip fer me. You an' Blake stay here an' run the detachment, Sarge, an' me an' Peters'll cross the divide. I've been in there onct, an' you haven't."

"Where's the woman—Dryden's wife?" asked Delhanty. "She might be able to tell us somethin'."

Hank Blossom nodded. "She kin spill you an earful, all right," he said. "But not about what's come off since they busted up. The only time she's spoke to him since then's the time she faced him right here in this room an' forced him to turn back Drewry's money. You kin take it from me, Sergeant, there's a fine woman. I've got pretty well acquainted with her since she's been nursin' a damn chechako that couldn't outrun a tree. She's plumb disgusted with Dryden—sick an' tired of helpin' him pull his crooked stuff. She helped all right—she won't try to deny it, neither. She'll give it to you straight, an' take whatever's comin' to her. She wants the slate wiped clean, so she kin start all over." The man paused, swallowed his drink, shoved the bottle toward the two officers, and con-

tinued a bit awkwardly. "An' say, Sergeant—you kin sort of call on me fer whatever it takes. I mean—like if there'll be any fine to pay fer her part in Dryden's crooked work. Or, like if she's got to hire a lawyer. I'll slip you a poke of dust, an' when you go back, I want you should hire the best lawyer in Dawson to look

after her end of it, an' I'll pay him whatever he charges. It would be a damn shame to put her in a jail. She's paid a hell of a price already fer what she's got."

The sergeant nodded. "Okay, Hank. You can take my word for it, if she comes clean, she'll get all the breaks. Keep your dust, and if there's any need for a lawyer, I'll see that she gets the best there is—and we can talk about his fee later. We'll slip over and have a talk with her now, and if she'll come clean, you don't need to worry about her going to jail."

TWO hours later, back at detachment, Corporal Downey ordered Constable Peters to make ready a trail outfit for a trip into the country beyond. "We'll be pullin' out early in the mornin'," he said, "an' believe me, we want to make good time. If Delhanty'll lend us his dogs, we'll load two sleds. It'll be faster, an' if we have to split up over there, we'll be in shape to do it. Dryden pulled out the same day Drewry did, an' he knows Beloit's short cut. Drewry had to follow my trail that swings way to the south to get around a spur of mountains. That's five or six days to Beloit's, if he has good luck. An' Beloit makes it in three by the short cut. There's no tellin' what's come off there by this time, but, believe me, whatever it is, I'll know it before I come back!" As he spoke he shifted the papers about on his desk top. "Where's that map of mine?" he asked. "It was here a few days ago."

"I couldn't say," Peters replied. "I haven't touched anything on yer desk."

"Well, it's gone!" Downey exclaimed. "Chances are either Dryden or that damn Walters slipped in here an' swiped it. They're welcome to it. I went through there the first time without a map—an' I can do it quicker this time. A man don't forget a trail he's once been over."

"You're welcome to our dogs, Downey, and I wish I was going with you," said the sergeant. "But there's no use in both of us making the trip. Anyway, if I stay here I can go over more details with Mrs. Dryden. Hank had her pegged right when he said she's a fine woman. She sure got a hell of a break when she married Dryden! She's shooting square, too. I haven't promised her a thing. She thinks she'll be prosecuted the same as he will—and yet hasn't tried to cover up for herself—never even tried to dicker. Just sat there and told a straight story because what she'd done had got on her conscience."

"That's right," Downey agreed, "an' when she'd got through she seemed right down happy—like she'd got a big load off her mind."

"Sure. She has, too. She's no more a crook than I am. When I get through checking up, I'll have enough on Dryden to keep him in out of the cold for a hell of a while. And when I tell her the police aren't interested in her any more, except to wish her good luck from now on—she's going to have a right to be happy."

"Yeah," Downey agreed, with a grin. "An' by the way, Sarge, isn't there somethin' in the law about where a woman kin get a divorce from a man if he's convicted of a felony?"

"Damn if I know—why?"

"Humph," grunted Downey. "Beats hell a man could get to be a sergeant without knowin' the law! What I was thinkin', if the law is like that, mebby you'd better take Hank's poke of dust an' hire her a lawyer."

Delhanty grinned. "Sergeants aren't s'posed to fuss around amongst little laws—like divorce. We leave that for corporals to worry about. But it looks to me as if Hank might be interested at that. Believe me, Hank's a good square shooter—he's worth a thousan' Drydens!"

CHAPTER XXIX

CORPORAL DOWNEY FINDS A DEAD MAN

TOWARD noon the following day, Downey and Peters topped the divide and struck off down the glacier, with

Downey leading and Peters traveling behind. A few miles farther on Downey halted abruptly and pointed to the tracks in the snow.

"Look!" he exclaimed. "We've be'n follerin' the trail of three loaded sled outfits—Drewry's an' two others. But here the two others cut off to the north. Dryden trailed Beliot through on his cut off, so he knows that trail. An' believe me—here's where we learn it, too!"

Swerving unhesitatingly onto the trail of the two sleds, the officers followed it, slanting off the glacier on a lateral moraine a few miles farther on. Night found them in an apparently patternless maze of intersecting steep-sided gorges. The wind rose and ragged clouds scudded across the heavens, thickening until they blotted out the light of the stars. Unable to follow the trail in the darkness, the two camped in the poor shelter of an overhanging cliff, and hardly had they finished their supper before the storm struck with a thunderous roar of wind and a smother of flinty snow powder.

"We're sure on our own, now," said Downey. "Fifteen minutes of this, an' we won't have no trail to follow."

"That's right," Peters agreed, "but we'll make it. Old Beliot didn't have no trail to foller the first time he come through here. We kin make it, if he did."

"Oh, sure, we'll make it. The only thing is, we might lose more time than if we'd held to the trail I know."

"We'd of lost time, either way," Peters said. "This here's a nor'easter an' they generally last three, four days."

For four days they lay in their blankets and robes while the blizzard raged about them. Once each day they crawled out to feed the dogs, and managed by screening their primus stove with the shelter tarp, to cook a meal. Early on the fifth day they harnessed the dogs and pushed on, heading as nearly eastward as the devious tangle of gorges permitted. For five days more they threaded their way among canyons and gorges, always bearing to the eastward, and on the morning of the sixth day they came out of the mountains upon the bank of a river that skirted a rolling plain. Downey pointed to a rock cairn that showed at the point of a promontory that jutted out near a horseshoe bend of the river.

"Look!" he cried. "There's a marker of some kind! Maybe we'll find a camp there."

Swinging the dogs toward the cairn, the corporal led the way, following the willow-bordered bank. A hundred yards farther on he halted abruptly. "Good God, look there! We sure got a break when we hit out of the mountains at this spot!"

Both officers hurried forward to stare down into the upturned face with its brow of marble whiteness, and the frozen mass of crimson slush that clung to the beard and mustache.

"It's what's left of Grubstake Walters," said Downey. "Someone knocked him off, all right. Careful now till we try to dope this out."

"There's his outfit!" exclaimed Peters, attracted by a slight sound from the direction of the willows. "Look—his dogs tried to break through that brush, an' got all tangled up in the harness. They're all dead but one—an' he might better be. The harness twisted around 'em so tight it cut off the circulation, an' they froze to death. Look at that live one's hind leg—it's froze hard as iron!"

"Yeah," said Downey. "Go ahead an' put him out of his misery while I look around here a bit."

PETERS shot the dog, and stepped back to see Downey examining a flattish black lozenge. "It's gold," he said. "Black gold—like Beliot's. It looks as if Dryden an' Walters located the old man's mine all right. An' then Dryden knocked Walters off to save splittin' with him. I guess," he added, a flinty note in his voice, "the Sarge won't have to bother about hirin' no lawyer

to git a divorce fer Dryden's wife—a damn good length of rope'll tend to that for her. But believe me—I'd breathe easier if I know'd that this was the only corpse we're goin' to find before we're through with this mess!"

Constable Peters was staring down at the blue-black pistol that lay on the snow near the body, and which Downey had left untouched while he examined the little fragments of black gold.

"So you figger it was Dryden done it, eh?" he asked.

"Why sure! It's a cinch Walters never shot himself in the forehead, an' then had time to pull his mitten back on! Who else could have done it?"

"Well," uttered Peters slowly, "there's two Beliots over there somewheres—an' there's Drewry."

"Why would they want to knock Walters off?"

"He found their mine, didn't he?" countered Peters. "An' I'm tellin' you, Downey, if Dryden did kill Walters, then the chances are he killed Drewry first."

"Why?"

"'Cause, that's Drewry's gun layin' there in the snow."

"Drewry's gun!"

"Well, not exactly his. It's the one Hank Blossom handed him the mornin' Drewry started fer the divide the first time. You re'lect you an' most of the others in camp went down the crick that mornin' to fetch back that chechako the tree fell on, an' you sent me to the Igloo to help Hank git a place rigged up to keep him, an' have hot water in case we needed it. We done so, an' then Drewry come in all ready fer the trail. Hank slipped him the gun an' told him to wear it constant an' continuous. Drewry, he claimed he didn't need no side gun, but Hank made him take it an' promise to wear it.

"You see Hank, he figgered that Dryden would like to git rid of Drewry, an' he figgered mebby he'd slip acrost after him an' knock him off over here where there wouldn't no one prob'ly ever find him. So Drewry took the gun, more to please Hank than because he figgered he'd need it. What it looks to me like—Drewry found out that Walters located Beliot's mine, an' shot him to keep him from recordin' it. He prob'ly knocked Dryden off, too."

"I think you're screwy!" Downey exclaimed. "Jack Drewry ain't the kind of a man that would knock a man off just to keep him from recordin' a claim! Anyway, it wasn't his claim. Why would he—?"

Peters interrupted. "It would be before very long," he said tersely. "Hank Blossom told me that Drewry told him the night he knocked hell out of Dryden, that he was goin' to marry Beliot's girl."

Downey uttered a long low whistle at the news. "Even at that," he said presently, "I'd bet my last stack of blue ones that Drewry wouldn't knock anyone off just to save a claim—his or any one else's! An' it wasn't self-defense. Walters' rifle is lashed to his load.

"But standin' around here gassin' an' guessin' ain't gittin' us nowheres. We've got a job to do. It's a damn good thing we took two outfits along—'cause right here's where we split. Whoever shot Walters stood right there in the willows, an' then he hit out toward that rock monument. I'm followin' that trail. You take the other outfit an' hit straight for Beliot House. It's on a lake in them mountains you kin see off there to the southeast. Looks like somewheres around twenty-five miles or so. You might make it tonight, if you have good luck. That dog bein' still alive, I believe Walters was killed sometime yesterday. If Drewry is there at Beliot's, arrest him an' take him to The Edge. If he ain't there, you git on his trail an' don't leave it till you find him. We ain't overlookin' no bets. If you should run onto Dryden arrest him, too. I don't know how the hell you'll handle 'em both—but that's your headache. I'll keep on this trail till I turn somethin' up,

an' then swing around to Beliot's. You got it?"

"Okay," Peters replied. "If I don't contact you at Beliot's, I'll be seein' you in The Edge. Good luck."

"I'm still bettin' this is Dryden's work," said Downey as he lifted the revolver from the snow. "An' if it is, Drewry's prob'ly dead—or how else would Dryden have his gun? It might be that Beliot, bein' crippled, sent Drewry to the mine; or maybe the girl did—she might have even gone there with him. Dryden an' Walters might have trailed 'em there, an' bushwacked 'em, an' hit for The Edge to record the claim—an' then Dryden knocked Walters off so he wouldn't have to split with him. If

that's so, Dryden's right now hittin' hell-bent for The Edge—an' I won't be more'n a day behind him. It's my guess that when you git to Beliot's, you'll find that Drewry's trail leads to the mine—an' no further."

CHAPTER XXX

HELENE ADJUSTS HERSELF

FOR many days before Jack Drewry had told her of his love, Helene Beloit had been conscious of that love. It had manifested itself in a dozen different ways—the tone of his voice, the touch of his hand, the look in his eyes that scarcely left her face as she read aloud from her father's books. And she was poignantly aware of her own great love for him. Almost, it seemed, from the first moment she had seen him, she had loved him. For hours on end as she lay between the warm blankets of her bed she would recall his every gesture, every look, every word from the time he lay unconscious with his head in her lap as she fed him brandy and water from a spoon, on through their hunting trips, their skiing, their fishing through the ice—but most of all she lived again their long evenings together before the roaring fire in the great living room.

It had not been by chance that she had propounded her questions to him that night at the fireside. Over and over she repeated his answers as she remained locked in her room, not daring to trust herself with him, while the mighty conflict raged within her breast. Times without number she was on the point of unbarring the door and rushing into his arms with no word of her Indian mother—only words of love on her lips. What mattered though the skin of her mother had been white, or red? She herself, she knew, was all white. Meticulously, almost savagely, she analyzed herself—physically, mentally, spiritually—and in no slightest particular could she find one single Indian thought, or trait, or feature. What harm, then, in deceiving him? Her father was a silent personality, not given to idle talk—the chances were that he would never mention her Dog Rib mother in Drewry's hearing. In fact, she could not remember his ever having mentioned the woman even to her. They could be happy—deliriously happy, here at Beloit House—and then maybe after her father had passed on, they would go away, far away, where no one would ever suspect that a drop of Indian blood flowed in her veins. Where could the harm be? He loved her for herself alone—that she knew. The fact of her Indian blood could not alter her person—the person he had learned to love. It was only if he knew of the taint that he would turn from her.

Feverishly she read and reread the philosophers. But the answer was not in the books. The bar sinister still reared its ugly head between them. If she should marry him and he should at some future

time learn of her Indian blood, he would stick to his bargain—he had said that. But he would know she had tricked him—and love would be gone. And the bargain he would stick to would be but an empty shell—an unthinkable, horrible thing, where only love and beauty should have been.

No matter with what twistings and turnings and intricate manipulation of sophistries her brain strove to justify such course, the inner self that was her conscience always brought her sternly back to face the issue. He would not marry an Indian—even a half-breed. She was a half-breed. Therefore, he would not marry her.

FOR days and sleepless nights the conflict waged—and conscience won. She would go hunting with him one last time, and would tell him of the barrier that was an irrevocable bar to their happiness. She foresaw that he would seek to brush it aside—would, in his impetuous love, seek to brush aside the barrier he himself had raised, would insist that nothing mattered—that he loved her and would marry her despite her Indian blood. But always she would know that deep down in his heart it did matter. A thousand times she wished she had never propounded the questions; but she had raised them—they could never be recalled.

And so with breaking heart, she steeled herself against his anticipated arguments, and went hunting with him. Then in the cave, just at the time she must speak the words that would separate them forever, Gauche had come, and then the Indian with news of her father's injury. Then Drewry had gone to The Edge for supplies, and the words remained unspoken.

The days dragged interminably after his departure. She worried for his safety. After all, he was a chechako, and he was traveling a trail that might well give pause to any sourdough in the North. The same trail that only a few short weeks ago had nearly got him. She took some measure of comfort in the thought that he had learned much since then. He was no longer the raw chechako who had rushed blindly ahead with an ax in his hand to blunder over a cut-bank, and leave his outfit unlashed to the mercy of his dogs, who had allowed his bed to drag on the snow until it was practically useless, and who had eaten cold snow until his lips and tongue were frozen. No, he would not repeat those mistakes, but the trail was a tough one—even though no mistakes were made.

For hours on end she brooded over the coming ordeal—the ordeal that had been postponed by events that followed the Indian's appearance at the cave. Almost she wished he had not come so soon. That the words had been spoken, and that it was all over. She knew she would never again be happy. But anything would be better than the dread with which she looked forward to that which she must face.

It never occurred to her to take her trouble to her father. They loved each other—these two—after a strange fashion of love. Until Drewry had appeared on the scene, each was all the other had in the world. Each knew that the other would unhesitatingly risk life itself for the other, but neither knew what was passing in the other's mind. For, to his daughter, Jules Beloit was the same strange, silent man of mystery that he was to all the North.

Then with Drewry's probable return only two days away, the Loucheux had come in the night with news of the starving Indians on Carcajo Lake.

Beloit had retired and the girl sat alone with her bitter thoughts staring into the fire, when the door opened and the Indian staggered into the room, mouthing fragments of jargon. And as he talked the girl knew that she must go. Her anxiety for Drewry's safety would be prolonged for days. Again it was the Indians! Always it was the Indians who appeared, as though by some sinister design, to torment her! If she did not go, she knew her father would. For in the North, one

may not ignore a call for help, even though that call involve the loss of life itself. And she knew that the old man was in no condition to go.

Hurrying the man into the kitchen, she set food on the table and as the Indian wolfed it down, she threw a stampeding pack together, and hastily scribbled a note. Then the two harnessed the dogs and pulled out. And as the sled slipped smoothly over the snow, with the million glittering stars lighting the way, she was glad that she had answered the call. Anything was better than the long bitter hours of waiting. The trip would at least turn her mind from her own trouble to the trouble of others.

They forced the trail, and shortly after noon of the day Drewry returned to Beloit House, they arrived at the encampment of the Loucheux. During the afternoon the girl boiled meat and fed the emaciated natives, men first, and then the women and children—for the supplies were short, and it was the men who must gain strength to hunt and replenish them.

In the evening came the storm, and with it came Father Giroux and some Hare Indians from the Mackenzie country, bringing additional supplies, word of the plight of the Loucheux having reached Fort Good Hope on the Mackenzie.

The priest took over, and dead tired, Helene spread her blankets on a pile of skins in the corner of a tepee and slept through the night. When she awoke, she threw back the blankets, drew on her mukluks and stepped to the doorway intending to pull out immediately for Beloit House. But as she drew back the flap of the tepee, it was to find the world blotted out by a seething white smother of powder dry snow particles so thick that one tepee could not be seen from another.

As she turned back, her heart bitter with disappointment, she encountered the beady eyes of an old Loucheux woman who sat silent as a Buddah just beyond the little fire that burned in the center of the tepee.

By signs, and in half-intelligible guttural, the woman told her that he of the long white hair had commanded that a potlatch be held in honor of their deliverance. That it was now in progress in several of the tepees surrounding the tepee of the chief, and that she had been sent to invite the white woman to the potlatch.

In no mood for festivities, the girl curtly refused the invitation, and after the woman had made her exit, gazing in silent wonder upon one who would voluntarily absent herself from a fete, Helene dragged a robe from the pile, and threw herself down beside the little fire.

CHAPTER XXXI

FATHER GIROUX TELLS A TALE

AN HOUR passed during which the girl, alone with her thoughts, stared into the smoky little fire. Then the flap of the tepee was drawn aside and a face appeared in the aperture. Helene resented the intrusion, for the face was the face of a white man.

"What do you want?" she asked.

The head was thrust farther into the room and Helene noted the finely chiseled lips and the asthetic features of the smooth-shaven face. The lips smiled.

"Have no fear, my daughter," said a low, rather musical voice. "It is only I, Father Giroux, a man of many years. One who like yourself has come here to relieve suffering."

At the sound of the rich, mellow voice all resentment vanished, and Helene smiled as her eyes met those of the old priest.

"Forgive me, Father, if I seemed unfriendly. I saw only that it was the face of a white man, and I was startled. For I had not expected to find a white man on Carcajo Lake. Won't you come in and sit by the fire?"

"'Tis a wild storm," said the old man, as he closed the flap behind him and beat the snow powder from his clothing. As he threw back the hood of his parka, the girl was fascinated by the wealth of long

white hair that seemed to flow like a silver cascade from his head to billow about the shoulders. "A storm that would stop any man. All during the night the wind roared out of the northeast full-freighted with its burden of snow. It was God's will that we arrived in the nick of time. These people could not have survived this storm without food. I dread to think what men would have found on the shore of Carcajo Lake in the spring had we failed in our missions of mercy."

The girl nodded and tossed fagots upon the fire. "A few died before we arrived," she said. "Two old men, a woman, and some children."

As the flame flared higher, the face of the girl beyond the little fire stood out with startling distinctness in the gloomy interior of the tepee. About to seat himself, Father Giroux started, his hand flew to the throat of his fur-trimmed parka, and his pale

blue eyes opened wide as he stared as though he were looking upon something that could not be. Helene glanced in surprise, as the priest moistened his lips with his tongue, and spoke with evident effort, as he seated himself cross-legged upon a skin.

"Ah—yes. Several have died—God rest their souls. But tell me, my daughter, have you come far? You will pardon an old man's interest — and also his agitation. Truly, in one of the most inaccessible reaches of the wilderness one does not expect to encounter youth and beauty. Death, and famine, and human misery one expects —for these things are the heritage of those who dwell in the outlands."

HELENE smiled. "But what you call this inaccessible reach of the wilderness is my home. I live only fifty miles to the souhtwestward."

"And—you have always lived there?"

The girl's brow clouded. "I do not believe we have always lived there — my father and I," she replied, speaking slowly. "At times, as in a dream, I see big log buildings, and a tall flagpole, and many people, white people and Indians, and one building larger than the others, was like the trading post at Fort Norman—only larger. And I can remember traveling for days and days, always camping in a different spot, and always pushing on and on in the canoes. My father was there—and some Indians. And I remember that upon the lake where we live my father and the Indians cut down trees and built our house —but that was long, long ago when I was but a little girl. These are not real memories, for when I try to recall more of the great trading post, or whatever it was—the memory will not come, and it all becomes hazy and unreal. So maybe after all I have always lived here—and those are only impressions of something I have read, or pictures I have seen."

"And your name? You have not told me your name."

Helene noted a certain tenseness in the priest's voice. "My name is Helene Beloit," she said.

The old man nodded slowly, and for a long time he sat staring in silence at the little flames that licked at the fagots, a far-away expression in his pale blue eyes. His mood coincided with her own, and she, too, sat in silence, her thoughts far from the shores of Carcajo Lake. She noticed that the finely chiseled lips of the lean ascetic face, were pressed tightly together, and that the long shapely fingers clenched, and unclenched.

Outside the storm seemed to redouble its fury. The sound of the wind became an all pervading roar, and the frail walls of the skin tepee rocked and swayed. Snow, fine

and glittering as diamond dust, entered through the smoke hole at the apex of the tepee, and now and then a gust would cause the little fire to flare and fill the tiny room with acrid smoke that stung the eyes.

Helene's thoughts were far away. Had Jack Drewry reached Beloit House before the storm? Or was he even at this moment hovering miserably beneath a shelter tarp against some rock wall, or in some fissure in the ice? Or had he tried to push on despite the storm to blunder over some precipice? And was he even now lying stark and lifeless, while the dogs wandered on and on to be set upon by the hunt pack? If everything had gone right, he should have reached Beloit House last evening—before the storm struck. But so many times everything does not go right. Only a few hours' delay might well make the difference between life and death.

BUT even if things had gone right, and he was safe at Beloit House—what of the future? Again and again her thoughts returned to beat vainly against the invisible barrier that would forever keep her from the man she loved. The torture of this realization was even harder for her to bear than the torture of her anxiety for Jack Drewry's physical safety. The soul torture would remain with her all through the years—time might mercifully dull the pain, but never banish it.

She was roused from her bitter revery by realization that the eyes of the priest were fixed upon her in a look of infinite compassion. His lips moved.

"What is it, my daughter?" the low mellow voice asked. "What thing is troubling your very soul?" The girl flushed. Her chin went up, and her eyes flashed proudly. The old priest raised a hand. "Be not angry. I, too, have suffered."

There was that in the tone of the voice, in the expression of humility and pain in the keen old eyes, that caused the girl to instantly regret her sudden flash of anger.

"Forgive me, Father," she said, in a voice of contrition. "I—I did not understand."

"Think no more of it. Your sorrow is your own, my daughter. For fifty-two years I have lived and labored among the little peoples—the unknown and the forgotten peoples of this great white wilderness. In fifty-two years one learns much. One's experience runs the full gamut of human misery—and also now and then one is permitted a glimpse of human happiness. But the North is a stern land, and dour. Happiness is for the more favored peoples. And yet—who can say that in fifty-two years of ministering, at first to the bodies, and later to both the souls and the bodies of my people, I have not tasted of life in its fullness? I am not a reader of minds. I know only that some deep trouble is torturing your very soul. I know nothing of the cause for this torture. But I do know, my daughter, that often the telling of ones trouble to another whose understanding is great—who, also, has suffered, brings, not surcease, maybe—but at least, a vast relief."

Suddenly it seemed to Helene that the old priest seated there beyond the little fire had somehow become closer to her in the short hour of their acquaintance than her her own father in all the years of their companionship. Before she realized it, she was pouring out her story—and as the Blizzard roared without, the old priest sat and listened.

"And so," she concluded, "through no fault of my own, the way to happiness is forever barred. Not only am I a half-breed, but knowing the way of the North, I am not sure that my father and mother were ever married." As she finished she glanced into the face of the priest, and once again the dark eyes flashed and her cheeks flushed with swift anger. For the priest was smiling, and in the pale blue eyes was the twinkle of laughter. "Am I a child whose tiny troubles can be laughed away and forgotten?" she asked hotly. "My

story seems to afford only amusement to you—to me it is tragedy!"

"We are all children, my daughter." As before, at the first sound of the soothing voice Helene's anger subsided. "To the little child the breaking of a doll is stark tragedy. But when the doll is mended, or is replaced by a new one, the world seems once more a beautiful place in which to live. The loss of property assumes tragic proportion at times in the lives of grown-ups. But in the acquisition of other property, the loss is soon forgotten. The death of a loved one is tragedy, also. But time heals the pain and the heartache."

"There is nothing of tragedy in the breaking of a doll or in the loss of the property!" exclaimed the girl. "Those are mere trifles. The loss of a loved one by death is no tragedy, either. It is merely an incident in the natural course of events. For it is inevitable that death must follow life. It is therefore, to be accepted. But to have the happiness of a life shattered; to be condemned to go on living in misery of heart and soul, knowing that the one who loves you and whom you love is also living in misery, each through no fault of their own, and all through the biological accident of birth—that is grim tragedy!"

The old priest nodded slowly. "I, too, have lived in the shadow of tragedy. Yet who can say that in my labors I have not found a measure of happiness? For twenty-two years I have carried the burden of a great sorrow—a sorrow that has prematurely silvered the hairs of my head so that for many years I have been counted an old man, though I am but sixty. But I thank the good God that he has permitted me to be here, this day, among the tepees of the Loucheux."

"Yes, Father," said the girl in a low dull tone. "I see what you mean. It is one of your days of happiness that you have been permitted to bring life and hope to the starving Indians. I, too, am glad I came. But my hurt is too fresh, my wound too raw for me to derive happiness from the fact. Satisfaction, yes. But not happiness. Perhaps I, too, shall learn—even as you have learned. Perhaps there will come a time when the carrying of food to starving Indians will afford happiness to me—when I am sixty. I am twenty, now."

Again the priest nodded slowly. "Yes, my daughter—you would be twenty."

"What?" asked the girl in surprise.

"I was only thinking of the traverse of the years. I would that all this world's tragedy were as groundless as your own."

"What! What are you saying?" cried the girl, her eyes widening.

"Only that I am conscious of a vast happiness, a greater happiness, I think, than I have known before. And this happiness comes not from the fact that I have brought food and hope to these Indians. As you say, my daughter, that is deep satisfaction—but not happiness. My happiness comes from the fact that I can mend your broken doll."

"You can—mend—my—broken doll?" The words fell slowly from the lips of the girl, as her dark eyes searched the face of the priest as though to read there their meaning.

"You have stood the test. In subserving your desire to remain at home to welcome the return of your lover, and to relieve the anxiety of your heart for his welfare, you have earned the right to the great happiness that is to be yours."

"The happiness—that is to be—mine," repeated the girl. "Father, I do not understand."

THE priest was gazing sombrely into the fire upon which he had laid fagots from the pile. "Concerning the Indian woman with whom Jules Beloit lived, I know nothing—nor do I care. It is immaterial to me—or to you—whether they were married; or were not married. For in your veins flows not one drop of Indian blood."

"Father!" The word exploded from the girl's lips, as she leaned forward staring

into the eyes of the priest, who continued.

"You are the daughter of Jules Beloit and Helene McDonald, who was his wife, and who died two weeks after your birth. Helene McDonald, your mother, was the daughter of old Sandy McDonald, for many years the Company's factor at Fort Chipewyan, and his wife, Helene Roshier, who was the daughter of Gaston Roshier, Company factor at Fort Resolution."

Tears were streaming from the girl's eyes. "Father—Father—is this the truth?" she faltered.

"It is the truth. Upon the word of God, I swear it. The records are at Chipewyan Mission—the record of the marriage of your father and mother, and of your birth. And the record of Helene's death and of your christening. Though the marriage was never sanctioned by the Church, for they were married by a civil authority, yet the record is there so that no cloud should attach to your birth. I, myself, attended to that. Your mother was buried, and you were christened by the good Father Gauthier, long dead. Why Jules has seen fit to keep these matters a secret from you, I do not know—nor do I care. I owe him no consideration. My judgment is as good as his. And in my judgment, you have the right to know these things."

"You call him 'Jules'," breathed the girl, her brain in a chaos. "You know my father well?"

"Aye, too well," replied the priest, a note of flinty hardness in his voice. "He is my brother."

LEAPING to her feet, the girl stepped across the fire and stood beside the seated priest, staring down into his uplifted face. "You know that this is true? You swear it—in the name of the God you serve?" she cried, a tense, hysterical note in her voice. "That I am white? That Onata was not my mother? That I am not a half-breed?"

The keen blue eyes met the stare of the dark eyes unflinchingly. "I swear it. Of my own personal knowledge all that I have told you is the truth. And the records will bear me out."

With a low cry the girl sank to the robe at the priest's side, and burying her face in the fur of his parka sobbed upon his shoulder. After a time the sobbing ceased, and she raised her eyes to his.

"My father is a silent man," she said. "Though all my life I have lived with him, at times we seem but strangers. He has

never spoken of you—nor of my mother. Nor has he ever mentioned the name of any place, nor of any person he had known before we lived upon our lake. But he is a just man. And I know that he loves me in his own way. He has been very kind, and very patient in teaching me, and in helping me to understand the things that are in the books."

The priest nodded. "Aye—and he is well qualified to expound the teachings of the books. For he was educated for the priesthood, while I was but the clerk to a factor."

Noting a certain bitterness in the man's words, the girl spoke. "And now," she cried, "after all these years you two shall meet again! You shall go home with me —my uncle!"

"No!" thundered Father Giroux. "With the passing of this storm I shall go back to the Mackenzie—and far beyond the Mackenzie. Maybe even to the Bay! One would think that twenty-two years spent in the service of God would have chastened the spirit. But man is indeed frail. In my heart I had forgiven Jules these many years for the grievous wrong he did me. But with the probing of the wound, the

old Adam has come forth." He paused and stared at his hands, working the long fingers slowly. "Is there no true forgiveness?" he muttered, more to himself than to the girl. "Is it true that these hands that for twenty-two years have been devoted to service could kill? Is it true that the centuries of culture and of civilization have gone for naught? That even as in the beginning—as Cain killed Abel, I, too, could kill my brother?" He paused, nodding slowly, his eyes fixed upon the fire. "That is tragedy—for it is true. I dare not go to Jules and speak forgiveness, lest I kill him."

"He did you a great wrong?" asked the girl slowly.

"Aye, he wronged me—he wronged his Church, his very God! Helene McDonald was my promised wife. I was clerk to her father. Jules was destined for the priesthood. I was sent upon a journey to transact certain business for the Company upon the lower river. I was gone for three months. When I returned it was to find that Jules had renounced his vows, had wronged me by winning the love of Helene, and fleeing with her upriver where they were married. I quit my post, went to Montreal and studied for the priesthood. In the meantime, you were born and Helene died. Jules then left the river, taking you with him. Word came, later, that he had married an Indian woman—a Dog Rib. Other rumors were rife on the river that he had gone far to the northwestward. From time to time I heard that he traded, now and then at Fort Norman, and at Fort Wrigley. I paid no heed to the rumors. I had put him out of my life forever. I prayed only for humility—and for the strength to forgive him. And—I prayed that we should never meet. In His infinite wisdom, God has granted that prayer."

"One thing more," said the girl. "Please tell me something of—my mother. What did she look like?"

"She looked so much like you that when I looked for the first time into your face across the fire, I received a shock, the like of which I have never before experienced. I thought I was seeing an apparition, thought I was looking once again into the face, the eyes of Helene McDonald." Abruptly the priest rose, drew his parka hood forward and turned toward the door of the tepee. "I must go now. The people are feasting. Will you join us?"

"In a short time, Father. I—I want to be alone."

THE next moment he was gone—swallowed up in the white smother. The girl stood for long moments staring down at the little red flames that licked at the fagots while the tepee rocked in the wind, and the dull roar of the storm surged in her ears like the beating of a mighty surf. Happiness was to be hers—life—and love—and happiness! The realization seemed at first to stun her, then she laughed and cried aloud in the delirium of her new-found happiness. She calmed down, dried her eyes, drew on her parka, and stepping out into the storm, groped her way to the tepee of the chief. Suddenly she realized that she was very hungry, and that the odor of the stew was good.

During the three succeeding days of the storm, the girl could scarce restrain her impatience to hit the trail for Beloit House. One moment her spirits would soar to the heights of rapture in anticipation of rushing into Jack Drewry's arms to pour into his ears the news that there was no barrier to their marriage, nor ever had been one—that the fancied barrier was merely a figment of her own imagination. The next moment blank despair would blot all rapture from her soul at thought that maybe Drewry had not succeeded in reaching Beloit House, and was even now lying frozen stiff, his body covered by the drifting snow. A dozen times a day she would throw back the flap of the tepee, and stare out into the seething white smother—only to return to the skins beside the little fire and listen to the incessant roar of the wind.

CHAPTER XXXII

BACK AT BELOIT HOUSE

ON THE morning of the fifth day Helene awoke to the consciousness that the tepee no longer swayed and rocked, and that the roar of the wind had given place to utter silence. Shadows flickered on the wall of the tepee and she threw back the robes and blankets to see the old Indian woman busy about the little fire.

Drawing on her mukluks, the girl stepped to the doorway and threw back the flap to gaze out upon a star-lit, snow-buried world. It would not be long, now—two days and she would know. . . .

Turning abruptly to the fire, she seated herself and accepted the plate of fried caribou steak the old woman handed her. She ate hurriedly, and made up her bed-roll. She had fed her dogs well the night before. She would harness them and make all speed for Beloit House. Slipping into her parka she stepped outside to be greeted by Father Giroux, who with the Indian who had been her guide to Carcajo Lake appeared with the dogs already in harness and a pack of provisions lashed to the sled:

"I realize the anxiety of these days of waiting, my daughter," the old man said, "so I had the boy harness your dogs and make ready the sled for your journey. I knew you would be impatient to start."

"Oh—thank you, Father!" cried the girl. "I—I wish you were going with me. But —you know best."

"Aye—I know best."

"I can never thank you for—for all you have done for me," continued the girl, tears welling into the dark eyes until the white world blurred. "For—for—why, to you I shall owe all the happiness I shall ever have!"

"Do not thank me. It is I who have cause to be thankful—and from the bottom of my heart I thank the good God that he has allowed me, of all men, to be the instrument of bringing into your life the happiness that has been denied me. And now farewell—Helene. Our ways must part here. We shall not meet again. But is it too much to ask that in the joy that will be yours in the passing of the years, you will find time, now and then, to think kindly of old Father Giroux—a priest of the land of snows?"

Impulsively the girl stepped close, threw her arms about his neck and kissed his lips. Then, releasing him, she snatched the whip from the hands of the Indian and cracked it above the backs of the waiting dogs. "Always I shall remember you—my uncle!" she cried. And the next moment she was gone. Once, from far out upon the lake, she looked back to see the old priest still standing as she had left him—a lonely, a pathetic figure standing there among the tepees.

Even with her lightly loaded sled, Helene found hard going among the hills. Later, in the open country, the new snow was wind-packed and she made better time. On the evening of the third day she burst into the great living-room at Beloit House to find her father seated before the fireplace reading a book. One glance told her that Drewry was not in the room—a glance that served to confirm the horrible suspicion that had leaped into her brain when she saw no dogs in the corral.

"Where is he?" she cried wildly. "Did he not come back? Is he somewhere out on the trail?"

IN THAT moment Jules Beloit knew that Drewry had spoken the truth. Only love could wring words from the very heart. He answered calmly:

"Monsieur Drewry returned from The Edge with the supplies. He is somewhere out on the trail—the trail to Carcajo Lake."

"Carcajo Lake!" cried the girl. "I just came from Carcajo Lake!"

"And the Indians? Did you reach them in time with the supplies?"

"Damn the Indians!" Helene cried, her eyes blazing. "Jack is somewhere out on the trail—and you sit and talk of Indians!"

The old man shrugged. "Impetuosity is

the way of youth, I suppose. I inquired of the welfare of the Indians, because it was to minister to their welfare that you set out. It was the object of your journey—the thing that had to be done. The absence of Monsieur Drewry is but an incident. He acted in the same impulsive manner. When he arrived from The Edge just as the storm broke and found you gone, it was with difficulty I succeeded in restraining him, tired as he was, from striking out after you—though in truth, no man living could have traveled, that night, let alone have followed a trail. The day following the storm he was again determined to go in search of you until I pointed out that necessity dictated that the meat cache be freed from snow to prevent the wolves from devouring all our meat. Youth is guided by impulse rather than by reason, though I will say that Monsieur Drewry is amenable to reason—he remained to clear the cache."

"When did he go?"

"Yesterday morning, or sometime during the night before last. When I awoke he had gone."

"But—why didn't I meet him?"

"That I cannot tell. I may remind you that the country is broad. There is no trail to Carcajo Lake, and Monsieur Drewry had no accurate knowledge of its whereabouts."

"Where is Gauche?"

"He, too, is gone. Mayhap to find you. More likely to replenish his store of gold."

The knowledge that Drewry had arrived at Beloit House before the blizzard lifted a load from the girl's breast. She anticipated no danger from his trip to Carcajo Lake. The weather would doubtless remain settled for some time, and within a few days at most, he would return, following her trail.

The hours dragged interminably, as she waited with consuming impatience to feel his arms about her, his lips upon her own, to hear the words of love he would pour into her ears, and to see the light in his eyes as she told him that the barrier that was to have wrecked their lives, had vanished into thin air.

SEVERAL times she struck out on his trail. Maybe he would be returning and she would meet him. But she never went far; suppose he should return some other way—on her own trail, for instance? She noted that his trail was following the trail of the idiot. Had Gauche, too, gone in search of her?

And during these long hours Jules Beloit seemed even more silent, more detached than was his wont. Hour after hour he sat before the fire, his eyes upon the pages of a book. Helene did not notice that he rarely turned a page, nor did she know that his brain took no cognizance of the printed word. Nor did she know that he was pondering in his mind the words he soon must speak—the words that he had known all along he must sometime speak. She could not know that, in his heart, the stern old man approved of Jack Drewry—had appraised him as a man of worth, a fit mate for his daughter. Nor could she know that Drewry had mentioned the barrier to him—for she had not told him what it was.

She could not know that the old man was waiting for Drewry's return with scarcely less impatience than her own—waiting to relieve his own mind of its burden of many years. That he would tell them of that other Helene—of his marriage to her, of her death, and of how when the McDonalds insisted the wee girl, his daughter, be sent southward in care of the good Sisters, to be brought up in a convent, there had been angry words. He had taken

the baby and fled to the Indians where he found a young woman who could care for her. Later he had married the woman for the sake of the child who needed her mothering. He would explain that when the child grew older, she developed a hatred for the Indians, and that he dared not tell her, fearing she would hate him for letting one of their race take the place of her mother. He would produce the written statement setting forth all these facts, that he had kept for years among his effects where the girl would be sure to find it in the event of his untimely death. All this Beloit would tell the two, there in the great living-room before the fire—and then he would ask forgiveness in the name of his great love for the girl.

But of what was passing in his mind Helene knew nothing. A dozen times she was upon the point of asking him to tell her something of her early life—and his own. But always she refrained, realizing the pain it would cause him to reveal his own great sin in the renunciation of a holy life and the wronging of his own brother. She knew her father's sensitive nature, and now she realized that his stern reserve down through the years had been a cloak to cover the torture of his soul. Why probe the old wound? Why not just go on and never let him suspect she knew, or cared about her birth? She did know. That was sufficient. She believed that Jack Drewry had no suspicion that she was a half-breed. But later—if he should learn of the Indian woman who had been Jules Beloit's wife—there were the records at the Mission at Fort Chipewyan, the record of her mother's marriage to her father, of her death, and of her own birth and christening. So why add to the suffering of years?

Helene realized, to her surprise, that her hatred for the Indians had vanished, and on the evening of the second day after her arrival home she helped old Ishka get a quarter of caribou meat from the cache. The girl climbed the ladder, loosened the tarpaulin, and rolled the quarter of meat over the edge of the platform so that it fell with a dull thud into the snow where the Indian woman waited with the saw, and returned to the ground, when a dog team she instantly recognized swept out of the timber and dashed toward the cache.

"Oh—Jack! Jack!" she cried, as the great brutes came to a stand. And the next instant she was in the arms of the parka-clad figure that dropped the tail rope and rushed forward to meet her, and the sound of his voice was in her ears.

"Thank God you're safe!" Then the arms released her and Drewry stooped and unfastening the lashings of his load rolled an unconscious form from the sled. "It's Gauche," he said, as the girl's eyes dropped to the inert form with the great blue bruise on its forehead that lay on the trampled snow. "He's been hurt. I found him lying in the snow. Couldn't leave him there to die. Get him into the house. He comes to at intervals, then sinks into unconsciousness again." The girl wondered at the note of hardness in the man's voice as his words fell in short, clipped sentences. Her eyes widened in surprise as he stooped, lifted the caribou quarter onto the sled, pulled tight the lashings, and abruptly swung the dogs onto the trail that led to the pass in the hills.

"Jack! Jack!" she cried. "Wait! Where are you going?"

The dogs were unwilling to leave home, and with a hand on the tail rope the man was laying on the whip and yelling. He turned his head at the sound of her voice. "I can't wait!" he cried over his shoulder. "There's not a moment to lose!" And the next moment he was but a blur on the long ramp of white snow that sloped upward to the pass.

Chapter XXXIII

CONSTABLE PETERS ARRIVES

FOR long tense moments Helene stood staring after the flying dog team until the pale starlight no longer revealed it.

What had happened? Why was he rushing furiously away? Where was he going? And what had happened to Gauche? Thought of the idiot lying unconscious in the snow, roused her to action. She whirled upon the old Indian woman who stood immobile as a statue, her face devoid of expression.

"Come—drop that saw and help me!" she cried, stooping and slipping her hands beneath the idiot's shoulders. "Get hold of his feet, and we will carry him into the house!"

The woman obeyed, and together they managed, half carrying, half dragging him to get Gauche inside and deposit him on his bearskin robe in the corner.

Beloit laid his book aside, crossed the room and stood for a moment looking down upon the unconscious form. Dropping to his knees, he felt of the wound with his fingertips.

"A concussion, perhaps—but no fracture," he said. "Where did you find him?"

"We didn't find him," explained Helene hurriedly. "Ishka and I were getting meat from the cache when Jack came very fast and rolled Gauche from the sled. He said he had found him lying in the snow. Then he took the meat we were about to saw up, and left as hurriedly as he had come. I do not understand. He spoke hurriedly—in a voice that sounded strange, and hard—like one who is very angry."

"Angry, eh?" repeated the old man. "It may be that someone assaulted Gauche and that Monsieur Drewry seeks revenge. It might be—" He paused and was silent so long that Helene could not restrain her impatience.

"It might be—what?" she asked. "Of what are you thinking?"

"I am thinking," Beloit replied, "that possibly Dryden has dared to once more cross the divide."

"Dryden!"

"Aye. Monsieur Drewry told me of an encounter he had with Dryden while he was in The Edge for the supplies. It seems that he chastised Dryden for his assault upon you. It may be that Dryden followed him across the divide, seeking revenge, and that while waiting for a chance to waylay Monsieur Drewry, he came upon Gauche, and tried to beat the secret of the black gold from him—even as he tried to choke that secret from you."

"And you mean that Jack has gone to find Dryden?" cried the girl. "But—oh—Dryden will kill him! He would stop at nothing—that man. There is murder in his eyes! I have seen it. That time he threatened to throw me over the cliff, he would have done it, if Gauche had not come! Oh—what can we do? I will go after him myself! I will shoot him, as I would shoot a wolf!" The words poured in a torrent from the girl's lips, as she turned toward the rack of rifles above the mantlepiece.

"Patience, my daughter," counselled Beloit in a calm voice. "Ends are gained not by acting upon impulse; but by subjecting facts to the light of cold reason. My words were only a conjecture. We do not know the facts. Do not excite yourself. Monsieur Drewry is no weakling. He is worth a dozen men like Dryden."

"But Jack would never have a chance! Dryden would lurk in some place of concealment and shoot him down like a dog!"

"What then could you expect to accomplish by taking Monsieur Drewry's trail? Do you not believe that should Dryden shoot him down, he would not do the like by you—or worse?"

"But I can't just stay here and do nothing—when Jack's very life may be in danger!"

"You have yet to learn, my daughter, that in matters of grave import, it is far better that one should do nothing; than that he, or she, should do the wrong thing."

The old man's argument, together with the fact that the girl realized that with the dogs she had she could never hope to overtake Drewry, prevented her from rushing to his assistance. With the help of old Ishka, they put Gauche to bed in his own

room—a room he rarely occupied, preferring to sleep on his bearskin in the corner of the living-room.

ALL during the following day Helene pictured Dryden hiding—waiting for the chance to shoot Jack Drewry from ambush, and Drewry rushing blindly into that ambush. Again she would wonder whether her father's conjecture were right—whether Dryden *had* followed Drewry back into the country beyond. Drewry had told Beloit that he had met Dryden, was it possible that Dryden had told him of her Indian blood? She knew that he knew of it—he had taunted her with it himself, while he tried to bully the secret of the black gold from her. Was it not possible then, that Drewry had not gone on the trail of Dryden at all, that he was leaving her forever because he would marry no Indian—not even a half-breed, as he himself had told her? But no! There had been nothing of renunciation in the fierce pressure of his strong arms as they had clasped her to him, nor in the tone of his voice when he said, "Thank God you're safe!" And even though he had known, he would never have left her without a word of farewell—of that she was certain.

And that evening came Constable Peters. Hearing a loud shouted word of command, Helene flew to the door and threw it open to be confronted by a man in the uniform of the Northwest Mounted Police standing beside a team of dogs.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, "a policeman! I—I thought it was—someone else!"

"Jack Drewry, mebby?" hazarded Constable Peters.

"Yes! Do you know where he is?" she asked eagerly.

"Was you expectin' him here tonight?"

"Why—yes. That is—no. I do not know."

The officer's eyes hardened. "'Yes'—'no'? It's got to be one of the two. It can't be both. Which is it? An' where's Drewry at?"

Quick to note the disapproval in the man's eyes, and quick to resent the peremptory tone of his voice, the girl's chin went up and her dark eyes narrowed. "I do not know," she replied.

"This is Beloit's, ain't it? Who are you?"

"I am Helene Beloit. If you wish to speak to my father, you may come in when you have looked after your dogs," the girl said, and abruptly closed the door and resumed her chair. She glanced across the table at Beloit, who had not raised his eyes from his book. "There is a man of the police outside attending to his dogs," she stated with a show of indifference. "I told him he could come in when he finished."

"A man of the police! Why, daughter—could you not offer to help him with his dogs?"

"I could have—but I didn't."

"But surely you remember Corporal Downey! He is the only man of the police who has ever ventured beyond the divide."

"Yes, I remember Corporal Downey. I like him. He is nice. This one is not nice. I do not like him at all."

THE old man smiled, dropped his glance to his book, and presently the door opened, and Peters stepped into the room. Helene's attention was apparently riveted upon the book she had opened in her lap. But her eyes saw no word of the printed page as question after question raced through her brain. What was a policeman doing at Beloit House? Why was he inquiring about Jack Drewry? What had he done? Why had he come and gone with scarcely a word? Where was he? It seemed to the girl that she must leap to her feet and hurl these questions one after the other into the face of the policeman. But she remained seated, her face expressionless as a mask, her eyes fixed intently upon her book.

Beloit rose from his chair, as the officer advanced into the room. "Ah, a constable of the Mounted. You are welcome to Beloit House, Monsieur. I remember to have

seen you at The Edge. Draw a chair to the fireside and make yourself comfortable. This is my daughter, Helene."

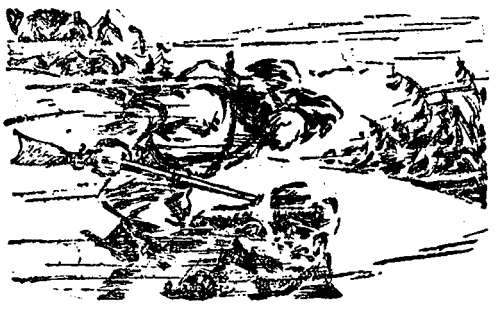
"Yeah," Peters replied, with a glance at the girl, who did not raise her eyes from her book. "So she told me."

"Here at Beloit House we are not often honored by a call from the police. Corporal Downey stopped here once on his way to the Mackenzie. Do you seek someone? Or are you simply on patrol."

"I'm huntin' Jack Drewry," said Peters. "Do you know where he is?"

"No."

"How long since you seen him?"



"Several days. Early in the morning of the second day after the storm, he left here with my dogs to go to Carcajo Lake."

"Carcajo Lake. Where's Carcajo Lake? An' what was he goin' there for?"

"Carcajo Lake lies some fifty miles to the northeastward. He went there in search of my daughter."

"Yer daughter? You got two daughters?" asked Peters, with a glance at the girl.

"No. Only Helene. It was she he was seeking. She had left two days before the storm to carry food to some starving Loucheux, and Monsieur Drewry feared for her safety."

"Did he find her there?"

"No. My daughter returned by herself and arrived here on the third day after the storm."

"An' she didn't meet him on the trail?"

"There is no trail to Carcajo Lake. The country is vast. It is not surprising that she did not meet him."

"I'll say it ain't," grunted Peters, "if Carcajo Lake lays northeast of here. An' you ain't seen Drewry since, I s'pose?"

"I have not, but my daughter has. Monsieur Drewry arrived here last evening, and departed immediately in great haste. Helene saw him and spoke to him for a moment. He brought Gauche home. Gauche is an unfortunate, an idiot, who lives with us here. He had been injured. Monsieur Drewry found him lying in the snow."

PETERS turned abruptly to Helene, whose eyes were still centered on the book. "You seen him an' talked to him last evenin'?" he demanded. "What was his hurry? An' where did he go?"

"I do not know."

"What did he say?"

"He said, 'Thank God you are safe.' And that he found Gauche lying in the snow. And that he could not remain because he must go."

"Go where?"

"I do not know."

Peters frowned. "Look here, Miss—it ain't gittin' you nothin' to hold out on the police. You're coverin' up fer Drewry, all right. Why?"

"'Covering up'?" repeated the girl, who had not once looked up from her book. "I do not understand."

"That must be an interestin' story yer readin'," observed Peters.

"It is—quite."

"Most folks, except mebby they was a Chinee, can't read with the book upside down."

The girl flushed deeply, and Beloit came to her rescue. "A few moments ago, Monsieur, you expressed an opinion that it was not surprising that my daughter did not meet Monsieur Drewry upon the trail *if Carcajo Lake lay to the northeastward.* Would you mind explaining your reason for that opinion? And also, why you are seeking Monsieur Drewry?"

"The reason is because he never went to no Carcajo Lake—if Carcajo Lake lays

northeast. He killed Grubstake Walters northwest of here—an' prob'ly Dryden, too. I want him for murder."

"Murder!" cried the girl, leaping to her feet so quickly that the book tumbled from her lap to the floor, and facing the officer with blazing eyes. "Jack Drewry never murdered anyone! I know nothing about this Grubstake Walters, but I do know that if he has killed that unspeakable Dryden he had a right to kill him!"

"The law don't give no one the right to kill no one—except it's self-defense."

"It was self-defense, then! He had to kill these men, or they would have killed him!"

"That ain't what the sign says. The tracks in the snow says Drewry hid in the willers an' waited fer Walters to come along an' when he got right to where he could almost reach him he shoves a revolver in his face an' let him have it."

"It's a lie—I don't care what the tracks say. Jack never ambushed any man! And Dryden? Do the tracks say he ambushed him, too?"

"Downey'll be able to tell you about that. He's workin' the back-trail. He'll prob'ly find Dryden's body at yer mine, er claim, er wherever it is you git yer black gold."

"The mine!" exclaimed Beloit. "Has Dryden been to the mine?"

"Like I said, I don't know nothin' about Dryden. We know Walters had. He had some black gold in his mitten, an' when he dropped, some of it spilt out onto the snow. The way I got it doped out—Dryden an' Walters follered Drewry back from The Edge, an' trailed him to the mine, an' then Drewry knocked 'em off to keep 'em from recordin' the location."

"But Jack did not know the location of the mine!" cried the girl. "They could not have trailed him there!"

"Hold!" roared Beloit, his fine face flushed with sudden anger. "I see it all, now! He has acted his part well! To think that he could deceive me with his apparent honesty of purpose! I was a fool!"

"Father!" cried the girl. "What are you saying? What do you mean?"

"I mean," thundered the old man, "that Drewry is not one whit better than Dryden! Only more plausible—smarter—a better actor! He has deceived us both—you with his word of love—and me with his honest eyes, and his straightforward manner! I mean that he is right now hitting the trail to The Edge—with my own dogs—to record my location for himself! I mean that his apparent anxiety for your welfare was all a sham, an excuse to follow Gauche to the mine and then to strike out for The Edge and record the location!"

"Father—stop! You do not know what you are saying. It is not true. Jack would scorn to record your location. If he has gone to record a location, it is a location of his own. He does love me, he is honest. In his eyes I have seen it!"

"In his eyes!" scoffed Beloit. "My God—the credibility—the gullibility of a woman in love! But wait! He cannot get away with it! He shall not rob me of that which is mine! It is not for myself I want the gold, it is for you! I'll hit the trail myself! Even with his one day's start I can beat him to The Edge! He does not know the short cut! Go you and throw my stampeding pack upon the sled and harness the dogs! First I shall see if Gauche can tell me aught of what has happened. He was conscious this morning."

IGNORING the girl's protest, the man strode across the room and threw open a door. "Where is he?" he shouted. "Where is Gauche? The room is empty!" Roaring for old Ishka, he strode toward the kitchen, bawling words in the Indian tongue. The old woman faced him in the doorway and replied in deep guttural. "She says Gauche was gone—she knows not where, or when. He was in his bed this morning. When she carried food to him at noon, he was not there. He must have slipped out while I dozed here by the fire. No matter! He could have told little—probably nothing. It

is only at times he shows a glimmer of intelligence."

Peters turned to the girl who stepped from her own room with a bed-roll which she tossed onto the floor. "Where did Drewry say he found this here idiot?" he demanded.

"Lying in the snow," replied the girl shortly, and disappeared into her father's room. A few minutes later she stepped from the room and tossed another bed-roll to the floor.

Ishka and Constable Peters were helping Beloit to get into his parka. Hurriedly dressing for the trail, the girl slipped outside, loaded the sled, and harnessed the dogs. Then she stepped back into the room where Beloit, rifle in hand, was striding impatiently up and down talking to Constable Peters.

"With inferior dogs and a crippled arm, it may take me four days to reach The Edge instead of three. But even so I stand a good chance of beating him to the recorder's. He has my dogs which are better, but they have already been five days on the trail. And he has undoubtedly been forcing them. They will be tired, while these dogs are fresh. He has a full day's start—if he makes it in five days, which is the shortest time possible, and I take four days, we should arrive at The Edge at approximately the same time. But if his dogs have slowed, then I will reach there first."

"You are in no condition to travel with your arm in a sling!" cried the girl.

"My arm! I would go if both my arms were in slings! It is not alone to save the gold, I am going! It is to prevent that unspeakable wretch from profiting by his treachery. I told you the day we found him that we might live to rue the day we brought him to Beloit House. And my words have come true!"

"They have not come true," retorted the girl, her face flaming. "You should be ashamed to condemn a man unheard—to believe him a thief and a murderer simply upon the word of this—this *person.* But come on—if you are bound to go on this fool's errand, I'm ready."

"You! Where are you going?"

"I'm going with you—to The Edge."

"You shall not go, you shall remain here! It is no trail for a woman!"

"Where's your cool judgment that you talk so much about? Who is acting on impulse now? I can outlast you on the trail even when you are uninjured. And how do you expect to handle the dogs with one hand—leave them in harness for three or four nights?"

"You are right. Let us go. And when we return from this journey you will be a sadder but a far wiser woman—for you will have learned that a man's actions are the true index to his character, rather than the look in his eyes, and the words upon his lips." He turned to Peters. "You had best remain here tonight, to rest yourself and your dogs. Then strike out on Drewry's trail in the morning."

"That's right," the constable agreed, "an' if you get to The Edge ahead of me an' find Drewry there, tell Sergeant Delhanty to arrest him fer murder. So long—an' good luck."

Chapter XXXIV

At the Recorders

AT NOON of the sixth day after leaving Beloit House so abruptly, Jack Drewry halted high on the long slope of the glacier that slanted upward to the divide to rest his dogs. Gaunt and tired from short rations and the gruelling pace, the animals sank onto the snow. A few hours more and he would arrive in The Edge, would know whether or not Grubstake Walters had beaten him, had already recorded Beloit's claim for himself and Dryden. The absence of tracks on the glacier surface meant nothing, for there had been a fall of snow three nights previous.

It seemed almost incredible to Drewry as he sat upon his sled that Walters had not crossed the divide ahead of him—with

his full day's start, and his knowledge of the short cut trail. Yet things can happen to a man on the trail—even to a sourdough like Walters. "If he has beaten me," he muttered, through clenched teeth, "I'll pound him to within an inch of his life with my two fists. I'll get that much satisfaction, anyway—but it won't get back Beloit's gold—and Helene's. Not that I care about the gold—for her. I'll find gold—and my gold will be hers. I'm going back there and make her marry me—Indian or no Indian! If only I hadn't had to take Gauche back to Beloit's I could have beaten Walters easily. But I couldn't leave the poor devil lying there in the snow to die."

His attention suddenly riveted upon a moving black object far down the glacier—an object that, in the light of the low-hung sun, soon resolved into a dog team heading upward toward him—toward the pass. As he stared he saw that there were two people with the outfit—one walking ahead of the dogs, and one behind. The outfit had evidently just reached the nave of the glacier by means of a long lateral moraine. "Walters!" he cried, his heart bounding with excitement. "And the other must be Dryden! Walters probably had trouble of some kind—and Dryden anticipating he would, went out there to meet him! Hooray!" he shouted, leaping to his feet, and shaking his mittened fist at the approaching outfit. "Come on, you damned crooks! Beat me to the recorder's if you can!" Forcing the

tired dogs to their feet with voice and whip, he headed them upward toward the divide. He glanced behind. The other outfit had halted at a distance of half a mile. A figure stooped, then stood upright. The thin whine of a bullet cut the air, and a few moments later he heard the sharp crack of a rifle.

The dogs were plodding loggily, heads lowered, tails almost dragging the snow. Snatching his knife from his belt, Drewry cut the lashings of the load and rolled it from the sled. Heads and tails came up, and the dogs increased their pace. Another bullet whined above him, and Jack Drewry laughed. "Try again!" he called derisively. "You haven't got a chance in a thousand to get me from there!"

THE dogs were making better time with the empty sled, but an hour later, as he reached the summit, he noted that the pursuing outfit had gained measurably. Once again, the figure raised the rifle, and splinters flew from an upstanding ice fragment not ten feet from where he stood.

"Close enough!" yelled Drewry, and throwing himself upon the empty sled, headed the dogs down the long slope toward the cluster of log buildings that straggled along the banks of Catterson Creek.

Hours later he stepped out from the door of the recorder's office and made his way along Front Street toward Igloo Saloon. A dog outfit swung suddenly into the street, and the next instant he was standing face to face with Jules Beloit, who had halted abruptly and was regarding him with blazing eyes, and white beard fairly quivering with anger. Beyond the sled, at the tail-rope, he saw Helene. Ignoring the man, Drewry called to the girl:

"Helene! You here! Why did you—?"

"But first," cried the girl, "you must tell us why you rushed away from—"

"I had to. I had to beat Walters to The Edge. There was not a moment to spare. I had to file that claim!"

"There!" cried Beloit, whirling to face the girl. "Now do you believe it? Now that you have heard it from his own lips, do you know him for the murdering traitor he is?"

Drewry stared in open mouthed aston-

ishment from one to the other as the girl, who had stepped to her father's side, replied, "No, I don't believe it. It cannot be!" She appealed to Drewry, "Oh—why do you not speak? Why—?"

"He has spoken!" roared Beloit, and seizing her by the arm, literally pushed her past Drewry. "Come—it is but a step to the recorder's. I will show you the record. If you demand more proof, you shall have it—black on white. *Voila!* What a fool is a woman in love!"

TOO dazed at the oldster's outburst to speak, Drewry stood there and watched the door of the recorder's office close behind them. "I don't know what it's all about," he muttered, "but there'll be plenty of time to find out after the old man has cooled down. It's something new to be called a murderer and a traitor." He walked on up the street and stepped into the Igloo Saloon.

The recorder greeted Beloit with a grin. "Well, old-timer, it's out at last—the location of your claim. When the boys find it out, believe me, there's goin' to be a stampede acrost the divide. There's many a man here in The Edge that's be'n wonderin' where you got all that black gold."

Without a word Beloit pushed the girl toward the big book that lay open upon the desk. "Read it," he growled. "Read what he had just written — and then tell me whether you think it is a claim of his own he has recorded."

Lying as it did in unsurveyed territory, among mountains and rivers and creeks that were unnamed, the location description was of necessity rather long. Womanlike, the girl's eyes swept the page to the last line, and as they did, she gave an imperceptible start.

"Read!" insisted Beloit. "Read it aloud."

With her back toward him, the girl read slowly and distinctly the words that described accurately the cavern at the head of the box canyon they both knew so well. When she ceased reading the last sentence no possible doubt could have existed that the description was that of the Beloit claim.

"Go on!" cried the old man, his voice quivering with rage. "You have not finished. You have read the words that show you that it is my location, and no other he has recorded. But you have not read the words that damn him forever as the traitor he is. You have not read the signature."

"Must I read it, Father?" she asked, her heart thumping, and her lips twitching so that she could scarcely hold her voice steady.

"Yes! Come—read—and have done!"

"The signature," said the girl, turning to face him is 'Jules Beloit'."

For a single moment the old man stood as one petrified. "What!" he cried. "What is this you are saying?" and pushing her aside, he stared at the written page. Tense seconds passed as he stood there, his eyes glued to the signature at the bottom of the description. Jules Beloit, per J. S. Drewry," he repeated slowly aloud. Then suddenly he jerked erect, and in the same roaring voice, turned to the recorder. "Give me that pen!" he demanded. "One might know a chechako would get it wrong!"

Hastily the recorder dipped the pen and handed it to Beloit, who wrote in a fine clear hand the words, *"and Jack Drewry, copartners."* Then without another word he turned and strode swiftly from the room. The girl followed, hurrying to overtake him upon the trampled snow of Front Street.

"Wait!" she cried. "Father—wait for me! Where are you going?"

The old man paused. "Going! I'm going to find Drewry! I'm going to tell him I misjudged him. I'm going to seek his forgiveness. I am a fool. And Peters is a fool. If Drewry shot Walters he had a good reason to. It is preposterous to think that a man like Drewry would murder anyone. Why do you stand there laughing?"

"Only because you have always taught

me not to act upon impulse. And for the last four days you have—"

"Impulse! I am not acting upon impulse."

"How can you know that if Jack shot Walters, he had good reason to? That is merely an impulsive statement."

"Impulsive! It is a statement based upon reason and sound judgment. No man who acts as he has acted could be a murderer. A man's actions are all of a piece. He cannot be a devil yesterday, and a saint tomorrow. Have done with your idle chatter! Wait you here. I am going to the saloon. I will send Drewry out to you when I have made my peace with him." He paused abruptly, and stepped closer to the girl. "And, my daughter," he said, in a softer voice, "he told me there is a fancied barrier—a barrier that you believed would keep you two apart. You may forget this barrier. I know what you think—that you are part Indian, that Onata was your natural mother. That is not true. Your mother was white. There is not a drop of Indian blood in your veins."

The girl nodded. "Yes," she answered. "I know. Father Giroux told me."

"Father Giroux!" The old man's face had suddenly gone white. His voice faltered as he talked in a voice scarcely audible. "Where—did—you—see—Father Giroux?"

"At Carcajo Lake. He also came with supplies for the starving Loucheux. He came from the Mackenzie."

"And—did he tell you—all?"

Slowly the girl nodded. "Yes, he told me all."

"And—do you hate me? Hate me for—for letting you remain in ignorance of your birth—for—for the great wrong I did my brother?"

"No! I do not hate you. I love you—even as I have always loved you. What has happened; has happened. I know you have suffered. It is best that it be forgotten. And now—will you send Jack to me?"

Entering the Igloo, Beloit strode to the bar where Drewry stood talking to Hank Blossom. "Can you forgive me, lad?" he asked abruptly. "For my words out there upon the street? I was a fool."

For answer, Drewry took the proffered hand and shook it in a mighty grip.

"And now tell me," Beloit said. "Why did you shoot Walters?"

"Shoot Walters! I didn't shoot Walters! The last I saw of Walters was when he pulled out to record your claim, leaving me to take Gauche back to Beloit House. I don't mind saying that I would liked to have shot him—but as a matter of fact, I didn't."

"Constable Peters of the Mounted Police came to Beloit House, upon the next evening after your hurried departure. He was searching for you. He said that he had come upon the body of Walters lying in the snow. And that he had been shot with your pistol."

"My pistol!" exclaimed Drewry. "Why—I have no pistol. I lost the one Hank here gave me, on that trip to The Edge for supplies."

"It's that damn Dryden done it," cried Blossom. "Him an' Walters pulled out of here, the same day you did—an' headed acrost the divide. I bet that dirty skunk got hold of that gun somehow, an' shot Walters, knowin' you'd git blamed."

"They cannot prove you killed him, if you did not kill him," said Beloit. "There will be plenty of money for your defense, and we will fight to the last ditch. Go along, now. There is someone waiting for you outside. I would confer with Monsieur Blossom."

Chapter XXXV

"There is no barrier"

"COME on, Helene," Drewry said as he joined the girl upon the trampled snow. "I've got a lot to say—and it can't be said here on Front Street."

"Where will we go?"

"Oh, we'll just wander up the crick," he

smiled. "If you're not too tired we might go up and call on Mike Haney, he was my old boss. I'd like to show him what kind of a devil I found over in the country beyond."

"What?"

"You see," laughed Drewry, "when Mike's claim petered out, I wanted him to throw in with me for a prospecting trip over beyond the divide. But he wouldn't go. He knew of the men who had gone over there and had come back raving maniacs, and of the others who did not come back—those were the ones you and your father found and buried. The two who came back crazy raved about devils and ghosts and whatnot that inhabited the country. Mike, being a superstitious Irishman, wasn't taking any chances."

The girl's brow clouded. "If some men came back crazy and raving of devils, I believe it was Gauche that they saw. And those two we found — the one Gauche dragged in, and that other—I believe they were crazy, too, before they died, because we never found their outfits. One who is not crazy will not leave his outfit and wander on and on until he dies. I wonder if Gauche did not know he was frightening those men? I wonder if it was not thus he protected our gold?"

Drewry nodded. "It's hard to say what goes on in a brain as warped and as twisted as his. But I do know that, intentionally or unintentionally, he scared Grubstake Walters to the verge of insanity."

"Was it then that you killed him?" the girl asked casually.

"Killed him! Good God, Helene—you don't believe I murdered Walters!"

"No. I did not say 'murder.' I know that you would not commit murder, but I know also that you might have had to kill him."

"But I didn't."

"Constable Peters said that he found Walters dead, and that he had been killed with your revolver."

As they passed the police office the door opened and an officer with a sergeant's stripes stepped out and headed toward the Igloo.

"He's a new man here," said Drewry. "I wonder if Corporal Downey has been transferred?"

"Peters said that Corporal Downey was

searching for Dryden's body. Did you kill Dryden?"

"No," grinned Drewry, "I didn't kill Dryden, either. But if Dryden and Walters were out there together, and Walters was killed it isn't very hard to figure out who killed him. I believe I know the answer — Walters trailed Gauche to your father's mine, and then Dryden murdered him so he would have the whole thing for himself. But something must have gone wrong with Dryden's scheme or he would have reached here by the short cut, and beaten me to the recorder's."

THE girl noded. "That is what happened, of course. And Corporal Downey will find Dryden and bring him in. I like Corporal Downey, but Peters I do not like. First he said you murdered Walters, and then he made me very angry the way he spoke to me, so that I would hardly talk to him at all. That policeman we just saw must be Sergeant Delhanty. Peters ordered my father to tell him to arrest you for murder. But I do not think my father will do that, because he, also, knows you would not murder anyone."

They were beyond the limits of the camp now, and Drewry stepped from the trail and led the way into a thick copse of

spruce. He turned and smiled into the eyes of the girl. "I didn't bring you here to talk of policemen and murders," he said, in a low voice, "but to tell you again that I love you. To tell you that in all the world the only thing that matters is our love. To tell you that there is no barrier between us, and there never can be one. I know you love me, dear. With your own lips you told me of that love. And I know now why you said you cannot marry me."

The dark eyes dropped before his burning gaze. "Why," she asked softly, "do you think I said that?"

"It is because your mother was an Indian," he replied, almost fiercely. "And because I was a fool—that night—when you asked me whether or not I would marry an Indian, or one who was even half Indian. I did not know my own mind—my own heart. I did not know the meaning of love, the all-compelling power of it. I could love no one but you if I knew that you were all Indian. Love is a personal matter, not racial. Who am I to say that white blood is better than red? It is you I love—and it is you I will marry, despite your fancied barriers!"

"But why did you not wait that night when you brought Gauche home? Just for a few moments. I—I had something very, very important—very wonderful, to tell you."

"I couldn't wait. I didn't know that Walters was dead—I believed that I hadn't a moment to lose. Even as it was, it looked like a hopeless chance—to beat him to the recorder's. But slight as the chance was, I was bound to take it — to save your father's gold."

"Your gold, too," smiled the girl happily.

"What?"

"Yes—the mine is half yours. You saw how angry my father was when we met you as you were leaving the recorder's. That was because he thought you had recorded the location in your own right. I had insisted that you would not, so he pushed me into the office and made me read the description aloud. I had glanced to the bottom and seen the signature, and I could hardly keep from laughing aloud while I read, with him standing there glowering and muttering maledictions upon you." She paused and laughed. "You should have seen him when I read the signature 'Jules Beloit.' He stood for a moment like one stunned. Then he leaned forward and read it for himself, then without changing his blustering, angry tone, he demanded a pen, and roaring something about a chechako never getting anything right, he wrote with his own hand the words, 'and Jack Drewry, co-partners'."

"But he shouldn't have done that!" cried Drewry. "He acted upon impulse."

"Try to tell him that," laughed the girl, "and see what he says."

"Yes, I know," grinned Drewry. "He is the great apostle of acting upon sound judgement, rather than upon impulse."

"It is a lesson he has learned through the experience of many long and bitter years," replied the girl, her face grave. "I think that maybe he will be happier now—that he knows his secret is shared by others, that he knows he has gained—a son."

"A son! Helene! Helene! Then—you will marry me!"

"Yes—of course," she answered, her face buried in the long hair of his parka as with arms about her he crushed her to him. "For there is no barrier! There never was.

"My mother was white!"

Then, standing there in the deep shadows of the spruce thicket, she told him of her trip to Carcajo Lake and of her meeting with Father Giroux, and of all the old priest had told her that morning as the wind roared and rocked the tepee in the camp of the Loucheux. "And," she concluded, "he told me that the records are at the Mission at Fort Chipewyan."

"And there they can stay for all I care!" cried the man, holding her even closer. "It is enough that I have you!"

Chapter XXXVI

CORPORAL DOWNEY CAME

TWO days later Constable Peters arrived at The Edge and stepping into the Igloo, stared in surprise at Jack Drewry, who stood at the bar talking with Hank Blossom, Beloit, and several of the sourdoughs.

"Why ain't you under arrest?" he demanded.

"What for?" grinned Drewry.

"Fer murderin' Grubstake Walters! An' you'll find out it ain't no laughin' matter before you git through. You can't git away with murder, even in the country beyond!" He turned to Beloit with a frown. "I thought I told you to tell Sergeant Delhanty to arrest Drewry if he was here."

Beloit eyed him coldly. "You did. But I am under no obligation to take orders from the police. Had the man been guilty, I should have demanded his arrest."

"He's guilty as hell, an' I'm arrestin' him right now!" retorted Peters, who turned to Drewry. "Come on over to detachment," he growled, "an' it's my duty to remind you that anything you may say may be used against you."

As there was no jail in The Edge, Drewry was allowed the freedom of the camp, pending the arrival of Corporal Downey, when he would be sent down to the Dawson jail with Delhanty and Constable Blake.

The arrival of Corporal Downey was not long delayed. The following day when a man burst into the Igloo with a report that a police team was heading down the trail from the divide, hell-bent, and traveling light, all and sundry crowded from the saloon to await its arrival upon the trampled snow of Front Street.

From a hillside across the creek, where they had gone for a stroll, Drewry turned to Helene.

"Look! Look—coming down the trail from the divide! I believe that's Corporal Downey. And look at the crowd in front of the Igloo. Come on, let's hear the news!"

As the team dashed up, Downey stepped from the sled where he had been riding the long downhill trail. He spoke to Peters who stood with the others. "Did you find Drewry?" he asked.

"Yes," Constable Peters replied, "he's under arrest."

Downey continued, speaking rapidly. I followed a trail from the point where we found Walters' body to a camp about a mile back from that rock cairn. The camp was abandoned, so I followed the trail of a one-man dog outfit that struck into Walters' back-trail. The man was traveling fast. That night I camped, and during the night it snowed. The trail was obliterated and I circled around for a day hoping to pick it up in some sheltered spot, but I didn't have any luck. I decided to hit for Beloit's the following day. I was camped in a patch of scrub half way up a hill, and late in the evening I saw a lone figure heading north up a wide valley. It had no dog outfit, and, believe me, it was burning the snow! I harnessed the dogs and took out after it. The trail led on up the valley and finally turned into a narrow, rock-choked canyon. I followed for miles until I came suddenly to a dead end. The lone traveler was nowhere in sight—but toggled among the rocks, a little to one side, I saw a string of dogs, and a loaded sled. It was the outfit I had been following before the snow came! But I could see neither the man with the outfit nor the other.

"Then I noticed that the trail led to a low opening through which the crick that flowed through the canyon came out from under the mountain. I wriggled through the opening and presently came out into a wide cave. The officer paused, and fixed his eyes upon Beloit, who stood beside Hank Blossom, in the very forefront of the crowd. "It was your mine," he said. "The source of your black gold. And there, on the floor, lay the man who murdered Walters."

"But, Downey, he's here!" cried Peters. "I trailed him clean from Beloit's!"

Ignoring the interruption, Downey continued. "The man who murdered Walters," he said, "is lying there dead on a floor of black gold. His left hand is clutching some flat black flakes, and the fingers of his right are still gripping the haft of a belt knife whose blade is buried in the chest of Gauche, the idiot, whose long fingers are closed in a death grip on the murderer's throat. The murderer's name is Dryden."

TENSE silence reigned until Constable Peters cleared his throat. "But how about Drewry?" he asked. "It was Drewry's gun. I kin swear to it—an' so kin Hank."

"It's not the man that owns the gun that's the murderer," replied Downey dryly. "It's the man that uses it. Turn Drewry loose."

Hank Blossom grinned widely and pointed to the two figures that were hurrying up the bank from the creek. "It looks like you come too late to turn him plumb loose, Downey," he said. "It looks from here like Jack Drewry's sentenced fer life!"

He paused abruptly and stared intently into the officer's face. "An' that reminds me!" he cried. "Be you shore, Downey, that Dryden is dead?"

"Dead as Pharaoh," grinned the officer.

Without a word Hank Blossom stepped from the crowd and started hurriedly for the shack next door—the shack that housed the injured chechako—and his nurse. The next moment he came face to face with Drewry and Helene.

"What's your hurry, Hank?" asked Drewry. "I want you to meet the future Mrs. Drewry."

"Yeah?" said Hank, snatching off his cap, "I'm shore proud to meet you, mam. An' some day I hope to tell you what a fine man yer gittin'. But, right now, I'm in a hurry. I'm agoin' to make a call on the future Mrs. Blossom!"

"On who?" asked Drewry, in surprise.

"On the Widder Dryden, of course!"

"Good luck, Hank!" cried Drewry, as the other turned away. "Believe me—we're for you!"

"Did you hear the news?" asked Beloit, as the two joined the group before the door of the Igloo. "That it was Dryden who killed Walters? And that he now lies dead upon the floor of the cavern with Gauche's fingers locked in their death grip upon his throat?"

"In his death grip! Is Gauche dead, too?"

"Aye—Dryden stabbed him to death."

"Poor Gauche!" cried the girl, tears springing into her eyes. "He was faithful to the last. He died while guarding the gold."

"Aye," replied Beloit, "and Dryden has paid—in full."

SELECTION BOARD

By WES FARGO

Author of "Death Waits for Divers," etc.

THE heat was pounding the *Suluan's* little wardroom like hammers. Sweltering heat, such as comes only to the inland basins of the Great River.

Yet neither Red Nelson nor Charlie King was thinking of the old heat. They were thinking of something else. Something that would be happening in a little while in Washington, half the world away.

A little group of admirals and captains would sit around a cool green table there, and talk, and look at records. And then they would make a choice. A choice that would likely mean the end of the trail for at least one of these two on the *Suluan.* One of them would go up, promoted a grade. The other would go out. Out of the Navy—finished—retired.

Odd that a few gold-braided men, who had seen neither of them for years, should have a power of judgment like that, just from dry words written on paper. The cut and dried words, mercilessly brief, that tell what a man has done with himself in this man's Navy.

Behind the Guns, Behind the Conflict and Intrigues of the East are the Men—Human, Courageous. Sure and Competent—the U. S. Navy.

The commanding officer of the *Suluan* drew a heavy breath, nodded at the perspiring mess-boy.

"Another cup of coffee, Akon."

The heat was getting worse. The sun had gone down, but it had left the *Suluan* a fireless cooker. Nelson could see the perspiration stand out in beads on Charlie King's face, across the table.

"Damn this heat! What wouldn't I give for a cold breeze off the Olympics——" Charlie King broke off, tapped a fresh cigarette against the ash-tray. "Boy! Matches! Why in the devil don't you keep matches on the table?"

While Akon skipped, Red Nelson stirred his coffee slowly. "China getting you down, Commander?"

"It's not just the heat, it's——"

"The Selection Board?" Nelson put his spoon down, tasted his coffee, then leisurely began stoking his pipe. "Well, there's nothing we can do about that now. Records are all in—nothing left but the shouting."

"I know it. That's just it!" King's fingers crushed the cigarette. "What chance has a man got, away out here in hell's back-channel? In the Fleet now—target practice, a chance at an 'E'—or in Washington, right where he can show his stuff in the Department. Or even down in Shanghai, where there's plenty doing, with the Japs pushing the Chinese around——"

"It's happened to other men, Commander. And the Board hasn't always passed up all the good ones." Red Nelson looked out the porthole. Looked out at the stretch of lifeless bank, the mud, the reeds, the brown hills in the distance. "For me, if this is going to be my last tour of duty, I'd just as soon it would end here as any place."

"Sorry, sir," King let his voice drop, half ashamed. "It's the heat, I reckon. I forgot you were going up before the Board, too."

HE DID not add "for the last time." But that was the way it was. Red Nelson had already been up before the Board, been passed over, twice. Two strikes on him. The next time would be *out.*

Red Nelson tried to think disinterestedly back at that record of his. Impersonally, as the Board would look at it.

A decent enough record, as far as that went.

"Painstaking — practical — attentive to duty—handles men well." Things like that. Not a bad mark on it.

But nothing outstanding, either. No flag duty, no rescues, no Letters of Commendation. Somehow the ships and jobs he had been assigned to, had never brought a chance for anything like that.

Then, also, he had been almost anchor man in his class—close to the foot in scholastic standing for the Academy course. And the savvy men at the top of his class had already been going up to Commander rank for two years.

Whereas Charlie King had been "number two" man at the Academy, in the class just under Nelson's. That was why he would be going up for selection at the same time. A whole year's difference in classes, but less than a dozen numbers in the Navy register.

But Charlie King had been passed over once already, too. Vaguely Nelson wondered why.

Some little thing away back in his ensign days even, maybe. Late relieving watch—two hours overtime coming back from leave. Things as small as that.

But little things count a lot, before a Selection Board in the upper grades. Ashore a civilian can dent a fender, run a red light, or even wipe his car out in a head-on crash, and get away with it. But in the Navy, if a man even scrapes a rock—just scrapes it, mind you, not loses the whole ship——

"You'll make it this time, Charlie," said Nelson reassuringly. "You'll be skippering this boat in a few months, a full commander, while I'm out on a farm somewhere, raising potatoes."

"I hope not, sir," said Charlie King, and he meant it. "I hope not, sir."

That he would be commanding the *Suluan,* whether he made his three stripes or not, was certain. For Charlie King had come upriver solely to relieve Nelson as commander of the *Suluan.* Ordinarily that would have been a two-hour job. But these were not ordinary times. The Chinese had strung a boom across the river, lower down. There was no getting up or down past it. When Nelson found a way to get down, Charlie King would be the *Suluan's* new captain. Until then he was in an anomalous position—on the ship, yet not of it. Not the executive officer, yet still second man in rank abroad.

Red Nelson finished his coffee, stood up. "You'll make it this time, Charlie. They won't pass you up twice with a record like yours." He tapped out his pipe. "Think I'll see if there is a cat's-paw up on deck. Evening breeze ought to come soon—if it's coming."

HE STROLLED out of the wardroom, out onto the little main deck, not three feet above the water.

Not a swanky craft, by any means, the U. S. S. *Suluan.* A dinky, flat-bottomed river gunboat that probably hadn't had a "dress ship" since she was commissioned. But she hadn't been built for show. She had been built for the one thing she was doing—patrolling the Great River far up in these empty stretches hundreds of miles from the salt water. A flat-bottomed thing, with superstructure like a houseboat. No turrets, no armored conning tower, no lofty tops. Just a bit of tin plate on her sides to keep out rifle or machine gun bullets, and a couple of double purpose three-inch guns and a few machine guns to shoo the roving Chinese bandits away if they got too ambitious on the banks.

But there were no bandits out there now,

they were all "soldiers." "Big Swords," matching their antique weapons against the modern planes, tanks, guns and boats of the Japanese that were harrying them by water and by land, even this far up the Great River.

Feet thudded softly on the holystoned deck. It was Lieut. Lake, Chief Engineer Officer. He was still wiping his hands with a bit of waste, after his evening check-up of the *Suluan's* engine and fire room. He took off his grommetless cap, and wiped his moist brow.

"Hot, eh, Captain? A nice cold breeze from the Olympics at Puget Sound wouldn't go badly now, would it?"

Red Nelson grinned. "That's what King was mentioning, too, Chief."

Lake took out a cigarette, glanced at his commanding officer for unspoken permission, and lighted up. "Don't know as I blame him. I didn't ask for this duty, either. But King—he's one of those energetic birds. Would rather have aviation, or a destroyer knocking off a thirty-knot clip, I reckon."

"Yes, it's not much fun, chaperoning oil tankers up and rice barges down—rice for the bellies and oil for the lamps of China. It's not as exciting as the Fleet, or being down at Shanghai where the shooting is."

"And the bars—and the cocktails and clubs," amended the Chief sourly. "Dull as hell, I call it. Compared to a thirty-knot destroyer, this upstream business of six knots isn't exactly what you'd call a dizzy speed!"

ANOTHER pair of footsteps sounded in the soft dusk. It was Snyder, this time, the *Suluan's* medical officer and ship's surgeon. He wore two stripes too, but above them was the acorn instead of the star, indicating the Medical Corps and not the Line.

"'Evening, Captain. 'Evening, Chief. Holding a Board of Strategy for the war, I see."

Nelson shook his head. "It isn't our war. All we're here for is to act as neutrals—and chaperon American ships up and down."

Chief Engineer Lake flipped his cigarette over the side. "Thought I'd ask you about tomorrow. Getting underway, are we?"

The *Suluan's* captain nodded. "Turn the engines over at seven. Couple of freighters coming up river. We'll have to be ready to pick 'em up, convoy them along. You'll find it written down in the Order Book."

The engineer officer saluted, moved toward the hatchway.

Snyder drew a disgusted breath of the humid air.

"Getting hotter, if anything. Did I hear we're getting underway early tomorrow, Captain?"

"As soon as the ship's had breakfast. There are a couple of American freighters lying off that village ten miles downstream. We'll pick them up off here, and herd them on upriver."

"Afraid of bandits—or the Japs, Captain?"

"Not afraid of anything. We've just got orders to convoy 'em. We'll carry out the orders."

The surgeon grunted.

"Not much fun for you line officers these days, eh? In the old days, an independent command like this would have meant something.

"But these days, with radio and cables and things to give you orders on everything that happens, it doesn't leave you much chance for glory, does it?"

Nelson looked away down the river, toward where half a dozen distant explosions had sounded, with an answering spatter of small arms fire. "Sounds like the Japs are dropping 'em again—— No, it doesn't, Doc. But the Admiral is in the same fix. Even he has to take his orders from Washington—from the President, the Secretary of the Navy, the State Department."

"Well broken in, aren't you?" The

surgeon laughed. "Old Navy family, Captain? Your folks in, before you?"

"No. Farmers. First time I ever saw blue water was when I went to Annapolis."

The surgeon shook his head.

"I've been in twelve years myself—and I still feel half civilian. But you Line guys —I've never been able to make it out. Four years at the Navy School, and a man can't tell one of you from another—a farmer's son from an old family that goes all the way back to Paul Jones."

"Well, they do a lot to you in four years down there." Nelson's lips curved reminiscently. "They certainly had plenty to do to me. I spent the whole four years, seems like, pitching pennies to Tecumseh for luck, praying he'd pull me through with a 'sat' mark in my studies. The old Indian did, but I think it cost him some gray feathers. Were you ever in the Academy in June, Doc?"

"No. Why?"

"Well, the grass is all green, the trees are full-leaved, the buildings look like they'd been fresh holystoned. The band was playing in the bandstand, I remember, that first morning I walked through the yard to take the oath. I could see the Severn, off to the left of the walk, and the weeping willow down by the tennis courts. It's lovely there in June, Doc."

"It must be." The surgeon glanced at the figure beside him in the dusk. "Hell of a thing, this Selection Board. A man starts like that, all full of ambition and vigor—and ends up on a table surrounded by a bunch of gold-braided admirals. Not the man himself on the table, but just a bunch of papers, efficiency records—you know what I mean."

"We can't all be admirals. They have to do something, Doc. If there wasn't selection out, there wouldn't be any promotion up. They can't have gray-beards bossing a single turret."

"Maybe not. But it's a damn shame. Well, Captain—I don't have to tell you that we're all pulling for you when you go up before the Board. Not just the officers—the whole crew. I get around among the men——"

"Thanks, Doc. But the third chance is pretty slim, you know. King ought to make it, though, Savvy man at Annapolis —staff side—torpedo expert—'E' turret at target practice. A good man—a damned good man."

"Yeah. But a man's record don't always show the really tough jobs—like baking in a little gunboat, a thousand miles up a muddy river——"

"Too bad you aren't on the Selection Board, Doc. Maybe some of us chaps with dry-looking records might get through, then. Well, I better turn in. Have to turn out early tomorrow. Good night."

His footfalls sounded soft on the deck, as he headed toward his quarters. He stopped just once—to look downriver where another rumble of explosions and rattle of fire had broken the night.

THE heat hadn't struck yet, next morning, when he went up on the bridge. That was one break, anyway. Those two freighters might have dawdled along until the sweltering midday.

King, with Lieutenant Miller, the *Suluan's* regular executive officer, was already there, and the bridge was manned—quartermaster, helmsman, men at the engine-room telegraphs. And on the wing, Ensign Kilroy, watch and communications officer, pink-cheeked and barely two years out of Annapolis.

"Freighters coming up the river now, sir," said the quartermaster, lowering the long glass from his eye.

"All ready for getting underway?" Nelson looked at Miller, in charge of the unmooring.

"Yes, sir. Whistle and siren tested, engines turned over."

"Then you can start heaving in."

Leaning forward over the bridge weather cloth, Miller shouted to the boatswain on the forecastle. "Heave in!"

With a clank-clank, the anchor chain began to crawl in through the hawse-hole, link by link.

"There's a Japanese armed river boat been quartering around out there for the last hour, sir," said Charlie King interestedly.

Nelson looked, and then glanced aft over his own ship. At the flagstaff there was a large American ensign flying, at the truck another one just like it. And painted across the top of the quarterdeck awning was another, eighteen feet by ten, so that it would not fail of being seen from above.

Somewhere a droning noise sounded. Nelson stepped out on the bridge wing, looked up.

"Those Jap bombers again. Flying early this morning— How much chain out now, Lieutenant?"

"Seven fathom at the hawse-pipe, sir," Miller reported, signalling to the forecastle-head.

Again the slow clank-clank. The *Suluan's* hook had evidently bitten deep into the river mud.

Suddenly Charlie King swung his binoculars downriver, whence had come a series of dull rumbling booms. "Captain! They—they're bombing the freighters, sir!"

Red Nelson looked that way. The yellow river there had all at once turned into frothing waterspouts and foaming cascades.

"Heave in! Heave in!" he ordered. "And let me know when she's underway!"

"Up and down, sir—she's up and down!" reported the executive. Then, after a moment, "Anchor's aweigh, sir!"

"Ahead, one third speed, all engines!" ordered Nelson, his voice sharp. Then, before the telegraphs had ceased to move, "Standard speed. Full speed ahead, all engines!"

Rumbling and shuddering, the *Suluan* slipped into the main stream.

"Those planes—I believe they're heading this way, sir!" cried the ensign.

ALMOST before the words were out of his mouth, they were unnecessary. The droning turned into a roar, the roar into a shriek, like an approaching tornado.

"They're diving!" yelled the ensign.

And then the *Suluan* seemed to leap half out of water. Thunder beat and racked Nelson's ears, smoke erupted and billowed, shutting the forecastle from sight. The bridge weather cloth ripped from its stanchions, whistling noises tore around and over the bridge.

"They're bombing *us!*" shouted King.

"General Quarters! Sound General Quarters!" Nelson picked himself up from the bridge rail where the blast had hurled him. The smoke and stench was in his eyes, his nostrils. He coughed from the acrid fumes. Then his voice lashed out across the bridge. "Sound General Quarters! Miller, take the gun crews! King, take the fire-control!"

Again the ship rocked and shook to the thundering blasts. Shrill above the roar came the howl of the solenoids, the dinning clangor of the alarm gongs.

King was already at the bridge fire-control station, where the nested communication tubes ran to the different guns. No armored conning tower was this—just a bare bridge, vulnerable to every flying fragment. Yet King's eyes were flashing, his lips curled with a fighting grin. A good man, King—a damned good fighting man.

"At the planes—three thousand yards—Commence firing!" said Red Nelson crisply. Then, to the ensign, "Call the engine-room, find out if she's damaged below. And call the sick-bay—find out how many men hurt."

With a crash the forward anti-aircraft gun leaped into action. Then the after gun. Fifty calibre machine guns rattled and chattered. Leaning out, Nelson could see the shells burst in white blooms far up around the swooping planes. Could see the planes whirl, like swallows, and dart away, the smoke bursts vainly following.

"The Chief reports the engine room out

of commission, sir." The ensign was trying to keep his voice from quivering. "Says the starboard shaft is broken, and she's holed below waterline. And sick-bay reports six men wounded. And—and the radio shack is wrecked, sir!"

"Forward gun reports Lieutenant Miller disabled, sir," echoed King crisply.

The smoke bursts were falling away behind the planes now. Nelson turned to King.

"Cease firing!"

IN THE sudden cessation of the guns, the ship seemed strangely quiet. Quiet, except for cries and groans from the forecastle, and a great hissing below, telling of broken steam pipes.

"The Chief Engineer reports, sir," said the ensign, "that the auxiliary steam line is broken, the engine-room full of steam."

"Ask him," said Nelson, "how long he can hold on."

"Captain!" King's voice was hoarse, his eyes gleaming. "That Jap river boat—we could reach her easy with our three-inch! We could blow her out of water—"

"It wasn't the boat that did it," said Nelson. "It was the planes."

"But they bombed us deliberately! They couldn't help seeing our flags!" If it's war they want——"

"It's not war—yet," said Nelson. His eyes sought the river boat, came back again to the forecastle. Men were bleeding down there, dying. His men. Slowly he shook his head. "The planes—might have done it without orders. It's not for us to say."

"They're bombing the freighters again, sir," reported the quartermaster. And then the ensign was cutting in again. "The chief engineer says he can't stand to the throttles for the steam. And the water's already up over the floor plates——"

The *Suluan*, with hard over rudder, was pointing squarely down river now, slowly trying to force her bow around and shoreward. But she was already listing underfoot, the thrust of her single remaining screw kicking her along jerkily, like a duck with a broken leg.

Captain Nelson looked at the water, then at the bank to starboard. Almost a mile away. Too far away——

"Stop the engines, call away all boats. Pass the word, 'Stand by to abandon ship,' wounded men first."

He turned toward the ladder leading forward and down, stopped to hurl a command at the ensign.

"Go to the safe. Bring the Battle Signal Book back with you."

Bugles were blowing, boatswain's pipes shrilling. Men were pouring out of doors and up hatchways. Perspiring men, grimy men, some bare-waisted and steam-reddened, some hobbling with wounds still untended. Three stretchers came up from sick bay, men lying in them white-faced. One of them was Miller, the executive officer. Snyder, the medical two-striper, was with the stretchers, a black surgical case in his hands. Two hospital apprentices followed with emergency kits.

"Two seamen very bad hit, sir—I'm afraid they won't live," said Snyder in a low voice to Nelson. Miller has a bad chest wound. Half a dozen others need attention. Damn it, here they come again!"

THE roar of the bombers was filling the sky once more, and fire and steel blasted and ripped. The *Suluan* reeled and groaned, like a maimed thing trying to escape.

"Man the anti-craft! Commence firing—"

The words suddenly seemed torn out of Nelson's mouth. The deck was being jerked out from under him. It was as though a mule had kicked his right leg from under him—a mule with red-hot shoes.

To his surprise he found himself lying on the deck close beside the three-inch gun platform. Someone else was there, almost touching him—the gun-pointer, his shoulder a mass of dripping red. But the gun,

crazily, was still roaring and recoiling. And Nelson, looking up, saw Charlie King sitting up there on the pointer's stool, his eyes glued to the telescope sight, his hands whirling the wheel as the gun coughed and kicked. A good man, King——

Slowly Nelson pulled himself up, hobbled across the torn deck.

"Cease firing! Abandon ship——"

Davit blocks were squealing, boats splashing into the water. The stretchers went in—half a dozen wounded men—the hospital apprentices.

"Wounded all embarked, sir. We'd better——" Snyder broke off in the middle of his report. "You're hit, yourself!"

"Scratch—no time for it now." Nelson turned to Engineer Lake who had come up bareheaded, his blouse open, his arm in a sling. "Hit, Chief?"

"Got pitched against the engines." The engineer winced. "Those bombs raised hell below."

"Everybody up from below?"

"Last man out, sir."

"Then abandon ship."

Nelson was the last man to leave the ship, as a captain should. The heavy laden boats made slowly for the river bank.

"Here comes that damned river boat again!" said King, swearing.

Nelson took his eyes off the riddled *Suluan*, glanced downstream.

The launch there was heading upstream, the water purling at her forefoot, the bow gun and clustered gunners plain on her forecastle head.

Nelson reached for the Battle Signal book, with its lead-weighted covers—held it out beyond the gunwale, over the river depths. "If they start shooting——"

But the little river boat with the sun-flag whipping at her stern churned on upstream, circled the low-lying *Suluan* and stood off curiously.

With a last lingering *whoosh* of imprisoned air, the *Suluan* suddenly shuddered, rolled her streaming bottom strakes into sight. She hung for a moment, her riddled stacks almost paralleling the surface. Then she tossed her stern and rudder high and slid slowly under, the still flying Stars and Stripes the last thing to show above water.

"Head for the bank," said Nelson to the coxswain.

In the mud and brush of the marshy bank they disembarked, dragged the uncomplaining wounded back into cover of the reeds.

"The freighters are beached, burning, across the river, sir," reported Charlie King. "And looks like the Japs are landing soldiers on both banks."

"Scuttle the boats," ordered Nelson. "Scuttle the boats, so they won't know where we landed."

SNYDER, the medical officer, came up, saluted. "Kemper, the storekeeper is dead, sir. I don't think Mason will last until morning. Miller will pull through, I think. And now I'd like to look at that legs of yours."

"How are the other wounded?"

"All treated and bandaged as well as we are able, sir. I've set Lieutenant Lake's collar-bone. You're the only one——"

King was back again, his eyes bright. "Boats scuttled, sir. I removed the two machine guns before scuttling, and set them up. That river boat is heading this way. We can give them a hot reception."

Nelson looked through the fringe of reeds.

"Keep the guns manned. But don't fire unless we are fired upon."

In his mind was mirrored King's thoughts. The Japanese might be planning a clean sweep. If they wiped out all survivors, there would be no one to get back to report exactly what had happened.

But the river boat came cutting around, chugged at half speed not a hundred yards offshore, and went on down the river.

"All right, Doc," said Nelson. "You can take a look at this leg now."

Snyder swore when he saw the bloody

gash, sopping wet and smudged from the river water and mud.

"No bones touched—but you'll be lucky if you miss infection."

He drenched the wound ruthlessly with biting disinfectant, bandaged it with double bandages.

The leg was throbbing now, seeming to swell the bandages to near bursting. Nelson took the chewed cigarette out of his mouth, ordered the cooks to prepare dinner.

Then he visited personally each of the wounded.

As the afternoon waned, he sat apart, silent, smoking. Then at dusk he called King.

"Commander," he said. "Someone has to go to that village downstream, get the word out, and bring back help. It will be a dangerous job. Miller is a stretcher case, Lake has a broken shoulder, the Doc is needed here—that leaves only you and me and Kilroy."

"I'll go," said King quickly. "I can raise one of the boats, take a couple of men, go down river. With one of those machine guns we can make a good stab at fighting through, if necessary."

"Those Jap river boats are patroling every inch of water. If they didn't want you to get through, you couldn't. No, it's not a case of fighting, it's a case of *slipping* through. That means one man—and by land."

"Well, you couldn't go, with that leg. Kilroy is young. I'm the man to go."

NELSON did not have to put into words the thing that was flashing through both their minds. The man who got through—if he got through—would not have to worry about any Selection Board. His name would be in official dispatches, in all the newspapers, on the lips of Congress.

Slowly Nelson nodded. "Yes—you're the man most likely to get through. That's the important thing. If you fail, Kilroy will try tomorrow night. After that—it will be up to me."

"Oh, I'll get through." King was grinning. "I'll start right away——"

But Nelson was interrupting.

"They might stop a foreign naval officer, in uniform. But they can't stop to question every Chinese farmer walking the country. The Chinese pilot's clothes aren't quite your size—but you'll have to make them fit."

"They'll take me for a spy—one of those Russians with the Chink Army, if they catch me—if I don't get through——"

"You've got to get through. And your chance of getting through is greater, that way."

"I know, Captain. Where's the pilot?"

In a couple of minutes he was out of uniform, dressed in the baggy formless shirt and trousers of the Chinese pilot. He smeared his face and hair with river water and mud. Then he reached for his gunbelt and automatic.

"Chinese farmers don't carry automatics," said Nelson quietly.

"Hadn't thought of that. Shooting would bring a flock of Japs, anyway." King laughed, flipped the gun and belt into the pile of stores. Then he pitched his cigarettes and matches after them. "Won't be needing these, either—a match or a cigarette butt might be a give-away. Well, good-bye, Captain. You can look for me back—with stretchers—early tomorrow morning."

There was still the same grin on his face as he turned toward the cane-brakes. A trifle tight-lipped, a trifle crooked—but still a grin.

"Doc," said Nelson. "I told you he was a damned good man."

BUT when night dragged past, and the morning came, with no King, little furrows came into Nelson's brow. Furrows of worry, in addition to the furrows of pain.

Because the leg was swollen to almost

double size now. It was stiff, and throbbed like a scalding burn. Doc Snyder shook his head as he dressed it. "I don't like the looks of that——"

"You're seeing things, Doc." Nelson forced his lips into a twisted smile. Have to keep Snyder from knowing how bad it was.

For, if King had failed, that second try must be *his*. Kilroy was young—too young. Too inexperienced. Besides, if he himself was to go, he'd have to go tonight. That leg wouldn't bear him up another day. No, he'd go tonight—and Kilroy would go the next night——

His head was hot and feverish, too, in addition to the leg. All the tobacco now was being reserved for the stretcher cases. The water breakers were running empty——

As sundown drew near, he began to check around, making a last inspection, giving Lake and Kilroy orders.

The crash of the reeds in the brake was the first sound—then Charlie King's breezy shout.

"Captain! Told you I'd be back. Had to wait for stretchers, though. Captain—where are you, Captain?"

Then King was pushing into the little camp, behind him a file of coolies, stretchers.

"Doc," said Nelson, "get the worst cases into the stretchers first. If there aren't enough stretchers, I think I can still walk. Kilroy, look out for the guns. And give me that Battle Signal Book——"

He stood up, tried to hobble across the camp. And then, oddly, his legs were giving way under him. He lay there, feeling the mud and leaves in his face. Vaguely, for a moment, he could hear Snyder's hurried voice:

"In the stretcher—lift him into the stretcher! He's passed out. Easy with that leg! There—— And put his Book in with him."

It was a long time after he woke, before he knew just exactly where he was. Then it came to him, vaguely, as in a dream.

He was in sick bay. Not just any sick bay—this sick bay was cruiser size. And the four stripes on the shoulder straps of the medical officer bending over him, made it certain. Only the flagship rated a full four-striper doctor.

"Awake at last?" Then the four-striper was grinning at him, was gibing at him, cheerfully. "About time. How do you feel?"

"Huh? Oh—I'm all right. Just—tired." Nelson closed his eyes, again, trying to force that fog out of them. There was something in the haze in the back of his mind—something that had been there a long time. He had to get it—had to—it was worrying him. Then, triumphantly, he had it. "My men—— Are they all right?"

"Coming along nicely—all but Mason and the storekeeper. And you're lucky too. I'm going to be proud of that leg." The four-striper chuckled, half swung around toward the door, and called out:

"All right, Admiral. He's begging for a football—to kick. You can come in and talk to him—but just for a minute."

Then the Admiral was standing there, too, his sea-dog face square jawed, but his eyes twinkling under their shaggy brows. He shook Nelson's hand

"How are you, Commander? Football, eh? But I thought it was King that was the Annapolis half-back, not you."

King—that was the second thing that was coming clear out of the haze. Nelson tried a grin—and made it.

"He never made better yardage—against the Army—than he did along the river bank, that night. A good man, an extra good man, Admiral. I'd like to recommend him, when I'm able to make out my report——"

"Report be damned!" The Admiral was salty—one of the old school. "What do you think we've been getting from Miller—Lake—Snyder—all the rest of the people

on the *Suluan?* We'll want your report, all right—but later. What I dropped in for, was to congratulate you on your own job. A fine job—a damned fine job, Commander!"

"But I wanted to get my report in in time, sir—you know King goes up before the Selection Board——"

"Selection? He couldn't have missed it if he'd tried!" The Admiral snorted. He turned to the four-striper medico. "How about it, Doctor? Will Nelson here be well enough to sail on the next transport for the States?"

Nelson didn't hear the doctor's answer. He only heard the one word "transport."

So that was it. The end. The end of the trail. Officers retiring, or to be retired, always went home on the transport. Well, a man didn't often get past the Selection Board after he had lost his ship——

HE DREW a deep breath. I'll be all right for the transport, sir. Anyway, after that, I'll be having a good long rest——"

"Rest? What do you mean 'rest'?" The Admiral blinked. "You'll get back to Annapolis just in time for the beginning of the Academic course. First time I ever heard teaching a wild bunch of unlicked cubs called 'a rest'! But the Academy Superintendent put in for you especially, to teach his midshipmen International Law."

Annapolis? International Law? Why Naval Academy duty was a two-year tour. They didn't give two-year assignments to a man about to be retired.

"But the Selection Board——" said Nelson weakly. "I lost my ship——"

"So did John Paul Jones!" The Admiral's teeth came together with a snap. "The Selection Board's already met on your case—the President, the Secretary of State, seventy million newspaper readers, and half a dozen Jap fliers five hundred miles up the river. First time in history a bunch of Japs ever sat on an American Navy Selection Board, I reckon" The Admiral glared at the four-striper doctor. "You mean to say you didn't tell him——"

The four-striper medico hesitated, mumbled something about "too sick to be excited——"

"Nonnsense! Never hurt a man yet to hear good news." The Admiral turned back to Nelson. "What I was saying was, that the Superintendent wanted you to teach his midshipmen how to use their heads as well as their guns. Any Navy man can fight—hell, we expect 'em to fight. But a man that can stop a war from being fought—— What about it, Doctor? Did you say he'd be fit enough for the next transport back?"

The doctor felt Nelson's pulse, then ran his hands gently over the bandages.

"He's all right for the transport. He'll probably feel some twinges in that leg this winter, though, when the cold hits it. But by spring he'll be plenty fit. That June weather in Annapolis, with the green grass, and the trees out—it's nice there in June, isn't it, Commander?"

Nelson lay back on the pillow. So the trail hadn't ended yet. It still lay ahead of him. How far? No one could say. But still ahead.

"Yes," he said, nodding. "It's lovely in Annapolis—in June."

"A Small Blond Man; Without Doubt One of the Greatest Liars the Foreign Legion Had even Seen"

HIGH AND WIDE

By ROBERT CARSE

Author of "Word of Honor," "Number Five," etc.

HIS name was Hans Tims. He was a small and blond man, and without doubt one of the greatest liars the Legion had ever seen. That was established after he'd been at Kebel less than a month.

Kebel was a block-house in the isolated line of posts along the far Southern frontier of the Saharan Territories hundreds of kilometers beyond Colomb Bechar.

Hans Tims came to it with half a dozen other men in a replacement draft, but he was the only one to receive immediate notice from the outfit already stationed there. When the draft got down from the truck that had brought them south, he formed them to salute the faded flag above the watch-tower. Then he gave another flawless salute to Dorkel, the big senior sergeant of the post.

"Replacement outfit reporting, *chef*," he said. Hans Tims, soldier second class, speaking."

Dorkel had been awakened from his mid-morning nap by the arrival of the truck. He was still sleepy, grouchy. "Who's got the papers for your lot?" he snapped.

Tims nodded smiling. "The driver.

He's some fellow from the transport, and not a real Legionnaire."

"Ja wohl!" Dorkel said, and cursed. "It's up to him to make the report. But get this bunch over into barracks."

Dorkel stood motionless as Tims marched them through the gate. Then he turned to the truck driver. "All right, stupid," he said. "The lieutenant will want to know a couple of things from you."

"That little half-pint told me—" the driver began. But Dorkel made a rough silencing gesture. "Shut up!" he said. "Follow me!"

Jean Balsain, the tall young lieutenant in command of the post, had come straight from Saint Cyr to the Legion. Yet his first year of service with the foreign regiments had taught him that true discipline was based in patience and a full understanding of the men under him. He sat quietly back in his shadowy office and smoked a cigarette as he listened to the driver.

"Bon," he said when the man was finished. "You say this Tims told you all he'd do would be to get the bunch quickly out of the truck. Then you'd take over and make your report."

"That's right, *mon lieutenant.*"

"But you were a bit slow, and Tims beat you to it."

"That's right, too, *mon lieutenant.*"

Balsain pitched the cigarette butt over into the box of sand by the sun-glaring doorway. "Tims seems to be a smart enough soldier. But that doesn't prove anything except that you were a bit careless. Next time, just don't let yourself be fooled by some slick-talking recruit. Now go out and get your food. You'll be taking the leave and hospital-call men north this afternoon."

Dorkel waited before the desk after the driver had gone. He balled his chew of Copenhagen snuff far back in his cheek and stared at Balsain. "Two of the men pulling out today are non-coms," he said. "We'll have to take a good look at the replacement bunch, Lieutenant."

"You mean," Balsain said laughing," that you want to take a look at Tims' papers. You want to find out whether he's a soldier or just a wind-bag. *Très bien.* Bring him here. I'm curious, too."

Tims was sweating. His bland, round face shone in the sun shaft of the doorway. "I'm a Swiss, *mon lieutenant,*" he said. "I didn't give my right nationality when I joined up. But I was a top sergeant in a mountain regiment at home. I come from the Jungfrau district, from Glatzag, and I'm—"

"What we need," Balsain said in his quiet voice, "is a muleteer. Show us you can handle mules, and you'll get your first class soldier's stripe quick. When you've got that, you've got a good chance of being corporal. Understood?"

"Oui, mon lieutenant, and thank you a thousand times. There were a lot of mules in Glatzag. My father had the best in the district. He used them winter and summer, and he was famous because of them. But I'm a mountain man, and it's very hot here. Maybe if you found another man to tend mules for a while it would be better."

"It's hot here for all of us," Balsain said, a note of sharpness in his voice. "You're assigned as muleteer. Dismissed!"

THE sun seemed to come right down and strike Hans Tims at the base of the skull as he came out of the lieutenant's room. He staggered and on the flinty ground his shadow did a wavering dance of mockery. "You're a fool," he said. "Always, you talk too much. You never even get within kicking distance of a mule. The lieutenant is smart. That big jug-head German sergeant is tough. If you don't handle their mules right they'll know, and quick. Then you'll catch it bad, and learn to keep your mouth shut on the rock pile."

The mule stable was in a far corner of the post compound. Flies were thick around it, and from inside came a heavy, pungent odor. The odor made Tims sick. He had to grip the door frame to stand, and the old scar on the back of his head had begun a constant pounding throb. But he went into the stable, leaned against the wall.

Twelve mules were in the place, big, gray animals, all with the Legion brand burned on their fore hooves. The straw they stood in was dirty, and the water buckets along the wall empty. Some man bound north on leave this afternoon had been the muleteer, Tims realized. As a parting salute to Kebel and his successor he'd left the stable ready for three days' full work.

Tims picked up a pitchfork and bent forward to turn the straw in the nearest stall. He never saw the mule kick. There was just the whistling sound of the up-sweeping hoof, and the pitchfork haft splitting jaggedly in his hands. *"Fils d'un fils inconnu!"* Tims said, then jumped before the mule kicked again.

He backed out of the stable still watching the mule. He was shaking so hard his teeth jarred. "All right," he whispered. "You've got to go back in there, but you've got to get a drink first."

IN THE barracks room the men off duty and the men going on leave were gathered together around the mess table. Only one of the replacement draft was with them, Tims noticed. It was Megya, the hard-faced Yugoslav. Megya had served in the Legion before, come back to the corps, he had told Tims on the way south, because a man got free wine. But Megya had invested his re-enlistment bonus money in wine and absinthe at the last base canteen. He was selling it now to the Legionnaires about the table. "Listen, soldier," Tims said, and took Megya gently by the arm.

Megya turned and swore at him. "Get out of here, you lying son!" he said. "This is for the old-timers."

"Easy," Tims said. "I'm an old-timer myself. The lieutenant just recognized it. He's given me the muleteer's job and my first class stripe. I'll be a corporal next week. But I need a drink bad. This heat is taking the stuff out of me."

"Then go bum a drink off the lieutenant," Megya said. "I'm selling mine for cash."

Tims made a wide gesture. "Get smart," he murmured. "You won't see these guys again. They're bound out of here for good. Me, I'll be here as long as you will. We can be partners and get ahead fast in this place. Don't worry about the cash. No doubt about me being around next pay-day."

Megya swore again, but he pulled a bottle of absinthe from underneath the table. "Drink it in the stable," he said. "Not around here. And don't forget it costs you fifteen francs. Try anything fancy on me and I'll knock the price out of your face."

"Sure," Tims whispered, already pulling at the cork. "Sure, old-timer—"

He drank down half the bottle as soon as he returned to the stable. Then, numb and stumbling, he went to work on the mules. He fed and watered all of them except the lanky beast that had kicked at him. That one watched him with evilly

flashing eyes, muscles flickering along the withers and rump. Tims tried to wheedle it as he would a man.

"I never did you any harm," he muttered. "I never saw you before today. What have you got against me? Here—go slow and I'll give you a drink."

He tilted the absinthe bottle, slopped almost a pint of the fiery stuff into the mule's bucket. He added a bit of water, stirred the mixture with a pitchfork handle, then thrust the bucket before the beast.

THE mule sniffed, sniffed once more, and drank. Tims moved fast while it drank. He jerked the soiled straw aside from its hooves, flung in fresh, forked-up fodder around the pail. But the mule was intent upon the contents of the bucket, was beginning to make strange, deep, hiccoughing sounds.

Tims could not help himself; he started making the same sort of sounds. He was very drunk, he knew, and the mule was even drunker. He sagged down by the wall beside the door and stretched out part awake.

In a vague stream of broken memories his past returned to him. He saw his home village of Glatzag, high there in the Alps, the sharp-roofed houses, the plump cattle in the summer pastures, and always the great, white gleam of the Jungfrau and the Alps in the background. There had been a lot of snow in the winter, he remembered, and sleigh bells had rung all the time in the streets, louder than the church bell. Skiers had swung down the slopes below the Jungfrau and kids in bright caps had tied their hand-painted sleds behind the sleighs, bunched, yelling.

But none of those memories was very clear. They were all confused, and it was that pain in his head that did it. He'd got the pain in his head after he left Glatzag and Switzerland, he recalled. For some time he had worked over in France, in the South, but where there were still mountains called the Alps, and where there was lots of snow. That had been in a village called Beuil, back of Nice. The place was full of hotels where skiers came to try the steep runs, and far down below you could see the azure blue of the sea called the Mediterranean.

Most probably he'd worked in one of those hotels at Beuil. But he wasn't sure any more. His head hurt too much. When he left there, though, he'd gone to Monte Carlo looking for work. He'd been out of money by then, been forced to walk the whole way. It was night and very dark when the car came around the curve on the high, winding road and struck him. After that, for weeks, months maybe, he had stayed in that hospital where the nurses talked English with the doctors when they looked at his head. Then a *gendarmerie* lieutenant had told him one day he had to get out. This wasn't a free hospital, the lieutenant said, and there was no place in France for a Swiss who didn't have a work permit.

So he left the hospital and started walking again until he came to Toulon. In Toulon there was a recruiting bureau of the Legion. You were fed three times a day in the Legion, they said, and you were given a wine ration, and you were paid——

The mule who had drunk the absinthe had stopped hiccoughing. It was making snorting, snuffling moans. Then a kind of convulsion seized it. Froth flung from the muzzle. The red-glazed eyes rolled. "Quiet!" Tims muttered. "You want the sergeant in here?"

But the mule was slumping down against the halter rope. It lopped over, lay prone. "Better," Tims said. "Now we can both have a little sleep—"

DORKEL awoke him. Dorkel pulled him erect and hurled him headlong out of the stable. "What'd you do?" the big man yelled. "What's happened to that mule?"

"Which mule?" Tims said. Then he saw the mule the sergeant meant, and saw that the beast was stiff in death. He straightened, brushed his hands across his eyes and mouth: "Real Legion mule, that one, Sergeant. I had a bottle, see, and I was having a little drink. The whole lot had been taken care of, and I figured I could have a drink. But that one smelled the stuff. Swung right around and grabbed the bottle out of my hand. Drank all——"

Dorkel hit him a back-hand blow that sprawled him flat. "Stay there!" he ordered, and went into the stable. When he came out, he had the empty bucket and he was smelling it. "So the mule took the bottle from you, hey? Right out of your hands?"

Tims was running as fast as his short legs would go. Dorkel caught him at the barracks door, banged the bucket down over his head, started to kick him. But some of the Legionnaires had heard and understood the yelling. They came from the barracks in a group and their laughter rang across the compound. Balsain was at the door of his quarters, silent, but keenly watching.

"*Très bien*, my Swiss cuckoo clock," Dorkel told Tims. "I've beaten you enough for now. But you've killed my best mule, and don't think I'll let you forget. Some time the lieutenant won't be around."

The men took Tims into the barracks after Dorkel had gone away. They were still laughing, and a couple of them bought a bottle of wine from Megya. "Here's to it, soldier," they said. "Drink deep. That's the best lie Dorkel's been told in fifteen years."

Hans Tims got drunk all over again on the wine. He forgot the sergeant, the mule and the dark chain of memories that had passed through his mind in the stable. "Thanks, lads," he said. "Let me tell you a story about a horse I saw one time in Italy. A plug they hired out to the tourists to climb Vesuvius from Pompeii, before they built the funicular railway up the mountain. That was some horse. Wouldn't eat anything but straw hats, and they had to be English hats. He'd reach right out and snap them off the Englishmen making the trip to the crater. Those Englishmen used to get so mad they'd even try to sue the Italian government. But you can't bring a horse to court, can you? Pass the bottle. Have a drink yourselves—"

From that night until pay-day Hans Tims was the barracks favorite. Life had been very dull at Kebel, and he made it gay, full of color, wild humor and endless stories all of which he persisted were true. Sometimes, as the pressure slackened in his head, he knew he was lying, but now he could not stop. The men wanted fresh stories from him every hour he was free from duty.

Then on pay-day Megya came to him. "Fifteen francs," Megya said "Quick."

Hans Tims sighed and gesticulated. "You're an old soldier, Megya," he said. "And a man of honor. You'll understand. I can't pay you now. I had to send every sou of my pay to my sister. As soon as I got it, I mailed it to her. Next time, though, you'll get it, and a couple of francs extra."

"So?" Megya said. He was taking off his kepi and blouse, stripping to his undershirt. "For fifteen francs, I get some crummy story about your sister. I don't think you got a sister. I think you're—"

"I haven't got a sister?" Tims said, his voice vibrant. "Why, she's the Countess Paula Andrejlin Rokabetsheff. Her husband's cousin's cook made the poisoned cakes that helped kill Rasputin, the mad monk who was putting all that funny stuff over on the Czar. Her husband has so many medals he has to have his dress tunic lined with leather to keep them on. He—"

"What," Megya said, his fists closing, "is a guy like that doing, needing fifteen francs?"

"The Count's kind of sick," Tims said.

He had turned to stare around at the men grouped behind, making a beseeching grimace at the mail clerk. In a moment, he realized, Megya would ask the mail clerk if he'd received a letter addressed to the Countess Rokabetsheff. And there was no countess, none at all."

"Go on," Megya grunted. He had advanced, stood very close. "What's the matter with the Count?"

"He's been sick for years," Tims said. "See, the men who poisoned Rasputin wanted to be sure the cakes had enough arsenic in them. So they asked my cousin to try a couple first, because they knew he was the strongest man in Russia. If he lived—"

MEGYA whipped in a left hook hard. It caught Hans Tims flush on the mouth, sprawled him prostrate. He stayed so for several seconds, watching the burly Yugoslav crouched over him. He had to fight, he realized. If he didn't, someone would ask the mail clerk the question Megya had forgot.

Then the whole tangled fabric of lies he had told would collapse upon him and he'd be outcast, the butt of any brutal joke or random blow.

He rose and charged straight for Megya. The Yugoslav was an experienced fighter who used knees, feet and elbows in the approved Legion manner. But the fury of Tims' attack drove him back for a bit. He ducked low behind his guard, cursing, then straightened, struck out with both hands.

Hans Tims went down again, but pulling Megya with him. He rolled over and twice bit Megya's ear. A great, roaring howl of rage came from Megya. Time and again, he clipped the smaller man with terrific body blows. He was absolutely furious now, ready to maim, to kill.

But the other Legionnaires there stopped him. They hauled him back from Tims. "Cut it out," the mail clerk said. "What if the little guy does lie a bit? He's funny doing it, and he doesn't hurt anybody."

"How about my fifteen francs?" Megya said. "Did he mail them north today?"

"Don't ask me," the mail clerk said. "I haven't orders to open letters. Now, shut up. Go soak your stupid head."

It was a bit different in the barracks after that, although most of the men still stood up for Tims and found him amusing. Megya hadn't forgotten the little man constantly, used his superior knowledge as an old Legionnaire to get him into trouble with the post commanders.

At inspection, Tims suddenly discovered that his rifle barrel was full of dust. Buckles were always missing from his equipment. When he came off guard duty at night, his cot collapsed to the floor with a bang, awoke the whole roomful of sleeping men. He was brought up before Balsain by Dorkel several times, and warned.

"You've got to do better, soldier," the lieutenant told him. "Right now, all you're good for around here is a kind of one-ring circus. What's bothering you?"

Hans Tims stood rigid, his hands flat at his sides. He had seen enough of the Legion, he realized, to know the fate of any man who privately accused a comrade to an officer. "Nothing much except the heat, I suppose, *mon lieutenant*," he mumbled. "I'm a mountain man, and the heat bothers me plenty. My head bursts——"

"The head story is something new," Balsain said. "The rest I've heard before. But watch yourself from now on. This isn't any mountain regiment. The sun's very hot in the penal battalion."

It was Dorkel who caught Tims that night, in the hour before dawn. Dorkel was on his way from the radio room and the lieutenant's quarters. He wore a pair of native sandals, moved without sound. But as he came to the door of the barracks he pressed the button of his flashlight, sent a broad beam across the room.

Hans Tims stood over Megya's cot. The

little man held a bayonet in his hand, and his face was contorted with a look of outright, insane fury. He blinked in the flashlight sweep, and the drive of the bayonet blade towards Megya's back deflected, struck the wood of the cot frame.

"Alors, salopard!" Dorkel yelled, and sprang at him.

But Hans Tims made no effort to resist. "He wouldn't let me be," he babbled. "He wouldn't let me be—"

The men were sitting up, staring. Dorkel took him by the neck and hurled him bodily out into the dark. "You crawling Swiss," he said. "You can't even yodel! But you'd stick a good soldier in the back for fifteen francs. Now the lieutenant will fix you well."

Balsain sat at his field desk. He wore full duty belts and his pistol; had a detail map spread before him. "You turn them out?" he asked Dorkel, not looking up.

"Not yet, Lieutenant," Dorkel said. "I want to ask you about this rat first. I just caught him trying to put a bayonet through Megya."

Balsain slowly folded the map. "I hoped you'd be smart enough not to try the bayonet trick," he said, his dark eyes square on Tims. "That's murder, and men get shot for it. But I understand what's bothered you. Megya's a tough man. He's sore about the money you owe him, and he's taking it out of your hide. Right now, though, that doesn't matter. We've got a real job to do. You'll have a chance to use your bayonet the right way. A bunch of about eighty Senussi are heading north in a *baroud*. They think they can swing past us and slip in a raid at the oasis at Tafilelt. We're going out to meet them. Let me see if you really are a soldier."

HANS TIMS was too dazed to do more than salute, swing for the door. But behind him Dorkel was shouting for the bugler, and then the misty dawn air was vibrant with the fierce shrillness of the call to arms.

They met the first scouts of the Senussi raiding party about ten kilometers west of Kedel. Those men fell back slowly upon the main group, already in position along the crest of a steep, rocky dune. A few Mauser shots clanged down from the crest, and that was all. The *caids* were checking the warriors, waiting for the Legion.

"They're looking for a charge," Balsain told Dorkel. "And we'll have to give it to them. That whole outfit is camel-mounted. We've got them blocked now, but we can't hold them here long."

Dorkel squinted up the slope. "It'll be slow going," he said. "But do we go now?"

"Now," Balsain said, lifting to his full height. He went at a trot before the Legion line. His polished belts shone, and the gold marks of his rank on his kepi and sleeves. He was a perfect target, yet his voice rose clear—*"En avant, la Legion!"*

Hans Tims listened to that sound of Balsain's voice instead of the whine of bullets from the crest. With his first stride, he forgot the bullets. If the lieutenant could go up the slope, he could. *"La Legion!"* he yelled, running. *"La Legion!"*

But at the dune crest only he and Balsain and one other, badly wounded man were left. The rest were down below. They had slowed, caught in the heavy sand. Hans Tims had a vision of brown, seamed faces beneath ragged headcloths very close, fired his rifle point-blank into

them. Some of the Senussi he fired at fell, and he yelled again, lunging with the bayonet. He did not distinctly hear Balsain, or know the lieutenant gripped him by the arm.

"Down!" Balsain said. "We've got to get out of here!"

They crawled back side by side, the wounded man between them. The men below were in disorder. Senussi had cut in across the dune to flank the Legion line. Dorkel was jerking the canvas jacket off an automatic rifle. He gave it to Megya. "Here," he said, "get out on the right wing and hold those chaps off." Then he glanced up at Balsain. "That man any good, Lieutenant?"

"He did all right in the charge. Send him with Megya as ammunition carrier."

"Bon," Dorkel said, and shoved two ammunition cases into Hans Tims' hands. "When you need more, come back here."

The heavy wooden ammunition cases banged his knees as Hans Tims sprinted out behind Megya. He stumbled and Megya cursed him. But then suddenly they were at the place Dorkel had indicated. A couple of big bowlders were there at the end of the dune slope. From behind them, a man with an automatic rifle could cover the whole right wing of the Legion line.

RIGHT now, Senussi were in behind the bowlders. They showed themselves slightly as they fired at him and Megya. A grunting curse came from the Yugoslav; he opened the automatic in a quick and violent burst. The Senussi tumbled one upon the other, flopping in death. "Haul them out," Megya told Hans Tims. "Make room for us!"

It seemed to Hans Tims that he and Megya lay among those bowlders for hours. The barrel of the automatic became glowing hot. Sun scorched them from overhead, and even the bowlders had the feel of fire. But to straighten up in a more comfortable position meant sure death. The Senussi out beyond were making charge after charge.

"They think they got us," Megya croaked once. "I'm running short on ammunition. Skip out of here and bring me more. Don't forget to come back, hey? This is a Legion scrap now, and no personal stuff goes."

"Understood," Hans Tims muttered. He slid up to peer over the top of the rear bowlder. Dead and dying Sensussi lay there under the awful white shimmer of the sun. If he reached their piled bodies he'd be safe, he thought. Then he could crawl on to the Legion line.

He scrambled across the bowlder, ducked low and ran. Panting, reeling, he flung himself down among the Senussi dead. A Mauser bullet had clipped his elbow and another knocked away his kepi. But he did not look around. That was death behind.

He hunched motionless, his hands raised to keep the sun from his head. But the sun beat at him with strokes like those of an immense hammer. Every blow seemed worse than the one before. Across from him, on the other side of the heap of dead, a young Senussi warrior was dying.

The man kept screaming in a terrible voice, and Hans Tims screamed back at him. Then he laughed at himself and the Senussi. He was going out of his head, he knew, going crazy. The sun had him. His brain had been beaten in by the sun.

HE TRIED to get up and go on three times. But he could not move. His body was held down by enormous weights. The whole world swirled and blackened about him. The roar of gun fire no longer had any meaning. With his last conscious movements he dug down into the sand to get away from the sun.

The muzzle of the pistol was cool. It brought Hans Tims back to consciousness. Dorkel held the pistol, Tims saw, and crouched right in front of him. "I'd have slugged you," Dorkel said, "while you

were sleeping. But the lieutenant doesn't play that way. He'll have you tried by a regular court, and shot by a firing squad."

"Why?" Hans Tims said, the word gasped, thick.

"For being a yellow-belly. For running out on Megya and leaving him to be slaughtered alone. He didn't have a chance. When you left, he was almost out of ammunition. The *bicos* just waited, then finished him with their knives. And all the time you were over here, hunkered in among the stiffs, asleep. If Balsain wasn't—"

Hans Tims was staggering to his feet. The flat blue dark of full night was upon the desert. Fires burned a short distance away, and around them men in khaki moved carrying other death-rigid khaki forms. "But I didn't know," he said. "I couldn't help what I did. The sun got me. Everything went black in my head."

"It'll go black for good," Dorkel said, "when the firing squad gets you. Step out! The *bicos* quit when we broke their main charge. Now we're bound for Kebel. Then you go to face your court-martial."

Hans Tims swung and squarely faced him. "You're making me out a coward," he said. "But the lieutenant will tell you how I acted during the charge."

"Sure, sure," Dorkel said. "You were all right while the lieutenant had his eye on you. That's what makes it cute. Once you were alone with Megya you pulled your job fast. You dirty, rotten swine, you let Megya die just because you owed him fifteen francs!"

THERE was a doctor at Kebel who had flown in with the ambulance plane to tend the seriously wounded. Balsain had him take a look at Hans Tims. The doctor spent some time in his examination. Then he talked alone and low-voiced with Balsain.

"The man's not in good shape," he said. "Right now he's suffering from the after effects of severe sunstroke. He has a deep scar at the base of the skull where some time or another he received a very bad concussion of the brain. Because of that it's quite possible he might have occasional delusions."

"More than occasional," Balsain said unsmiling. "But will you make out a report that he suffered extremely from sunstroke during yesterday's action?"

"Certainly, I will," the doctor said.

"Fine," Balsain said, and smiled a bit. "If you didn't, the poor chap would go up before a court-martial on charges of cowardice in the face of the enemy." He turned away then and went over to where Hans Tims waited.

"They going to shoot me now, Lieutenant?" Hans Tims asked.

"They're not going to shoot you at all," Balsain said. "The *toubib* says you got hit bad by the sun yesterday, and I believe him, and believe you. But some of the other men here are pretty sore about the way Megya died. They'll still blame you for it. You won't be safe around the post for a time. So I'm going to lock you up in a cell for your own good. In a couple of weeks the outfit will be pulled out of here. Up in the North, things will be different, and you'll be all right."

"Thanks very much, Lieutenant."

"Don't thank me. I haven't forgotten you were beside me in that charge. I'll see you get plenty of cigarettes and stuff to read while you're in the cell."

Hans Tims spent three weeks in the post jail. Most of that time he did nothing but read. Balsain had given him a great raft of material, old books and magazines and newspapers. But one dog-eared, yellowed volume Tims read over and over again, finally memorized.

It was a ski manual for the Chasseurs Alpins, the famous mountain regiments of the French Army. How it had ever drifted into the Legion and to such a place as Kebel, Tims never knew or asked. He was too preoccupied by the facts it contained.

Detailed instruction was given in it for every phase of mountain fighting by ski-equipped troops. Each phase of skiing was described and explained; how skis were made and kept, the various forms of turns and jumps and runs. As he studied the rumpled pages, he entered a new world. He lacked his usual audience right now, he thought. These days, he had nobody to talk to except Balsain's orderly and the soldier who came to feed him. But when he got out of here he'd hold the barracks room lot as he never had before. They'd soon forget Megya's death and any suspicion of him.

He was released the same day the post was taken over by the incoming outfit. Dorkel opened the cell door, pushed him forth into the sunlight. "Go pack your stuff fast, rattle-wits," the sergeant said. "We're heading north in an hour."

"Where we bound, *chef?*" Hans Tims said, sliding the Chasseur Alpin manual deep inside his blouse.

"High Morocco, the lieutenant says. Some post way up in the Atlas. Don't start to tell me now that your old man used to be a Chleuh *caid.*"

"No, but I know snow," Hans Tims said grinning. "I know how to ski. I'll be a good man for the outfit to have around up in those mountains."

"*Teufel!*" Dorkel grunted. "Even three weeks in the jug can't change your chatter!"

"Wait," Hans Tims said, "until you see me on skis."

THAT new post was at a place called Ait-Zigoun. It was far in the High Atlas, perched on a saw-toothed ridge at an elevation of over ten thousand feet. They marched to it in the last good weather of fall after a rest period at the base depot at Marrakech. Hans Tims had been talking snow and skiing ever since they had left Kebel. But the vast, sullen heights of the Atlas momentarily silenced him.

"What's the matter, cuckoo?" Dorkel asked him. "Your main spring break?"

"I was looking for snow," Tims muttered.

Dorkel slowed where he marched beside the column, and cursed. "Snow," he said. "Snow? Why, you half grown Swiss forget-me-not, you'll see enough up here to make your Jungfrau look like a pimple on the back of your neck. When it comes, it doesn't stop until spring. We're going to be stuck in that dump up there for six months straight while we work in snow, stand guard and formations in snow, shovel snow. You—"

"I'll teach you how to ski, too, *chef.*"

Dorkel choked, veins taut in his throat. All along the column men were guffawing, slapping each other's shoulders. "Just stick him in a snowball and roll him down the mountain, *chef,*" one of the file-closers said, then began to laugh again with the rest.

Hans Tims had his pair of skis almost ready when the first real winter gale ripped out of the North upon Ait-Zigoun. He had worked them from ash wood according to the specifications in the Chasseur manual, was steaming and curving them the afternoon the gale struck. Three of the younger men came to find him where he had set up his work-bench in the disused stable. "Snow," they told him. "How soon you going to be ready?"

He scowled at them. "You've got the wrong idea," he said. "This is no laugh. I've got to fit my edges and harness, make my ski poles. Then I'll be set to run from here down to the post at Aheil in half an hour."

"That's twenty kilometers."

"Sure, it's twenty kilometers. Didn't I used to be the best cross-country man in Glatzag and anywhere around the Jungfrau? Why, even the German-Austrian Ski Association gave me their Letter of Valor for a couple of my runs. I'll do *gelandesprungs* and *quersprungs* that will make your heart knock your teeth out. I

can do Christiana turns like nobody who ever lived. Get out of here now, and let me finish the job."

He finished the skis five days later, but he left them in a corner of the stable. It was Dorkel who forced him to get them out. Dorkel came into the barracks room at the end of supper. "How about it, Tims?" he said. "Me, I'm still not sure just how Megya got killed. I've heard too many of your cock-eyed stories. Now show us how you can ski."

HANS TIMS peered out the door. "The snow's not right," he said. "It has to be harder packed than this."

Dorkel laughed, his lips back from his snuff-stained teeth. There's fresh snow up here almost every day, smart guy. You won't find it any harder packed than it is right now. Let's see you go!"

Hans Tims kept still for quite a time, staring at him and the rest of the men. He had trapped himself again, he thought, talked too much. It was years since he had been on a pair of skis, and he couldn't remember now if he'd ever been expert. That pair of skis out in the stable he had only made to bear out his wild stories. Somehow, he hadn't believed he would use them.

They were just something to amuse himself with during his spare time and to talk about to the men after supper. But Dorkel was serious; Dorkel would keep at him until he finally used the skis.

"All right," he said. "Come on outside, on the slope."

Every man in the post who was off duty followed him out past the barbwire. Balsain was there, standing at the rear of the group, quiet, expressionless, his hands deep in his pockets. He'd like to talk to Balsain, Hans Tims thought, have the lieutenant get him out of this. Skis were dangerous. A man could kill himself on them. And the slope below was very steep. If he went to Balsain, though, Dorkel and all the outfit would know why. They'd call him yellow, blame him again for Megya's death.

He bent and slowly fastened the ski harness. Then he slid his hands through the pole lanyards, turned around and stared at the men. "What do you want to see?" he asked them. "A straight *schuss*, or some fancy stuff?"

"As fancy as you've got," Dorkel barked.

"Watch," Hans Tims said, and pushed off.

A vast elation held him during the first few yards of his run. He was in complete command of the skis. Every bit of the manual was clear in his brain. He was going to do a couple of telemarks and stem turns, he told himself, then head back up slope.

Those should be easy. They'd seemed easy when he'd studied them in the manual. Now, though, he was going faster than he wanted. Rocks and tree trunks were leaping up very swiftly at him out of the darkness ahead. "Slow down," he said aloud. "Use your poles! Make your turns!"

The poles buckled whimpering in his hands as he put his weight on them. A flurry of snow was stinging at his eyes. He couldn't see clearly anymore. He was afraid, he realized. The manual was no good to him. He didn't know how to ski. He was going to kill himself, crash and—

A curving crest of snow covered the log. He saw it only in the second his skis crossed. Then he was vaulting through the air, headlong, out of control, arms and legs thrashing. He cried out once in wild fear just before he struck the tree.

Balsain had four men carry Hans Tims back to the post. "Put him in the infirmary," he told them. "He's cracked his head wide open. Unless we watch him, he'll be a very sick man."

He went into the barracks room after Tims had been carefully wrapped in blankets. From a peg on the wall he took down Tims' *musette* bag, pulled out from it a dog-eared, yellow manual. He cursed

as he stared at it, then flung it in the stove. "What did the crazy fool have in there, Lieutenant?" Dorkel asked him.

"Something," Balsain said, "that's better burned."

FOR a long time Hans Tims thought it was he who made the low moaning sounds. But then he gradually realized that it was the men around him in the white-walled infirmary. A number of them, he saw were wounded, freshly bandaged. The rest were suffering from influenza. They had recurrent spells of wheezy, gasping coughing. That same thing affected him. He was emerging up out of the depths of days of feverish agony.

He hunched around a bit on the cot and touched the back of his skull. A newly healed scar and a great bump were there, but that nagging pressure was gone from his brain. All of his thoughts were clear. He could see his life in distinct chronological order back to the day he had left Glatzag for France. More than that, he could remember nearly every one of the fantastic stories he had told during his time in the Legion.

"When you got socked in the head that night outside Monte Carlo, you went kind of nuts," he told himself whispering. "You haven't done so well since, Hansig. You're down in this outfit as a liar and a man nobody will trust. You'd have probably kept on lying worse and worse. All that saved you was your crazy skiing stunt, and getting socked in the head again. The second sock must've put you right. Anyhow, now you see things straight, and you're all through with the lies."

In a swift, wild stammer of sound a machine gun started up on the wall of the post. The racketing echo came back through the compound and into the infirmary. It aroused some of the men. They sat up tensely listening.

The machine gun ran through a clip, through another. Then there was the whanging roar of a hand grenade, a yowled yell, and silence. "What the hell is going on?" Hans Tims asked Maglio, the young Italian in the cot next to him.

"You're the guy to ask," Maglio said through the swathe of bandages about his head. "You got a case of 'flu showing us what a swell skiier you were. Then Hauser, the lad who was working here as medical orderly, gave the germs to a couple of us in the barracks. Half a dozen cases got started. So Hauser volunteered to go down to the post at Aheil and pick up the right kind of medicine, stuff we needed bad."

"He didn't get back?" Hans Tims hoarsely asked.

"C'est ca, juste. He never really had a chance of getting back. A gang of Chleuh tribesmen from the village across the valley nailed him. The snow's thick out there now, and he was caught quick. They tortured him pretty bad. We could hear him yelling all one night. After that, Dorkel asked permission of Balsain to take a party out against the Chleuh. Six of us got back. The rest the Chleuh got. Now the Chleuh think they can take the post. They know we can only muster about a dozen men who're able to stand under arms. And the telephone line to Aheil is down. The semaphore won't carry that far. Nice, hey, the way you fixed us all up?"

HANS TIMS made no answer. He was slipping out of the cot, reaching for his uniform. He put it on while Maglio stared and swore at him, then he went staggering out the door.

Great, soft flakes of snow flecked the darkness, driven before a shrilling wind. He coughed at once and the resultant pain made him nearly collapse. But across the compound he could see the bar of light at the doorsill of Balsain's room. The lieutenant was there, he thought. Now the lieutenant was the only man with whom he could talk.

Balsain was unshaven, his eyes red-shot with sleeplessness. He raised himself a

bit in his chair as Hans Tims entered, then sat back again. "You belong in bed, soldier," he said.

"Not tonight," Hans Tims said slowly. "Not now." Then in deliberate and quiet words he repeated to the lieutenant what Maglio had told him.

"That's pretty much right," Balsain said when he was through. "We're in a really tough position. But there's nothing you can do. Until relief comes in from Aheil, we'll just have to hang on here."

"What if the Chleuh jump the wall?"

Balsain shrugged. "That's our gamble. About an hour ago, I asked for a runner to make a try for Aheil. The big Russian, Pietor, volunteered. He should get down the trail if any man can. If he can't—"

The door swung violently open. Dorkel stood there, his greatcoat rimed with snow, his eyes bleak, wild. *"Voyons,"* he muttered. *"Voyons, mon* lieutenant! Here's how the Chleuh worked it this time." From underneath his coat he dragged out a severed and still bloody head. "Pietor's—they just pitched it in over the wall."

Balsain looked very quickly at the head. Then he stared at Hans Tims. The little man was moving forward to stand right in front of him. "Please, Lieutenant," Tims said. "Listen to me a moment."

"Why?" Balsain said. "Now?"

"There's one reason," Hans Tims said. Just one. I'm to blame for most of this. I started it all, back at Kebel. I wasn't completely sane then; I was suffering from an accident I had before I joined the Legion. Now, I know that. When I was hurt again here, somehow I got back to normal. I'm not cracked any more. What I'm saying and what I want to say is all straight. Do you want to hear me?"

BALSAIN slightly gestured. "Go on," he said. But Hans Tims was looking around at Dorkel. The sergeant had put down the terrible head in a shadowy corner of the room. His hand had clamped onto the butt of his pistol, brought the weapon up and out of the holster. "Sure, cuckoo," Dorkel said. "Speak up. Just don't forget I'm listening, too."

"One of my lying stories," Hans Tims said, "was that I'd been a champion skiier. Of course, I'm nothing like it. But back in my village of Glatzag I used to do a bit of skiing when I was a kid. I wasn't any worse than most of the village boys. Now what I want to say is that I'd like to volunteer for the trip to the post at Aheil. I think I can make it on skiis, where a man on foot wouldn't have a chance at all."

"Schwein!" Dorkel said. "We saw you ski once. That was enough. You couldn't get two kilometers down the trail to Aheil. It's full of steep curves with a cliff on one side all the way. Shut up with your silly lies! Get out of here!"

Balsain rose slowly from his chair. He looked full into Dorkel's hard-lit eyes. *"Assez bien, mon vieux,"* he said. "I do the talking and give the commands here!" Then he swung to Hans Tims. "Your brain is clear now?" he asked him. "You're sure you wouldn't be wrong in risking such a thing?"

"Absolutely, Lieutenant," Hans Tims said. He was trembling, and the palms of his hands were sweaty. "It's a chance, but much less than the one Pietor took. A man on skis could move so fast down that trail the Chleuh would never get a square shot at him."

Dorkel was in motion. He was striding to stand close beside Balsain. His pistol muzzle trained level with the lieutenant's heart. "We've had too much of this guy," he said in his guttural French. "All of us know him for a no-good idiot. There's only one thing to do now—evacuate the post completely. Load the wounded on stretchers and start out in a body for Aheil. One more night here and the Chleuh will have us. They'll be in over the wall. Call it mutiny or call it anything you want, but if you let this guy go down the moun-

tain, I'll plug you sure by tomorrow noon. Relief should be in here by then, no later. Too many good men have died already to gamble our lives on this Swiss wind-bag."

Balsain rested completely immobile. He looked from Dorkel's tight-strained face to Hans Tims. The little blond man seemed very calm. His eyes raised in an open and steady gaze. He liked Hans Tims, Balsain told himself. He'd had sympathy for the man right along. But if Tims was wrong now he would die, and they all would die. There was a lot of logic in what Dorkel had said. Still, out there in the snow on a night like this the wounded would suffer frightfully, perish from the cold even if the Chleuh bullets missed them. "All right, soldier," he told Hans Tims. "I trust you. I'm willing to let you try to make the trip to Aheil. But are you certain you'd do best on skis?"

"Mais oui, mon lieutenant," Hans Tims said. He was smiling. "Now it's skiis or nothing. Don't worry, though. I'll be back."

Balsain got him out through the gate, blasted the way for him with a couple of hand grenades and an automatic rifle burst. Then the gat shut behind him and he was along, panting, shivering, his ski poles clenched tight.

THE flaring explosion of the grenades had shown him the Chleuh. A few of them were quite close still, hunched deep in the snow along the edge of the barbwire. He must pass them, he knew, before he could make his run for the open slope. He knelt, made fast the ski harness, entered the *chicane* passage through the wire. The fall of snow was slackening; he could see a bit now, the dark blur of the live-oak trees on the further slope and the black gap where the trail for Aheil began. But against the background of the snow his own body showed. The Chleuh had marked him, were starting to fire.

He bent down, shoved with his sharp-tipped poles to gain speed. Bullets struck past him flatly whining. The snow pallor ahead was split with the orange flashes of rifle flame where the Chleuh lay. Muscles tightened in his stomach. He wanted to call out to Balsain and the men in the post. But it was too late. Now he had to face the Chleuh without any weapon, with nothing but the speed of his skis.

"All right, Hansig," he said aloud. "Go right for them! Smack 'em down!"

A fierce fury was replacing his fear. The snow here had been packed a bit by the wind. He was gathering speed, going faster all the time. Now the strands of wire on each side seemed to close, merge. Then the wire was behind him, and he was running in the open, driving right down upon the Chleuh.

They rose up howling with surprise, broke back a bit. He went in among them wraithed in a whirling, blinding cloud of snow kicked from his sticks and skis. They fired once or twice into that white clouding, and then he was past, free on the lower slope.

He crouched into the telemark position, remembering the Chasseur manual and all he had ever learned at Glatzag. His body taut, he held his weight forward on his front ski, the trailing ski swinging him in broad skidding turns. Once, as he came to the head of the trail, he laughed. The Chleuh were silent; they weren't even firing at the post. One man on skis had frightened the wits out of them.

BUT the trail was treacherous, extremely narrow and badly dished. The fresh snow on top of the old crust of ice was very fast. He could kill himself here any second. As through an immense funnel, wind howled down the gorge he followed. Far below, the precipitous river ran roaring. If he swung too far out he would land down there, he knew. And if he cut too far in the other way he'd break his neck against the inside cliff wall. "You've given yourself a real job," he murmured. "Come on!"

Bowlders, jagged rocks fallen from the cliffside, stumps and branches of trees were all along the trail. They leaped up at him with a nightmare-like rapidity. Straining, his breath withheld, he flung in and out past them, making turns that time and again brought him to the extreme outer edge of the trail.

During those moments he was poised right out in space. He had the impression he was flying, that the skis did not exist, and he was some sort of disembodied spirit whirling marvelously through the night. Then he struck back onto the trail with a shock that convulsed his entire frame. The steel edges of his skis dug through to the icy crust so hard that he nearly fell, saved himself with the poles alone.

Slower, he thought. You've got to go slower. But then from above he heard men shouting.

They were the Chleuh he had eluded in front of the post, he recognized. They were calling to other warriors of their clan who must be waiting somewhere below.

He looked down, trying to see those other men. It was impossible. His eyes were stung almost to blindness by the incessant whirl of snow from the skis. He no longer saw anything clearly except the separate objects rushing at him.

He stem-turned from right to left, back again. A tree grazed his shoulder, a bowlder rasped his front ski. He hunched up, his body lifted, twisted. The wrench against his arms was terrific, and yet he was going on, still in control and holding the dragging poles.

WHEN the Chleuh down below fired their first shots at him he vaguely heard the sounds. His speed made a whistling shrillness that pierced deep into his brain. But a bullet spattered on a rock right ahead. Bits of the ricochet ripped back against him. He cursed at that. Just one bullet, he thought, would stop him forever. And tonight he had to get to Aheil. If he didn't Balsain and a lot of other good men would die.

He lessened his attempts to brake and slow. Now his descent was a hurtling sweep that made the snow fling wide across all the gorge. It was the same as it had been up at the post, he suddenly realized. The Chleuh couldn't see to kill him. The snow was saving him once more.

But as he passed this time men jumped right out into the trail. He heard their shouts to each other and then the bowlders they pried loose, started in a grinding, snarling avalanche down upon him. They thought they had him, he told himself. They knew an avalanche was faster than any man, skis or no skis. And they were right. If he stayed on the trail he'd be smashed to death.

He straightened a bit, fear and desperate hope pulsing through him. A ruddy glimmer was on the snow at the foot of the trail. That was made by the lights of the post at Aheil. He was almost there. Just two more steep, looping curves lay between him and safety. But at his back the avalanche was rearing higher, swifter every second.

HE TOOK a great, slow breath, shook the sweat from his wind-cut face. "You've lied high and wide," he said in a sharp voice. "Now jump high and wide. Take off right for Aheil. That's your gamble—jump!"

Stemming a bit, he swung toward the outside edge. He kept on along it, gathering momentum, setting himself for the final swinging rush into flight. Then the trail was no longer beneath him. He was out in the air, over the gorge and over the river.

The trail looked like a carelessly dropped piece of cord. He had gone by the first curve, was nearing the second. He lifted his arms, his elbows out from his sides. He was dropping, dropping all the time. Snow-bent tree branches whipped close under his skis. Rocks rose black and

jagged. He shut his eyes, then cursed and opened them. When he cracked, he thought, he wanted to see what he hit.

Then the snow of the slope before Aheil was ahead of him, a gleaming, mysterious blanket lifting from the night. His skis whimpered as he flung onto it. He tried to balance himself, went flopping out in a tangled crash.

He was up, numbly working to loosen the ski harness when the Legionnaires came sprinting from Aheil. They carried him in, laughing, slapping his shoulders. "I'm from Ait-Zigoun," he told them. "From up top. They need help. Tell your skipper, quick." Then he was in a room where a stove glowed hot and a man wearing lieutenant's stripes stuck a cup of rum in his hand.

"How'd you make it?" the lieutenant asked him. "The *bicos* let loose the whole mountain on you."

"I'm not sure," Hans Tims mumbled. "I just stuck to the skis."

"You must be a real ace," the lieutenant said. "A man who's used skis all his life. That's twenty kilometers of rocks and tough curves all the way."

Hans Tims blinked at him and the other men while he gulped the rum. His lying days were over, he realized. He'd never go back to them. But here was an audience that was too good to miss, and one last lie wouldn't hurt. "No," he said. "I'm no champion at all. Before tonight, I never saw a pair of skis."

He stretched out then beside the stove, was at once and peacefully asleep.

The lieutenant who had led the relief party from Aheil smiled as he shook hands with Jean Balsain. "You're lucky, *mon vieux*," he said. "That lad of yours who brought the word down to us told me he'd never seen skis before in his life."

The calm expression of Balsain's face did not change. "Maybe so," he said. "Maybe he didn't use skis at all. But when he left here he was sure wearing wings."

SEA TERMS ASHORE

SEA terms are puzzling enough to the uninitiated, but the landsman who is bewildered by many that he hears would be vastly surprised did he know how many of the expressions which he uses most commonly had their origin on the ocean.

Of the many sea phrases which have come into everyday use, there is none commoner than "I was completely taken aback." A ship is taken aback when the wind heads her and lays her sails back. When this happens the ship stops in her tracks as a man would who received a great surprise.

Equally common, perhaps, is the expression "to hold aloof." In the old days to hold aloof or luff or to keep one's loof was to get or to keep by superior sailing to windward of another vessel a position from which it was easy to approach or to keep away from the other craft.

The term "bitter end" is also of sea origin, but it entirely changed its meaning since it came to live on shore. Originally, the bitter—or, as it was sometimes called, the better—end of a cable was the part abaft the bits or heavy stumps to which the cable was made fast. Naturally, when a cable was paid out to the bitter end, there was nothing more left.

It is in this sense that the words came to be applied to the extreme of a controversy of any sort, but the original significance of the nautical word bitter has long been lost.

For the term "rakish," many derivations have been suggested. As used today, it describes an individual whose appearance is not altogether as respectable as it might be and who has, nevertheless, a certain dash. At sea, as everyone knows, a "low rakish craft" invariably turns out to be a bloodthirsty pirate.

As matter of fact, rakish was a recognized technical term for masts which inclined toward the stern more than usual. Such masts were formerly characteristic of the fast schooners and pirates, and, somewhat later, slave ships were very partial to schooners, which of course they wished to imitate and be as fast as possible. It was, therefore, quite inevitable for a rakish vessel to appear suspicious in the eyes of all peaceful traders.

An expression which betrays its origin more plainly, although the spelling has become somewhat distorted, is "all plain sailing." The learned assert that this phrase, whose meaning is obvious, was originally "plane sailing." Before the time of Mercator, we are told, the charts of the world which seamen used were made on a "plane projection." Navigation on this principle was very erroneous, but it was at least simple, and from it has been handed down to us the term "plain sailing."

Kenneth P. Wood

THEM DAMNED TWINS AGAIN

By CADDO CAMERON

Who First Introduced Paint and Pinto Hawkins to Several Astounded Citizens

CHAPTER I

"NO WONDER YOU'RE FAMOUS!"

THE Texas town of Catclaw crouched and snarled and showed its teeth when the two young strangers rode in. As they passed down Main Street, from the dives at one end to the livery corral at the other, men singly and in small groups regarded them with a brand of suspicion that bordered upon hostility; but Paint and Pinto Hawkins jogged placidly onward, sitting their saddles with loose-jointed ease and keeping their long, densely freckled faces pointed straight ahead as if ignorant of the situation or not at all concerned about it.

From the heels of their boots six feet up to the tops of their straw-colored heads, Paint and Pinto were identical twins. They dressed exactly alike in the working clothes of cowhands, armed alike with two belt guns and a rifle in a saddle scabbard, and they rode frisky bays—Bacon and Beans—who were mighty hard to tell apart. Their appearance was therefore calculated to arouse the interest of those who had never before seen them, but upon this occasion the boys knew there was nothing in their

"It Don't Never Do No Harm to Take Things for Granted As Long As It's the Other Fella That Gits Took!"

looks or behavior to incite the antagonism of strangers.

Accordingly, while squinting down the street into the late afternoon sun their sharp blue eyes took in everything and they couldn't help wondering why the town had dabbed on its warpaint at sight of them.

Said Pinto, "We ain't never done nothin' to this damned town."

Declared Paint, "Far's I can recollect we ain't never been in the cussed place befo'."

"Looks bad."

"Powerful bad."

They rode on in silence. While passing the Pony Saloon they caught snatches of a conversation between two half-drunken men who were untying their horses.

"Ain't never seen the scalawags," said one, "but I betcha it's them damned twins."

The other stood with a hand on his saddle horn, weaving a little and eyeing the boys a plenty. "Shore as hell is. Let's us ramble!"

Paint looked at Pinto and vice versa.

"Let 'em ramble," snapped Pinto.

"Uh-huh, and we'll he'p 'em to get a good start if they don't hobble their jaws," growled Paint.

He turned in his saddle and frankly looked the two strangers over well. They mounted with some haste and confusion, one of them making three stabs at his stirrup before his boot finally caught the thing.

A few moments later the twins rode past Brewster's store. In the door stood a girl, a trim little person with a heap of brown hair. She stared at the strangers for an instant, her lips slightly parted and her

large eyes very wide; then she turned quickly and ran back into the store.

"Looks good," said Pinto.

"Mighty good," declared Paint.

THE boys reined in to a walk. A man left a group on the porch of the Capitol Saloon a short distance down the street, mounted hurriedly at the rack and loped away ahead of them.

"Is he skeerd," muttered Paint, "or does he figger to git some place befo' we do?"

"Hard to tell," growled Pinto, "but I'm a mind to run onto him and find out."

The farther they went along the dusty street toward the sign that advertised a livery corral and wagon yard, the more mystified the boys became. Sociable, pleasure-loving scamps themselves, always ready to make a pair of hands in a wild frolic or a good flight, they simply couldn't imagine any Southwest Texas town greeting peaceable and fairly presentable strangers in this unfriendly fashion. It was not, therefore, very long before they quit trying to solve the mystery and went on getting mad, and by the time they reached the corral their long, bony faces looked plenty mean.

In the door of a little office which tied onto the fence near the front gate sat a short fat man with a round face and mild blue eyes.

He greeted the twins cordially enough, but kept his seat on the doorsill when they dismounted and asked for accommodations.

He regretfully shook his head. "Mighty sorry, fellas, but I ain't got a empty stall to my name and not a speck of room left in the corral."

From where he stood, Paint could see the long row of stalls and nearly every foot of the fenced enclosure. Less than a third of the stalls were occupied and aside from a few loose mules and a freighter's wagon, the corral itself was empty. He glanced at Pinto who nodded slightly, then he slowly turned his long face and looked down at the fat man.

Said Paint in a quiet, casual voice, "Mistah, you're a double-bar'led liar."

The corral boss scraped a sulphur match on the door facing, waited until it stopped spluttering then applied it to his pipe. He puffed diligently, saying nothing.

"That's fightin' langwidge where we come from," continued the tall cowhand in the same level tone, "Savvy?"

The fat man glanced up at each of the twins, his smooth red face showing no sign of uneasiness. He drawled lazily, "Maybeso, but, big fellas, far's I'm consarned they ain't no sech thing as fightin' langwidge. And I still say that I ain't got nary a stall or a speck of room."

Pinto shrugged his shoulders. "That's jest too damned bad. Reckon we'll have to make us some room."

He stalked off to the gate, leading Beans.

Paint jerked his head at the corral boss. "You jest come along."

The pudgy man sat still. "I'm right comfortable here, right comfortable."

"Don't doubt it a particle, but we cain't be noways comfortable out yander when you're a-settin' here with a shotgun jest inside the door more'n likely," drawled Paint. He dropped his reins and hitched up his pants. "You come along, pronto!"

The boss let a calm, appraising eye drift over the length of the freckled cowhand. "Mmmm-huh. This here seat's a-gittin' powerful hard all of a sudden-like." He grinned sheepishly and stood up. "Let's me and you go keep a eye on that there rip-snortin' brother of your'n."

"Mighty fine idee," declared Paint. "'Tain't never safe to trust him none to speak of."

THE twins watered out and put up their horses, giving them a sizable feed of shelled corn from the bin. While doing these chores they took turns standing guard over the corral boss and firing questions at him, but they learned next to nothing at all. Slim Roarke gave them his name, doing it in a way that indicated he'd

much prefer to keep it a secret, and he swore that the only way he could stay alive in that community was by being as dumb as an oyster and mighty nigh blind. Cornered and hard pressed by these two formidable looking young men, he eventually admitted that he had been forewarned of their coming by a man who arrived and left in a hurry shortly before they got there. At that point, however, Slim balked and flatly refused to answer any more questions—regardless.

He glanced about the corral as if half suspecting a hidden listener, puffed rapidly at a cold pipe, and declared, "It's jest like I don' told you, fellas. I ain't got a speck of room left. Every last stall is spoke for."

Paint snorted through his long nose.

Pinto growled, "I'm dead shore that two of 'em is spoke for, and likewise you'd better make damned sartin that nothin' happens to them nags of our'n."

The fat man's eyes got very round. He jerked his pipe from his mouth, and exclaimed, "Hell's fire, man! I'll sleep with yo' blasted brutes."

The twins left. As they were tramping along the path toward town, Paint stole a glance over his shoulder. Slim was again seated in the door of his cabin, smoking deliberately while staring thoughtfully after his departing guests.

"That there jasper ain't got nothin' agin us," observed the lanky cowhand. "He's jest a-takin' orders."

"Shore," declared Pinto, "and them orders come from the Capitol Saloon up yander."

"Uh-huh, so I calc'late we'd better go git us a dram of that there Capitol liquor."

Pinto ambled on for a rod or so. "Yep, sooner or later," he presently answered. "But fust off it might be a pious idee for us to sorta take a look around in Brewster's store."

"Now, that's good hoss sense. Maybe she's got a sister."

"Cain't never tell," drawled Pinto. "But if she ain't, mind you I aim to do mighty nigh all the talkin'."

Paint dropped a heavy hand upon his brother's muscular shoulder— a comradely gesture except for the weight of the hand and the manner in which its fingers bit into the flesh. The boys stopped in their tracks. Each looked at the other as if he were something fit to be tromped on or kicked out of the way.

Declared Paint with calm conviction, "There's where you're dead wrong and plumb foolish to boot. It's fifty-fifty. *I* talk and *you* listen."

Pinto glanced leisurely about them. "Reckon this is jest as good a place as any. Plenty room."

Paint ran an eye over the level ground and short grass. "Uh-huh. No rocks or clubs for you to lay hands on, and no badger holes to throw you when you start runnin'."

They squared off, ready to resume a series of brotherly battles which had commenced in the cradle that their proud dad —old Buckskin Hawkins—had made by hollowing out a big log. Their eyes met. Each discovered a twinkle of mirth which the other failed to hide. They grinned, slowly and more or less tentatively.

Keeping one eye on his brother as if he half suspected treachery, Pinto shot a glance at the town. "Come to think of it, that there gal *may* be twins."

"Hard to tell 'bout sech things, but she might be at that," drawled Paint. He cautiously took a squint at the chunky figure of Slim Roarke, still seated in the door of his cabin. "Anyhow, we gotta git

square with this doggoned town for insultin' us thisaway."

THEY trudged onward. Presently the path became a busy sidewalk and the twins moved with all the alertness of wild animals on unfamiliar ground. From the manner in which Catclaw had welcomed them they expected trouble and, if the truth were known, would be mildly disappointed should it fail to materialize. It was, however, slow to make its appearance. As they ambled leisurely along, the men whom they met and passed took no notice of them; but each of the boys felt eyes boring into his back and neither of them would have been greatly surprised by the sudden shock of a bullet.

They went straight to Brewster's store and walked in. The brown-haired girl and a boy of fourteen or fifteen, evidently her brother, were alone in the place. The lad stared popeyed at the twins, but she came hurriedly from behind the counter to meet them.

"Good evening, gentlemen," said the girl softly and with the merest suggestion of a smile on her somewhat troubled face. "I saw you riding in and I'm *so* glad you finally got here."

Training and experience had improved upon the poker faces with which nature equipped the twins. Neither of them showed a vestige of surprise.

Pinto rotated his old Stetson in his hands a bit awkwardly, perhaps, and declared, "You can jest betcha that we're powerful glad to git here, Miss."

"Yes'm," added Paint in some haste. "Fact of the matter is, if we'd had any idee you was a-waitin' for us we'd been here a heap sooner."

She smiled in earnest, impartially giving each of the boys a slaunchwise look that packed a wallop. Pinto swore to himself that she was as cute as a finch—all brown and little and quick, and sharp as a tack. Paint watched the dimples come and go in her smooth cheeks and wished that his brother was in a good, stout jail some place a long ways off.

The girl glanced at the open front door and a side window, then said, "When papa wrote to Captain Stewart for help, we never once thought that he'd send the famous 'twin Rangers'."

Paint looked at Pinto and vice versa.

"F-famous?" stuttered Paint.

"Fa—er—famous?" stammered Pinto.

"Of course," declared the girl. "We'd heard about you in Catclaw even before a man came through here and told what you did over in Sinkhole last month. Since then you've been famous in this town."

Each of the twins wondered what in hell happened over in Sinkhole. However, their long freckled faces showed only a becoming modesty.

Said Paint, "That wa'n't nothin' wuth mentionin', Miss."

Asserted Pinto, "Me—I mighty nigh clean forgot it already."

She glanced quickly from one to the other—at first skeptically, then admiringly. "Naturally you'd say such things, being the kind of men you are."

THE girl went on to introduce herself as Laura Brewster and the boy as her brother Billy. She added that her father, who did his own freighting, was absent on a trip to San Antonio accompanied by her mother and they would probably be gone another ten days or so. The twins responded by stating that most folks called them Paint and Pinto, and let it go at that. As if by an unspoken agreement made at the spur of the moment, these young scalawags elected to pose as the "twin Rangers" just for the fun of the thing and to see what happened. The fact that this deception might result in dangerous complications merely served to make it all the more alluring as far as they were concerned.

Leaving Billy to take care of the store, Laura took the freckled cowhands to a little office in the rear where they could talk without running the risk of being over-

heard. She placed a box of good cigars on the table, told them to light up and make themselves at home, and then with masculine directness described a situation which made these two big-hearted impostors feel mighty glad that they drifted in when they did.

Situated at a crossing of trails remote from other settlements and not far from a rugged, well watered and heavily timbered region that offered sanctuary to those pursued by their crimes, Catclaw had—within the last four years — become a haven for outlawed men and the parasites who shared their illicit gains. Attached to another county for judicial purposes and having no county organization of its own, the community in effect had no law enforcement agency other than the town marshal and his deputy. The nearest United States Marshal was many miles away and the Texas Rangers were under-manned, overworked, roving bands of fighting men who undertook to patrol a farflung frontier area that called for a force many times their number. As a consequence, the morals of Catclaw had degenerated to the point where it was no longer a safe place for an honest man and his family.

Old Tom Brewster was the first settler, having operated a stage station and trading post on the townsite long before the first saloon and dancehall made its appearance. Even after this unruly institution was joined by others of its kind and the trails began to swarm with northbound herds, freighters and travelers of all sorts, the old trader maintained a semblance of order by ruling the place with an iron will and a buffalo gun. And then, from nobody knew where, came Bruce Weston a gambler who opened the Capitol Saloon and Amusement Palace. A handsome man, a smooth talker and a good spender, he soon became the leader of the underworld element which outnumbered the honest folks. A town council was named at an election controlled by the six-shooters of Weston's crowd, Old Tom and his buffalo gun were shoved aside and Hank Greener was appointed town marshal.

LAURA leaned forward with her elbows on the table and her small, strong hands clenched tightly. "Live here a week and you'll swear this isn't a civilized country," she continued bitterly. "A man known to have money isn't safe on the street in broad daylight unless he's in with the gang. Travelers have been robbed and murdered in the only hotel we've got. Men walk into stores and help themselves and refuse to pay. Uncle Tandy Wilson was shot by Tom Scudder while trying to collect for a bill of groceries and Greener wouldn't even arrest the murderer. I'm afraid to leave papa here alone. Only last week Luke Wilkins threatened to kill him over the price of something, and my dad isn't any match for a professional gunman like Wilkins."

"What's this here Weston fella got to say 'bout sech doin's?" asked Paint. "Or maybe you don't never speak to the cuss."

"Course she don't!" grunted Pinto, giving his brother a disgusted look. "A lady like her wouldn't have no truck with *him.*"

"But I did talk to Mr. Weston," declared Laura in a low, tight voice. She dropped her eyes to her hands. Color tinted her cheeks and throat. "He's tried to be friendly with me. He said that he'd be glad to see that his—his father-in-law wasn't molested."

The twins sat perfectly still for a moment. When the girl concluded her story of Weston's behavior, there was something in their high-boned faces which gave them the look of hungry eagles contemplating a good feed.

Paint inquired, "D'you reckon this here Weston pusson ain't got no better sense than to figger he can git uppity with the Rangers and not suffer for it?"

Laura emphatically nodded her pretty head. "Certainly! He thinks he can get away with anything in this town and so far he has almost done it."

Asked Pinto, "Ain't no lawmen ever come a-nosin' 'round here befo'?"

"Yes, deputy sheriffs from other counties," she replied. "Two have been killed in Catclaw and I know of three that were run out of town. I don't think the Rangers have been here since Weston came."

Paint ran a hand through his hair, which looked so light in contrast to his deep tan and dark freckles. "How'd old Catclaw go about stampedin' them deppities, Miss?"

"Just like they've already started on you," answered Laura. "Word went around that they weren't to be sold a single thing, and no one was to notice them or talk to them any more than to say 'No' when they asked for something. It soon got on their nerves and they left in a hurry."

At that point a voice arose in the store, so loud and harsh as to be heard distinctly through the office partition, "I tell you I aim to take these here boots and pay for 'em when I git damned good and ready!"

The girl caught her breath. She sprang from her chair with a little cry. "Oh, Billy! They'll—"

Before she reached the door, the boys stood up. Pinto placed a hand on her arm. "Hold on a minute, Miss. Jest sorta take a peek and tell us what's goin' on, will you please, Ma'm?"

She carefully looked out. Her dainty face hardened. A moment later she silently closed the door and turned around. "It's Tom Scudder and Luke Wilkins and Soapy Joe. They're from Weston's Bar W, a crooked outfit he owns. Tom and Luke are two of his right-hand men and they're killers. Soapy is a sneaking little rat who works at odd jobs about the ranch. I've heard that they use him to spy on trail herds and wagon trains that they intend to raid. Those three fellows are dangerous men and I suspect that Weston is using them to torment us."

Billy Brewster's youthful voice came through the partition, furious, shrill, "If my dad was here you dirty thieves wouldn't get away with this!"

Paint nodded toward the door. He told the girl, "Go on out there, Miss, and make shore that you and the button are where you can take kivver quick." He added grimly, "We'll come a-smokin' if we have to."

Laura went into the store, leaving the office door ajar. The twins listened to the sharp click of her heels as she walked firmly across the floor, and they heard a man growl an obscene oath.

Her voice carried a world of scorn, but no fear, "Let 'em have the boots, Billy, and you come over here behind the counter. It'd be just like them to kill an unarmed boy and then crow about it."

DURING a short space the silence in the store was broken only by the shuffling and tramp of feet. The twins gave Laura and Billy time to reach a place of safety, in the meantime curious to hear what the three outlaws had to say for themselves when confronted by the girl. The average Texas badman wasn't low-down enough to show disrespect to a square woman, but these men were different. They cursed the girl and said they knew her father had sent for the Rangers and that he'd be damned sorry he did it, and they profanely told her that he was trying to hide behind her skirts. The words had no more than left their mouths before the tall cowhands strode into the room.

They walked straight to the three men who were grouped before the counter near the front door, ambling along unhurriedly and yet sternly purposeful. Neither made a move to draw a gun, but there was something challenging in the way their long arms swung loosely at their sides. Two of the outlaws, burly men, stared at them in surprise bordering upon consternation. The third, a colorless little man with a sharp face and shifty eyes, shrank backward toward the door like a terrified rat. In either hand he held a low-heeled, cowhide work boot as if unconscious of the fact that he had them.

Pinto barked at him, "Come back here!"

He stopped in his tracks, shooting a hungry glance over his shoulder at the door behind him.

One of the large gunmen, the darker of

the two, blurted out, "Why damn it, I thought you was—!"

"Yes sah, Mistah," Paint interrupted quietly, "you thought we went to the hotel next door."

"But here we are," added Pinto, stopping three feet away from him, "so yo' eyes played you a dirty trick or somebody done lied to you somethin' scandalous."

Halting near the other gunman, light-complexioned fellow with a thick neck and bulky shoulders, Paint told him casually, "Jest unbuckle yo' belt sorta cautious-like and let it drop."

Instantly he saw a vicious flash in the outlaw's mean little eyes, and snapped "Take keer, Mistah!"

But Tom Scudder went for his gun. Anticipating the move by a fraction of a second, Paint drove his big bony fist in a terrific uppercut which crunched into the outlaw's throat beneath his chin. All the power of the young cowhand's one hundred eighty pounds was behind the blow. Scudder's knees buckled. He went down in a heap. Laura gasped, jerked both hands to her own soft round throat, then momentarily looked away.

Meanwhile Pinto beat Luke Wilkins to the draw with time to spare. He rammed the muzzle of his gun into the big outlaw's paunch so hard as to bring a grunt of pain. Luke lifted his hands chin high, cursed steadily until the freckled twin told him he'd blow him in two if he didn't stop it.

CAUGHT by surprise at the suddenness with which things happened, Soapy Joe delayed his dive for the door a moment too long. Paint nailed him by the scruff of the neck and flung him backwards into the room. Soapy fell over a keg of vinegar and brought up hard against a barrel of salt, where he lay whining and almost sniffling.

Paint lost no time in disarming Tom Scudder who was sitting up, rubbing his throat and trying to talk; also Luke Wilkins, who kept his hands in the air and stared at Pinto as if he didn't believe it could happen but had to admit that it did.

"Git a move on you," growled Pinto to his brother, "and hobble their front feet while I make 'em behave."

"Hush yo' mouth!" snapped Paint. "I aim to hobble their necks."

He went to a coil of new rope that lay on the floor near at hand, cut off four pieces, used two of these to tie Tom's and Luke's hands behind their backs, and looped the other two lengths around their necks with running nooses.

Pinto holstered his gun, folded his arms and grinned at the prisoners. Tom Scudder got uncertainly to his feet, coughing and growling more or less incoherent threats. Luke moved away from the open door as if ashamed to be seen in captivity.

Each of the twins picked up one of the boots which Soapy Joe had dropped when he fell. Pinto inspected his boot critically, turning it this way and that. "Fust rate boot, I'd say off-hand."

Pain thoughtfully fingered the leather in the boot he held, and declared, "Betcha the cow that growed the hide that made this here boot would be mighty proud of herself if she could see it now, no foolin'."

Pinto glanced solemnly across the counter at Laura. "What you been askin' for boots like this'n, Miss, if it's a fair question?"

Mirth had replaced the fear that so recently darkened the girl's bright face. She looked from the twins to Soapy, who had arisen timidly and now stood apologetically against the opposite wall. "They sell for five dollars," she answered, "cash."

Soapy hastily shoved a hand into his pocket and brought out a five dollar gold piece.

Pinto looked at Paint and vice versa. They exchanged brief nods.

"Five dollahs, Miss?" inquired Paint doubtfully. "Cain't hardly believe it."

"Too all-fired cheap," declared Pinto. "'Tain't noways right."

Paint shot a hard glance at Soapy. "Jest double yo' ante, fella. You done hawned into this here game and it'll cost you ten dollahs to git out. Ante!"

Soapy Joe had the look of a rat in misery, but he made short work of swapping the five for a ten which he gave to Laura, keeping as far as possible away from the twins while crossing the floor. The boys handed him the boots.

PINTO stepped back to the counter and let his gangling body lounge against it. He folded his arms and looked soberly at Soapy. "Now jest lemme watch you try on yo' new boots."

Paint shot his brother an admiring glance, then told the little outlaw, "Good idee, so's to make shore that they fit. Ary fella that does as much snoopin' as you do, needs boots that fit him proper."

Soapy explored the inside of a boot with his hand. "They gotta be scraped befo' I can put 'em on."

By this he meant that the sharp, hardwood shoepegs came through on the inside and would have to be cut off. In those days manufacturers of work boots often shipped them from the factory in this condition, so that it was up to the merchant to scrape these pegs off close to the inner sole before delivery to his customer. Attached to the counter was a "boot scraper," a mechanical device with a chisel-like cutting edge which went down inside the boot and did the job.

Billy Brewster said he'd scrape the boots.

"Hold on a minute," objected Pinto. "That's too daggoned much bother. Jest you set down and shuck yo' old boots, Soapy."

The outlaw started a whining protest. Paint brought a hand down on his shoulder so hard it made his knees sag. "Set and shuck!"

Soapy made haste to obey. Once or twice he looked plaintively at Tom and Luke, but their heavy faces showed no sympathy for the little coward.

"Shore as you're bawn, he's a-wearin' socks," observed Pinto when the outlaw shed his boots, "and I betcha the things ain't been washed sence the last time a posse chased him through swimmin' water."

Paint towered over the prisoner, scowling down at his socks. "Take 'em off!"

Soapy did so; and moreover he pulled on the new boots when the tall cowhand ruthlessly ordered him to do it, flinching as his naked soles touched bottom. Paint jerked him erect. He howled when his weight came down onto the sharp pegs and did his best to ease the pain by holding first one foot then the other off the floor. At this juncture Laura interceded for the little crook, declaring that he had paid double price for the boots and she held nothing against him.

Pinto listened respectfully. He shook his head. "Yes, Miss, he's done paid for the boots all right but they's a whole slew of other things that he ain't paid for yet."

"Like cussin' you and callin' you bad names," growled Paint, "and bein' too ornery to live and too wuthless to hang."

The girl had nothing further to say.

Pinto asked Soapy, "Where's yo' pony?"

"Down to the corral," whimpered the outlaw, "and if you'll jest lemme send for him, Mistah Ranger, I'll promise never to come back to Catclaw no more—so he'p me God!"

Paint looked at Pinto and vice versa.

Simultaneously they shook their heads.

Pinto gazed down at Soapy Joe as solemnly as a judge about to pronounce sentence. "It wouldn't be noways fair to a honest pony to make it come so far after the likes of you. You go to the pony or hel—hallelujah, one or t'other. Move out!"

What one of the twins didn't think of, the other usually did. Pain quickly added, "And jest foller yo' red nose until you git to the middle of the street and if you make ary break to leave the trail befo' you hit the corral, I'll head you off with a fo'ty-five. Now git!"

THE little coward actually turned pale. He sent a pleading glance at the girl. She looked the other way, biting her lips. Pinto gestured curtly with his head and Soapy Joe started for the door, hobbling along on his heels and whining at every step. The twins followed. Paint halted at the threshold where he could keep an eye on Tom and Luke and at the same time see what happened outside, but Pinto trailed Soapy into the street. It seemed to him that the whole town of Catclaw was watching the performance. Every door and window framed one or more spectators, the sidewalks and hitchracks were lined with men and a few women, but no one had anything to say or made a move to interfere. Evidently some of the onlookers guessed what had happened to the little outlaw when they saw his new boots and the way he was hobbling and the news quickly spread, leaving grins, chuckles and some outright laughter in its wake.

When Soapy Joe and his grim guardian reached a point well out in the street he refused to take another step. He sat down in the dust like an unruly boy. Without a word Pinto lifted him clear of the ground, intending to stand him on his feet again, but Soapy drew his knees up to his chest, so the lanky cowhand simply dropped him and he landed pretty hard on the end of his backbone. He got up at once, fearfully watching Pinto's big hands.

"Hit for the corral!" commanded the tall cowman. "Better strike a high lope so's to take long steps and save yo' feet."

And the little outlaw did just that, to the vast amusement of the spectators.

As Uncle Jeb Timmons afterwards confided to a crony who missed the fun, "I was cold sober and I had a grandstand seat, and I'm here to tell you that Soapy Joe's boots hit the ground jest five times in a hundred yards."

Approaching the Capitol Saloon the panic-stricken outlaw quartered off toward it, whereupon Pinto pulled a gun and showed an admiring audience how near to a moving target he could drop lead without hitting it. Soapy Joe changed his course so abruptly as to kick up the dust like a cutting horse turning a frisky yearling. Thereafter he held to a beeline for the corral.

Laura had said that Bruce Weston was in town and Pinto was on the lookout for him, at first expecting the gambler to interfere in defense of his man. However, upon noting the attitude of the town toward Soapy's punishment he knew that the little coward was generally disliked and accordingly figured that Weston was too smart to back the fellow publicly.

The lanky cowhand holstered his six-shooter and stood where he was in the middle of the street until Soapy Joe reached the corral, in the meantime keeping his freckled face as stern and solemn as if this were deadly serious business; then he ambled back to Brewster's.

Lounging in the doorway with his gangling frame propped diagonally across it, Paint greeted his brother with a disapproving look. "Pore shootin'."

"Good shootin'."

"You missed him two feet or better every time."

"Wa'n't a-tryin' to hit the cuss."

"Sartinly, but you hadn't oughta missed him more'n six inches—mebbe three at that range."

"I *might've* shot closer—cain't tell,"

drawled Pinto. "S'pose *you* light out down the trail and I'll see can I do a mite better'n three inches."

Laura's happy little laugh interrupted an argument that was rapidly approaching the danger point, for the twins rarely found themselves in a situation so difficult as to prevent an exchange of brotherly wallops. They glanced shyly at her, each showing signs of being a bit flustered.

She saved them further embarrassment by changing the subject to one upon which they were likely to be in accord. "What're you going to do with these two men? Turn 'em loose? They really haven't done anything in here to give you a reason for arresting them."

The twins turned their freckled faces from Laura to the prisoners whom they regarded thoughtfully and impersonally for a long moment. Tom and Luke glared back at them.

Scudder spoke up, "If they know what's good for 'em they'll unloose us damned pronto."

And Wilkins added, "Then they'll get to hell outa this country and stay clean away from it."

Paint looked at Pinto and vice versa. Each nodded slowly at the other as solemnly as if they were a pair of wise and ancient mules.

Observed Paint, "Cussin' befo' a lady."

Agreed Pinto, "Uh-huh, so we gotta git 'em outa here."

WITHOUT further discussion they laid hold of the ropes that were looped about the outlaws' respective necks.

Said Pinto to Tom, "Better come along peaceable."

And Paint told Luke, "You, too, and I hope you're broke to lead 'cause I'd shore hate to see you choke yo'self down."

Scudder went to cussing in earnest, but the freckled cowhand jerked his neckrope so hard the profanity ended in a gurgle.

The boys led their prisoners outside and stopped on the porch, halting there for a few moments. They looked up and down the street in a manner which seemed to say, "Everybody take a peek at what we tied onto;" and apparently nearly everyone did. Although no one had ventured to approach the Brewster store after the Soapy Joe exhibition, obviously the town had kept its eye on the place in the expectation of further happenings for it was no doubt common knowledge that Tom and Luke went in with Soapy and failed to come out. A murmur arose, audible but no single word distinguishable, as if Catclaw had suddenly gone to talking to herself in a language of her own.

Scudder and Wilkins took on colors that ranged from the pale of anger to several shades of red and a sickly green. They tried to hide behind their captors in an effort to escape the gaze of a town that had

given them a reputation for being bad and always treated them with the respect accorded to dangerous men. They strained at the ropes that bound their wrists until their necks swelled and their eyes watered. They looked almost frantically around for help.

"Where in hell is Bruce?" hoarsely muttered Luke to his partner.

"Done dived headfust into a well, I betcha," observed Paint.

Tom broke into a storm of foul language aimed at the twins. With a careless little flirt of his hand, Pinto rolled his rope so that a wave slapped the outlaw's big jaw hard enough to slip hair. That silenced him.

At the moment the boys were in some-

thing of a quandry, having expected the boss of Catclaw to show up before things had gone even this far. Neither of these happy-go-lucky scamps had any use for bloodshed and since experience had taught them that ridicule was one of the severest punishments that could be inflicted upon a badman, they wanted Weston to show himself so that they might at least try to give him a big dose of it with the whole town there to see him take it. Of course they could and would go find him if they had to, but they figured it would be a heap better if he came prancing out to rescue his men and got a licking himself. Pretty soon it dawned upon them that they'd have to go a step farther in this little game of baiting the boss.

PAINT looked at Pinto and vice versa. Each glanced at the empty hitchrack in front of the store and back at his brother again. They swapped curt nods.

Said Pinto, "Spoilt meat draws flies."

Observed Paint, "You're mighty nigh smart enough to be my twin."

"Come on!" growled Pinto at his prisoner. "I'm in a sweat to git shed of you so's I can go to work on this here spotted hyeenie brother of mine."

At the hitchrack the twins had another argument, but it didn't prevent either of them from keeping his eyes peeled for bushwhackers. The town wasn't taking this performance as it did the Soapy Joe episode. Evidently Tom and Luke had plenty of friends, some of whom were commencing to make themselves known by yelling insults at the freckled cowhands and prophesying future trouble for them. However, these solemn-faced boys paid no attention to the yells and went about their business with hats pulled low over their eyes to hide the fact that they were watchful.

Suggested Paint, "Give 'em plenty rope so's they can tangle their hined feet and strangle theirselves if they go to actin' up."

Objected Pinto, "Nope—snub 'em up short so's to make 'em bend their blasted necks in shame."

Paint growled, "A ignoramus like you don't know nothin' 'bout how to—"

His voice was lost in the roar of Pinto's six-shooter!

The boys had made it a point to stand so that each could watch opposite sides of the street. While arguing with his brother, Pinto saw sunlight glance from a rifle barrel at a second-story window of a honkatonk diagonally across the street. Since the man behind the gun no doubt thought he was shooting at a Ranger and accordingly took pains to avoid recognition, he had opened the window a few inches but left the curtain drawn and merely pushed it aside enough to accommodate the barrel of his weapon. The big cowhand couldn't see the man, but a glimpse of the rifle was enough for him. Still holding Tom's neckrope in his left hand, he jerked a Colt with his right and sent five bullets into that window with a fine speed acquired by much practice while in keen brotherly competition. Glass broke and fell and shattered on the wooden awning below. A section of sash splintered. The green curtain danced and flapped as if someone inside were shaking it. The rifle disappeared.

At the first shot Paint spun about, seized Luke and roughly whirled the burly outlaw in front of him.

Pinto now calmly blew across the muzzle of his gun to whip out the smoke, then went to reloading it. "Gittin' a mite skeerd?" he drawled at his brother. "Don't you dast to spook and leave me with a tough town on my hands."

Paint's bony face went red wherever his freckles gave the color a chance to show through. At first he bristled up—afterwards he grinned.

"Jest for that," he said, "we'll snub these here polecats up short like you was a-mind to do."

Which was his way of thanking his brother for perhaps saving his life.

The twins tied their men at the rack and

ambled leisurely back onto Brewster's porch—Paint keeping a sharp watch on his side of the street, Pinto with his chin on his shoulder. Behind them they left Tom Scudder and Luke Wilkins snubbed so closely they couldn't stand erect, leaning against the rack, staring at the ground, saying nothing, two utterly cowed and beaten bad men.

LAURA BREWSTER met the boys when they came in. Her small face was alive with excitement and as she looked impartially from one to the other, there was something in her sparkling eyes which made the young rascals square their wide shoulders and hold their freckled chins a little higher. Impulsively stepping between them, she took each by an arm and led them farther from the door. Over the top of the girl's head their eyes met. They swapped scowls. At the far end of the counter where there was little danger of being overheard, she let go of their arms and again looked up at their faces in a way which inspired Paint to wish that his brother was snubbed down out yonder at the rack.

"No wonder you're famous!" exclaimed Laura. "That was the whitest and smartest thing I ever saw men do. When Tom and Luke get away they'll be ashamed to show their faces in Catclaw again. They're tamed and you did it without shedding a drop of blood, unless the man at the window got hurt. D'you think you hit him or just—"

She paused and gazed inquiringly at each of them, evidently unable to decide which twin did the shooting since they looked exactly alike.

"He done it," drawled Paint with a touch of envy, "he ain't never hit nothin' yet."

Laura continued quickly, thereby heading off the caustic comeback which sprang to Pinto's lips.

"The way you handled those toughs was wonderful," she declared, "but I'm afraid you were foolish to do what you did. There are too many of 'em against you. Didn't you hear 'em yelling at you? You need help. Two Rangers can't clean up this town. Please go away before they get another chance to kill you and don't come back alone. Please!"

Paint looked at Pinto and vice versa.

Into the store drifted many sounds—bootheels on board sidewalks and porches, the pounding of galloping hoofs, a boy's voice shrill with excitement, a barking dog, a drunken yell or two, sober men calling back and forth, and an undertone of unclassified sounds that carried a threatening note. Scudder and Wilkins bent dejectedly over the rack, silent, motionless. Evidently Catclaw was screwing up her courage to do something about it.

The twin's glances held longer than usual. Their faces didn't change a particle, but a hardness crept into their ordinarily humorous eyes. Trouble was coming up the trail and they knew it. In the meanwhile, however, here was a mighty pretty girl. They looked solemnly down at her.

"You're dead right, Miss," said Pinto. "We ain't never seen the time when we didn't need help."

"No foolin'," added Paint, "and I wouldn't be at all surprised if we have a leetle shootin' scrape befo' long."

"More'n likely," agreed Pinto, "and we shore don't aim to have no lead a-whistlin' 'round yo' purty ears, Miss."

"That's it exactly," declared Paint, "so I calc'late we better take ourselves away from here." They started to leave.

"Yes'm, we gotta go away," said Pinto, "clean away, pronto."

"Paint grinned over his shoulder at Laura, and added, "But if you was to run into any more boot trouble, Miss, you'll find us in a stall at the ho-tel next door."

CHAPTER II

"YOU BOYS HAVE GOT GUTS"

THINGS began to happen within two minutes after the twins walked into the Texas Hotel thirty feet west of Brewster's Store.

While Pinto lounged in the doorway so as to keep an eye on their prisoners and the balance of the town, Paint approached the proprietor who sat with boots hooked on the edge of a home-made desk near the east wall.

A short heavy man with sharp little eyes buried deep in a beefy face and big jaws that ground away at a frazzled cigar, he more nearly resembled a barroom bouncer than a genial host; and this resemblance was strengthened by a sawed-off double-barreled shotgun which lay conveniently near him on the desk. Before a word was spoken he looked the tall cowhand over as if undecided whether to go to work on him with the shotgun, to throw him through a window, or perhaps the door.

Paint saw at a glance that he wasn't going to get along with this fellow. The only other person in the room was the porter, a massive young black man with a shining face and a smile that uncovered a set of teeth which a horse might envy. At the moment he was doing a little sweeping and a lot of looking.

Paint moseyed across the floor as if he had a world of time and nothing important on his mind. Moreover, he pried loose a grin that was especially disarming because it removed the mask of premature age and gave to his long face a boyish appearance in keeping with his youth. An enemy who knew him well, once swore that the devil inside of him pulled the strings on that cussed grin. At any rate, the freckled cowhand kept on grinning and moseying until the legs of his chaps almost touched the front of the desk; then he reached out and picked up the sawed-off shotgun!

The thing was done so swiftly and unexpectedly as to have caught almost anyone napping.

The proprietor's jaws clamped down on his cigar and stopped. Lumps of muscle showed on his thick hands as they gripped the wooden arms of his hide-bottomed chair. In all other respects he sat unmoved. The porter's broom halted in the air six inches from the floor and hung there.

"Never did like to look one of these here things in the eyes," drawled Paint, "unless I was dead shore that it'd had its teeth pulled."

While speaking he removed the percussion caps from the muzzle-loader and replaced it on the desk.

Evidently the hotel man had a mean temper that he had broken to ride, and he now rode it hard. His heavy face flushed and paled in spots and he showed other symptoms of a coming explosion, but he didn't explode. His jaws took it out on the cigar while he glared up at the freckled young man, saying nothing.

Paint's grin having done its duty, his long face was solemn again. He went on to say, "Me and my twin brother over yander sorta figgered we might bed down in yo' place tonight, if you don't mind. Got ary stall left?"

"Full to the roof!" barked the hotel boss, "and what's more—I never will have no room for outside lawmen."

"Who said we was lawmen?"

"I did!"

"Reckon that makes us lawmen all right," drawled the lanky cowhand, "but we jest gotta have a roof over our heads. Cain't noways stand night air." He reached into his pants pocket and brought out some hard money. "It's cash on the bar'l head with us, Mistah. Shore you ain't got no room?"

"I wouldn't touch a penny of your money for nothin'," growled the evil-tempered hotel man, "and no stinkin' Ranger can sleep in one of my beds!"

PAINT'S dark brown freckles seemed to turn a shade darker; otherwise his sober face underwent no change. He said quietly, "Now I *am* insulted. Which would you ruther I'd do—kick you in the face while you're a-settin' down, or bust you on the snoot when you stand up? Don't make

a particle of difference to me, but I aim to do one or 'tother."

The proprietor jerked his feet down and bounced from his chair with an oath. Bulky, evidently as strong as a bull and a lot meaner, he had the bearing of a bruiser whose favorite diversion was a fight in which anything went. He came on aggressively, his head drawn down between his lumpy shoulders, his big fists clenched.

Paint backed off a few steps, speaking to the porter without turning his head, "Boy! Squat over yander on the desk where I can see you without strainin' my eyes none."

The big fellow dropped his broom and *moved.* "Yes sah, Mistah Ranger, yes sah-*ree!* I's done squatted!"

A long time back when the twins' legs were still wobbly, a broken down pugilist rode the grubline into the Hawkins ranch and Old Buckskin put him to work at odd jobs. A little later, while settling a difference of opinion on some subject, the pug ducked a wild swing then knocked Old Buckskin halfway across the horse corral and into a watering trough. Thereafter the pug had a steady job, his first duty being to teach the twins how to mix a little science into their everyday fighting. They grew up under the old pugilist's watchful eye, learned all he had to teach them and enlarged upon it by the addition of man-killing fist-and-skull technique forbidden in the early day prize ring, however lenient the rules of that institution may have been.

Obviously a crafty fighter, the burly hotel man moved steadily but cautiously toward his lighter antagonist, maneuvering him into a corner. Paint retreated, well aware of what to expect, hoping to bait the bully into a rush and gambling that it would come while he still had room for footwork.

From the doorway a lazy voice drawled, "Lick him, brother, or I'll stomp hell outa you."

Paint shot back at Pinto, "Jest you come on in here and I'll stomp the pair of you!"

This little diversion served its purpose. The big man's attention wavered for an instant. Paint's bony left whipped across and caught him squarely on the nose. He staggered, shook his head, dazed, half blinded. Quick as thought the loose-jointed cowhand's long right arm drove a finely timed uppercut that missed the point of his jaw and landed under his chin. His bullet head snapped back. He went down, his heavy fall jarring the flimsy building.

Again that lazy voice from the doorway, "Never knowed you to hit the bull's-eye fust shot."

Paint rubbed his peeled knuckles. Without taking his eyes from the man on the floor, he answered Pinto, "Don't you run off. I'll be over there d'rectly."

THE hotel man rolled over slowly and came up fighting. Those two blows had upset his strategy and knocked the caution out of him. He rushed, head down and huge fists swinging wildly, an easy victim for a trained fighter with the strength to hurt a tough customer like him. Having plenty of room, Paint shifted in and out and around him, doing a thorough and altogether merciless job of beating him up in a fashion strange to frontier bullies of his breed. Time and again the big man went down, always to come up bleeding, gasping for breath, growling like a wounded bear, staggering about with legs spread wide, boring in, fighting.

At length Paint suddenly realized that he'd better finish this thing before he wore himself out and took a licking. Although conscious of his guns, for their weight hampered him, it never occurred to him to use any weapon other than those that nature gave him. Thus far he had escaped breaking his hands on the bruiser's hard head or iron jaw and he didn't want to do it now if there was any other way to end the fight; so he got set, straightened his man with a left uppercut, then drove a murderous right into the big fellow's solar plexus with every last ounce of his weight

and strength behind it. The bully wilted to the floor. This time he stayed there.

Wet with sweat, breathing hard, Paint looked over at his brother. "You're next!"

Pinto grinned admiringly, and drawled, "You're mighty nigh right today. Don't want no part of you." He shot a quick glance down the street. "And besides, this old town is a-commencin' to squirm. Wouldn't be at all surprised if we had a leetle excitement befo' long."

Paint looked about him, then snapped at the porter. "Where in hell is everybody? Cain't be that we're the only folks in this here ho-tel."

"Oh no sah, Mistah Ranger, no sah!" exclaimed the black boy. "They's two niggah gals in the kitchen and plenty white folks 'round about. I done seen some of 'em a-peekin' through keyholes and cracks."

"Why didn't they come in and watch the fun?"

The porter, obviously a born actor and diplomat, rolled his eyes until nothing but the whites showed. "Sho' nuff, Mistah Ranger—whar at you-all is, they don't aim to be. No sah!"

THE freckled cowhand snorted through his long nose. He told the boy to fetch a bucket of water and wake up his boss, which the darky did so enthusiastically as to make it a case of come to or drown. The hotel man came to. He sat up and got his bearings, admitted he had taken a licking and said the twins could have any room in the place. Paint selected one opening into the office on the ground floor with windows on two sides, one facing the street and the other Brewster's store. When making this choice he had in mind its value as an observation post and a point from which to make a quick getaway.

Returning to the office with the proprietor who had said his name was Stub Penter, he told the man to go and patch himself up; but first he must sit down and listen close for a minute. Stub willingly dropped into his desk chair, for he had taken a terrific beating—mentally as well as physically. Standing over him and idly fingering the shotgun as it lay on the desk, Paint tried to assume what he imagined to be the air of a serious-minded law officer with a load of responsibility and the welfare of the community at heart; but the idea sort of tickled him and once or twice he had a hard time keeping his face straight.

"Penter," he began, "you're damned lucky to be alive, and don't you forgit it. We could've smoked you up fust off and our Cap'n would've patted us on the back for doin' it 'cause word has got to the Rangers that more'n one man has been robbed and murdered in this here ho-tel."

Stub tried to inject a protest, but Paint cut him off short. "Shet up! In Texas these days 'tain't so much what a fella has done, it's what he figgers to do from now on. Take this here scatter-gun, f'rinstance. Maybe it's done blowed the daylights out'n no tellin' how many men, but we cain't feel hard to'r'ds the gun 'cause we don't know for shore; but if we was to git the idee that it figgers to drive buckshot into our backs when we ain't lookin', we'd ram it down yo' throat loaded and cocked and that'd be damned tough on the gun. Savvy?"

Penter shifted uncomfortably in his chair, groaned, and said he savvied all right.

"Bully!" declared Paint. "And jest you recollect that if anything *was* to happen to us, they's a heap more where we come from and they're a sight tougher'n we'll ever be."

Stub looked as if he found the latter part of the statement hard to believe, but he didn't say anything.

The freckled impostor turned to the porter. "Boy, here's fo'bits for crap-shootin' pu'poses. Scoot down to the corral and fetch us our rifles and saddlebags. And don't let no grass grow underneath yo' feet 'cause it might turn out to be the pizenest kind of cactus."

The black boy took the half dollar bob-

bing his head, his shining face just one big grin. "Yes sah, Mistah Ranger, yes sah! I's a-scootin'. Fact is, I's mighty nigh thar. Look close and you see's that I's comin' back a'ready."

PENTER hobbled off to the kitchen and Paint ambled over to where Pinto was still propped in the doorway. During this short walk he told himself that he kind of liked the idea of being a Ranger, and then and there he pretty nearly made up his mind to marry Laura Brewster and enlist and get to be a famous Texas peace officer.

Tht twins remained at the door where they could see both inside and out, and perhaps talk with safety.

Pinto looked his brother over scornfully. He kept his voice low, but it had a punch, "You shore did cut a big gut."

Flushed with victory—moral and physical, Paint bristled up, "Don't you dast to talk thataway to me! How come?"

"A-shootin' off yo' spotted face to the ho-tel boss same as if you was *somebody*, when you know damned well you're jest a blanket-campin' saddle bum and won't never be nothin' else. Huh!"

This jerked Paint's head down from the clouds so hard it jarred him loose from his dreams of grandeur and made him forget to fight back. He merely said grumpily, "You're my twin and that's a heap wuss. What's been goin' on out here?"

"They had 'em a getherin' of some sort over to Bruce Weston's Capitol. Five six important lookin' fellas come from all directions in a hurry. They went in and they ain't never come out yet. Calc'late they're a-cookin' up somethin'."

"'Bout time."

Pinto nodded slowly, "Uh-huh. And two three bunches started for them polecats we got hitched over yander, then they busted up and scattered like quail. Reckon they ketched sight of me."

"Huh—huh! They must've knowed I was here."

"Which reminds me," said Pinto. "We ain't no lawmen even if everybody figgers we are."

"That's right. We're jest a-hawnin' in where we ain't got no business to be."

"Yep, so we hadn't oughta do no promiscus shootin'."

"Nope, and damned nigh no hangin'."

"Too bad," drawled Pinto, "but Catclaw's got herself a mighty fine jail over yander."

Paint looked thoughtfully at the jail—a long single story rock building situated diagonally across the street almost in the center of town, evidently at one time a store or saloon. "She shore has, and it's right handy if a fella happened to be in a sweat to find hisself a good jailhouse."

PAINT looked at Pinto and vice versa. "Well," said Paint, "why don't you git a move on?"

Pinto eyed his brother piteously. "Go ahead if you ain't got no better sense, but me—I'm waitin' for my rifle, 'cause from now on I aim to pack all the hardware I own and can borry."

"That's jest what *I* was fixin' to say."

In a remarkably short time the big darky came puffing through the back door with their saddlebags and Winchesters and the twins set out for Brewster's, each with a rifle under his arm. At the porch they glanced into the store, then turned purposefully toward the hitchrack. Laura called them inside.

They knew at a glance that something had given the girl a scare since they last saw her. A hardness had replaced the soft curves of her delicate features and her face looked drawn. Fear had darkened her eyes, driven color from her cheeks and lips. She was standing well back in the store with an arm about Billy Brewster, a slender lad who greatly resembled his sister. He, too, was frightened but doing a manly job of trying to hide the fact.

Laura was quick to notice a bruise over Paint's eye and some scratches elsewhere on his face. "Oh!" she exclaimed. "Billy

said he heard fighting in the hotel. Did you get hurt?"

"Not a particle," replied the tall cowhand. "What all has happened in here, Miss?"

And Pinto quickly added, "Yes, Miss, tell us how them polecats has been pesterin' you and who done it."

"Bruce Weston is behind it, of course," she said in a low, bitter voice, "but it's supposed to be the town council. They just sent word to me that they're going to get rid of you before dark and if I don't help them something terrible will happen to us because they're sure it was dad who asked for the Rangers."

Her arm impulsively tightened around the boy's thin shoulders. "I'm not afraid for myself. They'll let me alone. It's Billy! Some of them hate him because he talks back to 'em."

Billy made a weak attempt to grin up at the tall men who looked down at him and his sister with long, freckled faces that had suddenly grown older and very stern.

"Awww, I'm not afraid," declared the boy. "We got a Colt and a Winchester and a ten-gauge and my dad's Sharp's, and I'm handy with all of 'em but the Sharp's. It kicks too hard for me."

Now displaying the courage of her kind —the frontier woman, Laura quickly went on to say, "I know I tried to persuade you to leave here, but that was because I thought you couldn't handle this thing alone. If you won't go away for your own sakes, don't you think of leaving on our account. Stay here and finish the job if you believe you can do it. Billy and I can look out for ourselves. Maybe we can even help you a little."

She shot a glance through the door at the tethered outlaws. Her eyes blazed. "I'd love to see you keep on the way you've started. Give this damned town a cleaning it'll never forget!"

Both Paint and Pinto were dying to tell this little brown-haired thoroughbred what they thought of her, but neither had the nerve to do it. Instead they undertook to ease her mind by resuming their humorously solemn expressions and whimsical speech, openly poking fun at danger while secretly taking every precaution they could.

ASKED Paint, "What is this here town council thing, Miss?"

Suggested Pinto, "The scalawag bunch, I betcha."

"It is just that," answered Laura fiercely, "Bruce Weston and four other men elected by his gang to govern the town. One of 'em is a shyster lawyer and the others own and run three of the worst kind of dives. If a stranger goes into any of those places with money, he may come out alive if he's lucky but he won't have a cent left. All of them are bad fighters with killings to their credit. Weston himself is a gunman, probably the most dangerous of the lot because he's very smart and tricky and often fools folks into thinking that he doesn't want to fight. But Hank Greener the marshal is their official killer. He's one of those fellows who notches his guns. His deputy, Bud Phelps, shoots in the back and makes no secret of it. A little while ago he sneaked up on Bob Cross and killed him, and I heard him brag about how he did it without taking a chance himself."

The twins listened closely while Laura gave them this brief sketch of the men they were going up against. Neither showed the slightest change of expression.

Inquired Pinto, "D'you reckon that the good men here would grab a-holt and run things if they was to git a chance?"

"Oh yes! Give 'em *half* a chance and they'll do it."

Observed Paint, "but it 'pears to me that old Catclaw tallies mostly culls and cutbacks and not much prime stuff."

The girl shook her pretty head. "There are more honest men around here than you think and they'll fight, but they're cautious and slow to start trouble."

Drawled Pinto, "So are we — mighty slow."

Added Paint, "And plumb cautious to boot."

At the twins' request, Laura named the councilmen and described their hangouts. She went on to say, "But they're all over at the Capitol now. We saw 'em go in there. So is the marshal. Guess Bud Phelps is at the jail, for Billy saw him standing in the door a few minutes ago, and his head was freshly bandaged."

The girl stopped suddenly. Her face lighted up as if a startling thought had struck her. "Say!" she exclaimed. "I'll bet it was he who tried to shoot you from that window. It'll be just like him."

"Shore sounds sensible," agreed Paint.

"Reckon we might as well take it for granted," drawled Pinto, "'cause it don't never do no harm to take things for granted as long as it's the other fella that gits took."

Paint glanced admiringly at his brother, then said, "You shore got a memory in yo' skull. Betcha it's been all of sixty days sence you heard me say them same daggoned words."

Laura Brewster laughed. Looking up at these gangling young scamps whose long freckled faces were so solemn as to suggest that they'd never been known to smile, she couldn't help laughing. Thus the boys had accomplished what they set out to do —ease her fears without making any brave speeches or heroic promises.

Appearances to the contrary, however, the weight of their responsibility bore heavily upon them. They had a tough decision to make and it must be made in a hurry. Undoubtedly the town council meant business, for pickings in Catclaw were too good to be given up without a fight; and moreover, Weston and his crowd had to do something to save their faces since they were dependent upon the support of hard men who had no respect for timid leaders. The twins therefore knew that by remaining in town they might be endangering the girl and her brother, but to run off and leave them in such circumstances was not to be thought of. Besides, Paint and Pinto generally finished what they started. On top of all this, there was a strong probability that the Rangers wouldn't come. Laura made it plain that neither she nor her

father had expected them to, similar calls for help in the past having brought no results for the simple reason that there were not enough Rangers to cover the ground and small isolated communities like this one frequently had to work out their own salvation. If the twins should leave now and the genuine officers failed to come promptly, there was no telling what might happen to the Brewsters.

THESE troublesome things had been speeding through the boys' minds while they stood there talking to the girl. Neither could actually read the other's thoughts, although some folks swore that they did, but they usually came close enough for all practical purposes and this occasion was no exception. Their eyes met. Afterwards they glanced through the door at the lengthening shadows in the street.

Said Pinto, "Calc'late the sun ain't more'n a hour high."

Observed Paint, "'Bout that, but it's a long time 'til dark."

"Uh-huh, plenty time for a fella to do a heap of things if he's a-mind to."

"Yep," agreed Paint, "and it's time we was gittin' outa here so's Miss Brewster and Billy can lock up the store."

Since it was too early to close, Laura glanced from one to the other inquiringly.

Pinto spoke up before she had a chance to say anything. "Uh-huh, lock up good and go stay all night with somebody that's

got a big family of men folks and a whole slew of shootin' irons scattered 'round the place."

Paint placed his big hand on Billy's shoulder and grinned down at the lad. "From now on you're our deppity. It's yo' pussonal job to make shore that yo' sis don't set foot out'n the house between sundown and sunup."

The boy nodded vigorously, shooting an authoritative glance at Laura.

Then Pinto told the girl, "And I reckon that goes double for you, Miss."

She slipped her arm through Billy's. Her large eyes were troubled, but her lips and chin were firm. "I understand. We'll go to Stuckleys. Anybody can tell you where to find their place."

Without another word, the twins slung their rifles under their arms and started to leave.

"Wait a minute!" exclaimed Laura in a low anxious voice. "Don't think that because you're Rangers they won't shoot you down or mob you. Weston and his crowd have got the big-head so bad they wouldn't be afraid of what other Rangers might come and do to them. Law officers look just like anyone else who happens to get in their way. Be awful careful, won't you boys?"

Answered Paint, "Jest as keerful as we know how, Miss."

Added Pinto, "And mebbe a mite more keerful than that."

They halted on the porch to take stock of their surroundings before going further. The scene wrenched a growl from one and an oath from the other. It seemed as if the town had suddenly fallen dead and was lying motionless, sprawled there while the sun's rays clothed it in a pink shroud and the everlasting wind powdered its remains with dust. Open doors and windows gaped empty and forlorn. Sidewalks lay like abandoned trails soon to be overgrown. Scudder and Wilkins stood leaning their bodies against the rack with hunched backs to the street, bare heads drooping and hair streaming down over their faces, buried so deeply in shame as apparently to have lost interest in everything. The only moving things in sight were horses at the hitchracks—some dozing with a lip and a hip sagging, lazily switching at flies in their sleep, and others—creatures of habit, rolling inquiring eyes about for masters who should be coming to take them home.

The twins read the sign. They read into it what the trail boss saw in the stillness that ushered in the fury of an electrical storm on the plains. They knew that honest men had taken cover while badmen brewed a dose of hell between walls.

LOOSE-JOINTED and inclined to shamble along, Paint and Pinto moved swiftly without appearing to do so. They went and untied their prisoners and led them down the sidewalk to a point opposite the jail. From there they strode rapidly across the street, Paint holding Scudder by the arm and walking so close as to make it difficult to shoot one without endangering the other. Pinto did likewise with Wilkins. The jail door stood open, also a small recessed window on the right of it. The twins went under the hitchrack and halted at the edge of the shallow porch. Through the door they saw that the front part of the building was an office with table and chairs and they caught a glimpse of a bunk against the wall. A man was lying upon it. Three long steps carried Pinto across the porch while his brother guarded the prisoners. When the tall cowhand strode into the room, a wiry man with a bandaged head rolled over and sat up with a jerk on the edge of the bunk. A cartridge belt and gun hung over a chair nearby. He reached for the weapon.

Pinto gestured significantly with the barrel of his rifle. "Hold 'er!" he growled. "I can blow you plumb all to pieces befo' you grab steel."

A look of surprise bordering upon consternation filled the wounded man's treacherous face, but he sat back on the bunk

as if relieved to learn that it would be foolish to make a fight. "Wa'n't a-grabbin' for no steel," he said sullenly. "I was reachin' for my hat."

"You won't need it none."

Paint herded Scudder and Wilkins through the door hard upon the heels of his brother.

"Ain't you Bud Phelps," demanded Pinto, "Greener's deppity?"

"Yes! What in hell are you tryin' to—?"

"Be still!" commanded Pinto. "Make 'aste and open me up a cell."

Phelps evidently undertook to stall for time. He fumbled in first one pocket as if in search of something and then in another as if in doubt whether he ever had such a thing, in the meantime stealing a glance through the door and down the street. There was a crafty look in his narrow-lidded eyes and even when speaking, he somehow gave the impression that he was listening for something.

"We ain't got but one cell and it takes up more'n half of the jail," he said, carelessly motioning toward a door in the rear wall of the office. "Go in yander. Cell door's open. Jest he'p yo'selves."

"Git up!" barked Pinto sharply, "befo' I wrap a rifle bar'l 'round yo' head where that there fo'ty-five creased you."

Moved by either the implied accusation or the threat, Bud Phelps almost sprang to his feet. He sidled away from the freckled cowhand who towered over him looking mighty mean, and thereafter was quick to obey orders. Producing an extra key, he gave it to Pinto and readily led the way from the office to a narrow room at its rear into which the cell door opened. The twins locked him up with their other prisoners, having first searched his clothing and released the outlaws' hands.

PAINT and Pinto hurried back to the office. The town was coming to life. Doors that so recently had stared silent and vacant into the street, now erupted men and the noise of men. Soon the sidewalks were teeming with men. Horses awoke, lifted their heads, flirted their ears, stamped, fidgeted. Up and down the street men gathered into close bunches, talked quietly, stood facing toward the jail or from time to time turned to look at it. There was no shouting or laughter, no calling back and forth, no running hither and yon, no audible excitement of any nature, but the very air tingled with it. A few high-strung horses sensed it, snorted, reared, kicked, squealed. A terrified cat slithered across the street, running low in the dust. Two men went to their saddles and took down their ropes.

The jail office had no side windows. Paint and Pinto stood at the door and front window, well back—watching, listening, having little to say. At the moment they were no longer rollicking young scamps with an eye for girls and an appetite for fun. As often befell the youth of the frontier, age had suddenly placed its sobering hand upon them—tempered their judgment, hardened their souls; and it traced lines in their thin faces, set their jaws, locked their lips. For they were spectators at the birth of a mob and no man, however courageous he might be, could view that awakening of savage instincts in men without experiencing the grip of cold fear—fear of what he might do were he a part of the mob, fear for his life if he were its prey.

The boys had a clear view for some distance up and down the street, but they couldn't see the Capitol Saloon. However, they soon became aware that something was taking place down there. On the opposite sidewalk men suddenly quit talking and looked in that direction. The town dropped its voice to a murmur. It seemed to sigh as a man may do at the end of a long wait. Then figuratively it got stiffly to its feet and walked slowly toward the jail!

Paint turned from the door where he had been standing with his back to Pinto. During the space of five seconds they stood

in silence face to face—their eyes now a lighter, colder blue.

Said Paint, "I see dust up the trail."

And Pinto, "Me too."

A tiny spark of boyish humor momentarily melted the frost in their eyes.

Said Paint, "I recollect how we used to skeer hell out'n our old mammy."

Added Pinto, "Uh-huh, and we didn't have no better sense than to try it on pappy."

"So he h'isted our shirt-tails and set us afire."

"Yep, both of us over the same knee simultaneous.

Continued Paint, "But we was jest leetle shavers them days."

"Uh-huh," agreed Pinto, "and we done growed a-plenty sence then."

NOT another word passed between them. Paint closed the front window but left the door wide open. Pinto strode quickly into the room at the rear of the office. The three prisoners were grouped at the cell door, obviously listening for all they were worth.

Pinto told them gruffly, "Git away from there and keep yo' damned mouths shet. Jest lemme hear a peep outa you and I smoke you up. Cain't afford to be squeamish now."

The way he looked and what he said carried conviction. Phelps and the two outlaws moved off to a far corner and hunkered down with their backs to the rock wall.

Paint stood watch at the door. From both right and left and upon either side of the street, men walked slowly toward the jail. Some feet lagged; others moved with feverish eagerness, fretting at the leisurely pace the mob had set for itself. The tall cowhand momentarily exposed his head for a quick look in the direction of the Capitol. A group of six men were striding along the sidewalk as if they knew exactly where they were going and what they'd do when they got there. Others moved aside to let them pass, then fell in behind them. Bruce Weston, Hank Greener the marshal, and the town council, thought Paint. The fellow in the fancy vest, black pants and shiny boots would be Weston, he figured—a tall man with red hair and mustache and something of an air about him.

Before moving away from the door, Paint noted with satisfaction that the Brewster store was closed; and he saw the big black boy at the hotel window, a worried look on his good-natured face.

When Weston and his companions were within a yard of the porch, Paint coughed; and when the sound of their bootheels ceased at the door, a lively conversation was in progress in the small room behind the office. Pinto's voice came through the rear door, "Aw hell! They got too much sense to mob a pair of Rangers 'cause they know damned well that Rangers'll jest keep on a-comin'."

Then another voice, almost identical except for a slight difference in inflection, "We dassn't bank on that. I done heard tell that this here Weston polecat ain't got nary a brain in his head and he thinks he's mighty nigh God."

The tall gambler crossed the threshold at a stride. His arrogant face flushed with anger, his fingers closed on the handle of the gun at his thigh and he went into the room with all the assurance of a man who believed himself master of the situation. At Weston's heels came a spidery fellow with a sharp face and deep-set colorless eyes, two guns tied down, a marshal's badge on his shirt. Four others followed Greener, tough-looking customers, each armed to the teeth and evidently hoping for trouble. Six pairs of eyes fixed upon the back door to the exclusion of everything else.

"Come out of there!" barked Weston. "Both of you!"

Instantly the *front* door slammed shut!

Weston and his men turned as if shot. There stood Paint leveling a brace of guns waist-high, thumbs on their hammers and

a dry grin on his densely freckled face.

"Here *I* am, Mistah Weston," he drawled lazily, "jest a-honin' to split yo' spines with lead and he's over yander all set to blow yo' guts out."

The amazed outlaws jerked their eyes from Paint to the rear. Pinto's rawboned frame filled the doorway. In his left hand he held one of the marshal's own weapons —a sawed-off double-barreled shotgun fitted to a pistol handle, and in his right dangled a six-shooter.

"And here I am, gents," he, too, drawled lazily. "'Tain't noways hard to tell which is t'other if you know how, 'cause I'm freckled but *he's* spotted."

FOR once in his life, smooth-talking Bruce Weston was at a loss for words; and, with the exception of Greener, his companions were utterly flabbergasted. Pinto afterward declared that he read their minds and knew they were counting the slugs they might have to dodge if they started anything—fifteen bullets from three six-shooters and eighteen buckshot from one double-barreled scatter-gun. But the marshal belonged to a different breed. Laura had said that he was a professional killer, and he now looked and acted the part. When the door slammed, his hands darted to his guns as he whirled and the weapons were leaving their holsters at the time he first looked down the throat of Paint's Colt. He may have read certain death in the cowhand's bony face, for the boy had already singled him out as the most dangerous one of the bunch and fully intended to let him have it. At any rate—Greener didn't finish his draw and when Pinto showed up a moment later, he followed the example set by the others and folded his arms. There remained in his face, however, all the craft and viciousness of a trapped weasel. The twins never for an instant relaxed their vigilant watch over him, aware that should either make a false step he might kill them both before they could stop him.

Weston was quick to recover his voice and his poise. "Damn your dirty souls!" he snarled. "What is this? An ambush of law-abiding citizens by a couple of bandits?"

Answered Pinto, "Call it whatever you're a-mind to, but be damned keerful what you try to do 'bout it."

Added Paint, "You betcha, and unless you want folks to be callin' it a mighty fine

killin' long after you're gone, jest h'ist yo' paws while I strip you down to yo' cussed hides. H'ist 'em!"

The four councilmen obeyed without a moment's delay, but neither Greener nor Weston made a move. From a point slightly behind the marshal, Paint stepped closer to him and Pinto sidled over to within arm's reach of the gambler. He was careful to keep Weston approximately between him and the front window as a precaution against a shot from the outside. Through that opening Pinto saw that the mob had now converged upon the jail, that the street was packed with men from one sidewalk to the other and that they were standing quietly, just waiting. He grimly wondered how that mob would behave if it knew what was going on inside, and a chill crawled up his back when he thought of what might happen should Weston yell for help. That was the thing he feared. While Paint was making the councilmen walk backward to where he could disarm them with his left hand, keeping Greener covered with his right, Pinto watched every move the gambler made—even to every breath he drew. He figured that the

man's pride would keep him from calling for help until he found that there was absolutely no way around it, since to acknowledge that he and five of his picked steers had been roped and tied down by a couple of boys would be a painful admission for a man like Bruce Weston to make. But Pinto wished to hell that his brother would hurry!

Up to this time the mob had left the porch clear and as far as Pinto could see, no one had made a move to look through the window. This didn't surprise him.

Paint kicked the last of the councilmen's guns across the floor and under the bunk.

"Now squat over yander by the wall," he told the four men, "and make damned shore to act natural-like, jest in case some cuss was to take a squint at you through the winder. Git! We ain't got no time for foolishness. Squat!"

THE four toughs followed the young cowhand's orders readily enough—ashamed for themselves, no doubt, and certainly bitter toward Weston and Greener for getting them into the predicament. The scorn with which they looked at them must have been a blow to the pride of the two leaders. Accordingly the twins expected most anything to happen when they undertook to disarm Bruce and Hank. Of one thing they were sure, however: there must be no shooting if it could possibly be avoided, for that would draw the mob.

Paint was first to speak, his voice low and very hard, "Don't you go and be a damned fool, Greener. We done got you cold and—"

Suddenly the gambler went into action. A yell arose from his throat and simultaneously his slender hand flashed downward to his gun. Trained from early youth in the deadly art of gun fighting, Pinto instantly discovered the almost imperceptible danger signals that announced Weston's intentions. He struck with the barrel of his Colt, a vicious upward and outward blow. It laid the gambler's cheek and white temple open to the bone, the cry for help died at his lips, his gun remained in its holster and he crumpled to the floor.

Greener made his play a fractional second after Weston. His whippy body swayed aside as swiftly as a snake's and his spidery arms moved almost too rapidly for the eye to follow. One hand struck at Paint's six-shooter, the other darted to his own weapon. The gunman's speed was so great Paint had no time for a blow. He jabbed with the muzzle of his Colt, a short jab timed as he had been taught to time his fist. Driven by the weight and strength of a powerful wrist, arm and shoulder, the gun barrel sank deeply into the small of Greener's back—a kidney blow paralyzing in effect. The next instant Paint slapped him over the ear with his six-shooter. The gunman wilted without a sound.

"Be keerful!" snapped Pinto at three of the toughs who had scrambled to their feet preparatory to mixing in the fight. "We mean business and we'll beat yo' heads clean through that there rock wall if we have to." He gestured with the shotgun. "Light out for the cell in yander. Git!"

Two of the four councilmen went to cussing. "Shet up!" barked Paint. "You seen what happened to Weston when he tried a holler. Rattle yo' hocks!"

Shoving their prisoners along and working fast, the boys soon locked them up and returned to the office.

Suddenly it seemed very quiet, uncomfortably so. Its rock walls defied sound, the closed door and window reluctantly admitted only snatches of the mutterings of a mob that had grown impatient for a sight of its victims. But the twins knew that the mob was still there, could see it through the small window, and being muffled its voice was all the more fearsome. Their eyes met for a moment. Each saw that the other's cheeks were drawn and each wished that his brother was somewhere else.

Pinto glanced down at the insensible men at their feet, then at the door. Paint nodded.

Said Pinto quietly, "Reckon it's whole hog or none."

Agreed Paint calmly, "Yep, we're in big water and it's sink or swim."

Pinto bent quickly and locked his arms about the gambler's middle as the man lay prone on his face. Lifting him bodily, he staggered toward the door. Paint got there ahead of him. He flung the door open in the face of the mob. A shout went up—instantly choked off. Paint stepped out onto the porch, six-shooter in one hand—the shotgun in his other, then moved aside to make way for Pinto and his inert burden.

AS IF undecided where to lay him down Pinto held Weston erect for a moment. A burst of oaths, a growl of astonishment, then silence from the mob. Men shifted about and craned their necks the better to see. The wound on the gambler's face and temple was an unpleasant sight. An artery had been severed, his heavy hair was matted with blood.

Pinto laid the wounded man on the porch as gently as if he were a friend. Straightening up, he looked out over the faces of the mob and said in very matter-of-fact fashion, "This here man got hurt purty bad. Somebody run fetch a doctor befo' he bleeds to death."

Then he turned carelessly back into the office.

From the far side of the street a large man with a white beard came elbowing his way through the crowd, shoving men aside as if he'd prefer to beat them out of his path. He carried a black kit.

"I'm a doctor," he told Paint, "and I brought my tools along. I knew I'd need 'em before this dirty work stopped."

Momentarily ignoring the injured gambler, he looked Paint squarely in the eye, and said clearly, "Officer, you boys have got guts."

Before Paint had a chance to say anything, Pinto came from the office carrying Hank Greener. He placed the gunman beside Weston, arose, hitched up his pants, and said to the doctor, "That's all of 'em, Doc."

The doctor snorted into his whiskers and went to work.

By this time the mob had reached a state where nothing could surprise it, so it relaxed and went to talking.

Paint holstered his six-shooter, laid the shotgun on a loafers' bench near the window, then ambled to the edge of the porch and spoke to the nearest men.

"Wonder if I could git one of you fellas to go over to the ho-tel," he said casually, "and tell the boss to fix us up enough vittles for—lemme do some figgerin'." He glanced down at the doctor. "How soon will them fellas git their appytites back, Doc?"

"Huh! They'll be hungry as hell inside of an hour."

"Bully!" said Paint. He went on to his attentive listeners, "Then we'll be needin' grub for eleven men. Calc'late you better tell Penter to make it a-plenty for 'bout thirteen fo'teen, 'cause I got a twin brother."

So many men started for the hotel, the twins decided that the mob used this simple errand as an excuse to break up and scatter. Before long there weren't more than eight or nine left and they were merely hanging around in the hope of finding out what actually happened inside the jail.

Then Paint looked at Pinto and vice versa.

They swapped grins.

SOMEWHERE around eight o'clock in the morning three days later, the twins were sitting cross-legged on the floor in their room at the hotel cleaning their guns and trading caustic insults over two juicy bones of contention.

First there was the question of who

would marry Laura Brewster and settle down in Catclaw as marshal of the town, an office which they were at liberty to hold jointly. In fact, they had been urged to accept it by the law-abiding citizens who, under the leadership of Doctor Bowen, had started in where the twins left off and were now safely in control of the town.

And running a close second was the problem of who would escort Laura to the big dance that was to be given in their honor that very night. The fact that the dance would take place in a vacant building just twenty feet east of Brewster's store over which Laura lived, didn't make a particle of difference to the twins. As a matter of principle, the situation called for an argument.

After almost coming to blows, they had already settled the question of who would ride at the head of the parade slated to precede the dance. It was decided that they'd ride abreast on Bacon and Beans with Laura between them.

The discussion had reached the point where it began to look as if they'd have to settle their differences with their fists, when the stage rolled in and its six wild mules slid to a halt in front of the hotel. The twins were a bit slow in getting to the door, but they nevertheless got there in time to see a fine looking young man alight and do a first-rate job of kissing Laura Brewster who had come running from the store to meet him!

And the boys heard two old codgers talking.

Said the first old-timer, "Wouldn't be at all surprised if Laura and Sammy git theyselves hitched in double harness, now that he's come home to stay."

"'Spect so. They done had a onderstandin' long enough."

The twins tottered back to their room and again sat cross-legged on the floor.

Declared Pinto, "Never seen the beat of the way you make a fool outa yo'self over a gal."

Retorted Paint, "Huh! Jest gimme a piece of calico for bait and I can lead you clean to the bottom of the bottomless pit."

It didn't take the boys more than ten minutes to decide that they were too young to get married anyhow; and besides, since they firmly intended to become famous Texas peace officers it wouldn't be right for them to leave wives at home to worry about them while they were away off somewhere taming a tough town like Catclaw. So they got up and ambled over to the window and looked out into the street, trying to imagine how they'd feel while leading the parade and making Bacon and Beans misbehave just enough to show folks how they sat deep and rode 'em straight up, with pretty girls waving handkerchiefs and throwing kisses from the sidewalks, and the fellows all yelling like Indians and shooting holes in the sky like white men. This wasn't going to be half bad and they sure wished the old sun would get a move on him.

Having been mighty attentive to the doings of Laura and her young man, Pinto hadn't any more than noticed the two men who escorted the stage into town; but he now gave them an extremely close examination as they walked across the street toward the jail. Short and stocky, with red hair and two guns apiece, they looked exactly alike and they had "Ranger" written all over them!

Pinto nudged his brother violently in the ribs with a sharp elbow. "See that?"

"I see 'em."

"Betcha it's them damned twins."

"Ain't no doubt about it."

Paint looked hard at Pinto and vice versa. They swapped pale and sheepish grins. Then they glanced at their rifles and saddlebags over in a far corner, measuring the distance from there to the side window.

Said Paint, "Reckon we might as well take the winder."

Agreed Pinto, "Yep, it's handier'n the door and a damned sight closer to the corral!"

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Quivering Earth

KILAUEA VOLCANO had been active for a week when the inter-island boat carrying us from Honolulu docked at Hilo, Hawaii, that day in May, 1925. We had been reading accounts of the eruption in the newspapers with great interest and so lost no time in going ashore and engaging a car to take us to the hotel situated at the edge of the volcano.

It was just before noon when our Kanaka driver pulled up before the rambling frame building and we tumbled out. Lunch was being served and at the urging of the manager we decided to eat before going out to watch the fireworks.

We had scarcely seated ourselves at the table when the building began shaking with a fearsome grinding and squeaking. Without conscious thought, my companion and myself jumped to our feet, knocking our chairs over, and dashed madly outside—neither of us bothered about the steps which led from the porch to the ground; we cleared those in one jump.

As our feet struck the ground we could feel it undulating in short, smooth waves, and then we heard the laughter of the people we had left behind; glancing back sheepishly, we saw a dozen or more of them standing on the porch laughing at us. We hadn't realized that the safest place around there during a quake was inside the specially built frame hotel building; it had been constructed to give with the motion of the earth-waves.

That was our introduction to earthquakes, and possibly that is the reason we later placed ourselves in a rather ticklish position from which we escaped only through good luck.

After lunch, we engaged a guide to show us around. Most of the area around the huge crater had been declared out of bounds for it was too dangerous, but the guide took us to a point a short distance from the hotel from which we could get a good view of the fire pit, about three miles from the edge of the crater where we stood.

It was a magnificent sight which struck our eyes; a huge column of white smoke rising many hundreds of feet into the air with, now and then, an eruption which sent molten lava and rocks flying with a roar.

Our guide pointed out a section of the crater wall several hundred feet high about a half mile around to the right from where we stood which curved inward from top to bottom and told us that a boulder dropped from that spot would curve in and follow the contour of the cliff rather than drop straight down as might be expected. This section of the crater rim was restricted territory, but that evening as we sat talking over what we had seen that day, my companion and I decided to go there

early the next morning and see for ourselves if the guide were right.

Just before daylight the next morning we slipped out of the hotel and, by taking a circuitous route, reached our destination without being seen by any of the rangers patroling the area. We waited there until there was sufficient light for us to see the crater edge, for we had no desire to make the experiment with our own bodies, preferring to drop a boulder to the cold lava floor of the crater.

We inched along on our bellies for the last twenty feet, rolling a boulder the size of a man's head before us, and at last reached the edge. Holding our breath, our eyes followed the sheer drop to the ragged lava below us; it was such a fearsome sight we lost no time in rolling the boulder to the edge and dropping it over. It fell straight for possibly fifty feet, then curved gracefully inward, following the contour of the cliff just as the guide had assured us it would.

We had been so interested in our experiment that we did not notice when the ground began shaking; only after we had seen the boulder crash on the lava and heard the sound of the shattering rock did we feel the quivering of the earth. Panic-stricken, we started hurriedly crawling back to safer ground; we did not dare stand and run, but we moved almost as fast on our hands and knees. We succeeded in getting about twenty feet from the edge when we heard the dull, blood-curdling grinding rumble as the cliff, where we had lain, broke off and went crashing to the crater bed so far below.

Now we cast caution to the winds; scrambling to our feet we ran as though possessed, and every step we took we could feel the earth crumbling away beneath our fast-moving feet.

At last, utterly spent with the exertion and excitement, we fell to the ground and lay gasping. The earth continued shaking but we knew we were sufficiently far from the crater edge to be safe from being pitched into the volcano.

After we had rested there for about ten minutes, gaining strength for our return to the hotel, we rose and started back the way we had come. We had not gone more than a hundred yards when the ground suddenly opened up before us. At first it was but a narrow crack; but, even as our wondering eyes stared at the dark chasm, it slowly, inexorably widened. Our subconscious minds took possession of our bodies and forced us to make a mad, unheeding jump across the gash in the earth which was opening up at a ninety-degree angle from the volcano. We fell sprawling on the far side, but quickly scrambled to our feet and did not stop running until we neared the hotel.

We were outwardly calm as we greeted the other guests, but, inside, our nerves were still jumpy and we decided that thereafter we would view the volcano either from the hotel porch or from the area designated by the rangers as being safe.

Allan Dixson

The STORY TELLERS' CIRCLE

The Thrilling History of Cattleland

IN OUR next issue starts a new serial, a thrilling chapter from the history of Cattleland. It is by William MacLeod Raine, a great favorite with our readers, who has been too long absent from our pages. The study of the epic of cattle and the West has long been Mr. Raine's hobby, and for the readers of adventure novels it is a grand thing that added to this intense interest in one of the great chapters of our American West, Mr. Raine can also tell a thundering good story.

The scene of his new novel is Wyoming in the days when the free open range was passing forever. For a decade and a half the cattleman had been king. His stock had ranged the plains unhampered and had multiplied exceedingly. The big ranches had paid good dividends to the stockholders in Edinburgh, London or Boston. Then evil days had fallen on the industry. The cattle boom had collapsed. There were several good reasons for this. One was bad management. Those in charge of some of the large ranches had fallen into the habit of living in Cheyenne or Denver and leaving the properties mostly to the care of subordinates. In order to show profits they had overstocked the ranges and in some cases sold too many cows and calves. The grass was eaten short and the winter feed killed. Moreover, as the country opened to settlement, nesters moved in and homesteaded the water holes. There was conflict between them and the cattle kings who had up to this time possessed the land. As a result of this, rustling greatly increased. It was easy for a small outfit on the edge of a big one to increase its holdings by branding calves of the large concern. Year by year the antagonism increased until it grew very bitter. The great ranches were doomed, the managers saw, unless they could stop the stealing of their stock and hold sufficient range to feed the herds.

And it is here Mr. Raine picks up the story of "Riders of the Rim Rocks." Calhoun Terry was particularly hated by the smaller ranchmen because he had been one of them. The owners of the great ranches wanted his support since he was now one of them; Ellen Carey, daughter of a small rancher thought she hated Terry, but when killings broke out, wouldn't see him accused of murder. Politically the small man dominated the county. The nesters combined with the people of the towns to elect tickets opposed to the cattle barons. As a result of this clean sweep the latter felt they could get no justice in the courts. No proof was sufficient to send a cow thief to the penitentiary. So the victims of rustling claimed some of them felt that if they were to get fair play they must make it for themselves outside the law; they wanted the support of Calhoun Terry.

So the stage is set and next issue up rolls the curtain for "Riders of the Rim Rocks" by William MacLeod Raine.

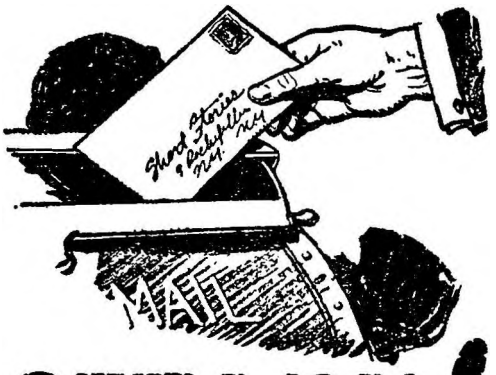
Youth on the Frontier

PAINT and Pinto Hawkins, those two youngsters whose exploits have enlivened our pages before, are back in this issue of SHORT STORIES in the Caddo Cameron story "Them Damned Twins Again." They carry off most nonchalantly the fact that they are mistaken for Texas Rangers, but nevertheless, as Mr. Cameron says in the story: "As often befell the youth of the frontier, age had suddenly placed its sobering hand upon them—tempered their judgment, hardened their souls, and it traced lines in their faces, set their jaws, locked their lips, for they were spectators at the birth of a mob and no man, however courageous he might be, could view the awakening of savage interests in men without experiencing the grip of cold fear—fear for his life if he were its prey."

That's a quotation from the story and it

struck us very forcibly, as so often happens with a passage from a Caddo Cameron story, so we picked it out to reproduce here in the Story Tellers' Circle.

Our youngest editor, whose comments get into the Circle every now and then, says that youth in the cities comes up against problems too, "How about that row you left me to straighten out last week?" he asked. "Printers and engravers—there's mob violence for you!" We pointed out that it wasn't a case of leaving him anything, it was good for him professionally to learn that an editor's job wasn't all going to lunch with authors. "You've got to be *some* use around here, you know," we said and grabbed the elevator before he could reply.



The Editor,
SHORT STORIES,
9 Rockefeller Plaza,
New York, N. Y.

Perhaps this will sound like fiction, but, since I've been reading fiction for over sixty years, it is possible that some of it may have been absorbed.

On my desk, table and shelves, are fifty-four periodicals, forty-nine of them less than two years old. So I think I should qualify as a judge of good fiction, and as such, my vote goes to SHORT STORIES, first of all. I read all kinds of Detectives and

Westerns, but I always read SHORT STORIES first.

As to your writers, I've failed so far to find a dud and if that young editor can continue to pick 'em, you better hobble him or picket him, or some other publisher will steal him or entice him away from you.

But back to your writers. One hesitates about making a choice, but I must admit that Hendryx and Greene are my favorites, and stories in series with the same chief characters suit me best.

Another thing, either your writers are very careful or your proofreaders earn their salaries, for I have yet to catch them in an error, local or otherwise, and I surely dislike to have a writer display ignorance of common geography or age-old customs.

As to your illustrations, they are good and sufficient. Fiction readers don't read pictures. They read good English, if they want pictures there are always the funnies. Your writers' plots suit me. I don't care for a plot full of treachery that a six-year-old would recognize, but which the hero remains in blind ignorance to the end.

You have a good thing—push it along and may you all live long and prosper.

Dr. P. S. Smith.

Shawnee, Oklahoma.

(Always glad to hear when we make no errors; even when we do.—EDITOR)

The Editor,
SHORT STORIES,
9 Rockefeller Plaza,
New York, N. Y.

Sure been reading and enjoying SHORT STORIES for a long time and have yet to have a copy that was a disappointment; I thought that as long as the rest were writing you I might as well have my say to add to the rest.

Have a leaning to the stories pertaining to the West, which is natural as I have been a range rider, peace officer, including a deputy U. S. marshal, but I enjoy all the stories as they are always well written and good clean stuff.

Tuttle, Van, etc., are always read first and then I go back and finish the rest and always pass it on to the one not so fortunate as to have secured his copy or to one who enjoys good reading.

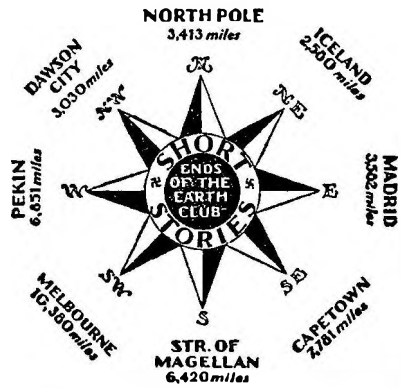
I wish to congratulate the editor for the material he gets and the publishers for putting out the best magazine that I know and that is SHORT STORIES.

Wishing you all the success you are entitled to, I am,

Will S. Dobson.

Red Lodge, Montana.

THE ENDS OF THE EARTH CLUB



HERE is a free and easy meeting place for the brotherhood of adventurers. To be one of us, all you have to do is register your name and address with the Secretary, Ends-of-the-Earth Club, c/o Short Stories, Inc., 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York, N. Y. Your handsome membership - identification card will be sent you at once. There are no dues—no obligations.

Here is another collector to add to your list.

Dear Secretary:

I am one of the many readers of your SHORT STORIES and don't know what I should do without them to keep my mind occupied. I have often wanted to join your club and at last am sending you a

line hoping you will enroll me as a member. I have several hobbies, which include taking snapshots, collecting used stamps and above all I am fond of writing.

Boys or girls, old or young, I shall be only too pleased to answer all correspondence. Yours sincerely,

William D. Drennan

c/o Ampat Tin Dredging, Ltd.,
Tujoh Section,
Kampar, Perak, E.M.S. (Malay)

A stamp collector from Australia.

Dear Secretary:

I am writing to you because I am interested in collecting stamps and wish to join your Ends of the Earth Club.

I am twenty-four years of age and am an accountant. It is only by corresponding with other people that enables me to add to my stamp collection.

Hoping to hear from all parts of the world, I am,

Yours faithfully,

Roy M. Forsyth

12 Wangalla Rd., Lane Cove,
New South Wales, Australia.

If you're looking for information on China, Panama, Hawaii or the U. S. here is one of Uncle Sam's boys who will help you out.

Dear Secretary:

I am a soldier in the good old U. S. Army and would like to hear from people all over the world. Will answer all letters from near or far. So please sign me up with the Ends of the Earth Club. Can talk on China, Panama, Hawaii, the good old South and the New England states.

Charles F. Henning

Hq. Battery, 16th C. A.,
Fort Ruger,
Honolulu, T. H.

Williamsport, Pennsylvania, calling the far corners of the earth.

Dear Secretary:

This is my application for membership in the Ends of the Earth Club and can be

listed under hobbies of stamp collecting. Other interests are swimming, canoeing, target shooting. I belong to the Cities Stamp Club, and my wife and I spend many evenings looking them over.

SHORT STORIES is a very interesting magazine and if one issue is missed it is very difficult to find at the used and trade in magazine stores. I am interested in correspondence from all lands.

Very truly yours,

M. Harthertz

342 Pine St.,
Williamsport, Pa.

ENDS OF THE EARTH CLUB MEMBERS

WITH hundreds of letters from new members coming in every day, it is obviously impossible to print all of them in the columns of the magazine. The editors do the best they can, but naturally most readers buy SHORT STORIES *because of the fiction that it contains. Below are more names and addresses of Ends of the Earth Club members. Most of these members will be eager to hear from you, should you care to correspond with them, and will be glad to reply. Note these lists, if you are interested in writing to other members. Names and addresses will appear only once.*

ALL MEMBERS PLEASE NOTE

We have had numerous complaints from foreign members about insufficient postage on their mail. This, of course, necessitates their paying the additional postage or refusing the letters. If your letters addressed to foreign countries have been returned to you, perhaps this is the answer. Please remember—all foreign mail MUST carry five cents postage. Canada, Panama, and the Philippines—three cents.

CHANGE OF ADDRESS

A. Klaassen, Provenierssstraat 78b, Rotterdam, Holland

D. A. Adkins, 48-15—221st St., Bayside, L. I., N. Y.
John Aitkens, Box 915, Lexington, Va.
Monsuru A. Alade, 48, Balogun St., Lagos, Nigeria, West Africa
E. O. Alikor, c/o P. O. Wabli, H. M. Convict Prisons, Lagos, Nigeria
John I. Amucchi, c/o W. U. Osisiogu, Via Degema, Nigeria, W. Africa
Grove Raymond Arroway, Gen. Del., Richfield Springs, N. Y.
Benjamin Attas, Montefiore Hospital, Gun Hill Rd., Bronx, N. Y.
George A. Backnor, c/o B. C. M. School, Abonnema, Via Degema, Nigeria, W. Africa
Bill Bailey, 168 Carlaw Ave., Toronto, Ont., Canada
E. Bense, 532 Martinson, Wichita, Kansas
Andrew Biarchi, 31 Thomas Ave., Yonkers, N. Y.
John W. Blake, Co. 354 CCC, Sebring, Fla.
Daniel Block, 122 Nassau Ave., Brooklyn, N. Y.
Arnold Brekstad, Box 186, Mound, Minnesota
G. A. Bucknor, c/o B. C. M. School, Abonnema, Nigeria, West Africa
Francis Burke, CCC, Co. 3762, Union, Mo.

James J. Burns, Madison Barracks, Sacketts Harbor, N. Y.
Bob Butler, Box 957, Durango, Colorado
William Butler, Jr., U. S. CCC, Co. 1476, North Forks, California
Thomas M. Camfield, CCC, Co. 4738 D. G. 14, Oreana, Idaho
Garfield Chapelle, 11 Esher St., Charlottetown, P. E. I., Canada
Earl Collins, Box 133, Alpaugh, California
Eugene A. Conklin, 622 Irving Ave., Syracuse, N. Y.
Donald M. Cooper, 169 Westmoreland St., Fredericton, N. B., Canada
Giles H. Courter, Jr., 1755 Springfield Ave., Maplewood, N. J.
Roy T. Daniels, P. O. Box 264, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, Md.
Pvt. John C. Daugherty, Jr., Co. 1, 33rd Inf., Ft. Clayton, C. Z.
F. L. Carl Dealtry, Royal Army Med. Corps, Reception Sta., Changi, Singapore, S. S.
A. V. de Tardino, Sec'ry of I. A. C. L. Toronto, 283 Wright Ave., Toronto, Ont., Canada
Marne Dilettuso, 5127 Coral St., Pittsburgh, Pa.
Milford Douglas, 232 Lester Ave., Mamaroneck, N. Y.
Joseph W. Dowdy, c/o U. S. A. Mackenzie, 401 Custom House, San Francisco, Calif.
Bill Downie, River St., R. F. D., Plymouth, Mass.
Luckie V. Du, Rt. 3, Box 644, Duluth, Minnesota
Brod Dunson, Box 96, Lexington, Virginia
A. Eagan, 16 McClellan Circle, Buffalo, N. Y.
Robert Eckstein, Co. 3762 CCC, Union, Mo.
John Eimpshore, Box 381, Lexington, Virginia
Arthur Erber, 110 Lincoln Place, Brooklyn, N. Y.
Einar Enroth, 2936 Fairmount Blvd., Cleveland, Ohio
J. Farrell, 32 Seventh St. East, Cornwall, Ont., Canada
Willet R. Fisher, 200 W. Washington Ave., Pearl River, N. Y.
Tom Fleming, Box 276, Lexington, Va.
C. E. Fox, 17 Menzies St., Dingle, Liverpool 8, Lancashire, England
Harrison Fox, 815 Eddy St., San Francisco, Calif.
Jay E. Freudenthal, 6200 Calif. St., San Francisco, Cal.
Charles Fusick, 164 Cook St., Brooklyn, N. Y.
Arthur L. Giroux, 7043 St. Denis St., Montreal, Canada
Marion Gray, 23 North Terrace, Birstall, Nr. Leeds, Yorkshire, England
Will Green, 1150 Victoria Rd., Nanaimo, B. C., Canada
Thomas Gursky, 138 Moore St., Brooklyn, N. Y.
O. Hale, 3122 Imperial High, Lynwood, California
John Hall, 615151, D 22, No. 1 Wing, No. 1 Sqdrn., RAF Station, St. Athan, Glamorgan South Wales, England
Pvt. D. A. Hamer, 3rd Eng's Co. B, Schofield Barracks, Honolulu, T. H.
Howard R. Hamilton, 215 Kay St., Sacramento, Calif.
Wilbur Hampe, 133 North Genesee St., Waukegan, Illinois
Stewart Hant, Box 36, Lexington, Virginia
Robert J. Harvey, 313 Pelican St., Dunkirk, N. Y.
E. Harvey, 313 Pelican St., Dunkirk, N. Y.
H. C. Hofpower, 2213 Lee Ave., Houston, Texas
Arabia, N. W. I.
W. Kitchener Hyman, Metropole Club, San Nicholas,
Johnny Inman, CCC Co. 3762, Union, Missouri

James Hanover,
SHORT STORIES,
9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York, N. Y.

I enclose these four coupons from SHORT STORIES.

Please send me a list of Ends of the Earth Club members interested in stamp collecting.

Name .....

Address .....

Will You Let Me PROVE I Can Make YOU a New Man?

MEN—Meet J. G. O'Brien, of California, one of my Silver Cup Winners! Look at that strong neck—those broad, handsome, perfectly proportioned shoulders—that muscled chest and stomach. Read what he says: "Look at me NOW! Dynamic Tension WORKS! I'm proud of the natural, easy way you have made me an 'Atlas Champion'!"

This Sterling Silver Cup Being Given Away

This valuable cup stands about 14" high on a black mahogany base.

I will award it to my pupil who makes the most improvement in his development within the next three months.

Do you want a better build? Are you dissatisfied with your present physical development? Then listen—All I ask is a 7-DAY TRIAL. Let me show to you—in even that short time—that I can give you the kind of body men respect and women admire!

I was once a skinny weakling of 97 lbs. I didn't know what real health or strength were. I was afraid to fight, ashamed to be seen in a swimming suit.

Then I discovered the secret that changed me into "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man," the title I won twice and have held ever since, against all comers. My secret is Dynamic Tension. It is a natural method. Its purpose is not only to give you the powerful, rippling muscles you'd like to see in your own mirror, but also—for those whose systems are sluggish for lack of proper exercise—to help them tone their entire body, inside and out.

Just give me a week! Make me prove—in even that short time—that continuing with my Dynamic Tension method will make a New Man of you—give you bodily power and drive, and put you in magnificent physical condition which wins you the envy and respect of everyone.

FREE BOOK ON DYNAMIC TENSION

Let me show you the results produced for other men! I'll send you FREE my famous book, "Everlasting Health and Strength." It shows actual photos. Write your name and address carefully on coupon. Mail to me personally today. I'll rush your free copy to you AT ONCE! Charles Atlas, Dept. 9F, 115 E. 23rd Street, New York, N. Y.

CHARLES ATLAS
Dept. 9F, 115 East 23rd Street, New York, N. Y.

I want the proof that your system of Dynamic Tension will help make me a New Man—give me a healthy, husky body and big muscle development. Send me your FREE book, "Everlasting Health and Strength" and full details about your 7-DAY trial offer.

Name .....
(Please print or write plainly)

Address .....

City ..... State .....

FOOT ITCH

ATHLETE'S FOOT

Send Coupon

Don't Pay Until Relieved

According to the Government Health Bulletin No. E-28, at least 50% of the adult population of the United States are being attacked by the disease known as Athlete's Foot.

Usually the disease starts between the toes. Little watery blisters form, and the skin cracks and peels. After a while, the itching becomes intense, and you feel as though you would like to scratch off all the skin.

BEWARE OF IT SPREADING

Often the disease travels all over the bottom of the feet. The soles of your feet become red and swollen. The skin also cracks and peels, and the itching becomes worse and worse.

Get relief from this disease as quickly as possible, because it is very contagious, and it may go to your hands or even to the under arm or crotch of the legs.

Most people who have Athlete's Foot have tried all kinds of remedies to relieve it.

Ordinary surface germicides, antiseptics, or ointments are seldom successful.

HERE'S HOW TO RELIEVE IT

The germ that causes the disease is known as Tinea Trichophyton. It buries itself deep in the tissues of the skin and is very hard to kill. A test made shows it takes 15 minutes of boiling to kill the germ; so you can see why the ordinary surface remedies are not satisfactory.

H. F. was developed solely for the purpose of treating Athlete's Foot. It is a liquid that penetrates and dries quickly. You just paint the affected parts. It peels off the tissues of the skin where the germ breeds.

ITCHING STOPS QUICKLY

When you apply H. F. you should find that the itching is quickly relieved. You should paint the infected parts with H. F. night and morning until your feet are better. Usually this takes from three to ten days, but in severe cases be sure to consult a specialist.

H. F. should leave the skin soft and smooth. You may marvel at the quick way it brings you relief; especially if you are one of those who have tried for years to get rid of Athlete's Foot without success.

H. F. SENT ON FREE TRIAL

Sign and mail the coupon, and a bottle of H. F. will be mailed you immediately. Don't send any money and don't pay the postman any money; don't pay anything any time unless H. F. is helping you. If it does help you, we know you will be glad to send us $1 for the bottle at the end of ten days. That's how much faith we have in H. F. Read, sign and mail the coupon today.

GORE PRODUCTS, INC. N. F.

845 Perdido St., New Orleans, La.

Please send me immediately a bottle of H. F. as described above. I agree to use it according to directions. If at the end of 10 days my feet are getting better, I will send you $1. If I am not entirely satisfied, I will return the unused portion of the bottle to you within 15 days from the time I receive it.

NAME_____

ADDRESS_____

CITY_____ STATE_____