A long Western novelette by WALT COBURN

Short Stories

25c

Twice A Month

June 25th

"ANNIE OAKLEY OF ATTU"
Andrew H. Hepburn

"DEATH RIDES THE HIGH WIRE"
Bill Gulick

H. BEDFORD-JONES

JAMES NORMAN

GEORGE ARMIN SHAFTEL

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ACTION, ADVENTURE, MYSTERY

Short

Every author's finest and

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BIGGEST AND BEST—TWICE A MONTH

Stories

latest stories—no reprints

June 25th, 1943

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

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The Story Tellers' Circle

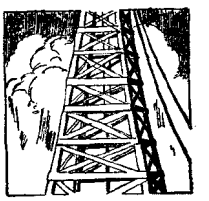
High Liners

THE line must go through, the juice must go on—much the same as the play must go on. And the high-liners get it there.

Bill Gulick is a newcomer to SHORT STORIES with his novelette of the men of the High Wires in this issue, and from Oklahoma City he writes us:

Biographically speaking, I'm a tenderfoot in this writing game compared to some of the old top hands whose names grace SHORT STORIES pages. Pertinent personal facts: Age, 27; residence, Oklahoma City; likes, beer, baseball, golf, bull sessions; dislikes, cold weather, people who call us Oklahomans "Okies." Have been scribbling about three years, during which time a few dozen yarns managed to find their way into print. Most of these have been Western or adventure stories; however, I did write one (1) beautiful love story which sold—sadly enough, none of my friends would believe I wrote it, so I reformed and went back to the he-man stories.

The high-line color is authentic. I spent a couple of years knocking around with a construction crew as timekeeper, field clerk, truck driver, flunky, and what-have-you. We built power plants, sub-stations, transmission lines, etc., all over Oklahoma. If there's a game more fascinating than the electrical construction game, I don't know what it is. You work under all sorts of conditions, fighting heat, cold, dust, and the ever-present danger that goes with heavy construction. If a sleet storm happens to strike, your crew is called out to help keep the existing lines in service—and that often means working at close quarters with live stuff carrying anywhere from two to a hundred ten thousand volts. You live out of a suitcase, eat what you can get and like it. Believe it or not, I once worked in a Panhandle town whose water supply failed, and for six weeks the only liquid you could get in a café was beer. Ah, what hardship! Try washing your hotcakes and bacon down with beer sometime!



The oil boom-town color is obtained from no particular town, but it would fit any of half a dozen former Oklahoma boom-towns. Down this way all you have to do is stand in the middle of a chunk of bald prairie and whisper "oil," and twenty-four hours later a town has sprung up around you, complete with boarding houses, honky-tonks, and an overcrowded jail.

I don't suppose it's even worth mentioning that here in Oklahoma city oil wells are nearly as numerous as houses. Fact is, the capitol building itself is surrounded by derricks and the governor's mansion has a well in its back yard. (No, I haven't got one in my back yard. What would I do with it?—all I can get is an "A" card!)

Well, that ought to be enough about me. Just one more item. What little I know about this elusive story-telling game was taught to me by a gent whose name should be familiar to SHORT STORIES readers—a swell guy by the name of Foster-Harris,

who took me in hand and raised me from a pup. *Bill Gulick.*

Cowhand at Work

HERE'S a letter from Walt Coburn which drifted in the other day from the author of "Bench Warrants for the Wind River Gang" in this issue of SHORT STORIES. Life sounds a bit hectic in Del Mar:

Just to let SHORT STORIES know we've moved over to the California coast for the summer. Even so, the low fog looks sort of good after a couple of years of Arizona sunshine. And while the ocean is a little coolish for swimming, the salt water moistens the old leathery hide and the cool air makes for more working pepper.

Our place here was rented and the old cowhand has been doing manual labor cleaning up after the tenants. I'm not much of a hand at any kind of a job that can't be done a-horseback, but there were a few little tinkering jobs for me to do. Like fixing a busted dingus on the venetian blind on the big window and an electric floor plug that was out of kilter. I took 'em apart with my trusty pliers and screwdriver and hammer. And then called in the electrician to get the job done. There's a dripping faucet in the bathroom and a wobbly shower head, but the local plumber has one of those high-salaried war plant jobs, so I again get out the pliers, the screwdriver, the hammer with the flying-off head and head for the bathroom.

We have an old slow motion Mexican who comes around a couple of days every week to putter around. He put in one of those Victory gardens, and I helped the old boy out a little and weeded it for him. I looked out the window a while ago and saw old Louie standing by my wilted pile of "weeds," talking with gestures to the Missus. Louie's English is a-sprinkling of cuss words, but he has a soft, deep, musical voice and even his cussing has a mellow sound. He kept pointing to my weed pile. Over and over he was repeating a word I looked up in the Spanish dictionary. The word is "tomateras." It means "tomato plants." . . . Maybe the Missus will get it after a while. I think I'll just head straight from my shack to the beach without going up to the house. By evening Louie should be gone unless he's lying in ambush behind the pomegranate hedge with the pruning shears. Meanwhile, it looks like a good time to go swimming.

Adios,

Walt Coburn

A letter which came to us from the Smithsonian Institute in Washington

IN THE editor's notes of the current issue of SHORT STORIES you wonder how people read the magazine. For many years I have found relaxation by reading this magazine. Almost invariably I take all you print as it comes, just as if each issue were a book.

As to the type of story I like best, I enjoy all except possibly the animal stories and those dealing with sports, unless they are unusually well written. Several of the old-time Western story writers have degenerated somewhat—and this includes some others—in that they substitute killing for real plot and skill. Slaughter does not make a good story in itself.

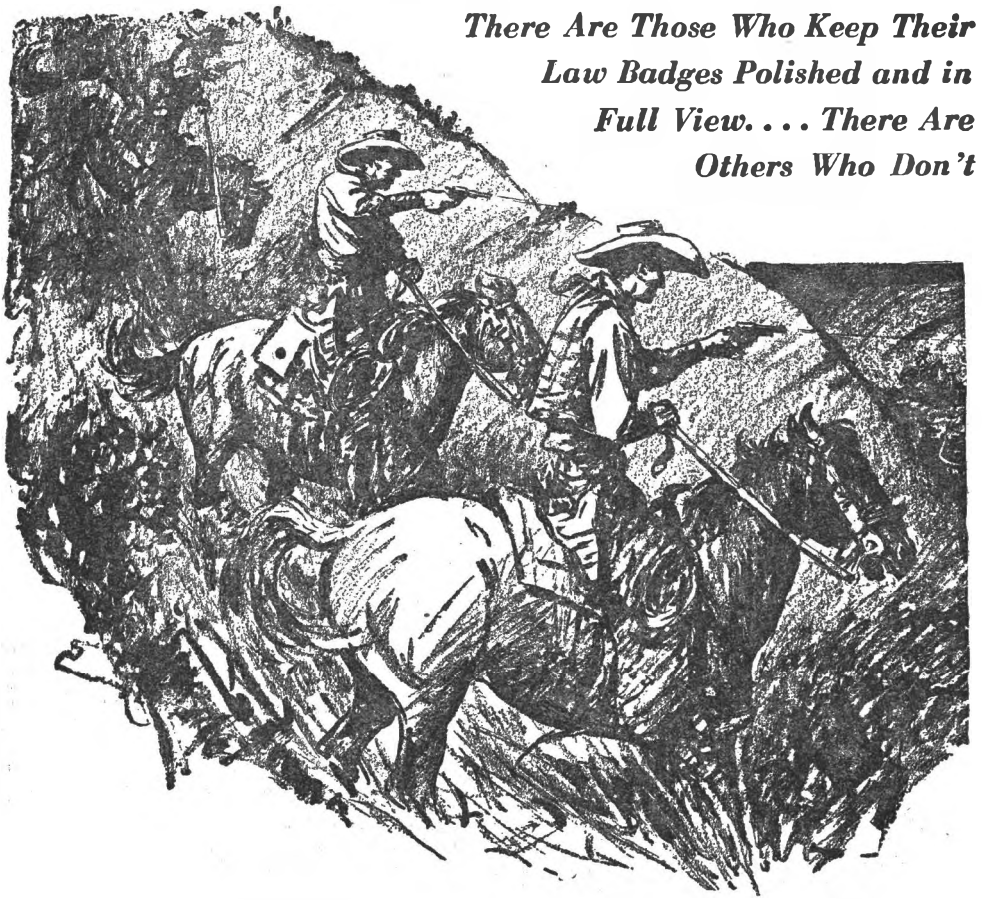
It seems to me that the vast field of technology and business is neglected by story writers. Then, too, if politics can be avoided, stories dealing with the cartels should be very interesting.

SHORT STORIES printed one of the two funniest stories I recall reading. I wish your story could be reprinted. It appeared possibly ten or twelve years ago. The story centered around the cowhand in Montana who became interested in the new school teacher to the extent that it caused him to send to the mail-order house for a bathtub. The episodes that follow were exceedingly humorous.

I trust that you will keep up the quality of your stories. I read other magazines but by experience know that not all the stories in any issue will be good. On the other hand, one need not count on more than an occasional poor story in SHORT STORIES. That, of course, cannot be helped. So keep up the good work.

CHAS. E. RESSER,
Curator, Division of Invertebrate Paleontology and Paleobotany

Do any of our readers recall the story Mr. Resser mentions?



There Are Those Who Keep Their Law Badges Polished and in Full View. . . . There Are Others Who Don't

BENCH WARRANTS FOR THE WIND RIVER GANG

I

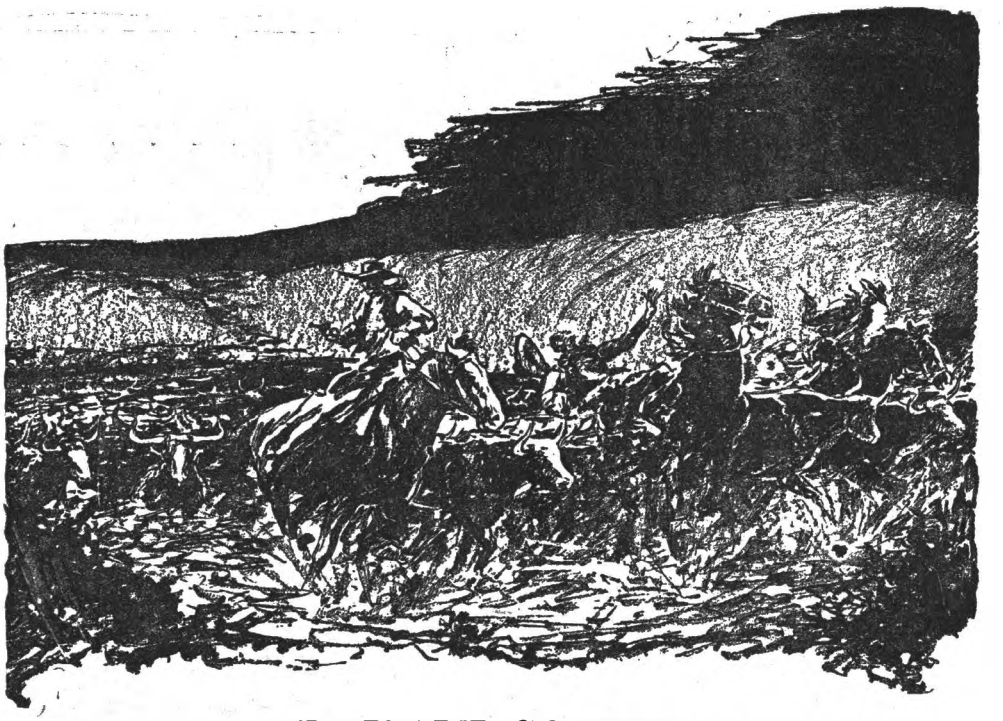
TAKE him sober and Tom Regan was a soft spoken, quiet mannered man who would go out of his way to keep from getting into trouble.

But drunk, he was a loud-mouth braggart. A whiskey liar. Quarrelsome and treacherous.

For a stranger in a tough cow town like Landusky, Montana, Tom Regan was taking up a lot of room for himself. His talk was getting louder and bigger with every drink.

Landusky took a sort of pride in the toughness of its citizens. Pike Landusky was ornery. Jew Jake, with his peg leg, used a shotgun for a crutch and the gun was always kept loaded. The hard rock miners were fighting men. The cowpunchers who rode into town from nearby cattle outfits were plenty tough. And now a lawless element had been drifting in from the Hole in the Wall country in Wyoming, fresh from the bloody Johnson County Cattle War.

The bartender at Jew Jake's Saloon told Jew Jake and Pike Landusky that the tall



By WALT COBURN

Author of "Blocking of Buzzard Pass," etc.

black complected cowpuncher who talked and acted like a tough hand Texican was getting ornery.

"Who is he?" asked Jew Jake, who was banking a poker game in the back room that connected his saloon and general store.

"Says his name is Tom Regan and that he's killed more Mexicans than a smallpox plague."

"Mexicans!" leered Pike Landusky, drawing to fill a bobtail flush.

"*And* white men," said the bartender. "He's just come up the Outlaw Trail."

"If you can't handle the job," growled Jew Jake, "pull off your apron and I'll give it to a man that's got guts."

The bartender scowled and muttered something and went back into the saloon.

Tom Regan stood with his back leaning against the bar, one spurred boot hooked on the iron rail by its high heel. He held his glass of whiskey in his right hand. He was left handed. The bone-handled six-shooter in a holster that left most of its six-inch blued steel barrel exposed, he wore tied low on his left thigh. And his left hand never strayed from the butt of the white-handled gun. And while he talked, making quick gestures with the whiskey glass, his deepset cold gray eyes kept watching the door from under his slanted hat-brim.

"Cold sober," he was saying in his Texan drawl, "I'm so damned polite I go around tippin' my hat to sheepherders. But when I'm likkered, I'm ornery. I've killed men because I didn't like the color of their hair!"

Four cowpunchers who needed a shave and some whiskey came in through the swinging half-doors of Jew Jake's Saloon. The night was black outside and it was raining a little. They blinked their eyes as they stared into the yellow lamplight that was clouded with tobacco smoke.

The man in the lead was short and blocky with reddish hair and a week's growth of whiskers. He headed for the bar, sighted

Tom Regan and halted in his tracks. His right hand grabbed at his holstered gun.

"You long geared, double-crosser!"

Tom Regan beat him to the draw by the fraction of a second. He fired twice. The red whiskered man's gun spewed fire, sending a .45 slug into the pine board floor near Regan's feet. Tom Regan's two bullets thudded into the blocky man's belly and chest. The red whiskered man was dead when he slumped to the floor.

The black haired Texan's smoking gun barrel covered the other three men.

"The defugalty," he called through the gun echoes, "was strictly between him and me. An old grudge. But if you fellers are takin' it up where he left off, fill your hands!"

Tom Regan's voice had lost its whiskey sound. It was flat toned and ugly.

Two of the men looked at the third. A big man with drooping gray-black mustache and grizzled whiskers on his square jaw.

The big man's hand came slowly away from his gun. His opaque black eyes stared hard at Tom Regan.

"I don't reckon," he said quietly, "that anybody will be pickin' up the cards Red dropped and playin' his hand out. You kin put away your hog-leg, stranger." He looked at the bartender.

"Where's Pike?"

"In the back room with Jake."

The big, soft spoken man with the graying black mustache nodded to his two cowpuncher companions and the three of them went past the bar and into the back room.

As the door opened and they went in and closed the door behind them Tom Regan caught a brief glimpse of Jew Jake, Pike Landusky and three other poker players sitting tense, their hands on their guns. The tall Texan grinned faintly and ejecting the two empty shells from his long barreled, white handled six-shooter, shoved a couple of cartridges into the chambers of the cylinder.

The gun still in his left hand, he walked over to where the dead man lay. "I'll see if he's got enough money in his pockets to pay for his plantin'," Tom Regan said.

Nobody made a move to stop him as he emptied the dead man's pockets. Some silver and a couple of crumpled bills. Matches and tobacco and cigarette papers. A jackknife. A soiled pocket handkerchief. A cheap watch on a buckskin string fastened to a suspender button.

Then Tom Regan ripped open the front of the dead man's stained flannel shirt, tearing loose the shirt buttons. And every man in the saloon saw him unpin a metal badge from the bloody heavy flannel undershirt.

Tom Regan straightened up and walked back to the bar. He tossed the blood-stained range detective badge on the stained pine board bar and wiped his hands clean on the scabbed buckskin seat of his heavy wool pants.

"Them gents," he drawled, "that wears a law badge pinned to their underwear, leads a lowdown and dangerous life, no? I got about enough outa his jeans to buy drinks for the house. His plantin' comes outa my pocket. Or does Landusky plant 'em in the boothill free of charge?"

THE door of the back room had opened quietly and the big man with the drooping gray-black mustache was standing there, Pike Landusky at his elbow. It was directly to them that Tom Regan was speaking.

"Red was workin' fer me," said the big man quietly. "I reckon the Seven Up kin stand the cost."

"Red," said Tom Regan, tossing the crumpled bills and silver on the bar, "is buyin' his last round of drinks."

The card room was empty. Jew Jake and the other two whiskered cowpunchers and the poker players must have gone into the store and on out through the back door.

Pike Landusky and the black mustached man lined up at the bar. The bartender took the ivory blade he used to skim the foam off beer and used it to slide the blood-

stained law badge down the bar to where Pike and the big man stood at the far end.

"Red," he said in his whiskey husk voice, "had this pinned to his undershirt. Looks like you've had a range detective on your payroll, Jim."

The big man looked hard at the law badge. Then along the length of the pine bar to where Tom Regan stood. Their eyes met and held for a long moment in a gripping scrutiny.

"Badge or no badge," said the big man, "Red Smith was a good cowpuncher. You've throwed me short handed, stranger. I'm Jim Thornhill. The Seven Up outfit. Lookin' for work?"

"I kin take Red Smith's job," nodded Tom Regan.

Some of the men in the saloon remembered that remark later. And then they were able to give it its true significance.

Jim Thornhill nodded. "You're hired, stranger. What's the name?"

"Regan. Tom Regan."

"Wipe that damned thing off," said Pike Landusky, indicating the blood-soiled law badge, "and put 'em on the back-bar. Mebbyso," he grinned wolfishly, "somebody will show up to claim it, now that Red Smith's got no more use fer it."

Nobody asked Tom Regan any questions. The dead body of Red Smith was rolled in a dirty tarpaulin and carried out somewhere.

THE heavy drinking started. Jew Jake hobbled in on his peg leg and shotgun crutch. He said something to Pike Landusky and Jim Thornhill in a low tone. The two whiskered Seven Up cowpunchers came back in the front door and lined up at the bar.

As Tom Regan got drunker he talked louder and bragged about his toughness and hinted darkly at a back record that was plenty bloodstained. He casually mentioned such hideouts along the Outlaw Trail as Robbers Roost, Brown's Park, Brown's Hole, Lost Cabin and the Hole in the Wall. The Lincoln County War in New Mexico. The Johnson County War in Wyoming.

"I swung past a trail herd the other evenin'," he grinned at Jim Thornhill, "that come up outa Wyoming."

The big quiet spoken cowman nodded and rubbed a calloused thumb across his drooping gray-black mustache.

"A man kin pick up them Wyoming cattle cheap right now," he said.

"The Curry gang," said Tom Regan, leering drunkenly, "is shore fast cowhands. Between train hold-ups, cattle rustlin' keeps Flat Nose George Curry in poker money. Looks to me like if Red Smith had used his guts he'd have grabbed the Curry gang when they delivered them cattle to you, Mister."

"Don't you kinda run off at the head a little loose, Regan?"

"Whiskey talk, Mister. Sober, I'm close mouthed as a damn' dummy."

"In which case," said the cowman, "you'd oughted leave the forty-rod alone. You kin talk yourself into a grave thataway."

"That'll be my sorrow and none of yourn, Mister."

"Men that work for me, Regan, keep their mouths shut."

"Like Red Smith? It didn't buy him nothin'." And he added, winking broadly, "I kin shoot off my mouth for a week and still never tell nothin'."

Tom Regan kept drinking. He talked a lot and spent his money freely but he was no longer quarrelsome. Killing Red Smith had seemed to satisfy his ugly, quarrelsome streak.

He was weaving unsteadily on his feet before daybreak when he said he was bedding down for the night.

Pike Landusky said that he had just built a new hotel. Two or three rooms up over a saloon a ways up the street. That there was no sense in Regan sleeping at the barn. The two Seven Up cowpunchers helped Tom Regan lug his bedroll with

its warsack inside, up the street to the new hotel.

They climbed the outside stairway and went into the front room. There was a washstand and a table and an iron bed with springs but no mattress or bedding. A kerosene lamp. New green-colored window blinds on the two windows overlooking the street. Tom Regan dumped his tarp-covered bedroll on the springs and the two Seven Up men pulled the blinds low.

Tom Regan staggered drunkenly as he fumbled with the knotted rope that held his bedroll together. Then spread the tarp and blankets, unsnapping the tarp to spread it wide.

He opened the quart he had fetched along and they had a drink together. Then the two cowpunchers left, saying they had to finish their town drinking.

When the clumping of their bootheels and the jingle of their spurs down the hall and down the outside stairs told Tom Regan they had gone, he filled the basin with water from the big chinaware pitcher and shoved his head and face in the cold water. When he had wiped his head and face dry he took a look at himself in the mirror that threw back at him a sort of billowy and distorted reflection from the cheap glass. But it showed his bloodshot gray eyes clear and steady. The whiskey fumes were cleared from his brain.

He carefully untied the whang leather string that fastened the opening of his canvas warsack. He looked inside without touching anything. Then he nodded and went through the warsack, emptying its contents on the floor. Then putting everything back.

Somebody had gone through his bed and warsack at the feed barn. Jew Jake and the two Seven Up men, he reckoned. Satisfying their suspicions. Carrying out the orders of Jim Thornhill and perhaps those of Pike Landusky.

Which, grinned Tom Regan, was what he had expected and wanted them to do. And they had found only what he had planted there in the warsack with his shirts and socks and underwear and shaving outfit, for suspicious-minded men to find.

That meeting with Red Smith had been a close call. He had killed that red-muzzled menace before he could do any talking. But it had been a close shave.

He recalled the orders he had got at the headquarters of Montana Stock Growers' Association at Helena.

"We have a man at Landusky, working under cover. He goes under the name of Red Smith. You can make yourself known to him when the sign is right. He'll get his orders how to work with you. He'll know what men to deputize when the time comes to go into open action against the rustlers—

Red Smith had turned out to be Utah Red. And Utah Red had made a desperate gun play to wipe him out and collect some kind of a bounty on his dead carcass from Jim Thornhill and the Rustlers' Syndicate. That was Utah Red's way. Red Smith, hell! No wonder the Association was getting nowhere slowly in their war against organized cattle rustling and horse stealing between Wyoming and Montana. That badge Red wore pinned to his undershirt had been no surprise to Jim Thornhill. Utah Red had no doubt shown it to every man in the Seven Up outfit and they had helped him drink up the fighting pay he drew from the Association.

There had been no incriminating letters in Red's pockets. But that was not proving that Red had not already told Jim Thornhill that the Association was sending out another Range Detective to help him. A stranger to replace Rale Cobb who had mysteriously disappeared a month or so ago in the badlands below Landusky and on the north side of the Missouri River. Rale Cobb, as square shooting and straightforward and fearless as Utah Red had been treacherous and cowardly and crooked.

It had been because of Rale Cobb, not the big money the Association offered him,

that had fetched Tom Regan, cowpuncher, here to Landusky, Montana. Rale had been the best friend Tom Regan ever had. Tom thought of Rale now in the past tense. No dead body had ever been found. But Rale was not the first law officer who had ridden alone into the Montana badlands and never returned. There were a thousand places where a man's dead body could be hidden and never found.

Tom Regan froze. Down below, in the empty place that was going to be the new saloon, a door had opened on hinges that creaked a little. The sound of cautious footsteps moved down there. Then silence.

Tom Regan went into action. He stumbled around the room like a drunken man, upsetting a chair and cussing it loudly. Taking a drink in hopes the listeners below would hear the cork pulled and the tinkle of the bottle neck against the edge of a water tumbler.

Then he flopped down on the edge of the bed. He noticed for the first time that the legs of the iron bed were bolted to the floor. That there was a strip of carpet tacked down under and around the bed, covering a large part of the new floor.

Tom Regan pulled off a boot and let it drop to the floor. Then the other boot. Then he flopped down on the bed. The springs creaked beneath his weight. He blew out the lighted lamp. Then as soundlessly as possible he quit the bed and walked cautiously across to the door in his sock feet. And standing crouched near the door he snored loudly. Then let the snoring change to muttering and grunting. Then silence.

Down below he heard cautious sounds. Other sounds coming along the hallway. Stopping outside the closed door that had no lock or bolt.

Tom Regan gripped his six-shooter and waited. He had not long to wait.

From down below came the heavy blast of a double-barreled shotgun. Then a six-shooter. The double charge of shotgun slugs tore through the springs and tarp and blankets and soogans. The six-shooter emptied six more bullets into the empty bed.

The door of the room swung inward. Slowly. Cautiously. And two men tip-toed into the room and across the bare floor to the bed.

"Strike a match, Curley," sounded a hoarse whisper.

A match flared. It showed the faces of two men Tom Regan had seen in Jew Jake's saloon. They had carried out the dead body of Red Smith, alias Utah Red.

Now they gaped, six-shooters in their hands, at the gun-riddled bedding. Slack jawed, wide-eyed. They were more than half drunk and trying to sober up in one second. It couldn't be done.

"Light the lamp," Tom Regan called from the dark corner of the room. "Pronto! Or I'll gut shoot the pair of yuh."

They whirled, shooting at the sound of his voice. Tom Regan emptied his gun at their shadowy forms. One of them let out a wild howl. The other man dropped heavily without making a sound.

"Don't shoot no more," yelled the wounded man. "I'm dyin'!"

Carrying his boots, Tom Regan quit the room. He re-loaded his six-shooter quickly and pulled on his boots.

Stepping into an empty room down the hallway he waited for men to come up the outside stairs. But nobody came. The wounded man in the front room was hollering for somebody to get to him before he died. Nobody was coming to help the man. Nobody rushing up here to see what had gone wrong with the murder trap.

THE room where Tom Regan now crouched in the darkness was on the opposite side of the log building from the outside stairway. He slid open the window and looked out. All he could see below was blackness. It was about a twenty-foot drop. He eased himself feet first out the window, hung by one hand, gripping his

gun in the other. Then dropped. Letting his knees buckle as his feet hit the hard ground. Rolling over and over in a ball. Then onto his feet. Ready for almost any kind of an attack in the thick darkness.

There would be men waiting with guns at the foot of the outside stairway. Let them wait. Tom Regan slipped away through the shadows and a few minutes later he swaggered brazenly through the swinging half-doors of Jew Jake's saloon.

Pike Landusky and Jew Jake and Jim Thornhill stared hard at him. The bartender said, "I'll be damned!"

"That new hotel of yours," Tom Regan spoke in his lazy drawl, "is lousy with prowlin' bed-bugs. That bed cost me about forty dollars. That's what I'll settle for. And if there's a doctor in town you better send him up to the bridal chamber. One of your bushwhackers might live if he gits some quick doctorin'. All the other 'un will ever need from now on is a pine box. And now, gents, whose smart idea fer a joke was that bushwhacker trap?"

"Thought you was drunk, Regan," said Jew Jake.

"I sober almighty quick at times. I asked a question. Who hired them killers?"

"Take 'er easy, Regan," said Jim Thornhill, quietly. "Nobody hired any killers. You flashed a big roll here at Jake's. Somebody trailed you to the hotel. Tried to kill you for your money."

"While I slept in a bed that's bolted to the floor. And under the carpet there's a section of floorin' that comes loose from below. It'll be a part of the saloon ceilin'. When a shotgun is poked through that hole in the floor and both barrels cuts loose, it blasts a man in two. Tears his whole guts and belly out. What are you grinnin' at, Mister?" he asked Pike Landusky.

"The boys musta put you in the snake room," chuckled Pike Landusky. "I'm fixin' 'er up for the drunks to sleep in. Under the carpet is a slidin' panel. There's a hoodus fixed to the bed to let loose the springs. The carpet slides off. Down comes the sleepin' drunk. He slides down a greased chute into a tank of ice cold water. It ain't completed yet. The snake room. It'll be ready for business in a week or two." His bloodshot eyes, hard and ugly and drunk, stared at Tom Regan.

"Nobody hired nobody to kill you, stranger. I'm the Law in this town. I'm Pike Landusky and this is my town. It ain't a Sunday school picnic place. But don't let that big drunken mouth of yourn git to callin' me names. I got a bellyfull of listenin' to you brag about your toughness. Shed your coat and guns. I'm goin' to give you a hand whippin' that'll quiet you down. I'm goin' to work you over till you won't know your own face in a lookin' glass. Put up your dukes, Regan!"

II

PIKE LANDUSKY could fight. He was big boned and hard muscled and fast with his hands and feet. And no holds were barred. He had working knowledge of all the tricks known to dirty rough-and-tumble fighting.

Pike Landusky bragged that he could whip any man in the Little Rockies. And while that took in a limited amount of territory, it managed to include some of the toughest hard rock miners, mule skinners, drifting thugs and fighting cowpunchers in the West. Furthermore, Pike's was no idle boast. He had, upon countless occasions, made good his whiskey brags.

Tom Regan knew the man he was up against.

There was a hard, wicked grin on the mining man's face and cold murder glinted in his bloodshot eyes.

Jim Thornhill and his two whiskered cowpunchers had edged back. The others in the saloon, acting from previous experience, formed a grinning circle. They were, to the last man of them, rearing to see this swaggering, bragging black-haired Texan who called himself Tom Regan take the

sort of whipping Pike Landusky could hand out.

Jew Jake had clumped in behind the bar on his peg leg and now the shotgun he used for a crutch was lying across the bar and its barrel was pointed at Tom Regan's belly.

Tom Regan wasn't shedding his six-shooter or the short-barreled sneak-gun he carried in an armpit holster under his shirt. He jerked off the short canvas brush jacket he was wearing. Pike rushed him before he could get his arms out of the sleeves, while the jacket was half off.

Regan had been half-anticipating the rush. He doubled up. Pike's swinging arms flailed the air. Tom Regan butted the big man in the belly. Pike Landusky grunted and gasped for wind. Tom Regan danced back to avoid being pulled into a bear-hug clinch. He had one arm free of the canvas jacket. And as Pike came at him he flung the heavy canvas garment with a backhand slap. As it caught the mining man full in the face, Tom Regan's other arm came free of the sleeve. Pike lifted his both hands to jerk the jacket from his head and face where it blinded him like a dirty gray hood. Tom Regan ripped a hard left into the big man's belly and threw a heavy right into the canvas-covered face.

Pike Landusky threw aside the jacket and spat blood that came from his smashed nose. He rushed and Regan moved away with a smooth speed that had the bully of the Little Rockies a little bewildered.

"Stand up and fight!" snarled Pike. "This ain't no dancin' lesson!"

There was a flat-lipped grin on Tom Regan's face. Somewhere along his back trail he had picked up a smattering of ring science and he was using it now. He was giving away fifty pounds weight and he had to make up for it with boxing science. But if one of the mining man's terrific swings ever connected it was the end of the fight. Not exactly the end of the punishment he'd take, however. Pike would kick in his face and ribs as he lay there on the floor.

That would be the finish of this fight, Tom Regan told himself as he backpedaled out of reach of Pike's flailing fists. He didn't have a friend in the place. This was Pike Landusky's town. He had not and never would lose a fight in his own mining camp.

Pike tried to rush him off his feet. As Tom Regan danced back, a long leg reached out and tripped him. He went over backward. Twisting as he fell. He grabbed the leg that had tripped him, pulling the man down with him. Pike's boot, kicking at Regan, caught the tripper in the face. The man let out a yelp. Blood spurted from a nose that had been smashed to a pulp. Regan used the man as a shield. He rolled over, kicked the man in the belly as he scrambled to his feet, and then went down again as Pike Landusky rushed him into a clinch.

Pike and Regan rolled over and over. Pike's knee kept driving at his groin and the big bully of Landusky was gouging at Tom Regan's eyes with a clawing hand. The tall Texan heaved and twisted and threw off the big man's weight. He fought loose with short, ripping jabs. Reeled to his feet and tried to get his balance.

A big hard rock miner gave him a flat-footed kicking shove in the rear. He staggered forward. Caught his balance by sheer luck as Pike rushed. Regan ducked a wild swing, sidestepped, and stopped Pike's bull rush with a looping left to the jaw.

As Tom Regan backed away, circling, he caught a brief glimpse of the big miner sprawled on his face and belly on the floor. Jim Thornhill stood over the fallen miner, a long-barreled six-shooter in his huge black-haired hand. The big cowman's cold eyes were glinting.

"Tom Regan's workin' for the Seven Up," his quiet toned voice was now like the growl of a silver tipped grizzly. "I'll kill the next man that bothers 'im."

Tom Regan's hawk beaked nose was streaming blood. His mouth was battered and one eye was swelling shut and taking on a greenish hue. He was breathing hard and sweat poured off him. The air in the place was fouled with tobacco smoke and the stale fumes of beer and whiskey. Pike's gouging thumbs had raked his eyes and they felt as if they had been filled with red pepper. Regan was wondering how long he could last. If he hadn't better jerk his gun and kill Pike Landusky and go out shooting. But this abrupt move on the part of Jim Thornhill changed things. Gave him new courage. Fresh hope. He spat out some blood and grinned through the blood smear and went at Pike with a savage fury that had the big man covering up.

"Stay a loooong time!" one of the Seven Up cowpunchers yelled tipsily, and waved a half-empty whiskey bottle.

But Pike Landusky tore into Tom with a snarling ferocity that battered down his guard and sent him back against the bar. Pike's heavy fists beat him down to his knees. A hard kick in the belly doubled him up. Pike kicked him in the head and it felt like an explosion inside his brain, behind his eyes. Everything went black as he made one last groggy move to jerk his six-shooter.

Pike Landusky was still Champion of the Little Rockies.

When Tom Regan came alive again he was in the small back card room. Somebody had thrown a pail of water over his head and face and his clothes were sodden. His head ached with throbbing, sickening, dizzy pain. He heard Jim Thornhill tell somebody to get the hell out. Tom Regan found himself sprawled in a big barroom chair and the owner of the Seven Up was the only man in the card room. The two doors were closed. Jim Thornhill shoved Tom's six-shooter and short-barreled sneak-gun across the green cloth-covered poker table. Then handed him a beer glass full of whiskey.

"Swaller that, Regan," the big man grinned faintly, "and you'll feel luckier."

"I shore took a whippin'." Tom Regan drank the raw whiskey. His bruised lips moved stiffly.

"You got off easy, Regan. Pike don't make a habit of lettin' a man he hates walk away from a fight."

"So I've heard. I might tackle 'im again when the sign is right. But it won't be no fist fight."

"You might as well wait your turn. There's a long list ahead of yuh. The Curry boys, fer instance."

"Flat Nose George?"

Jim Thornhill shook his head. "Johnny and Loney and Kid Curry. They're no kin to Flat Nose George but they work with him outa the Hole in the Wall. Their right name is Logan. The Kid is Harvey Logan. Offhand, I'd say that Harvey Logan is the most dangerous cowpuncher that ever fought for a friend or hated an enemy. Yeah, Kid Curry is bad medicine. And he hates Pike Landusky's guts. Some day Kid Curry is goin' to kill Pike Landusky, shore as hell is hot."

The whiskey was warming Tom Regan's belly and taking away the pain and dizziness.

"I have a notion," he said slowly, almost reluctantly, "that you saved my life, Mister."

"No doubt about that, Regan," said the cowman bluntly. "Pike Landusky ain't goin' to let me forgit it, neither. Directly you git to feelin' better, we'll pull out for the ranch. Your horse is saddled and out at the hitch-rack. The boys is kinda keepin' Pike and Jew Jake quiet."

"The two fellers that needs a shave?" Tom Regan managed to grin. "They must be shore enough tough. Pike's got a saloon full of men to back his play."

Jim Thornhill smoothed his drooping mustache with the back of his big hand.

"The Curry boys rode up about the time your light went out. They're in the saloon a-waitin' for us."

Another stiff drink put Tom Regan on his feet. He shoved the two guns back into their holsters. Fishing for tobacco and cigarette papers he found them in the wrong pocket. He knew then that he had been thoroughly searched. They had even pulled off his boots and looked inside them. One of the tight-fitting shop-made boots was only partly on his foot. He stomped his foot into it and grinned. His eyes met the hard, cold eyes of the big cowman. Jim Thornhill smiled slowly.

"We kinda looked you over fer lice and nits, Regan. A man like me can't afford to take no chances. Stray stuff like that Red Smith slip into the herd. And some folks like to claim that them Wyoming cattle is stolen stock. You all set to go?"

"All set."

"We'll go out the back way. The sight of you on your laigs once more might rile Pike and we don't want no more ruckus."

"Pike Landusky's tough hands tried to murder me in my bed," said Tom Regan stubbornly. "No man kin treat me thataway and git away with it."

"You got no proof it was Pike's men. You flashed a big roll of money. There's tin-horns in town that'd kill their own grandmother for a hell of a lot less than you're packin' in that bankroll. Your best bet is to forget it. Mark 'er down to experience. You didn't lose nothin' but a tarp and some soogans. Come along, Regan. You got as much brains as you've got guts."

Pike Landusky's wife and one of her daughters was tending Jew Jake's store. It was broad daylight outside. Pike had married a widow with four grown daughters. The girls had taken the Landusky name.

Jim Thornhill spoke to the two women. They acted friendly enough. The girl Jim had called Lolly gave Tom Regan a ready smile and handed him a package wrapped in brown paper.

"Some salve and liniment to rub on yoer face, Mister. You might not be bad looking when you get healed up. You sure gave the big he-wolf a scrap. Come back some moonlight evenin'. A girl gets tired of the same old faces. There'll be a dance Christmas."

Tom Regan grinned and fished in his pocket for money to pay for whatever was in the package. Lolly Landusky shook her head. She was, Tom Regan decided, mighty easy on the eyes.

"It's on the house, Mister."

"Jew Jake," said Jim Thornhill, "will ketch you some day, givin' away his stock of goods."

"If he gets tough with me, Jim," laughed Lolly, "I'll yank off that peg leg of his and shove it down his throat."

THEY left the store and got on their horses. The two cowpunchers with the whiskers came out. Then the three Curry boys. Johnny had only one arm, but he could use it a lot better than most men use two good ones. Loney and the Kid backed out through the swinging half-doors. Their hands were on their guns.

"If you feel anyways lucky, Pike," Kid Curry was saying as he came out on the plank walk, "claw for your gun. You ain't handcuffed like I was once when you had that hog-leg of yourn shoved in my face. It'd give me pleasure to rid Montana of another rattlesnake if I was to gut shoot you where you stand."

Kid Curry's tone was as sharp as a razor blade.

"Come along, Harvey," said Jim Thornhill quietly. "Killin' the damned buzzard won't buy you nothin' but trouble, Kid."

Kid Curry cursed to himself as they rode out of town. He said that Montana was too damned cramped to hold him and Pike Landusky. Loney Curry got a corkscrew out of his pocket and pulled the cork on a bottle of Jew Jake's best whiskey. He passed it to his brother Johnny. Then the Kid took a big drink and the whiskey must have washed the bad taste of Pike Landusky's name out of his mouth because he

began to grin and josh Tom Regan about his black eye.

Jim Thornhill must have vouched for Tom Regan because the Curry brothers were accepting him as one of the outfit.

The Thornhill ranch was ten or twelve miles south of Landusky. The big log barn and log cabins and corrals were below a high strip of benchland. A creek with big cottonwoods and willows flowed past. Below was a fenced pasture. A couple of cowpunchers were riding loose herd on a big bunch of cattle that showed signs of having been driven a long way.

"Yonder," Jim Thornhill told Tom Regan, "is the trail herd you sighted comin' outa Wyoming. We'll be puttin' 'em into the Four T iron in a day or two. Rasslin' brandin' irons will sweat that Landusky forty rod outa your system, Regan.

The Four T iron?"

"Belongs to Kid Curry. Him and Johnny and Loney is quittin' the Outlaw Trail and settlin' down. They bin punchin' cows for the Circle C. They're good cowhands and if the law lets 'em alone they'll build up a big spread in a few years. I'd shore give a lot to hear that Pike Landusky bit hisself like a rattler and died of his own poison. Because the Kid is liable to git on the prod some day and kill 'im. And the man that kills Pike Landusky, no matter if he calls him fair and square, is bound to hang for it. Unless he hits the Outlaw Trail.

The Curry boys were dark complexioned, with black hair and dark eyes. They looked as if they might be part Indian. Later, Tom Regan learned that their grandmother had been a Cherokee squaw.

They didn't look or act like wanton killers. They were like any other cowpunchers Tom Regan had ever worked with on the round-up.

And when they gathered the cattle and branded them a week later, Tom Regan knew that Jim Thornhill had not exaggerated when he said the Curry boys were good cowpunchers.

Tom Regan made a mental note of the brands on the Wyoming cattle and filed the brands in his memory for future reference.

Jim Thornhill asked Tom Regan if he had ever handled broncs and when he said that he had, the cowman cut him a string of ten green three year old broncs to break out. Kid Curry rode two broncs that threw Tom. The Kid was the best bronc rider Tom Regan had ever seen in action.

One of the whiskered cowpunchers helped Tom. His name was Bob Lee and he was a cousin of the Curry boys, whose real name had been Logan down in Kentucky where they had been born. And where they were raised near Dodson, Missouri, by an aunt, Mrs. Lee, when they were left orphans. They had, Tom knew, been known in Wyoming under the name of Roberts. Their record there was blurred and mysterious, but if they were doing any cattle rustling here in Montana, Tom Regan was never able to catch them at it. And he spent some of the happiest months of his life here at what was now called the Four T Ranch.

They were accepting him just so far into their midst. But no further. And he knew better than to try to horn in on their private talks or try to spy on them when some business took them away from the ranch on rides that lasted a day or a week.

He cautiously dropped little hints about Rale Cobb. And his carefully worded questions and hints gained him nothing at all.

Then he played a long hunch and a dangerous one. He began paying secret visits to Lolly Landusky. Loney Curry was paying court to Lolly's sister. Effie. Effie or Elfie, he never knew which was her real name. Loney and the others called her Effie. And it was when Loney came back from one of these secret moonlight trysts that he handed Tom Regan a note from Lolly. Lolly, Loney told him, wanted to get better acquainted with the tall Texan who had almost licked her step-dad Pike Landusky

The note was something of a challenge to meet her at a deserted cabin at Antelope Springs. Tom Regan accepted the challenge or invitation. A woman, he figured, was more apt to talk than a man. Especially if the woman was a girl in love.

"Don't git so moonstruck," Jim Thornhill warned him, "that you don't keep your gun arm free in the clinches. Pike might be cold-trailin' Lolly."

III

THERE was a bold recklessness about Lolly Landusky that was mighty attractive to the hard riding cowpunchers who drifted out of nowhere, lived dangerously, and perhaps rode away between sundown and dawn, never to be seen again. Lolly was a tall, lithe, frank spoken girl with more than the average girl's share of good looks. She talked the language of the cowboy and savvied his ways. And she could ride as gracefully as she danced.

But Tom Regan soon learned that Lolly Landusky was not going to fall in love with him or let any sort of infatuation loosen her tongue.

"If I was a talking female, Tom," she told him, "I could have this Little Rockies cow country tied up in a gun war that would make that Lincoln County War you talk about, look like an old maids' tea party. Your Billy the Kid was a buck-toothed button that built up a tough rep by shooting men in the back and keeping a tally on 'em. I bet he counted Mexicans on his notched tally. Kid Curry could take a forked stick and run your Billy the Kid out of the country. If ever Kid Curry really takes to the Outlaw Trail he'll leave a rep behind him that will make Billy the Kid look like a cry baby."

Tom Regan grinned to himself in the night's shadows and told her that Billy the Kid was the fastest gun slinger that had ever fanned a six-shooter with twenty notches on its wooden butt. He laid it on as thick as cold black-strap molasses. And then leaned back against a granite boulder in the shadow of the scrub pines and rolled a cigarette and listened with both ears while Lolly Landusky hotly defended the gun prowess of the Curry Boys, Bob Lee and other outlaw cowpunchers who drifted in and out of Landusky and called Jim Thornhill's Seven Up Ranch their headquarters.

Tom Regan had found the combination to the safe.

Lolly Landusky was tensely loyal to these wild cowpunchers who were her friends and she was quick to defend any slur against their reputation as tough hands. All Tom had to do was listen. Slip in an occasional carefully worded barb. Sit back and listen some more. Lolly was not lying. He knew that. And if he believed what she now told him about the Curry brothers and Jim Thornhill, then the Stock Growers Association were trying to catch the wrong men. Johnny and Loney and the Kid were tough cowpunchers, but if men like Pike Landusky and a few glory hunting sheep brained gutless deputies would let the Seven Up and Four T outfits alone, Jim Thornhill and the Curry boys would play the game square and bother no man's cattle.

"Pike's got it in for the Currys because Effie is goin' around with Loney. Pike had the Kid and Jim Thornhill arrested for cattle rustling. And while he had 'em handcuffed and tied, he cussed 'em for all the fightin' names he could remember. And he can cuss himself black in the face without repeating himself. No man is going to forget a deal like that, Regan. The Circle C outfit is big and tough. They hired a smart lawyer and kept Pike from railroadin' Kid Curry and Jim Thornhill into the pen at Deer Lodge. But some day the Kid will kill Pike.

"Pike is the Law of Landusky. Pike Landusky is the only Law there is in the Little Rockies. And if you got a good look at the bunch of men that's drifted in from Johnson County, Wyoming, then you know the breed of hired killers that get their

drinks free at Jew Jake's Saloon. And Pike and Jew Jake are pardners."

"Bob Lee and another Seven Up cowpuncher named Hanks figured I was drunk one night. They put me to bed in the snake room at Pike's new hotel. The one that burned down later. The bed was bolted to the floor and there was a trap door underneath. It was——"

"They were going to slide you down the chute into a big tub of cold water," Lolly interrupted him. "Just for a josh. Then Curly Jack and Slim Brown and Joe Mace and Tate Dillard slipped in ahead of the Seven Up cowpunchers. You'd killed Red Smith and Red was their pardner. All of 'em belong to the Wind River Gang. They weren't joshing, Regan. They play for keeps.

"And here's something you'd better think over. You killed Slim Brown and Curly Jack died the next day. Joe Mace and Tate Dillard have sworn to kill you when they get around to it. I heard 'em talking to Pike and Jew Jake before they pulled out.

"They're down in the badlands now with some more of their Wind River Gang from Johnson County. The Wind River Gang is shoving stolen cattle out of Wyoming by the hundreds. They're drifting big bunches of stolen horses up into the badlands along the Missouri River. If the Stockmen's Association would quit hanging around the Seven Up and Four T outfits and send their stock detectives after the Wind River Gang, they might be able to stomp out cattle rustling."

Tom Regan wanted to slip in a question about what had happened to Rale Cobb but he dared not. One question like that and Lolly Landusky would quit talking.

"Joe Mace and Tate Dillard," he said, "can't be so tough. They wait till a man gets drunk. Then try to kill him while he's sleepin' off his jag. They've got the guts of sheep thieves. They was in Jew Jake's when I shot Red Smith. Why didn't they take it up then?"

"Because," said Lolly, "they didn't know which way Jim Thornhill and his two cowpunchers Bob Lee and Camella Hanks would jump. There's bad blood between the Curry Gang and the Wind River Gang. Red Smith was a crooked range detective who was playing both ends against the middle. Double-crossing the Association. Trying to stand in with both gangs. He figured he was playing it foxy. And somehow he got caught in the broad middle. Why did you kill Utah Red, Regan?"

She had called the dead man Red Smith. Then Utah Red. And now she had fired a point-blank question and Tom Regan knew that he'd better have the right answer.

"Utah Red," he said bluntly, "killed a friend of mine. I took it up."

"Was your friend's name Rale Cobb?"

THEY were sitting on the ground where the pine needles lay like a thick carpet, their backs against a big granite boulder. And he had been holding Lolly's hand. He felt the slight tightening of her fingers and knew that she was waiting tensely for his answer.

"Long before Rale Cobb ever wore a law badge, before he was appointed Stock Inspector here in Montana, he was the best friend I had in the world. Utah Red knew that. When Rale Cobb turned up missin', then I showed up here, Utah Red jumped at his own conclusions and jerked his gun when he sighted me. I beat him to it."

Then Tom Regan took his chance to ask the question that he had wanted to ask her.

"What happened to Rale Cobb, Lolly?"

"The Wind River Gang set a trap for him down on the Missouri River at the Cow Island Crossing. They baited it with stolen cattle. Those cattle from Wyoming had been hair branded in the Four T iron. To make it look like the Curry boys were doing the rustling. I know that because I got it out of Tate Dillard one night when he was drunk. When I let him think he was beating Kid Curry's time by riding

home with me from a dance. I was getting the information to pass on to the Kid, savvy?"

"You think a lot of Kid Curry, don't you, Lolly?"

"Harvey," she said quietly, using his real name, "has treated me darned white. If I had a brother, that would be Harvey Logan. But that's the way it is and always will be between us. Regardless. In spite of hell and high water and Pike Landusky," Lolly Landusky finished flatly. Her fingers gripped Tom Regan's hand tightly.

"Rale Cobb rode into the rustler trap at Cow Island Crossin' on the Missouri River?" Tom Regan got back to the subject.

"In the middle of the night. And out in the middle of the river. They shot him and his horse. The carcass of the horse floated ashore, Rale's carbine still in the saddle scabbard. Landed on a sandbar a few miles below. They never found Rale Cobb's dead body. But they knew they'd shot him and he'd said more than once that he didn't know how to swim. And it was in the early spring when the Missouri was overflowing her banks. You can mark your friend Rale Cobb off the books as dead, Regan. I'm sorry. He was a brave man and a square shooter."

Tom Regan would have found out more from Lolly Landusky that night if Loney Curry and Effie had not ridden up about then.

"Time we headed for the ranch, Regan. The girls had better git home before Pike gits done pokerin' at Jew Jakes and gits home before they do. Though it would be shore a pleasure to have to kill the old he-wolf of the Little Rockies. Kiss her good night or good mornin', Regan, and we'll split the breeze."

On the way back to Jim Thornhill's ranch Tom Regan told Loney Curry that he was going to Chinook.

"Chinook's the County Seat, Loney. That's where they issue marriage licenses, ain't it?"

Loney slapped Tom Regan on the back and joshed him. Tom told him not to tell the boys at the ranch. Because he hadn't even popped the question to Lolly. He was getting the marriage license so that he'd have it handy just in case she said "Yes."

"Better come along, Loney. Make 'er a double weddin'."

Loney said that the climate at Chinook wasn't healthy for the Curry boys. But he wished Tom Regan plenty of luck.

"You ain't roped and throwed and hog-tied her yet, cowhand. Lolly has dodged many a loop."

Tom Regan let it go at that. He knew that Loney would never even think of keeping the secret. And before he saddled a fresh horse and pulled out for Chinook, he had to take a lot of rough joshing.

The only man who didn't josh him was Jim Thornhill. And when the range detective saddled a big black gelding that wore Thornhill's 7 UP brand, the big cowman threw his saddle on his town horse and said he reckoned he'd ride to Chinook with Regan.

Perhaps Jim Thornhill did have some business to tend to at Chinook, like he said. And he was in dead earnest when he told Tom Regan that he'd be a lot safer if he had company on that long seventy-five mile ride to the County Seat.

Or it might have been that the big soft spoken cowman was getting suspicious. That he suspected Regan's real reason for making that long ride to Chinook.

Though Thornhill never acted in any way suspicious of him as they rode along, when they reached Chinook, Thornhill went with him to the court house and Tom Regan had to go through with this business of getting a marriage license issued.

Later, Tom Regan managed to slip away from Thornhill long enough to make out a brief but pithy report to the Association.

"Send me my law badge by return mail," he finished his report. "Not a range detec-

tive badge like Red Smith wore. I want a Stock Inspector badge. I'm pinning it on the outside of my shirt.

"Also have bench warrants made out for the Wind River Gang. Here is a list of their names. Tate Dillard, Joe Mace, Pete Allan, and Charlie Fox. A couple or three John Doe warrants for any stray members I might find with the gang. I don't need warrants for Curly Jack and Slim Brown. I taken care of them at Landusky.

"Put the law badge and bench warrants in a strong shoe box. Mail it to Tom Regan, Landusky, Montana. In the upper left hand corner print 'From the Miles City Saddle Co.'

"Don't send any men. I'll pick my own posse."

When he had mailed his report, Tom Regan met Jim Thornhill at the hotel. They had a few drinks and went to bed in the same room.

Tom Regan had intended having the badge and bench warrants sent to him at Chinook, but with Jim Thornhill along, the had no real excuse to offer for staying over at Chinook another day or two.

So he had been forced to have the disguised package sent to him at Landusky. A risky business, because Jew Jake was postmaster and his combination saloon and store was the U. S. Post Office.

He figured on having Lolly Landusky pick up the package before Jew Jake could tamper with it. She worked in the store and was usually around when the stage fetched the mail.

It was a weak spot in his plan but he had to risk it. He wasn't at all certain about Lolly, either. She might get curious and open that box from "The Miles Saddle Co."

The rest of his plan was still somewhat vague. The Wind River Gang was tough. They would murder a man or they would fight hard in the open if they were crowded. It wasn't any one man job.

But if Tom Regan could somehow bring about open warfare between the Wind River Gang and the Curry Gang, he would be able to swing it. With the backing of the Curry boys and Jim Thornhill, he could kill or capture the real rustlers working out of Johnson County, Wyoming.

IT WAS sheer luck that dealt him a few aces on the ride back to the Seven Up, Four T Ranch.

The trail led through a little saddle between a couple of buttes covered with scrub pines and buckbrush. It narrowed to where they had to ride single file. There was a big round white moon that showed them up like shadows thrown on a silver screen. Black shadows filling the brush. And where the trail narrowed, Tom Regan swung up into the lead.

It was one of those quick hunches that come to a man who rides through a country where danger hides in the black shadows.

Tom Regan thought he saw a movement in the brush ahead. He raked his horse with the spurs and jerked his gun. As he rode at the brush, bent low across the saddle horn, two guns behind the brush streaked flame. A bullet nicked Regan's shoulder. Another bullet tore a hole in the crown of his hat. Then he was on top of the two bushwhackers, his six-shooter spewing fire. He shot as fast as he could thumb back the hammer of his gun and pull the trigger.

Tom Regan's gun was empty when Jim

Thornhill rode up. One of the bushwhackers was dead. The other one was badly wounded.

Thornhill kicked the gun out of the wounded man's hand. His voice was no longer soft and slow.

"Talk fast, tinhorn. Who you workin' for?"

"You kill me, Thornhill, and the Wind River Gang will git you before you're a week older. If this damned Regan thing hadn't gummed the cards, we'd have hung your Seven Up hide on the fence. Your number's up, Thornhill. The Wind River Gang is cleanin' up the Curry outfit, and you with 'em. When Pike Landusky gits your ranch and Johnny Curry's place and Loney's land, we'll have a market fer all the cattle we kin drive outa Wyoming. Now go ahead and pull the trigger, Thornhill. Show this damned stock detective that you're nothin' but a two-bit murderer. Then Regan kin arrest you fer what you are. Unless he's playin' the same game Utah Red played."

"Mebbyso," said Jim Thornhill, "you'll bleed to death. But you might be tough enough to git on your horse and make it to Landusky. Tell Pike Landusky that you fell down on your dirty bushwhacker job."

Jim Thornhill got on his horse and nodded to Tom Regan.

"I'll ride up in the lead from here on," he said quietly.

IV

IT WAS one hell of a big gesture for any man to make. And it showed the quality and breed of the big cowman. It was Jim Thornhill's way of discounting the wounded man's story, right or wrong. And he was showing Tom Regan that he trusted him. Because, as he rode on ahead in the moonlight, his wide shouldered back made a big and easy target. Tom Regan told himself that it took one hell of a big man to do what Jim Thornhill had done.

Nor did the big, soft spoken cowman ask him any questions. He was giving Regan his own time about taking up the wounded bushwhacker's accusation that he was a law officer.

When the trail widened, Tom Regan rode up alongside Thornhill. He broke the silence between them.

"Rale Cobb was the best friend I ever had, Jimmer. When I got word that he'd turned up missin', I pulled stakes in Texas and come up to Montana. I went straight to the Stockmen's Association headquarters and told 'em I'd pick 'er up where Rale Cobb left off. I've never worn a law badge. Down along the Mexican Border I was makin' a livin' shovin' wet cattle outa Mexico into Texas. I run afoul of the Rangers a time or two but the Texas cowmen that was buyin' the Mexican cattle I was fetchin' acrost the Line without payin' duty on 'em, got me out of it."

"Bob Lee and Camella Hanks," said Thornhill, smiling faintly, "went through your warsack and bed where you'd left 'em at the feed barn. They showed me the newspaper clippin's they found in your stuff. Where you'd bin indicted for cattle stealin' in Texas a couple of times.

"Now, no man but a plain damned fool would be carryin' that kind of evidence ag'in hisself. Unless he was one of them loud mouthed whizzer-runners like you let on to be when you git drunk. And you didn't git nowheres near as drunk as you pretended to be that night in Landusky when you out-foxed the Wind River Gang.

"I talked 'er over with the boys. Told 'em that the best way to size you up was to hire you. The Kid was a little hard to handle. Since Pike Landusky used his law badge to hide behind while he handed us a rotten deal, the Kid has hated every law officer in the wide world. But somehow he'd taken to you strong. And when Kid Curry likes a man he'll go through hell barefooted for him. But if ever you double-cross him, Regan, he'll kill you."

Tom Regan nodded. "When I first hit

the Little Rockies, I was dead certain the Curry gang was my bear meat. Now I know better. It was Lolly Landusky that put me onto the Wind River Gang. Though I'd bin workin' for you long enough by then to know you was in the clear."

"Yeah, I made it a point to prove that the boys are tryin' to go straight. That marriage license, Regan. You've laid your cards face up. You aim to play your hand out?"

"If Lolly Landusky will marry me. Yes. She'd make a man the right kind of a wife if she was given half a chance, Jimmer."

"If you was usin' this marriage license for any other reason," Jim Thornhill said quietly, "you might run into a streak of tough luck."

"I'm marryin' Lolly if she'll have me. If I was foolin' at first, she changed my mind for me. I'm askin' her tomorrow night."

Jim Thornhill might have been hiding a smile behind his big hand as he stroked his drooping gray-black mustache. His eyes, cold, hard, crinkled at the corners, tiny lights of something like humor in their depths. And the big cowman had Tom Regan a little puzzled.

"We couldn't find any kind of a law badge on you when we looked you over after that fight with Pike," Thornhill said.

"I haven't ever worn a law badge," grinned Jim Regan. "I'll pin one on, wide open and shinin', when the sign comes right."

"I wouldn't shine it too strong in the Kid's eyes."

"I won't. I'm goin' into the badlands after the Wind River Gang."

"Lone handed?"

"Lone handed, if that's the way the play comes up, Jimmer."

Regan had heard the Curry boys call Thornhill "Jimmer" and so had got into the habit of thus addressing the big cowman.

"Mebbeso, Regan, you'll git backin'."

Tom Regan knew that there would be one of those secret pow-wows when they got back to the ranch. And the Curry boys might take a notion to go down into the badlands after Tate Dillard and his Wind River Gang.

They reached the Seven Up ranch at sunrise. Kid Curry and Loney and Johnny, Bob Lee and Camella Hanks were at the barn as they rode up.

When Tom Regan stepped off his horse, they walked up to him, one at a time, grave faced, and shook hands with him. Acting for all the world like men at a funeral offering silent condolence to a man who has lost some dear one by sudden death. Or a man condemned to death.

Tom Regan's blood chilled. Beads of sweat gathered on his forehead. If this was a death trap, it was a good one. They could kill him here and his disappearance would be as complete and mysterious as that of Rale Cobb.

He slid a quick look at Jim Thornhill but the big cowman had deliberately turned his broad back and was unsaddling his horse.

"Let's have a look at that marriage license, Regan," said Kid Curry.

When Tom Regan handed it over, the Kid took a long look at it, then passed it around for the others to see. When it had gone the rounds, Kid Curry handed it back to Regan.

"If you're one of them gents that collects souvenirs, you might have it mounted in a gilt frame. Tell 'im, Johnny."

"I'm too damned chicken hearted. Loney, it's your job."

"Anybody got a bottle handy?" said Loney Curry. "Regan needs a big snort right now."

Kid Curry brought a quart bottle from the barn and pulled the cork. He handed it to Tom Regan.

"Take a big 'un," he said flatly.

Tom Regan tilted the bottle. He was swallowing the raw whiskey when Loney spoke.

"Lolly Landusky married a Circle C cow-

puncher named Tim Maloney yesterday!"

Tom Regan choked on the whiskey. When he had finished coughing he saw the circle of grinning faces. They joshed the hell out of him and everybody had a drink on it.

Tom Regan was torn between a vast relief and a smoldering anger at the girl's duplicity. And then he remembered that right now that package with his badge and the bench warrants was on its way to Landusky. And Lolly would not be there at the Post Office to claim it for him before Jew Jake opened it.

They mistook his feelings for the genuine bitter feelings of a thwarted and disappointed lover. Even Jim Thornhill was fooled. They eased up on the horseplay and hoorawing and joshing. Kid Curry told him that Lolly and Tim Maloney had been stuck on each other for a long time. Then had quarreled. And when Tim rode to Landusky with a marriage license and a wedding ring to patch the quarrel, Lolly had run off with the Circle C cowpuncher and married him. Tim was taking a hay contract at the Circle C Ranch and they were going to live in the little whitewashed log cabin at the home ranch that was called the White House.

Tom Regan struck a slow burning sulphur match and set fire to the marriage license. They had another drink all around.

Thornhill and Tom Regan ate a big breakfast and while Tom Regan was getting a few hours sleep, the cowman talked to the Curry boys and Bob Lee and Camella Hanks.

They all came into the bunkhouse together. Tom Regan swung his long legs over the edge of the bunk. His right hand near his gun.

"The Wind River Gang," Jim Thornhill told him, "is movin' a big drive of cattle across the Missouri at the Cow Island Crossin'. They'll be crossin' the cattle tomorrow. The boy's are goin' down to cut their trail herd for strays. Mebbyso you'll like to go along, Regan."

Tom Regan's hand came away from his six-shooter and he grinned, nodding his head.

"I'd be proud to. The stage from Chinook gits into Landusky tonight. I'm goin' to town for my mail. Then I'll be ready to trail along."

"Landusky," said Thornhill, "ain't very healthy for you, Regan."

"Hell," said Kid Curry, "we'll all go to town with 'im. If Pike Landusky starts a ruckus, he'll never finish it."

"Which," said the big cowman gravely, "is just what I'm tryin' to prevent. You kill Pike and not even the Circle C outfit kin git you out of it, Harvey."

"It's bound to come sooner or later," said Kid Curry, his black brows pulled in a hard scowl. "It might as well come tonight."

Tom Regan shivered a little inside when he got a look at Kid Curry's eyes. The eyes of a killer.

They rode to Landusky together that night. Bob Lee and Camella Hanks stayed out at the hitchrack, holding the other horses. While Tom Regan and Jim Thornhill and the three Curry boys walked boldly into Jew Jake's Saloon.

The stage coach had just come in. Jew Jake had unlocked the mail sacks. He dumped the mail on a poker table and hobbled back behind the bar.

"Them as is expectin' mail," he told the crowd, "paw into the pile and help yourselves to what's yourn. I done got mine." He broke the wrapping on the Helena *Record* and the Great Falls *Tribune*. Those two newspapers were the only mail Jew Jake ever got.

Pike Landusky was not there. None of the Wind River Gang was there. If the wounded man, shot by Tom Regan, had reached Landusky, nobody was telling anything about it."

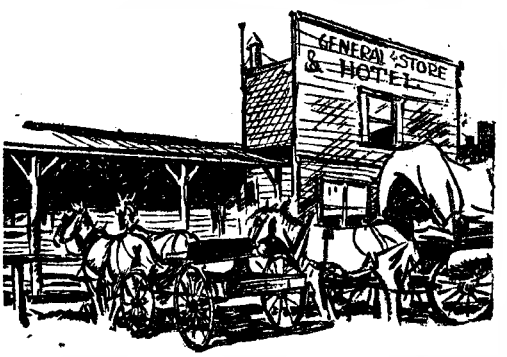
Tom Regan spotted the shoe box in its brown paper wrapping. With its "From the Miles City Saddle Co." in the corner. As he claimed it, he saw Jew Jake covertly watching him.

They had a few rounds of drinks. Tom Regan's package lay on the bar. He was tempted to open it but his better judgment got the best of that rash impulse.

A few more drinks under his belt and that cold caution would melt. He would get a little loud mouthed and might start bragging. He fought down the temptation to cut the heavy twine and open the box. Pin on his Stock Inspector badge and wave those bench warrants like a battle flag. He was getting a little loose tongued.

"Come on, boys," scowled Jim Thornhill, who had been watching him, "let's git to hell outa here. It kinda stinks in here."

He was standing next to Tom Regan.



His big hand reached out and took the package.

"If there's dynamite in this, Regan, I'd better pack it."

He herded them outside and onto their horses. As they headed for the badlands, Thornhill handed Regan back his package.

"Then that damned fool loud mouthed braggin' of yourn ain't some kind of an act, Regan? I seen 'er comin' on like a feller about to throw a hydrophobia fit."

"When I git drunk," Tom Regan told them, "I'm the damndest whiskey liar in the world. Afterwards I always feel like swallerin' the end of a gun barrel and pullin' the trigger."

He opened the box. Found the badge with Stock Inspector engraved on its shining metal surface. Pinned on the badge. Then he called off the names on the bench-warrants in a whiskey loud voice.

"And that's it, Senors," his lips pulled back in a flat lipped grin. "That's my job. The Wind River Gang killed Rale Cobb. They're my bear meat. You kin turn back from here if you've a mind to. I kin serve these bench warrants lone handed."

"You kin play hell!" Kid Curry's voice was a snarl. "Shove them bench-warrants and that damned tin badge outa my sight."

Jim Thornhill rode in between them. "You're actin' like a couple of bald faced kids that's bin slapped silly with a bar towel. We got a mule to ride tonight. Got a chore to tend to."

Kid Curry was in an ugly temper because he had ridden to town to kill Pike Landusky, and Jew Jake had told him Pike was laid up in bed from a bait of bad whiskey. He'd got drunk on the strength of Lolly's runaway marriage to a damned Circle C man.

And the Kid had said he wanted Pike to be in good health when they met because, before he shot holes in his guts, he aimed to give Pike Landusky the damndest whipping any man ever got.

That's what was in Kid Curry's craw. Whiskey had aggravated it. And Tom Regan was getting on one of his spur jingling, fighting jags.

"Just hold 'er a few hours," Thornhill told them in his deep toned, quiet drawl. "You'll both git a belly full of fightin'."

Kid Curry and Tom Regan shook hands and had a drink out of the Kid's own bottle.

Thornhill told them that he had a hunch Tate Dillard and his Wind River Gang would not wait till daylight to cross their stolen cattle. They were in a rush to get the cattle on the north side of the Missouri. Where the best crossing was, the river ran from north to south. The cattle would be crossed from the west bank to the east. And because cattle are hard to swim with the sun in their eyes it would mean hours of delay until evening when the sun was behind them. And Tate Dillard was the best cowhand in the business when it came to

handling cattle at night. It would be a moonlight crossing.

They had twenty-five miles to ride and they rode it at a long trot. The moon came up in a star-filled sky. Tom Regan wondered if this was the last moonrise he would ever see. He and Kid Curry took another drink.

V

SOMETHING, something had torn the lid of hell from its hot hinges. The badlands stillness was shattered by the din and the river banks tossed the echoes back and forth until those echoes seemed to crash and splinter into lesser sounds.

Out there in the middle of the muddy Missouri that took on a metallic sheen in the moonlight, cattle struggled and pawed and bellowed crazily as big steers rode one another down below the top of the swift current. Long horns clashed as the cattle in the lead swung downstream and collided with the cattle behind and they threshed the water into churning foam as they struggled and went down and rose again somewhere below, pulled by the swift undercurrents. Scattered, swimming for whichever black bank seemed nearer in their panicked cow-brute brains.

Six-shooters banged. Riders, caught out there in midstream by the swimming, milling, spooked cattle, shouted hoarsely and headed their horses downstream in a desperate, frantic effort to get clear of the horns and hoofs that made a tossing black mass of death out there in the deep, swift water. The hoarse shouts of the bewildered men added to the din. Their six-shooters banged. There was hoarse fear in their voices. A bewildered and confused fear of the black water that was trying to pull them and their horses down to a smothering, waterlogged death.

And through the dull thudding pow-pow-pow of their six-shooters there came the sharp, spatting crack of a .30-30 Winchester. And cutting the hoarse voiced harsh throated cursing of bewildered rustlers came the mocking, clear cut, sharp edged shout of one man who was sharing no part of the confusion that gripped the Wind River Gang of cattle rustlers. That taunting voice had for its accompaniment the sharp crack of the .30-30 carbine.

"Just the ghost of Rale Cobb!" it pierced the other sounds like a knife blade slicing meat. "You ain't spooky, are yuh, boys? Only cattle and horses git spooked of a night! Just the ghost of Rale Cobb, you murderin' sons! The ghost of Cow Island!"

But the voice came from the east bank of the river where a lone man squatted on his hunkers behind a patch of red willows, taking pot shots at the riders out in the river. Riders who had but one thought now. The desperate thought of self-preservation.

Tom Regan, Thornhill, the Currys, Bob Lee and Camella Hanks had pulled up sharply when that hellish din broke loose. They had been riding cautiously along the slant of a sparsely timbered hogback, intending to slip down quietly and take the rustlers by surprise. And from their vantage point a few hundred yards above the river bank, sitting their horses below the ridge so as not to skylight themselves, they had watched the thing happen.

They had heard the familiar sounds and watched the blurred, blotted shapes of half a dozen riders crossing a big bunch of cattle from the west bank. In the moonlight it had made a handsome picture.

Then that picture had changed. While the cattle and horses and riders were still out there in the channel of swimming water, a man on the east bank, hidden by the black brush, had shouted.

"Throw away your guns, you Wind River bushwhackers. Ride ashore ahead of them stolen cattle! Come with your hands a-clawin' for the round white moon! Don't git spooked, you white-livered sons of snakes! I'm just the ghost of Rale Cobb! Remember Rale Cobb? The law officer you shot all to hell and drowned out there in

that black water! Ride ashore! What's holdin' yuh?"

One man had been riding in the lead of the cattle. He must have got panicky or very brave. Because he began shooting as his horse's front feet found the wet ground and began lunging through the shallower water that was stirrup deep.

Rale Cobb had opened up. His first two shots had knocked the man out of his saddle. Then he began shooting into the lead cattle. He killed or wounded a couple of the lead steers. Then when the cattle began turning downstream and piling up, he raised the line of his fire and began shooting just above the heads of the riders upstream and some on the downstream side of the line of swimming cattle that reached clear back to the west bank. And he called his grisly, mocking taunts as he fired and re-loaded his carbine and emptied it again.

For perhaps the space of a long minute Tom Regan and the Curry Gang sat their horses. Caught and stunned by the unexpected chaos below, they stared down at it.

"There's bound to be men a-waitin' on this side for them cattle," said Jim Thornhill, his quiet, deep-toned voice breaking the spell that held them all frozen. "They'll come awake directly. When they do, they'll kill Rale Cobb like he was ketched in a bear trap."

Tom Regan spurred his horse down the shale bank without waiting for the others. He caught a brief glimpse of three or four riders below. His horse went down the almost perpendicular shale slope, front legs braced stiff, sliding on its rump. Regan holding a tight enough rein to balance himself and his horse.

"Take to the brush, Rale!" he shouted hoarsely. "It's Regan a-comin'!"

THE riders below began shooting at him. He heard the whine of bullets around his head. Heard the guns of Thornhill and the Currys, Bob Lee and Camella Hanks up above. The riders down below jumping their horses back into the cover of the heavy brush.

It was a fifty-foot slide down the steep shale bank. From right behind him Kid Curry's voice, wild, reckless, followed him. Accompanied by a thick shower of loose shale and small rocks.

"Step aside, Slow Motion. Here's a cowboy that's in a hurry to git there!"

The two horses and their riders hit the foot of the shale slant at the same time. Piled up. Untangled themselves from the scramble of kicking hoofs and shale that came down like a landslide.

Their horses were unhurt. They were back in their saddles and riding as the others came down the steep slope.

Down below here, where the brush hid the river and all that was happening out there, the din was more confusing and unearthly, and it filled a man's ears with nightmarish racket.

Tom Regan heard Rale Cobb shouting his name. "Hi, you Regan! You warthog, Regan!"

He thought he caught the direction of the voice before the cracking of guns and the bawling of crippled cattle blotted out punier sounds.

Regan had to run the gauntlet of guns to reach the brush patch where he reckoned he would find his old pardner. A couple of bullets nicked his tough hide. His horse stepped in a hole and turned a somersault and Tom Regan was thrown into some buckbrush. He kept a death grip on his saddle gun. A hail of bullets clipped the brush above him and he flattened himself on the ground until the fusillade of whining lead slacked up. Then he crawled on his hands and knees through the heavy underbrush, slowly, cautiously, head bent low.

A gun barrel poked him in the head. A croaking whisper challenged him there in the darkness of the brush.

"Quien es?"

It brought back old Mexican Border memories. In the flash of a split second.

"Hold 'er, Cobb! It's Regan!"

The sound that came from Rale Cobb's throat was something like a sob and a grunt and a laugh.

"Hurt bad, Rale?"

"Hell, no," the man lied profanely. "Got me a hole dug. Crawl in. Take care them skunks don't make it your grave."

Tom Regan lurched through the brush and fell headlong into a deep hole. When he managed to scramble to his feet and feel around, he saw that the hole was nearly shoulder high.

Rale Cobb was gripping his shoulder in a bony clutch. "Looky yonder at the river. Cattle's comin' ashore. See ary horse-backers?"

"Not yet. The fellers out in the river has drowned or made 'er ashore. By the sound of the shootin', the ones on this side are havin' theirselves a time dodgin' bullets."

"You fetched backin', Regan?"

"The best backin' in the Montana badlands. Listen!"

OFF A way they could hear men riding through the brush. Calling to one another now and then. Guns cracking.

But the sounds that Tom Regan's ears were trying to catch were much closer. And the sounds were stealthy. The rustling of dry leaves. The movement of brush as a man shoved through. The snap of a twig under a man's boot.

"Somebody," whispered Rale Cobb, "has us surrounded in the stump hole. They're closin' the circle."

"Jimmer!" called Tom Regan cautiously. "If that's you boys comin' Injun on us, holler back. Sing out or we'll shoot! It's Regan and Rale Cobb! That you, Jimmer?"

"It's us, Regan!" called a muffled voice not thirty feet away in the brush. "Where are yuh?"

"Where's the dance goin' to be and who's goin' to fiddle?"

"What dance, Tom? What do you mean, fiddle?"

"Just hoorawin', Jimmer," called Tom Regan. He gripped Rale Cobb's arm. "We're right here. Standin' up. Watchin' the river. Come on. Hurry!"

Then he whispered in Cobb's ear. "It's not Jimmer and the boys. They'd know the answer. We're givin' Lolly and Tim Maloney a dance at Johnny Curry's place. Loney is goin' to play the fiddle. It's a

sort of password in the brush. Git set, Cobb. Let 'em have it!"

It seemed to Tom Regan that they came from all sides and came shooting. That they must be shooting each other. Regan and Rale Cobb crouched back to back in the deep hole, their six-shooters roaring. Spewing streaks of fire. The recoil of Regan's gun felt good in his hand because it sent sharp stabbing pains into his shoulder and up into his neck and the needle-like pains kept his brain from fogging.

He felt Rale Cobb's back quiver and go limp against his. And then he was standing alone in the deep black hole with his short-barreled sneak-gun in his hand. Shooting at the blaze of guns in the brush.

Then men on horseback were crashing through the brush. He could hear them yelling at him to lay low and quit shooting. They called each other by name as they rode in closer, their horses lunging and tripping and pawing through the underbrush that was matted with a tangle of vines.

"Harvey—Johnny—Loney—"

Then their guns roared as the Wind River killers tried to break out and get back to wherever they had left their horses.

Then the heavy shooting was over. The bawling of cattle no longer sounded from the river, but all around in the brush and on the river bank where the bulk of the cattle drive moved sluggishly, milling, hooking one another out of the way. Then Tom Regan's world went black.

And somewhere in the distance the big, deep-toned voice of Jim Thornhill. And Tom Regan was alive again and somebody was holding him up.

"String 'em out before they git to trompin' one another, boys! Ride into 'em from yonder side, Bob. Me'n Hank will start 'em walkin'."

"Where'll we water 'em, Jimmer?"

That was Kid Curry's voice hoorawing Jimmer. It sounded nearby. They were pulling him and Rale Cobb up out of the hole and Johnny Curry was cussing because he had tumbled head over spurs into the hole and damned near broke his neck, he was telling somebody who was laughing.

AFTER that Tom Regan woke up again and found himself laid out on the hard-packed dirt floor of a log cabin. It was getting daylight and near him, lying on some saddle blankets, lay a ragged looking skeleton of a man with long gray hair and gray beard that only partly concealed the gauntness of his face. Only the eyes, bloodshot and sunken, were the black-flecked gray eyes of Rale Cobb. And his grin was a grisly replica of the easy grin Tom Regan remembered.

Kid Curry held the neck of a whiskey bottle against Tom Regan's teeth and told him to open his damn' mouth and swaller long and often.

"You stopped a few chunks of lead but we got you tied back together, Regan. And all that ails your pardner Cobb is that he's bin livin' on beef straight for a month or two, over on Cow Island."

He gave Rale Cobb a drink from the bottle. Then he took the black silk neckscarf from around his throat and gravely polished off Regan's new nickeled law badge.

"Shine yourn, Cobb?" he grinned.

"I lost mine somewheres," said Rale Cobb.

"I got to git yourn a-shinin' awful bright, Regan," said Kid Curry, "for the eyes of Tate Dillard and Joe Mace and Pete Allen and Charlie Fox to see 'er glitter. For to see 'er glitter in hell."

He was holding the sheaf of bench-warrants in his hand and there was a sardonic grin on his dark-skinned face.

Tom Regan knew that the men whose names were on those bench warrants were dead. That the other members of the Wind River Gang whose unknown identities were covered by the John Doe warrants were likewise dead. Because the Curry Gang did not take prisoners.

Jim Thornhill and the others came into the cabin. The big cowman said that the bulk of the cattle drive had got across. That they were scattered out along the river bottom grazing. Ready for legal inspection.

Big Jim Thornhill stood on widespread legs, looking down at Rale Cobb.

"That was a shore game and foxy lone-handed play you made, Cobb. How come you're still alive from that bushwhacker trap you rode into near two months ago?"

"I grabbed at the water when I got shot in the shoulder and my horse got shot from under me," said Rale Cobb slowly. "Grabbed at the water and my hand ketched a driftin' log. I hung on and floated with it, only my face above water. It was dark out there on the river and they couldn't sight me. The log floated aground on Cow Island.

"There was a little grub and a Winchester and ca'tridges I'd cached there. I tied up my shoulder and laid in the bush till the pain and fever went outa me.

"They'd gone. I killed a beef. There's cattle on the island. And when the grub

I had cached there was gone I lived on straight beef. Makin' the salt last as long as it would. Eatin' 'er raw when there was men camped on either bank.

"I laid low and played for time. I knowed they had me figgered out dead. And I laid my plans accordin'.

"Red Smith had framed the trap on me. I didn't dare trust no man. A few nights ago the Wind River Gang camped here on the river. They had a jug and their voices got loud enough to carry acrost the water to the island. I heard 'em make medicine about fetchin' a big drive of stolen cattle outa Wyoming. Crossin' 'em at night.

"When they pulled out I loaded my guns and ca'tridges and clothes on a couple of logs I tied together for a raft. Shoved 'er into the water and let the current drift me ashore a mile or two below. Located that stump hole near the river bank. Crawled in her and waited.

"I figgered I was playin' a losin' game but it was the best I could do. I was alone and afoot here. All I had was a six-shooter and .30-30 Winchester and ca'tridges.

"Just before the man ridin' in the lead could ride into the shallow water, I played my hand like I was holdin' aces. But he showed fight and the jackpot was open. And thanks to Tom Regan and you boys, I'm alive to tell it."

Jim Thornhill nodded, smiling faintly. "You done a first-class job, Cobb. And you got one hell of a game pardner. You're both white men. Even Kid Curry admits it. That's why he's willin' to let the both of you kinda throw in with the Curry Gang."

He saw the puzzled look in Rale Cobb's eyes. Smiling faintly, he tossed a metal badge and a legal-looking paper on the floor beside the gaunt, bearded Stock Inspector.

"It's a sheriff's badge. And a bill of sale for them cattle from Wyoming. I took the badge and papers off the dead body of that feller that rode out in the lead of the cattle. The feller you shot, Cobb. It looks like you done killed some kind of a sheriff from Johnson County."

Rale Cobb sat up slowly. A hard, bitter grin crept into his black-flecked gray eyes.

"The Curry boys know that dead sheriff," Rale Cobb said slowly. "They knew that he's bin as crooked as a dog's hind leg. That this bill of sale ain't worth a damn. But the owners of the cattle don't dare make a holler because they know they'll be murdered if they squeal. And so that's the way the Wind River Gang played safe."

"That was the way they've bin a-playin' 'er," said Kid Curry, his voice cold. "That damned sheriff was worse than a common rustler. He hid behind his tin badge. And just where does that put you, Cobb? You and Tom Regan?"

Rale Cobb turned his head and looked at Tom Regan. He forced a stiff-lipped grin and Regan tried to grin back at him.

"Looks like I've got us both into a mess, Regan. I don't know just how far the Montana Stock Growers' Association dare to back our play. It's my guess that their agreement with the Cattlemen's Association in Wyoming will hang together. That man I killed was a genuine sheriff. I'm just a two-bit Stock Inspector that made the mistake of shootin' first and askin' questions later. It's a better bet than even money that I'll be tried and sent to the Deer Lodge pen for murder if I go back to Helena with a true report.

"So we ain't goin' to Helena, Regan. If Jim Thornhill will put up with us till I git the wrinkles outa my belly and meat on my bones, we'll just let that report wait. When we're in shape to hit the Outlaw Trail and foller it back to Texas where we belong, I'll write out a full report and you write out yourn. We'll mail them reports at Landusky. We played what cards was dealt us. The Association won't forget that. The Montana cattlemen might even pay us off in real money. But last night's work has outlawed us both."

Tom Regan was grinning as he slowly unpinned his badge. His wounds were just flesh wounds but they pained him a little.

"Here, Jimmer. Take the tin badge. The next time you ride to Landusky, toss it acrost the bar to Jew Jake. He's got Red Smith's badge. He might as well start a collection. Him and Pike Landusky."

"Jew Jake has Rale Cobb's badge," said Jim Thornhill. "It was pinned to the coat tied on Cobb's saddle when they found his dead horse a couple of months ago."

"Give him this sheriff's badge," said Rale Cobb flatly. "For his collection."

The cattle were turned loose there. The bill of sale for them would, in due time, be mailed to Helena with the official reports of Stock Inspectors Rale Cobb and Tom Regan.

It was easily understood by both law officers now why the Curry brothers had only contempt and bitter hatred for the Law and the badges a lot of law officers wore in sight or pinned to their undershirts.

BACK at the Thornhill ranch they talked and argued it over many times. While Rale Cobb regained his strength and Tom Regan's bullet wounds healed. Those arguments always left Regan and Cobb a little baffled. It was only a matter of time before Kid Curry would kill Pike Landusky or get killed trying. And that would send the Curry brothers back along the Outlaw Trail. Only Jim Thornhill would stay clear of the trouble because that's the only way the Curry boys would have it. Over and over they discussed it, drunk and sober. The Law was not going to give Loney and Johnny and Kid Curry their chance to settle down and go straight. Because the Kid could not stay in the same cow country with Pike Landusky and keep his cowpuncher pride. That killing had to come.

Regan expected it to come that night of the postponed wedding dance in honor of Lolly Landusky and her husband Tim Maloney. But it did not. There were probably too many Circle C cowpunchers there ready to back Kid Curry's play.

Landusky, to the last man, got drunk. But there was no big gun ruckus. The day of the clash between Pike Landusky and Kid Curry was postponed.

At sunrise when the dance broke up Tom Regan and Rale Cobb mailed their official reports to the Stockmen's Association at Helena, Montana.

"I'll collect them badges you've got there on your back-bar," Tom Regan told Jew Jake. "They're bein' sent back home."

Regan and Cobb put the sealed letters with the badges enclosed with the legal reports that confirmed all the wild rumors about the fight at Cow Island Crossing and the vanishing of the Wind River Gang.

They all had a final drink at the bar. Tom Regan and Rale Cobb were pulling out for keeps. Headed back along the Outlaw Trail for Texas.

It was then that Pike Landusky made one of his few gestures that had built him up a following of tough, gun-toting friends.

He asked Jew Jake for a bottle of the best whiskey in the house. A grin on his scarred, battered face, cold blood shot eyes glinting, he handed it to Tom Regan.

"To warm your guts along the trail, Regan. You put up a hell of a good fight. Remember it whenever you hit the bottle. So-long."

Jim Thornhill, the Curry boys and Bob Lee and Camella Hanks shook hands with Tom Regan and Rale Cobb.

"Till our trails cross again," grinned Kid Curry. "Which I got a hunch they will. Take care of yourselves. Don't buy no more law badges!"

An Eskimo Girl With a Yen for Guns Could Help the Army a Whole Lot

ANNIE OAKLEY OF ATTU

By ANDREW H. HEPBURN

I DON'T ask you to believe this yarn, I found it hard to believe myself when I first heard it. You can put it down as just another of those crazy tales that crop up in this fantastic war. But the Army vouches for it and so does the Navy. That's something. And it does explain some things that are hard to explain any other way. For example, remember when the Army bombers found a hole in the fog over Attu and plastered the Nips? Well, how do you think they found that hole?

So take it or leave it. I'll just put it down the way it came to me. It happened this way. The city desk had a call one afternoon from the Public Relations office out at the Fort. It was from Major Harry Clark. He said he had something hot and big. So the city editor asked me to have a look-see.

I found Major Clark in a back office with a soldier named Sergeant Tim McCoy. He was a little guy, bright-eyed and tough, and cocky. This is his story.

Major Clark explained that the sergeant

had just been flown down from duty in Alaska. He'd been brought back in a bomber, and was on his way home to Akron, Ohio, for a thirty-day leave. He'd earned the leave, it seems.

This is what he said, after unbuttoning his blouse, putting his feet on the table and mooching a cigarette from me. From now on it's Sergeant Tim McCoy of Akron, Ohio, speaking, radio technician extraordinary.

IT WAS like this. I was one of the first gang that went to Dutch Harbor, to make a base there. I guess they picked me because I'm a ham. What? You know, a radio ham, always did tinker with it ever since I was a kid and had my own short wave set.

We were up at Dutch Harbor a long time getting things ready, ready for the Japs to smack hell out of us. Remember when they came over a couple of months ago and dropped their eggs and strafed us a bit? It did a lot of damage. Everybody knows that, but what it mostly did was make our gang hopping mad. All we could think of was to sock back, hard, out there at the end of the islands where they'd sneaked in, Kiska and Attu, remember?

Every day after that the Cats took off. What? Pardon, the Catalinas, the big flying boats, the best we have for patrol duty. But they couldn't find the Nips. If you've ever been to the Aleutians you know why. You never have? Well, don't bother. I can tell you what they are: rock, water, fog. Just that, nothing more: rock, water, fog. Fog all the time, day after day, night after night. The Cats would take off in that soup, be gone six, eight, ten hours and come back, only sometimes they didn't come back. There's a lot of drowned Cats out there still. It was always the same story—fog. Fog everywhere.

One day about a month after the raid on Dutch Harbor I got orders to go see the CO, quick. That was Colonel Rogers. I found him in his hut with the meteorologist officer and Commander Brady of the Navy. Brady was the guy in charge of the subs we had based on Dutch Harbor. What's that, Major? Okay. I won't say how many we had. Fact is, I don't know. Anyway this commander was the CO for the sub flotilla.

"Sergeant McCoy," says the colonel. "I want you to volunteer for a special detail, and I'm telling you now it's dangerous."

"Yes, sir," I says, "I've volunteered. What is it?"

The colonel grinned. "Commander," he says, "you owe me five bucks. I told you McCoy would take it on and ask questions afterwards." And then he turned to me and said, "The Commander said no one would volunteer for this job. I bet him you would."

Then he turned to the meteorologist officer. "All right Captain, you explain," says the colonel. I wasn't feeling any too good, about that time, and I was feeling pretty sick when the captain got through. I always was a sucker for a dare, and I figured that the colonel had dared me not to volunteer. I won't try to tell you just what was cookin' in the captain's words. They say he's a scientist, and he used a lot of fancy language to describe our weather. I can describe it better in just one word—soup. But it boiled down to this. It seems the meteorologist had figured out that the weather across the Aleutians moved from west to east, and that the reason the Cats could never find the Japs was that they never knew what the weather was out at the end of the islands, to the west. The fog didn't lift often and when it did it was generally for just a few hours, maybe half a day. But if you knew it was clear at Dutch Harbor, it didn't mean it was clear at Kiska, or Attu, out at the end of those damned dismal rocks. The problem was to find out when it was clear there, because that was the only time we could get in with the bombers and blast the yellow stuffing out of those Nips.

This is what the meteorologist boys pro-

posed: plant a man on Attu with a short wave portable set. When the fog began to lift he could signal back to Dutch Harbor. The bombers could take off and be there under three hours. Simple as that. Yeah, it was simple, like saying let's put a man down inside a volcano to see how hot it is. Those scientific boys don't worry about men. They're all pure theory. But they sold the colonel and the Navy on the deal. And the colonel made a sucker out of me with that dare of his.

It seemed I was elected. Of course the Navy was going to help. One of the subs would take me out there and drop me on the island with a short wave set, and they promised to pick me up when the show was all over, if I was still there in one piece. That's how it started.

I won't bother to tell you what happened next. It took about three days to get ready. They had to get a lot of junk and gear together so I wouldn't freeze or starve before I could signal. After that it didn't matter.

Anyway, I got a ride in a pig boat. Less said about that the better. Was I sick—yeah, boy, I was sick, and I was scared. But I was sicker than scared, I guess, because I was really glad one morning when they surfaced before dawn and the lieutenant who was skipper sent a gob down to holler, "All ashore who's goin' ashore," and all those submarine guys came up to shake hands and ask if I had any message for my folks.

WHEN I came out on the deck of the sub it was blacker than the inside of a cow. The only light was a little blue flashlight one of the crew was holding and all I could see in it was the big fat edge of a rubber boat that one of the boys was holding.

"Where are we?" I asked.

"Attu," says the lieutenant.

"Sure we're not in the middle of a railroad tunnel," I asked, trying to be cute to keep from showing how scared I was.

"She's there, all right, about a thousand yards. Hear the surf?"

I heard it, all right, sort of a dull roar. The lieutenant explained that the rubber boat was all loaded with everything I'd need—guns, food, radio equipment, water, ammunition, flares, everything. All the comforts of home.

I asked him if there was a rabbit's foot.

Two of the seamen were to go ashore with me to unload the boat and bring it back. After that I'd be on my own. The lieutenant explained that we were on the open north side of the island, and that the Jap base was on the other side, across a mountain. He said I ought to be able to find a nice cozy cave for headquarters, or maybe a big rock to crawl under.

Getting ashore wasn't easy. When we pushed through the surf I got plenty wet, and the water seemed forty below. But we got ashore and pulled that big awkward boat up on a rocky beach. Those sailors did a quick job of unloading. They wanted to get back to the sub, but even so it took a good two hours and before they were through it was getting light, a sort of a soupy gray light coming through the fog.

I think the sickest I've ever been and the scaredest was when I watched those lads push the rubber boat through the surf and disappear in the fog. My teeth were chattering so loud I was afraid the noise would wake the Japs on the other side of the island.

Several hours later I'd found a little cave in the rocks halfway up the side of the mountain. It took the rest of the day to haul all my junk up to it. I'll say this for the boys back at Dutch Harbor they hadn't overlooked anything. There was a waterproof blanket roll with enough blankets to keep me warm at the North Pole. There were dry clothes, parka and all the trimmings, just like an Eskimo. There were canned goods, enough for a month, there was a little stove and a couple of cans of gasoline to run it. There was a whole arsenal of guns; a wicked looking long

barreled rifle with a telescopic sight and a silencer. I blessed the boys for that later. There was a Garand rifle and a stubby looking Tommy-gun with enough shells to mow a regiment down, and there was a good old-fashioned Colt automatic.

But the main thing was the radio stuff. There were two sets, one a special sending set sealed so that it was tuned all the time to Dutch Harbor. It was a honey, all right. Then there was a walkie-talkie. What? You know what a walkie-talkie is, a portable receiving and sending set, short range but boy was I glad I had it.

There was a lot of other stuff, compass, roll of maps, knives, lamps, flashlights, Army binoculars.

THAT first day the fog lasted all day. Even at noon you couldn't see a hundred yards. There wasn't anything to see, so it didn't matter, just rocks, and more rocks, sloping up from the beach and getting steeper the higher you went. I figured the mountain ran right down into the sea. The cave I found was maybe two hundred yards above the beach. It wasn't really a cave, just a place where three big rocks had sort of wedged together with a narrow opening on the sea side, but it was dry inside and I rigged the tent around to keep the wind out and when I got my little stove going and changed clothes it wasn't bad.

My orders were to signal back to Dutch Harbor at six, noon and six if I was able to do so, except in an emergency when I'd signal at any time. They'd have some one on the receiving set all the time. Just in case. At six in the evening I threw the key on my sender and gave the signal. Believe me, it made a difference in the way I felt when the answer came right back, clear as a bell.

"How are you, pal?" said the lad back at Dutch Harbor. I told him what I'd done, that the fog was still thick. "Okay, pal," he said and good huntin,."

Wasn't I afraid the Japs would get the signals? That's a fair question, but they couldn't make anything of them if they did pick 'em up. The signals went through scrambled, if you know what I mean, and the receiver unscrambled them. Don't ask me how they do it.

Believe me, I felt better after that and went right to bed, after busting open a couple of cans and stewing up a bit of supper.

When I looked at my watch the next morning it was just getting light and was a few minutes before six. I stuck my nose out. The fog was thick as ever. I put water on for coffee and made the call back to Dutch Harbor. They told me eight bombers were ready to take off as soon as I gave the word, but I knew they wouldn't make it that day.

After breakfast I decided to explore. That's how I found Annie Oakley. Of course her name wasn't really Annie. I never did know what it really was. But I'm getting ahead of my story.

I started out with the rifle, the one with the silencer, the forty-five strapped around my waist, glasses and a compass. An hour later I had reached the ridge which divided my side of the island from the Jap side. I knew it was the ridge because the rocks started sloping the other way. But I couldn't see a thing, just fog and near rocks. I did hear things though. There was a steady sound of surf, every once in a while a shrill whistle, the sort they use on boats. Then there were other sounds, hammering, for instance.

So I wouldn't stumble on a Jap patrol I started ahead slow and easy, but even so I almost fell over a Nip sentry. He loomed up suddenly out of the fog. He was a mean-looking little fellow sitting on a big rock. He had telephone earpieces and mouthpiece hung over his head just like a switchboard operator. He wore big round glasses. On the rock beside him was a control box, and just beside him stood one of those funny looking detectors with big horns they use for airplanes. As soon as I spotted him I ducked behind a rock and

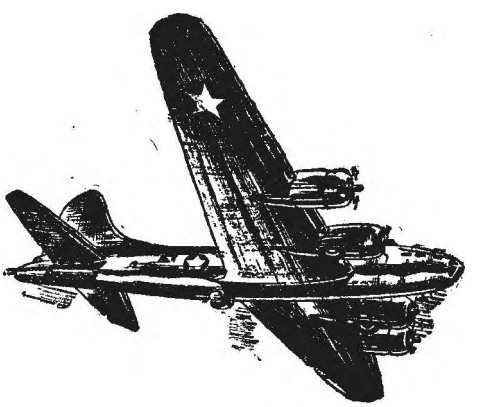
took a gander through my glasses. They brought his ugly mug up close. He didn't look happy. I thought of plugging him with the rifle. It wouldn't make a sound, but I didn't. I wasn't anxious to have Jap patrols scouring the island.

I backed up and began to make a big circle to see if I could get closer to the bay. I got closer all right. I could tell that by the sounds, but not close enough to see anything. I decided it was too risky and started back to my cave.

That's when I found Annie Oakley. I had crossed the ridge and was on the down slope when I heard her. I didn't know what it was at first, sort of a moaning, coming from behind a rock, or a mewing like a hurt kitten. I walked around with the rifle at ready and saw what looked like a bundle of rags. I prodded it with my foot and the bundle moved. I rolled it over and there was Annie. She was an Indian girl—round fat face, with black hair stringing down and bruises all over her face. She started to scramble up and run, but she was too weak.

It took me an hour to get her back to my cave and more than two hours to get her story. Sure she spoke English. She'd been to a mission school in Dutch Harbor a couple of years before. She liked Americans, and she seemed to like me. And boy, how she hated the Nips.

This was her story, boiled down fine, of course. She lived on a neighboring island.



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Several days before she and some of her Indian friends, including her husband, had come over to Attu to fish in the bay. It was foggy and they were well in the bay before they discovered the Jap ships. Annie was in the leading boat. Before they could turn around, the Japs had spotted them. The boats behind got away, but Annie's boat which had four of the Indians had been picked up by the Japs. They killed the men. Annie was the only woman. They took her into camp and because she was young and healthy they tried to do with her what you would expect them to do. When she bit one of them they beat her and tied her up. But somehow she managed to worm loose and got away in the fog. That had been the day before. She had been lying on the mountain all night, half frozen.

I fixed her up with some water and hot food. She wasn't badly bruised and was healthy enough. In a few hours she was all right and jabbering away like an excited kid. She talked a sort of pidgin English. I've heard the same from the Indians at Dutch Harbor. Was she pretty? Well, no, not pretty. But then she wasn't bad looking when her face was clean. Good looking like a healthy dog, or a horse is good looking. She had fine white teeth. I wouldn't want her to bite me. Her eyes were black like round marbles and her hair black. Her clothes were pretty well shot, but that didn't seem to bother her. She was excited about the cave and the things she saw there, the food, the radio, but particularly about the guns. She grabbed the Tommy-gun and put it to her shoulder. I had to snatch it away from her, for the damn thing was loaded, and on ready.

I said, "No you don't, Annie Oakley, papa spank."

That's when I started calling her Annie. It was as good a name as any, though I think her real name was Mookoo or something goofey. Anyway, from then on Annie was Annie to me. And she seemed to like it. Every time I called her Annie

she giggled in a silly sort of way. I didn't know what to do with her but she solved it by saying she knew where there was a cave and would sleep there. I told her to come back for breakfast, and I gave her a blanket. She went away jabbering, as happy as a kid.

WHEN I woke up the next morning and looked out, Annie was the first thing I saw. She was sitting on a rock waiting for me to wake up. She had a big fish, brought, she said, for my breakfast.

"Me catch for you," she said.

I was so interested in seeing the fish and Annie that I didn't realize what had happened during the night. For the first time I could see the sea, not just the edge of it but a lot of sea, several miles of it. I looked up and could see the whole mountain. The fog was so thin it was hardly fog at all, just like low clouds.

I was excited and pointed to the sky. Annie looked up and sort of sniffed the wind.

"Sun come soon," she said.

"Are you sure, Annie?" I asked.

"Sure, the sun come soon, wind say sun come soon," she said. Sure enough, off to the west was a tiny patch of blue sky, and while I watched it it got bigger. I figured it was now or never for the bombers and popped back to send the message. I must have been excited or something because I couldn't get through right away. Maybe I sent the wrong signal. I tried for ten minutes and couldn't get an answer. Was I sick! Then I got it.

"Okay, Attu, what's on your mind?" came the operator.

I told him it was clearing fast, would probably be clear for several hours. I told him to have those bombers hop off pronto.

"Annie says the sun will shine," I said.

"Look, pal, are you nuts, who the hell is Annie?" came back the operator.

"Skip it," I answered. "It's really clearing."

He told me to stand by. Ten minutes later I got the signal.

It was the colonel himself. "Listen, Sergeant," he said. "Eight bombers are taking off now. The first is already up. It will take from two and a half to three hours to make it to Attu; do you know what the enemy have there?" I told him I didn't, but I did mention the sentry and what I'd heard in the fog.

"Good work, Sergeant," the colonel said. "Can you take care of that sentry?"

"Sure," I said.

"Take him, then," the colonel came back, "and any more you can spot."

"You can pick up the bombers with your portable set when they're about twenty minutes away." Then he gave me the wavelength.

WHEN I got through I took another look at the sky. The blue in the west had grown to quite a chunk.

Annie was standing around swinging her fish waiting for me to get breakfast. She seemed excited, too, but didn't understand what it was all about. I told her to save the fish for summer, took the rifle, glasses, compass and slung the walkie-talkie over my shoulder. It made quite a load to climb a mountain with. But I was too excited to worry about that. I'd done maybe a hundred yards when I heard Annie shouting. I looked around and here she came, jumping over the rocks like a goat, carrying the rest of my arsenal, the Tommy-gun and the Garand.

"Take more guns, kill more Japs," she said. She was a bloodthirsty gal, Annie was. I told her I didn't need the other guns and made her take them back. She seemed sort of unhappy over that, and kinda puzzled but I watched her put them back in the cave. Then I went on. I was pretty nearly bushed when I got to the top of the ridge, with the weight of the walkie-talkie and the guns and everything. But what I saw was worth the climb.

I poked my head over a rock and took

a good look. The rocks sloped down sharply toward the sea maybe half a mile away. There was a round little bay. In the bay were five ships, two destroyers and three good-sized cargo boats. They were anchored there and little boats of all sorts were moving round over the bay. The Jap base was on the east side, which was flattest. They'd built a lot of huts there. One of them was pretty big. I figured it was headquarters. Off beyond was a sort of level place. I could see lots of movement there and make out about ten planes. It looked as though the Nips were trying to smooth the place off for an airfield.

I looked hard for about ten minutes, using my glasses. With them I could make out a good many details. I tried to locate anti-aircraft batteries but I couldn't see any. I figured they thought of using the guns on the destroyers if they needed to. Then I looked for my sentry. He was there all right, about two hundred yards down. I never was very good with a gun and I knew I couldn't afford to miss, so I began creeping from rock to rock. Lucky for me that sentry wasn't looking my way, or he'd have seen me sure. Pretty soon I was about a hundred yards away from him. I put everything down and unlimbered that long rifle. Through the telescopic sight I seemed to be sitting right in that Jap's lap. I took a good bead on the back of his head and pulled the trigger. Ever shoot a gun with a silencer? It's a funny feeling. There was a sort of click and a swish and the Jap fell off the rock, rolled over and lay still.

I went down fast then and got to where he was lying. Then I had a bright idea. I took off his coat and hat. I put 'em on. There was a hole in the back of the hat. Then I climbed up on the rock, put on the earphones and set my walkie-talkie where I could get it.

Next I figured out what wires led from the plane detector and cut 'em. About then I looked at my watch. It was just two and a half hours since I'd talked to the colonel back in the cave. I figured from twenty minutes to half an hour before I'd begin to get the bombers on the walkie-talkie. It was twenty-four. The first thing I heard was:

"How you doin', Sergeant?" Boy, did that voice sound good. It was Captain Hennessey, one of the best guys in the army. He was flying the lead bomber. Quickly I gave him the lay—the two destroyers, the three cargo ships, the camp on the east side of the bay, the airfield.

"Any anti-aircraft?" asked the captain. I told him I couldn't see any and figured they'd try to use the guns on the destroyers.

"Where are you talking from?" he came back. I told him about the sentry and what I'd done.

"Look, Captain," I said. "Lay off this hill when you start strafing. I may look like a Jap, you know."

"Okay, Sergeant, we may spray you just a little, but we won't hurt you much. Whoops, there she is, get set, gang! We can see your island, Sergeant. We're coming in low and fast as hell so hold your breath."

I looked up and there they were sure enough, just over the horizon. I couldn't hear them, though, and I hoped the Japs couldn't. But they did in about two minutes. They started coming out of the huts and running around like ants.

In a couple of minutes I could hear the bombers plain enough. It was the sweetest sound I ever heard. Then something awful funny happened. I was watching the big hut with my glasses. I figured it was headquarters and a mess of officers would start busting out. They did. But they didn't go far. They began to fall in a heap just in front of the door of the hut. Then I heard a machine-gun. But it wasn't just like a machine-gun, more like a Tommy-gun. The officers came running out of that big hut and the Tommy-gun

rat-tatting away and they'd all fall in a big heap.

Just as the first bomber came over, the Tommy-gun stopped. The next few minutes was something wonderful to remember. They weren't five hundred feet up, spread out level and even, just right to take the whole bay at one sweep. They were over the bay in a roar. I could see the bombs flash as they dropped and then the whole bay seemed to explode. I crouched down behind my rock and watched. But even so, it seemed to jar the whole mountain.

Then one by one the planes rolled up and flipped over and headed back. The second batch of bombs hit all in among the huts on the shore. Wow, what a sight! It was marvelous. But they weren't through yet. They swooped up and over again and this time came back with all their guns going, right over the tops of what was left of the buildings. The Japs didn't have a chance. The planes kept right on going east. All except one. It swung off and headed straight for the mountain, climbing fast, and just as he went over me I heard the captain's voice from the walkie-talkie.

"Many thanks, Sergeant. See you at Dutch Harbor." I looked up and could see him waggle his wings.

I looked back at the bay. It was a mess. Both destroyers were on fire and while I looked one of them blew up. A big column of black smoke was coming from one of the cargo ships. Another was listing way over in a cloud of steam and the third was settling fast. There were little bonfires all over that brand new airfield and I figured a Jap plane was in the middle of each one.

I wanted to get out of there quick. But I did take time to put the Jap's coat and hat back on him. Wasn't any use letting the Japs know he hadn't been killed by a stray bullet.

I sneaked back up over the mountain and started for the cave. I didn't see Annie at first, but when I got down close she was sitting there on a rock, grinning like a kid that's just stolen a watermelon. She was sort of panting, too. I didn't think anything of that until I went in the cave to signal the harbor and accidentally touched the barrel of the Tommy-gun. It was hot.

I went out and called Annie.

"Hey, Annie," I hollered, "did you shoot this gun?"

She looked so funny I knew she had. But it took half an hour to worm it out of her. After I left she'd sneaked out the Tommy-gun—I'd left it loaded with a full drum and set on ready—and gone over the mountain, Jap hunting. She'd crept around to behind the big hut without being seen and had got there just when the Jap officers heard the planes and started piling out. She'd just pulled up the Tommy-gun and let it roll. Then she heard the planes and got scared and ran, just in time too, because when they came back for the sweep over the shore she was just barely out of range. But she'd put a big drum of shells into those scrambling officers before she ran. It was the damnedest thing I ever heard of, and maybe she was lying but I saw them pile up and there was the gun with the drum empty, and the barrel hot, and there was Annie out of breath and looking like she'd been caught in the jam pot. She showed me how she held it, saying, "B-r-r-r-r—me kill Japs." She made it sound almost like a Tommy-gun, at that.

I figured we'd done a good day's work and had better lie low, so I made Annie come in the cave with me and started signaling the Harbor. I got them pretty soon and gave a full report. Were they happy! Told me to stand by and they'd let me know when I'd be taken off.

In about an hour the message came back. They'd located a sub on the prowl. It was coming to the island. It would arrive about ten the next morning. I was to have everything ready to get off quick.

That afternoon and night were the longest I ever spent. I made Annie stay in the cave with me. I didn't want her roaming around tangling with the Japs. I told her there was a boat coming and she could go to Dutch Harbor with me, but she said she wouldn't. She'd stay on the island. But she did ask me for the Tommy-gun. She seemed to think it was just her kind of a toy. I figured she'd earned it, so I told her she could have it. I told her she could have all the food and blankets and stuff, too. After all, Annie fixed it so none of those Nip officers could give orders to the gun crews on the destroyers.

The next morning for breakfast we cooked Annie's fish. It was good. Then I moved the radio sets down close to the beach ready to push off fast when that sub showed up. It was foggy again, thick as soup. I sat down there on the rocks with Annie. She had the Tommy-gun and I had the rifle. We waited and waited. Ten o'clock, no sub; eleven o'clock, no sub. Noon, and still no pig boat.

Then about twelve-thirty I heard it. It was the sound of oars out on the sea, behind the fog. And at the same time I heard something else that didn't make me happy. There were Jap voices coming from the mountainside above us. I knew they'd heard the oars too and were coming our way, fast and excited.

I was awful sick. If they saw the boat they'd plug it sure, and us along with it. I turned around to Annie, but she wasn't there. The voices were coming closer, and were they excited! I could tell there were several, probably a big patrol and they were floundering around on the rocks.

The next thing I heard was a burst of fire. It was the Tommy-gun. It came from the right and up a little way. It was Annie, after the Japs, drawing them away from me, bless her. A Jap squealed. I heard him fall. I looked out and there was the boat from the sub, just nosing into the surf.

Then the Tommy-gun again, two bursts, further up and more to the west. The Japs started to fire, sort of scattered. Another one squealed.

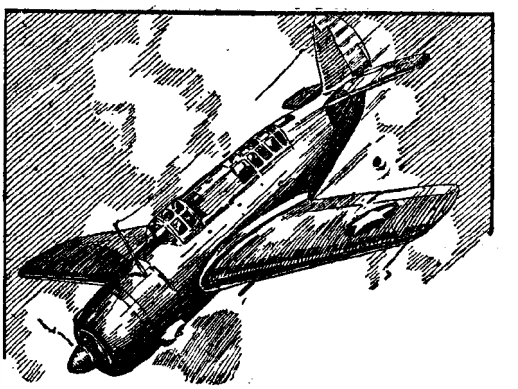
I jumped down to the beach quick. The boat was just coming over the surf, with a sailor standing in the water on either side steadying her. I didn't try to explain, told them quick, load the radios and push off.

'Who's doin' the shooting?" one of them asked.

"Annie Oakley, you lug," I answered. They looked at me as though I was off my beam.

Then I heard Annie's Tommy-gun, from way up the mountain this time and Japs firing again, ragged and scattered. Annie had done it. She'd drawn them off.

Well, I didn't know what to do. If she



was hurt I wanted to go get her, but I knew I never could find her in the fog. I held that boat there an hour, waiting. The sailors were getting sort of restless. We were just about to shove off, Annie or no Annie, when all of a sudden she showed up, sort of slithering along on the rocks close to the beach. She was all right. She'd shot about fifty shells from the drum of the Tommy-gun and she was grinning like a kid.

"B-r-r-r-r-r—me kill Japs," she said.

Well, we shoved off without her. She

wouldn't go. The sailors tried to argue with her too. But she refused.

That's almost the end but not quite. Back at Dutch Harbor they gave me a medal, and promised me this leave. I told them about Annie, but I knew they didn't quite believe me, and the boys and the sub who saw her, had gone off on a long cruise and couldn't back me up. I think they thought I was a little crazy, that the fog and the island and the bombing and everything had touched me. But the colonel and everybody was nice about it. I was a hero all right and if I wanted to talk about Annie that was all right with them. After all, they hadn't seen those officers pile up.

ONE day I was tinkering with a walkie-talkie and thinking about the steak I was going to order when I got back, when somebody hollered for me.

"Hey, Sergeant, come down to the pier quick, lady to see you."

I thought they were ribbing, but I went down. There was a big crowd on the pier. There was an Indian canoe, and at the end of the pier were a couple of Indians. One of them turned around and looked at me. It was Annie. She still had the Tommy gun, only it was empty.

She grinned all over her shiny round face.

"B-r-r-r-r—me kill Japs. Me need bullets," she said.

No, she didn't get them. They persuaded her to stay in Dutch Harbor. Her story was that she'd lurked around on the island for several days, picking off stray Jap patrols with the Tommy-gun. She couldn't remember how many she'd plugged. She must have been the sort of phantom in the fog that drove those Nips crazy. They had patrols roaming the island all the time looking for her. Then one day a stray Indian fisherman put in to the beach. Annie was ready to leave. She'd used all her ammunition.

He took her to another island. There she'd persuaded an old friend to ferry her to Dutch Harbor, from island to island. It had taken weeks.

Sure, Annie's still there. She's the belle of the Post, and she's getting rich, too. They fixed up a sort of a shooting gallery for her. The targets are all Jap heads. They gave her a nice twenty-two rifle. For two bits Annie will plug a Jap for you. She's a real Annie Oakley. She never misses. But she sort of misses the Tommy-gun because every time, just before she takes a bead on one of those doll Jap heads, with her toy twenty-two she says, "B-r-r-r-r—me kill Japs." The boys say it's worth two bits to hear her say it.

I Got a Good Horse and a Gun But I'm Not Hittin' the Trail with a Killer's Mark Posted Against My Name!

THE BLACK KNIGHT

By WALTER C. BROWN

Author of "The Camphorwood Chest," "Blood-Red Cash of Kublai Khan," "Deepwater Man," etc.

OLD Jeff Carter stood on his vine-covered porch and watched the grim-faced posse fan out separately as they left the dusty road and headed for Bald Ridge. He sighed, thinking of by-gone days when he himself had often ridden forth on just such an errand, his sheriff's star shining in the sun.

He looked down at the official placard the posse had left with him—the printer's ink scarcely dry on it:

WANTED FOR MURDER!
—Roy (Tex) Knight—
Reward—Dead or Alive!

"Damn young fool!" Jeff muttered, studying the pictured face—a handsome young face with bold features and reckless eyes. Shaking his head, he went back inside to finish his interrupted breakfast.

As he seated himself at the table, a sudden shadow blotted out the morning sun streaming in the open window. Jeff twisted around and found himself facing the hard, taut stare of the original of the placard photographs!

Jeff's glance flickered toward his gun belt hanging from a wallpeg, but as he half rose from his chair the warning clap of a hand against a pistol butt checked his movement.

"I come here friendly, Carter—but keep sittin'!" Tex Knight advised. He swung his long legs in over the sill, keeping his right hand idling over his holstered Colt.

Jeff relaxed in his chair. "Come to give yourself up, Texas?" he asked, casually.

Tex gave a hard, sharp laugh. "I come here to find out what kind of evidence they're holdin' against me on Ned Griscom's murder. Give it to me straight, Carter."

"I don't rightly know, Texas," Jeff replied. "Sheriff Baxter wasn't ridin' with the posse that just left here, and the boys didn't go into details—too much in a hurry to get t'other side of Baldy."

Tex frowned. "Well, whatever evidence they got, it's been framed against me. I'm tellin' you, I didn't kill Griscom. Hell—Ned Griscom was my friend."

Jeff slowly re-filled his coffee cup. "Well, Texas, if you've got a story to tell, there's no use a-wastin' it on me. Tell Sheriff Baxter. You can trust him, Texas—he won't deal you no cards from the bottom of the deck."

"Yeah, Baxter's honest enough—but dumb!" Tex snapped. "Even so, I might take a chance with him, but not while Galt's his deputy sheriff. I wouldn't trust Galt any farther'n I could throw a longhorn."

Jeff gave him a sharp look. "You mean Galt's still carryin' a grudge because you cut him out with that yellow-haired Dawson girl?"

Tex Knight's tanned face grew darker. "There's a lot more than Lou-Anna Dawson between Galt and me. Galt lied a-plenty about what happened over at Three Forks—"

Tex spun a chair around and straddled it. "Listen, Carter, I had nothin' to do with that fight in the Crystal House Bar. I don't even know what started it. But I see this squint-eyed Mexican pulla knife, so I land one on his whiskers and take the knife away from him. Then some fool starts shootin' out the lights, and I ease out the side door. I swear that's all I had to do with it."

TEX'S voice hardened. "Next thing I hear is that the Mex is dead from bein' cracked over the head with a bottle—and that there's a warrant out for me—"

"The Mexican's brother swore out that warrant," Jeff cut it. "He swore he saw you swing the bottle."

"He's a damn liar!" Tex flared. "I never yet knocked a man down with anything but my fists. . . . Well, as soon as I hear the news I start ridin' back to the Forks, and on the road I meet up with Joe Galt. Without even a word of warnin' he draws and starts throwin' lead at me."

"Galt says you fired first," Jeff declared.

"That's another lie! I didn't fire at Galt—first *or* last. I was too busy gettin' away—Joe Galt was fixin' to bring me in dead!" Tex drew a deep breath, anger smoldering in his eyes. "After that I headed for the back hills, and I ran across Ned Griscom up along Whisperin' Creek. I told Griscom what had happened, because he never had much use for Galt either.

"Anyway, Griscom offered me his hunting cabin over the South Fork for a hideout. So I went there, and he brought over a load of grub from Pine Lodge. He told me he'd go down to Three Forks and have a palaver with that lyin' Mexican.

"Griscom said there wasn't anybody stayin' at the Inn just then, but it'd be safer if I didn't show myself on that side of the Creek. So I stayed close to the cabin, waitin' for him to bring me news. . . . He didn't come back! . . . Next day I hear horses splashin' through the ford, and it is Baxter comin' with a posse, so I light out in a hurry. Later on I heard that Griscom had been found murdered in Pine Lodge, and that they had plenty of evidence to prove I'd killed him."

Tex straightened up. "I been on the move ever since. . . . But I've told you the truth, Carter—the whole truth—so help me!"

Jeff shook his head. "You're in a mighty tough spot, Texas. But why tell me all this? I'm not sheriff any more. Baxter's carryin' the star now—you'll have to settle it with him."

"I could get away easy enough," Tex said slowly. "I got a good horse, a gun, and plenty of grub. But I'm not hittin' the trail with a killer's mark posted against my name."

Tex was silent for a moment. "Mr. Carter, I figure you're the only man in these parts smart enough to get at the truth—the real truth. So I'm askin' you to go up to Pine Lodge and check up on whatever evidence they got. No matter how good it looks, it's a fake, because I didn't kill Ned Griscom—I didn't even set foot in Pine Lodge. . . . If you'll do that for me, I give you my word I'll come ridin' back here tomorrow sundown and give myself up! . . . Is it a deal?"

There was silence in the room as Old Jeff Carter stared hard into the grim young face across the table. "Think it over good, Texas," he said. "Even if you're tellin' the truth, don't forget Galt's had the run of Griscom's place for three days now. It ain't likely I'd find anything there he don't want me to see."

"I'll have to take my chances on that," Tex answered. "But I'll keep my end of the bargain—win, lose, or draw. How about it?"

"It's a deal, Texas," Jeff said quietly.

"Thanks!" Tex moved swiftly to the window and swung his legs outward. "Just one more thing," he said. "Could you get word to Lou-Anna about this? I'd like her to know—"

Jeff nodded, and slowly drinking his coffee, listened to the galloping hoofbeats fading away toward the sheltering green of the friendly hills.

A LITTLE later in the morning Jeff was lucky enough to get a lift in a ranch car as far as the footbridge over Whispering Creek, but he was breathing hard by the time his old legs had finished the long up-hill climb to the scene of the murder.

Pine Lodge Inn was solidly built of untrimmed logs, with wings added to either side, for Whispering Creek was famous for its trout pools, and in the sporting season Griscom's inn often had as many as twenty guests at one time.

There was a roan horse tethered to the veranda rail, and three men were talking together on the steps as Jeff appeared. He saw they were Sheriff Baxter and his two deputies, Joe Galt and Hank Tilson.

"Well, look who's here!" Sheriff Baxter exclaimed cordially. "Ain't seen you in a dog's age, Jeff. Takes a good murder to coax you out o' hidin', eh?"

"Looks like you got hold of a good one this time, Baxter," Jeff replied. "Who was it found Ned Griscom's body?"

"I did," Tilson said, and Jeff nodded. He had a high opinion of Deputy Tilson—a lean-jawed, level-headed man.

"You satisfied Tex Knight did it?" Jeff asked him.

Tilson nodded. "No two ways about it, Jeff. You'll see why, when you go inside."

Sheriff Baxter turned to Galt. "Joe, you show Jeff around in there. . . . Be with you, Jeff, in a couple minutes. Tilson's got to ride."

Joe Galt's voice was friendly and courteous. "The trail starts right here at the front door. You can see by these bloodstains on the floor that Griscom was shot as he opened the door. He was shot in the right thigh. . . . Knight picked him up and put him into this chair, here by the table. Griscom must have sat in this chair for at least an hour—"

"How do you figure the time that close?" Jeff interrupted.

Galt smiled. "It was long enough for Griscom to smoke four or five pipefuls of tobacco. He'd probably keep smoking pretty steady, to help him stand the pain of that bullet in his leg."

Jeff nodded, and Galt went on. "Well, when Knight finished rummaging around, evidently he decided to cover up his trail by a cold-blooded job of murder. So he fired three more bullets into Griscom—shot him from behind!"

"And what makes you so sure Tex Knight did it?" Jeff demanded.

Galt's smile widened. "Griscom himself told us!"

"Griscom!" Jeff exclaimed. "You just said he was found dead!"

"He was," Galt replied, "but he left a message behind. When Knight left here, Griscom wasn't quite dead. He managed to drag himself across the room—all the way to this table in the corner. With his last bit of strength he reached up and dragged out this drawer. We found it on the floor, with all this stuff spilled out—playing cards, dice, poker chips, checkers and chessmen. Griscom wanted something that was in this drawer. What do you think it was?"

JEFF shook his head, and Galt, with an air of triumph, held up one of the chessmen—a small black wooden carving of a horse's head.

"This is what he wanted, Mr. Carter—the *knight!* He had it clutched tight in his dead hand. It wasn't just by accident either, because he'd reached out and brushed all the other stuff away from him. Not much room for argument with a clue like that, is there?"

Jeff Carter's face was completely blank as he fingered the black wooden marker. "What do you figure was Knight's motive?"

"Money—and grub!" Galt answered. "Griscom kept quite a bit of cash on hand. It's missing, and we found a lot of Griscom's supplies over in the South Fork cabin where Knight was hiding out."

From outside the pounding of hoofs indicated that Deputy Tilson had ridden off to join the manhunt. Sheriff Baxter came inside, his round face beaming with pride as he noticed the black chessman in Jeff's hand.

"Nice clue, ain't it, Jeff?" Baxter's voice boomed. "Griscom was right smart, to think of that. Makes a mighty neat case. Everything fits perfect—not a loose end left over anywhere."

"Well, no, Baxter, I wouldn't go that far," Jeff drawled. "That's puttin' it a little too strong."

"You think so?" Baxter challenged. "Well, go ahead and point me out just *one* thing that don't add up right!"

"Well," Jeff replied. "Galt telis me that Griscom smoked four or five pipefuls of tobacco before he was killed. I've known Ned Griscom a long time, and I never saw him smoke a pipe. He didn't use tobacco."

"You're wrong, Jeff," Baxter replied. "Just take a look at that shelf over the fireplace. Griscom has half a dozen old pipes and all kinds of smokin' mixtures."

"That don't mean anything," Jeff answered. "These city fishermen stayin' at the Lodge often go away leavin' smokin' equipment behind 'em. Griscom just picked up their stuff and laid it away on the shelf. Look for yourself, Baxter—the pipes are all dusty and the tobacco's dry as a bone."

"And I'm tellin' you Griscom smoked a pipe!" Baxter insisted. "The evidence is right here before your eyes. Here's the table where he sat—just like we found it. Pipe—tobacco pouch—match-holder—ash-tray."

"The ash-tray's empty," Jeff pointed out.

"Because I emptied it into the fireplace," Baxter said. "But there was nothin' in it but tobacco ash and matchsticks. I'll take a Bible oath on that."

Jeff walked over to the burned-out hearth and began poking into the litter of charred wood and ash. Galt came up behind him, trying to peer over his shoulder.

"Looking for something, Mr. Carter?" Galt asked.

"No, just lookin'," Jeff replied, and straightened up with a little grunt, brushing off his hands.

Baxter's booming voice rose again. "What's the big idea, Jeff—all this fussin' around over a pipeful of tobacco? Next thing you'll be sayin' that wasn'a a *knight* we found clutched in Griscom's hand!"

Jeff stared off into the distance. "No—but it could have some other meanin' than the one you give it, Baxter. I've been sayin' it over to myself, like this—the knight—the black knight. . . . Suppose what Griscom meant was black *night*—darkness!"

"That's a crazy idea, Jeff!" Baxter snorted. "You take a plain, straightforward fact and try to make a pig's tail out of it."

"Think so?" Jeff gave a slow smile. "You give me charge of this case for about ten minutes or so—maybe you'll change your tune!"

"Okay, Jeff!" Baxter grinned. "It's all yours—fire away!"

"Well, first off I want it dark in here," Jeff said crisply. "And I mean dark—pitch-black! Not a sliver of light showin' anywhere. . . . Galt, you go around and close all those storm shutters."

Galt looked at Sheriff Baxter with lifted brows, but the fat Sheriff only shrugged and grinned. "Give him what he wants, Joe."

So Galt went from window to window, closing the solid wooden shutters. The big square room dimmed into shadow, the open door furnishing the only light.

"Ready?" Jeff called. His lean figure made a flat black silhouette as he swung the door shut, and the room became a pit of utter darkness.

"Now keep standin' where you are!" Jeff called.

They heard him grope his way across the room—the rasping scrape of a piece of furniture—then a soft but vibrant "*Ha!*"

"What're you doin', Jeff?" Baxter called out impatiently. "What's all this hocus-pocus in the dark?"

A flashlight blazed in Jeff's hand. He was standing beside Griscom's table, his face a grim mask above the beam of light as he swiftly brushed aside Griscom's pipe and tobacco pouch, the match-holder and the ash-tray.

"Come closer now!" Jeff ordered. "Stand right here by the table. Watch this part of the table-top—where my flash is shining. Watch!"

The flashlight beam winked out and pitch darkness reigned again. "Look!" Jeff commanded in a tense voice.

A faint glow began to gather on the invisible table-top—a ghostly wavering that was like a thin yellow mist at first. It grew a little stronger as they watched—less wavering. Then the lines began to shape themselves into printed letters about four inches high! Faint letters, but quite visible to their straining eyes—glowing letters that spelled out a fateful message.

A STRANGLED cry exploded in the darkness—frantic footsteps hurtled through the darkness in a blind search for escape—

Jeff Carter's flashlight probed the darkness like a merciless finger pointing out the panic-stricken figure of Joe Galt as he clawed furiously at the wooden bar of the door.

"Stop him, Baxter!" Jeff shouted, holding the beam steady.

Sheriff Baxter could move his 220-pound bulk with astonishing speed whenever occasion called for swift action, and as Galt turned at bay, snatching for his gun, Baxter literally smothered the move. The sheriff's massive fist swung once, and Joe Galt wilted to the floor.

Jeff flung open the door and the nearest windows, and Baxter stirred his limp deputy with his foot. Then he turned his still startled gaze on Jeff Carter.

"What in thunder was that trick you

pulled in the dark?" he demanded. "It looked like ghost-writing—"

"'Twarn't a trick, Baxter," Jeff replied. "Ned Griscom himself wrote those words you saw, just as sure as if he'd used pen and ink. He wrote 'em with matches!"

"Matches!" Baxter echoed, bewildered.

"Let me explain it from the beginning," Jeff said. "I knew Griscom never used tobacco, so I asked myself why he took to smoking a pipe all of a sudden, and when I looked into the hearth, where you dumped the ash-tray, I found the answer."

Jeff held up one of the blue-tipped matches. "You see, Griscom still used old-fashioned wooden matches, the kind they call blue lucifers. They've got a lot of phosphorus in 'em, and if you wet the tips you can draw letters that only show up in the dark. I'll bet Griscom did that often when he was a kid. I caught on when I found half a dozen of these matches lyin' in the hearth, with their blue tips all worn away, although they'd never been struck. I didn't pick 'em out, because Galt was watching me."

"Well, I'll be damned!" Baxter said. "You figured all that out of the black knight in Griscom's hand?"

"No," Jeff answered. "I didn't waste any time over the black knight. I figured that was put there by the real killer to throw the crime onto Tex Knight. I did all that talkin' about it just to make Galt worried and uneasy. It was the smokin' angle gave the game away. I figured Griscom must've had some mighty special reason for askin' for pipe and tobacco. Matches! I said to myself—he wanted to get hold of some matches!"

Joe Galt stirred on the floor and sat up, holding his jaw. Sheriff Baxter's eyes were like flint as he stared down at his deputy. Then he turned to Jeff.

"Take a walk for a couple of minutes, Jeff. I got a little talkin' to do with Joe Galt!"

Jeff nodded and stepped outside. The door closed with a bang. He paced to and fro on the veranda, closing his ears to the assorted noises which came from within. In a little while Sheriff Baxter came out, rubbing a bruised knuckle on his sleeve.

"I got the whole story now, Jeff," he announced grimly. "Galt was sweet on that Dawson girl and wanted Tex Knight out of the way. So he bribed the Mexican to swear out a false warrant over that fight at Three Forks, and then tried to make it doubly sure by ambushin' Knight along the road.

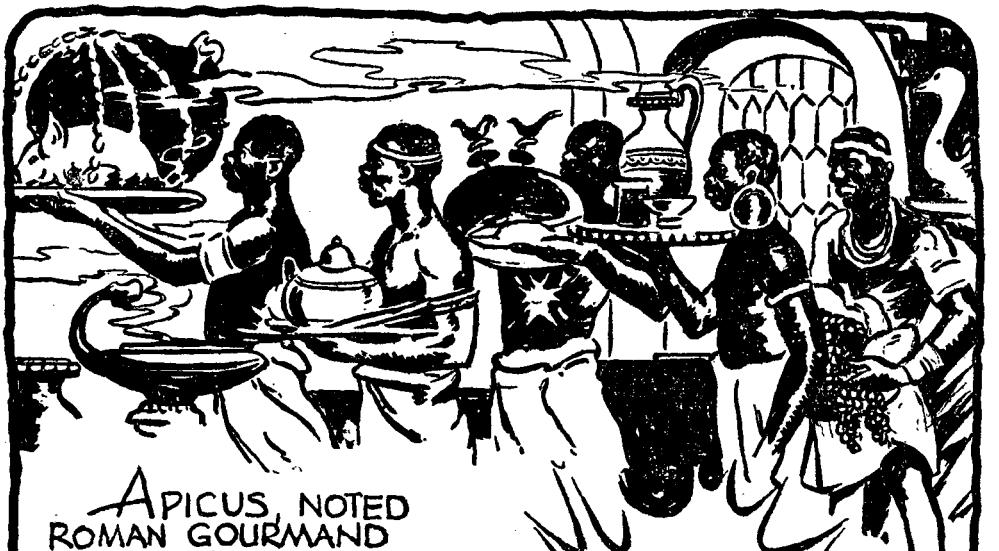
"But Tex got away to the hills, and then Ned Griscom arrived at the Forks. Griscom asked the Mexican a lot of questions, so Galt got scared and trailed Ned back here to Pine Lodge and shot him. And just like you figured, Jeff, it was Galt who put the black knight in his hand."

Sheriff Baxter mopped his forehead. "I don't mind admittin' that that black knight had me fooled," he said. "And when I think how close I come to puttin' a rope around an innocent man's neck—well, maybe you quit bein' sheriff a little too soon, Jeff."

Old Jeff nodded and smiled. Out of his vest pocket he pulled his sheriff's badge, dulled now by the years. He breathed on it, rubbing it vigorously against his blue flannel shirt until the five-pointed star glittered in the sun.

"It still shines up pretty near as good as new, don't it?" he chuckled.

Curioddities By Weill

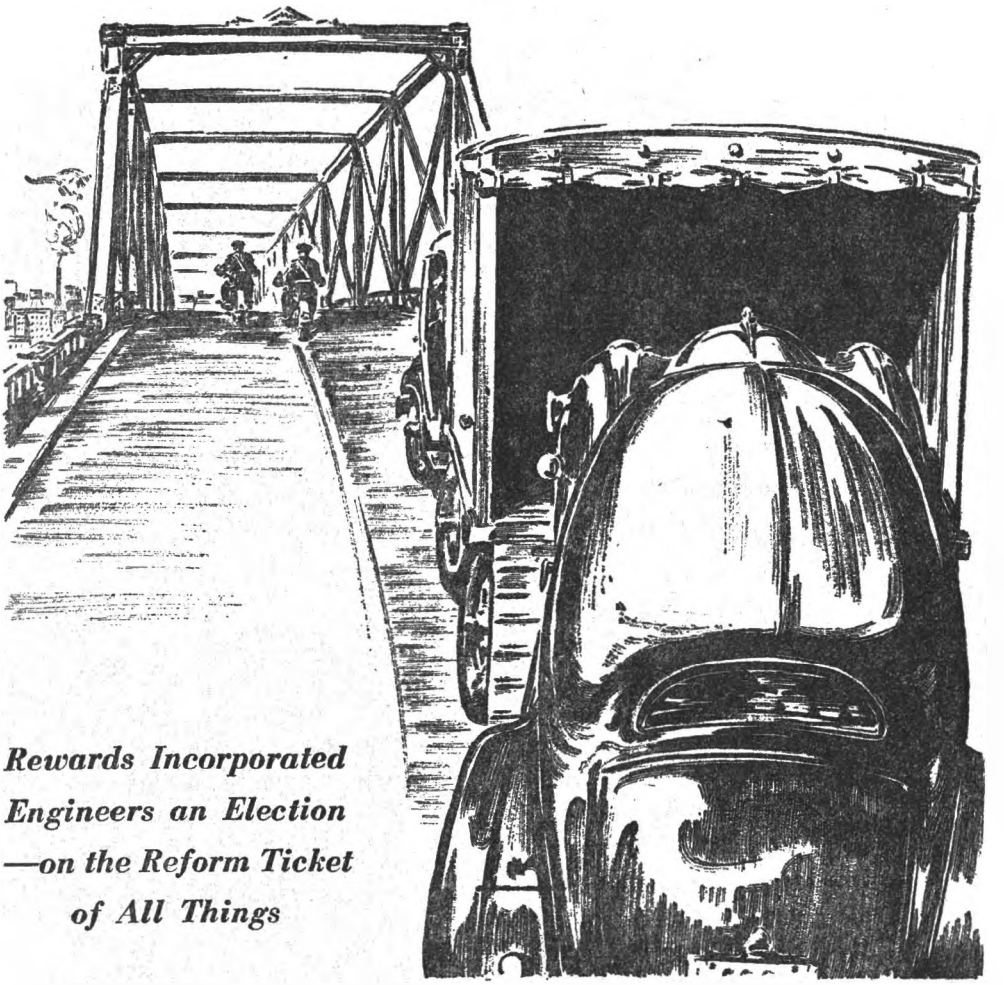


APICUS, NOTED ROMAN GOURMAND AND GOURMET, ESTABLISHED A SCHOOL OF **GLUTTONY**! HE DELIVERED LECTURES ON THE SCIENCE OF EXCITING HUNGER *AND HOW TO PRODUCE A* **SECOND HUNGER** *AFTER THE FIRST PANGS WERE APPEASED*!

GUNPOWDER AND **PAPER** ARE INVENTIONS OF THE **CHINESE**!

THOMAS JEFFERSON ORIGINATED OUR DECIMAL SYSTEM OF CURRENCY! BEFORE BECOMING PRESIDENT HE WAS A PROSPEROUS LAWYER— *BUT AT HIS DEATH HE WAS PRACTICALLY* **PENNILESS**!

HOW MANY TIMES A MINUTE DOES AN ELEPHANT'S HEART BEAT? *See Curioddities next time.*



Rewards Incorporated Engineers an Election —on the Reform Ticket of All Things

REWARDS INCORPORATED

By JAMES NORMAN & RICHARD WORTHINGTON

Conclusion

XXI

12:30 P.M.

ON THE corner Piper found a tavern, crowded with such of the citizenry as did not feel they could live through three hours of Boss Bent's foaming oratory without the aid of an anaesthetic

Piper elbowed his way through the mob to a phone booth. He dropped in a nickel and called Rhea Vern. She answered almost at once.

"Nice work with the cop. Thanks."

Rhea sniffed. "I thought he needed to study a little law. No warrant, indeed. Of course, I didn't expect it to fall on him."

"Or did you?"

She didn't answer that. "I've found something else," she said. "I've got to talk to you or Muir or somebody."

Piper told her where he was and she said she was coming right over. In three minutes she arrived and Piper waved her into the booth he had held stout-heartedly against all comers.

"Has Mr. Muir located that red-headed woman yet?" she said, when the waiter had brought them a pair of cool, foamy beers.

Somebody ought to tell her, Piper reflected. "She's dead," he said. "We found her body yesterday. I guess you won't be able to ask her about those checks."

Rhea was silent for a long time. Then she said, "Oh," in a soft voice. "But it doesn't fit—not unless she saw him—"

"What are you talking about? What are you holding back?" Piper demanded.

"I—I can't tell you," she said. "I'm not sure myself and anyway you have no right to accuse me of holding back. I've brought you every single thing I've found. Those checks and—now this." From the folds of her cardinal red sports coat she brought out a manila folder. If producing it just then was one of Muir's diversion tactics, it worked. Piper pounced upon it.

"What is it?"

"It's the record of the O'Connell case—you know, that labor leader that Matti tried to frame. And there's something about it that I don't understand. It hadn't been filed in the proper index. But the way the edge of it was sticking up over the other things made it look as if somebody meant it to be found. And there's a fingerprint on it. In something that looks like—blood." She shivered a little.

Piper leafed through the contents of the folder—neatly clipped legal briefs, with a rusty brown smudge in the upper right-hand corner of the top page.

"Do you think it could be Mr. Stevens' blood?" Rhea asked.

"It looks smudged and dried as if it had been there for a long time," Piper told her.

"But I'm sure it's new. I filed the O'Connell brief originally, and I wouldn't have noticed it today if it hadn't been in the wrong place. Someone's had it out in the last day or two."

"Stevens?"

"Perhaps. But unless he was terribly excited or disturbed when he replaced it, he'd have put it in the proper place. He was awfully neat about things. How about Matti? He was in the building Monday night."

Piper frowned a little. "If Matti had been upstairs and seen this, he wouldn't have left it. Six to one, somebody else planted it to frame Matti. Maybe Bent or Fingers. Maybe—" His eyes rested suspiciously on her face. Who'd know more about the files and what was in them than Rhea Vern? Was she using this in another one of her attempts to strew suspicion prodigally and in any direction she could think of?

She was watching him, reading his thoughts. "You think I did it—you think I killed Mr. Stevens—" Her voice rose shrilly.

"Hey, cut it out," Piper begged. And then to quiet her down and avoid the embarrassment of a scene, he swore that no, of course he didn't think any such thing. "Although," he added seeing that she had calmed down a little, "it has occurred to me once or twice that you might be covering up for somebody."

"Which is why I hired Muir, I suppose." She tried to look scornful, without quite succeeding.

"It could be"—he hazarded the shot in the dark—"that you might try to help this person in every way you could, cover up for whoever it is—and still you'd hire Muir, because more than anything you had to *know*—because nothing could be worse, nothing at all, than not knowing, not being sure."

She raised the glass of beer quickly to her lips. As she set it down, her hand trembled ever so slightly. "Don't be absurd. You go around talking like that and you'll only get into a lot of trouble."

"I'm in trouble right now. Up to my

ears in it. And I didn't try to get into any of it. It just came right up and bit me." His eyes happened to lift over the back wall of their booth and his spine stiffened as quickly and thoroughly as if it had been subjected to a blast of liquid air.

Standing at the far end of the bar was Bent's trigger man, John Fingers. But he didn't seem to have them spotted. Piper sighed, lowered his voice.

"Muir wants me to have a look at Stevens' apartment," he said. "How's about a key?"

She fished one out of her purse. "Captain Kennedy was over there yesterday. I don't think he overlooked much. But here."

Piper dropped the key into his pocket. "And now it is indicated that we scram. You take that folder to Lincoln Wegg at the Bentwood Arms, and if you want me for any reason come to Stevens' place. Knock four times."

As they left the tavern, Piper glanced back. Fingers pushed away from the bar and followed them at a respectful distance.

2 P.M.

THE sun was a mild and custardy yellow. Between one-thirty and two, Preston's population had decamped, virtually en masse, to Larkin's Grove eight miles out on the Lake Shore. By automobile, taxi, train and chartered bus they traveled. Give 'em a picnic and they'll give you a vote, was Boss Bent's variation on the classic bread-and-circuses theme.

The sudden activity of Colonel Abbott's Reformers had caused City Hall nothing more than a slight, momentary scare; 250,304 picnickers were on hand at Larkin's Grove to show Boss Bent just where he stood in their admiring hearts.

Promptly at two, Mayor Bent's cavalcade of official cars, headed by the Boss' own brocaded limousine, eased from the curve and swung over to Pizarro Drive where a shrieking escort of police motorcycles picked them up. They hit Highway Twelve at a sixty-mile clip, and Mayor Bent nudged his companion, Police Commissioner Wirt.

"I'll practice again," he said.

With a tactless groan, Commissioner Wirt fished the copy of the mayor's speech from the briefcase on his stingy lap; the chauffeur-bodyguards on the front seat winced and wished they dared lower the window behind them. They were huge and their police uniforms strained madly to accommodate their hulking frames. Beneath the jaunty blue caps beamed the faces of Denny and Albert, who, having by a stroke of luck and the judicious application of a bottle of rye in the proper quarters learned that the mayor's bodyguards were chosen from a group of third-ward huskies and rotated at frequent intervals, had managed to assume these roles for one special matinee only.

Mayor Bent's voice lifted magnificently from the back seat.

Albert stooped down, reaching cautiously for the sawed-off shotgun beneath his feet. Denny restrained him. "Not yet," he whispered. Albert looked disappointed; and Bent's voice rasped on unchecked.

They were approaching a narrow steel suspension-bridge, and Denny checked his speed. Pretty soon, now—

Albert picked up the shotgun just as the first of the advance guard of motorcycles whizzed across the bridge and sailed on, passing without notice the blue moving van parked on the shoulder of the road just this side of the bridge.

Suddenly the mayor's voice choked off. Denny had swung the big limousine off the road, cut the speed, and driven neatly up a convenient ramp into the interior of the van. Almost in the same second, another limousine, looking exactly like the mayor's, fell into line in the parade.

The blue van turned off Highway Twelve into a clay sideroad; and the barrel of Albert's gun looked right into Mayor Bent's eye, counseling silence.

In the brocaded limousine that had taken their place, Angel Auden was busily coaching Colonel Abbott in a few last-minute changes in his speech.

XXII

3:15 P.M.

STEVENS' apartment was even more still than the deserted streets outside as Piper entered it cautiously, using Rhea's key. He went to the windows, raised the shades, and made sure that he had finally lost the persistent John Fingers.

The flat, as Piper surveyed it, was a solid reflection of Stevens' solid character. Everything was simple, orderly, and compact. The impression was of neatness carried to the point of mania, and Piper remembered what Rhea said about Stevens' files. Everywhere were signs that Captain Kennedy had been rooting around.

In the ice-box in the kitchen, there was nothing but a bottle of ginger ale, and Piper wished he had something to go with it. Except if he really had had any whiskey, he wouldn't have ruined it by mixing it with ginger ale.

He came to the living room, sat down at the desk, riffled idly through the lawyer's letter stack. Then he called the Bentwood Arms number, but there was no answer. He hoped Rhea was all right.

His eyes fell on the white edge of an envelope sticking out from under the green, fresh blotter. He pulled it out and opened it.

The letter was written in longhand on stationery bearing the crest of the Evergreen Club in Chicago. The date on it was two months old.

Dear Mr. Stevens.

I hope you can help me although I am a complete stranger to you. I'm trying to find my brother who's been lost for almost twenty years. The last news I had of him was while he was in France in 1918.

The War Department has informed me that he returned to this country in 1921, after he had spent three years in the hospital in Paris. Since then, I heard that he had come to some city or town near here.

He was with the 51st Infantry Brigade and was wounded on or about October 27, 1918. I have been told that this was your outfit.

I am enclosing a snapshot he sent me before he was wounded. Also his war record which the Government sent to me.

I pray you can help me.

Both war record and snapshot were missing; but Piper didn't search very hard because he was pretty sure where the snapshot, at least, was. At headquarters, where it had been taken after the police had found it in the service closet with Stevens' body.

A key scraped in the lock of the front door.

Quickly, Piper shoved the letter into his pocket. It wasn't Rhea, because he had her key. Piper made tracks for the pantry door; he was about two-thirds of the way there when the door swung open. Piper froze.

John Fingers drifted into the room, accompanied by two thick-shouldered men who were a cinch to spot as police officers in mufti. Piper felt very, very cold. Because Mayor Bent's cops loved their bright and shiny uniforms. The only time they didn't wear them on duty was when the job they had to do required a certain amount of anonymity.

"Okay," said Fingers. "It's him."

Piper's yearning for escape was strong. But his frozen feet wouldn't cooperate. His throat felt dry and hot. Even when one of the men came up and grabbed his arm, he couldn't speak. Instinctively he pulled away. The man's big paw lifted and batted him back toward the desk. The blows rocked his head and he struck out blindly.

He had a vague, dreamy impression that the heel of his hand had connected with someone's chin; he heard a grunt.

Mallet-like fists sledge-hammered his face, his head, his belly. More than two fists; a whole slew of them. Piper couldn't see through the redness that pulsated across his eyes; he was still swinging but he was no longer connecting.

His knees buckled and he fell on his face. Something lifted him and slammed him down into a chair. They strapped him to it with his own belt. Piper's fists went on swinging like some crazy mechanism that wouldn't run down.

Fingers ducked in and slammed him across the mouth. A ribbon of pain tore Piper's lips and he felt the warm wetness of blood leaking down his chin. Fingers got his hands in Piper's hair and jerked his head back.

"Okay, Hamlin," he said. "That was a taste. Now let's have your statement, or we'll really make it tough."

"Nuts," said Piper thickly, stubbornly.

A brass-knuckled fist smacked cruelly across his cheek. Piper cursed in a low, dogged monotone. Cursing himself mostly. For being a damned fool. They had him cold. They could slap him around until they killed him. Why did he sit here and take it? Why didn't he show some sense and do what they wanted him to?

But he wouldn't. He wasn't being a hero; he was just a stubborn jackass who never would learn any sense.

The next blow of the brass knuckles caught him over the ear. Then Fingers took Piper's wrist and clamped it firmly between his bony knees while he brought a gold penknife out of his pocket and opened the smallest blade. He jabbed its point up under Piper's fingernail. The room spun sickly.

Fingers began talking in a low, hateful monotone. "I'll tell you what you're going to do, chum. You're going to sign a statement, see? The Stevens' kill was framed to spike the Machine, understand? Abbott made you do it. You was acting for him. He gave you money. A lotta money. You put your handle to that and we'll see that you get off—state's evidence. And twenty grand in the bank on top of it. Why make it tough on y'self?"

Why, indeed? Maybe the Machine had figured it pretty close, at that. Maybe fingering Abbott wouldn't be too far from the truth.

"Go to hell," Piper said through his bloody lips.

FINGERS clouted him across the side of his jaw and started to go to work again with the glistening little blade. Piper sucked in his breath and wondered how much more he could take.

Suddenly the phone rang. Fingers lifted the receiver. Piper leaned forward and shouted: "Help!" until one of the other two men grabbed his head back by the hair and brought the side of a hard hand forcefully against Piper's Adam's apple. Piper gagged.

"Mr. Halliday's office calling," said a sing-song secretarial voice. "Mr. Halliday wants you here immediately. If you have contacted a certain party leave him where he is but make sure he stays there. Mr. Halliday will go back there with you."

Fingers mumbled an "Okay," and hung up. Then he turned to Piper and said, "Me and the boys gotta scram. But you'll keep." They ripped curtain cords from the windows and tied his hands and feet. They used his yellow silk pocket handkerchief as a gag.

When he was alone, Piper started to work on the lashings. But his body felt numb and heavily clumsy; his brain wouldn't work right. At the end of five minutes all he'd done was to work up a clammy sweat that soaked through his clothes.

Then the key turned in the lock again, and Piper's abdominal muscles drew together. But this time it was Rhea. She had a tiny gun in her hand. She stared at

him sickly for a moment and then ran to set him free. "I had to wait until I was sure they'd gone," she said.

When the last of the ropes lay neatly severed on the floor, Rhea helped him over to the couch. He grinned at her weakly, and she began wiping the blood from his lips.

"How did you know they were here at all?" he asked.

"That was me on the phone just now. I called to tell you that Mr. Muir still hadn't come back. A voice answered that I didn't know, and then you shouted for help, so I pretended to be Halliday's secretary. It was the only way I could think of to get them out of here. I think this gun is Angel's. I found it in her room. Did I do all right?"

"Baby," he said, "you did just fine."

XXIII

5 P.M.

THEY hailed a cab outside of Stevens' place and drove to Rhea's apartment. "I've really got to fix up those cuts and things a little, and those men may be back any minute," Rhea'd said.

In her small, comfortable living room, Piper lolled back on the chintz-covered couch, while Rhea fussed over him deftly with peroxide and witch hazel and mercurochrome and warm water and lint and adhesive.

Piper tried not to yowl when she brushed the sorer places, but finally he reached up and took both her wrists firmly and pulled her hands down from his face.

"Enough's enough," he said. "I must look like a sunset now." He didn't let go of her wrists for a long time. She kept staring down at him in an odd sort of way, half-baffled, half-tender; and it seemed to Piper there were tears in her eyes. If only she'd level with him, if only she could somehow make him sure that she was as sweet and decent as she looked.

The phone rang shrilly and Rhea, with a little jump, as if her thoughts had been a long distance away, answered it. She jerked the handset at Piper. "It's for you," she said, puzzled.

"Somebody's got the eagle eye on me all right," Piper said, and took the phone.

"Listen, Hamlin," said a voice that sounded as if its owner was muffling the mouthpiece with a handkerchief. "Rhea Vern doesn't want any part of you. She's just being nice to you so you won't go snooping around in places you shouldn't. She doesn't want an unimportant bystander like you to get hurt. But I'm not so fussy. I'm warning you to lay off. She's spoken for."

Piper's scalp tightened angrily. But he had to be cagey. This was very important. To him, and maybe to a couple of other people. "How did you know I was here?" he demanded.

Across the line came a dry little cough. "I have eyes," said the voice. "And they'll be watching you. So be smart, Hamlin." A little click announced that the connection had been cut off.

"Who was it?" Rhea demanded, looking frightened.

Piper wheeled on her with blazing, bitter eyes. "A friend in disguise, warning me to lay off you," he told her. She looked more frightened than ever, and backed away.

"Then you must, Piper. You really must!"

He gripped her shoulders hard. "No," he said flatly. "I'll be damned if I will. You're going to tell me what you've been holding back—and why you went to Muir. You're trying to protect somebody, and yet you're afraid of him. If he did this killing, you want him behind bars. But Libby La Roche didn't fit into the picture. I know that much. I'm not leaving here until you tell me the rest."

"All right, Piper," she said meekly. "I will. I—I don't think you'll care for it much." She took a shuddering breath. "I met this man when I first came to Preston,

even before I went to work for Mr. Stevens. He wasn't good-looking or anything, but he was—well, sort of interesting. I think even then I was afraid of him a little, but I couldn't seem to keep him out of my mind. He was like some kind of dangerous magnet that drew me in spite of myself.

"One night, after I'd known him for about six weeks, we went to dinner. I'd just got my job with Stevens and we were celebrating. I got tight or he got me tight —it doesn't matter; and I went to his apartment. I must have passed out there. Anyway I was still there the next morning. He —he said— No, Piper, please don't look at me—"

Piper turned his face away obediently. "He said that while I'd been tight, I'd done—terrible things. And that he'd taken pictures of me. I didn't believe him and I insisted that he show me the pictures if there really were any. He just laughed at me, and I couldn't tell if he was bluffing or not. It was quite terrible really.

"In some funny kind of way, he seemed to be in love with me. But not like another man would be. He didn't even act as if he wanted to kiss me or anything like that. He just insisted that I be there whenever he wanted me and go places with him and wear the clothes he picked out for me. He treated me more like a doll than a woman." She shuddered. "He touched me once and his hands were so dry and horrible that I couldn't help shivering. He struck me then, in the face; but he never touched me again. He seemed satisfied just to feel that I belonged to him."

A strange look came into her eyes.

"Then one night, Mr. Stevens saw me with him, and told me that he was a terrible person and I mustn't go out with him any more. I explained a little, but not about the pictures; and Mr. Stevens said that if the other man made any more trouble for me, he'd settle him for good and all. I think he told that to this man too, frightened him somehow. Because for months and months I never saw him again.

"Not until Mr. Stevens began to take an interest in me personally, and finally asked me to marry him. I was very fond of him and I trusted him. I knew I wasn't in love with him. But I was always terrified that this other man would come back into my life—and I thought if I was married to Mr. Stevens, he'd leave me alone.

"Somehow he found out what was going on. He phoned and made dreadful threats. I saw him several times to try to make him be reasonable—that must have been the meetings Halliday's men found out about—but he just grew wilder and wilder. Finally I told him he could do what he liked, I was going to marry Mr. Stevens.

"The next morning Mr. Stevens was dead."

Piper whistled. "You poor kid."

"I was afraid it would all come out, if he was arrested. So I just sort of threw suspicion all over the place to confuse the police. Then I saw I'd got you into trouble, and I was sorry. People have always been unfair and horrible to you, haven't they Piper? I—I didn't want to be.

"Anyhow, as you said, I had to know, one way or the other. So I went to Chicago and hired Muir. When we came back, I got in touch with this man and he assured me that he had an alibi for Tuesday morning. He'd been at work very early, a lot of people had seen him. So then Muir was unnecessary, really."

"Why did you keep him on?"

SHE looked at him, and smiled. "Because by that time, you were in deeper hot water than ever. I'd started it, really, and I thought I might just as well use Mr. Stevens' money to set an innocent man free. So I kept Muir on. And then it came out that the killing had been done on Monday night, and I'd seen this—this man near the building myself on that night.

"Then as you said, Libby La Roche didn't fit into the picture. Unless she'd seen him do it and he had to kill her too. So I still don't know. And that's all ex-

cept that I did know about Mr. Stevens' will and I kept quiet because I was afraid to admit it to the police. And that's the truth, Piper. Every word of it."

Piper nodded. "I guess I believe you. But you haven't told me the man's name."

She shook her head wildly. "You mustn't ask me that—he'd do something to you—"

"Stevens handled him. So could I."

"No, Piper. Mr. Stevens was—" She stopped abruptly.

His smile was wry. "Mr. Stevens was a whole man, not half a one, is that it?"

"No, it isn't. I was going to say that Mr. Stevens was different. Don't you see, Piper, I wasn't in love with him—I was selfish and I honestly didn't care—"

"Wait. Wait a minute. Do you know what you just said?"

"Of course. *I* said it, didn't I?"

Piper's grin was beatific.

No girl had ever fitted into his arms as perfectly as this one. Not even Glory's lying lips had been as sweet as these warm, honest ones. The words of an old song flitted through Piper's brain: "Here I go again . . . taking a chance on love. . . ."

Piper didn't care. His arms tightened about Rhea's shoulders and he kissed her again. . . .

They were in another taxi on the way to Bentwood Arms when Rhea had a sudden, half-indignant thought. "Why, Piper," she said, "after you kissed me, you never once asked me again about that awful man's name."

He smiled happily. "I know I didn't. You see, I think I know his name. All I really wanted to find out from you was *why* you wouldn't tell it to me—I had to be sure whose side you were really on."

Before this colloquy could continue, the cab stopped at a downtown crossing; and a newsboy thrust an extra through the lowered window.

BOSS BENT DISAPPEARS!

screamed the headline. Piper let out a startled howl and fished in his pocket for a nickel.

Excitedly they glanced through the news story, their eyes hitting salient phrases. Mayor fails to appear at Larkin's Grove . . . statewide search . . . no clues . . . developments expected hourly . . . state investigation scheduled to probe Boss Bent's bank account . . . tainted millions alleged to pour in from land-condemnation racket robbing taxpayers of untold sums . . . state militia at polls tomorrow.

"Well, I'll be a bartender's grandfather!" Piper muttered admiringly. He scanned the text of Abbott's speech. It was pointed and punchy, and it had the further advantage over the Boss's astonishing rhetoric in that it seemed to be in English.

5:15 P. M.

THE first thing that Angel did when she saw Piper's battered face was to rush forward and clutch at him with comforting coos.

"I'll fix you right up, lollipop," she murmured.

"Nix, Florence Nightingale," Piper told her, one eye on Muir. "Somebody's beaten you to the antiseptics."

Angel looked disappointed.

"Me," said Rhea smugly. The two girls gazed at each other coolly for a minute, then Angel smiled.

"Well, I'll be darned. Here I am standing over a hot election all day and you go and walk off with my most profitable patient. Nice going, pal. Piper's a sweet lad." She squeezed Rhea's shoulder, and Rhea smiled too.

Muir and his lead soldiers were fascinating each other again. "I suppose you hijacked the mayor this afternoon," Piper said. "Maybe that wasn't such a hot idea."

Muir sat back and lit a cigarette, waving a slender hand over his battlefield. "Napoleon would have admired this—strike hard against the enemy center after

it's been softened up with plenty of artillery fire. That's just about what we did this afternoon. Kept striking hard with the scandals and graft—and then a smashing blow right to Headquarters staff."

"Wait till they start firing back, coach," Piper advised.

"We can't wait for anything," Muir snapped. "We've got to strike again. Right smack at City Hall."

Piper's mouth sagged open. "Call the *News,* Rhea. Tell them to start working up obituaries on Muir, Hamlin and the rest of the team."

Muir smiled. "That reminds me. You have another piece coming out in the *News* tonight. Getting to be quite the political expert, aren't you?"

Piper knew better than to argue. "What did I say this time?"

"You tell all about Bent's land racket. Very juicy. I happened to be going through the back files of the *News* and it struck me as distinctly odd that every time the city condemned a parcel of land for public use the owner was inevitably our own dear Mr. Sneeze."

"Sienciewicz," Piper murmured. "You mean Sienciewicz."

"I know exactly who I mean. But I refuse to cope with that name even once more. As I was saying, our friend Mr. Sneeze seems gifted with a strange foresight as to where the condemnation lightning will strike next. He's always there one jump ahead of the city. It couldn't be that someone has been giving him the office, could it? That he's merely acting as an agent?

"Our friend Mr. Donne did all the assessing on this land, and we can assume that in each instance he jacked up the price nicely, so that the city had to pay its mayor through his agent Mr. Sneeze two or three times what the plots were worth." Muir spread his hands in that annoying gesture. "Q.E.D. You're a genius to have discovered all this, Mr. Hamlin. Virtually a public benefactor."

"Virtually," said Piper, "a public benefactor, deceased."

Rhea had been listening. "Then that's what Mr. Stevens knew."

"We haven't any proof that Donne or anybody else sold such information to Stevens. And who was dealing with Stevens—Donne, Libby, or Mr. Sneeze? And why kill the goose that was laying golden eggs?"

"Sneeze—now you've got me doing it," fretted Piper; "Sienciewicz said he was there to buy land. Why couldn't he be telling the truth? He'd probably got a tip on the next site to be condemned for public use, and Stevens happened to own it."

"And the cigarette lighter?"

"Libby could be short for Elizabeth. Hence the E."

"Not bad at all, Piper. Not bad at all. Maybe I knocked a little sense into you this afternoon."

Piper reddened, glared, and didn't answer.

Lincoln Wegg appeared in the doorway. For once his hands were perfectly still; his pale eyes held a worried gleam. "Muir"—he said, and sounded vaguely puzzled.

ON THE white screen in Wegg's darkened workroom, the magnified image of a smudged fingerprint was thrown in detailed exactness. The huge whorled patterns had already been classified; whorls and friction ridges were marked off and numbered.

"That's the thumbprint from the O'Connell file Miss Vern brought," murmured Wegg. "Hopelessly smudged. I did better on the blood analysis—same type as Stevens'. And on the back of the paper I found three additional prints that I brought out easily with antimony—index, fore, ring. Identified."

Wegg shot a sidewise glance at Rhea. "Well, whose are they?" Piper demanded.

"Another dead man's," Wegg answered. "It's crazy, but there it is. Those prints

belong to this man." He handed Muir an enlargement of a reward poster, and Piper crowded forward to see it. The picture was of a plump young man with a heavy mustache, in profile. Beneath it, in black type:

$500.00 REWARD

Edward Frothers—19 yrs. old; 5′ 11″; blond; wt.: 175 lbs. Wanted for blackmail and forgery. Escaped Tierny County Jail, Idaho, Jan. 10, 1917. Aliases: Edward Brothers; Edward Kane.

Piper pointed to the numeral B. DF-742 which had been added in longhand beneath the row of fingerprints displayed on the poster.

"Reward Inc.'s reference number," Wegg informed him. "It means: Biography, dead file, card Number 742. I've checked it. According to the record, Brothers committed another crime in Michigan, antecedent to the Idaho jailbreak. He was traced to Canada. In 1917, he joined the Canadian Army; transferred in France to A.E.F., Yankee Division. Killed in action.

"His fingerprints show plainly on the McConnell file."

"But that is absolutely goofy," Piper protested.

"You're telling me?" Wegg demanded morosely. "Something is very, very wrong."

"*Something,*" Piper corrected him, "stinks to high heaven. And I'm not sure it isn't the fingerprint department."

Wegg looked hurt.

At this point, Angel beamed in the doorway and beckoned to Piper. With a wary glance at the preoccupied Muir, he slid away. Angel slid her hand through his arm. "There's something mamma wants lollipop to do for her," she said, drawing him into the living room where the radio was going full blast, belching out the nasal utterance of some Middlewest congressman who was yammering the usual isolationist twaddle. "Sit down and listen, like a nice lollipop," Angel said sweetly, and jammed him down into the chair in front of the radio so hard that his spine almost twanged.

She retired across the room, where Piper couldn't see her.

At first it was just the guy's voice that Piper couldn't take. Then the things he was saying rubbed under Piper's skin. The way the speaker wanted it, America was an island having no communication with anything else in the world. The oceans were her boundaries and behind them she should crouch eternally, her eyes blinded, her ears deafened to any sight or sound from beyond them.

The guy didn't seem to understand that, no matter how you felt about it, it just wasn't physically possible any more. You let your friends get picked off one by one, and then you were alone. And the ocean wall might be too high for you to cross, but somehow it didn't prevent the enemy from coming over and getting you. Only because you hadn't admitted there was an enemy or a fight going on, for justice and freedom and the wellbeing of all your friends and neighbors in the whole wide world, you were hopelessly unprepared and surprised, hideously defenseless. Piper didn't know there was anybody left who believed these things any more.

THE blary voice stopped blatting at last. Piper snapped off the radio and, standing up, made a face. "That guy," he muttered in disgust. "What did you want me to listen to him for?"

"Don't you know?" Angel came over and stood close to him. "Maybe you'll see it some day. But you're like that guy, Piper. And you shouldn't be."

"I'm like that twerp?" Piper was indignant.

"He wants a whole country to live in a little hole. Think it over." Then she put her arms around his neck and kissed him.

"And what was that?" Piper demanded, considerably startled.

"Same as the other. Call them sort of wedding presents. Gavin asked me to marry him today. I've been trying to needle him into it for years, making a play for every man I see, when he's the only one there is. I think you got his goat especially. But more than that, I think you told him something earlier today that finally made up his mind. So thanks, Piper sugar. Thanks for the world on a platter."

XXIV

6 P.M.

THE city lay deserted. The amber sun drew long melancholy shadows along the empty streets. Muir and Piper, parked in front of City Hall in the station wagon, were enjoying the late news bulletins, which announced such welcome tidings as the wild acclaim that had greeted Colonel Abbott's sensational appearance in Larkin's Grove, after word about the land swindles had leaked through; Boss Bent's machine seemed to be in complete rout.

"Comes the revolution," Piper muttered. They got out of the car.

The City Hall corridor hollowly echoed the click of their heels as they marched across it. They had a little trouble with the uniformed guard; but Muir insisted that they were on their way to see Maloney, and that he, in his turn, was bursting in his eagerness to see them.

The cops frisked them and let them pass.

They waited until the elevator had started down again before heading along the third-floor corridor, not to Maloney's office, but to the mayor's own sanctum sanctorum.

"No one home," Muir said, as they pushed in, eyeing the empty mahogany chairs, the vacant receptionist's-desk, and the blank wooden stiffness of the unoccupied office.

"Congratulations, by the way. That's what Angel had to tell me."

Muir acknowledged Piper's words with a grunt and an almost imperceptible jerk of the head. Well, I'll be damned, thought Piper happily. The guy's embarrassed. Old Steel-frame Muir is all a-twitter. He'd never thought he'd live to see the day.

They pushed through a second door, and still encountered no one. They stood in Bent's private office. Muir took off his hat and skimmed it across the desk.

The room was large and airy, slightly smaller than a medium-sized auditorium. Its walls were a pale blue; the hangings an angry red. The carpet had once been white. On the mayor's desk were half a dozen phones each painted a different color to indicate with which city department each line was in direct connection.

On the wall behind them was a gigantic map of Preston, breaking the city into its six hundred odd election districts, as well as its foreign-language centers. It showed ward by ward the details of each previous election, down to the hour by hour vote, and influences such as weather, church feasts, accidents and fires.

"If that isn't the old finger on the city's pulse," Piper asked, "what is?"

The door in the outer office closed with a bang that shook the whole room, and Mayor Bent, his face purple and his temper ablaze, came striding into the room. Chail, Maloney and Wirt were behind them. Denny McHughes, at the tail end of the procession, closed the door and leaned against it.

"C.O.D.," he murmured. "And fragile."

His cheeks puffed, the mayor stormed over to Muir and Piper. "Vandals," he raged. "Reds. Anarchists!"

"Sit down, Bent," Muir advised him. "Think of your blood pressure."

"And don't wince," said Piper, beginning to enjoy himself.

Muir raised his voice to carry across the room. "Louie dig up Kittens Matti yet?" Denny nodded.

"On the way."

Muir pulled a prepared list out of his pocket. He shot it across the room to Denny. "Good. Then get these."

Denny left.

"You are all," said the mayor in a voice which thirsted for attention, "under arrest!" He streaked for his desk, grabbing up simultaneously one pink and one orange telephone. Muir's fingers broke the connection. The umbrella in his other hand tapped Bent chidingly across the knuckles. Mayor Bent dropped the phones.

"Now," Muir began, "let's all sit down for a quiet little informal chat. Shall we, for instance, begin with the burning question of whether or not Bent is running for mayor this season?"

The mayor started to rant, and Muir raised his umbrella provocatively. "I suppose you're aware that all of you gentlemen are rather strongly suspected of having participated in a huge land swindle. Or haven't you seen the papers yet? Yes, yes. I imagine Denny's influence was shockingly confining."

"Embezzlement?" Commissioner Maloney went pale.

"Land swindle?" Commissioner Chail's ashy face couldn't go any whiter; so it went green.

Four pairs of eyes slid nervously around the room, meeting each other uncertainly and traveling on.

"You know what I'd suggest?" Muir asked them, conversationally. "A small spot of retirement. To be devoted to clearing your names. It shouldn't take you more than ten years. Seven if the parole board fancies the conduct grades the warden gives you. Then you'll all be white as snow, and you can run for a whole platoon of other offices. Of course, the voter must be pleased. That, my friends, is what democracy means. Not, the pocket must be lined."

Bent had by this time got back a little of his assurance and a good deal of his breath. He, it was noisily pointed out, was running this election. He didn't want a lot of greasy-nosed reformers interfering. Or any fool voters, either. That was the gist; but it took him a good five minutes to get it said. Muir waited patiently for him to finish.

"You're missing the point entirely," Muir reminded him. "Can't you read the writing on the wall? The reformers *have* interfered. So have the voters."

The handwriting on the wall might have escaped their attention, but it was impossible that Angel should, as she swung into the room, looking like a sunburst in burnt orange and yellow, with a brown hat and brown suede slippers, and a smear of rouge on her sun-yellow blouse. Colonel Abbott and Rhea followed her; and in the brief instant that the door was open, Piper caught a glimpse of Albert, who seemed somewhat bewildered on finding himself on the side of law and order, among several state militiamen stationed in the outer office.

"What goes on?" Angel wanted to know.

"A class in Americanism," Piper told her. "Good, solid stuff. The boys are learning fast. Congratulations, Colonel—I hear your speech went over fine."

"Nothing at all," the colonel said with unbearable archness. "All the work of this young woman here. Even if she did run away before I'd finished my delivery."

Angel looked amazed. "I wrote the damned thing," she protested. "Surely you didn't expect me to hang around and listen to it?"

While Mayor Bent was still doggedly and rather pathetically expounding the virtues of practical politics, a full dinner pail, and two city jobs in every voter's pocket, the door opened again and Kittens Matti, Mr. Sienciewicz, and District Attorney Halliday arrived in varying degrees of confusion and dishevelment.

"Pretty high-handed, isn't it, Muir?" Halliday asked. Halliday, it seemed to Piper, wasn't profoundly upset. But then Halliday had his eye on the governorship, and he was too smart to let the Machine drag him under when it sank.

Suddenly the washroom door, shrieking on its hinges, opened and shut. All the faces in the room turned toward it, and they all gaped at the incredible figure lurching through the doorway.

Behind him, Piper heard Maloney's tearing gasp. "Donne!" Patrick Donne's huge body swayed there slackly, his clothes filthy, his hair matted, his fat face glistening with sweat and for all its plumpness oddly haggard.

Nobody moved. Nobody spoke. Nobody even dropped a pin.

Donne's little pig eyes rolled slowly around the room, a crazy light glaring from them.

Piper's chilled nerves did a little jig, and sensing the danger by instinct, he moved over in front of Rhea just as Donne whipped a gun out of his clothes.

The way his eyes had done a second before, the gun muzzle swiveled around the room, then centered and stopped on a dead bead for Mayor Bent, whose opened mouth couldn't produce a single sound.

"Three days, Bent," Donne said thickly. "For three days and three nights, I haven't had any sleep. Do you know what that's like—not to eat, not to sleep, not to have any money for three days and nights—just to run and run and run and never dare quit running? Do you know what it's like, Bent? Well, I'll tell you. You've got a right to know why I'm killing you. I'm killing you because I've been through living hell for three days—and I'm so beat that the only thing that'll give me any rest is to see your fat skin laying there on the floor and the blood bubbling out of it—"

ANGEL gasped. Muir's umbrella cut suddenly down across the gun barrel. At the same instant, Muir's fist crashed into Donne's right ear, rocked him sideward. Donne didn't fall at once. He blinked, dazedly. His lips quivered on the edge of sobs.

And then at last, with a sucking noise from his throat, he crashed to the floor like something dead.

Angel Auden stooped and recovered the gun. She glanced with reproachful possessiveness at Muir. "You damned idiot, that gun was loaded!" she snapped. Muir smiled at her and there was something in his eyes that Piper, if he hadn't known better, would have sworn was tenderness.

The telephone rang, and after a few tentative fumbles along the rainbow row, Muir located the right one. "Yes, speaking. Oh, Wegg. Sure." Muir listened. "All right, I'll send Hamlin. See that Kennedy gets here."

He put down the phone, and gestured to Piper. "Go over and pick up Adam Lake will you, Piper?"

"Okay. Say, is it all right with you if I stop and do an errand of my own?"

Muir frowned. "Don't take long."

"I promise that," Piper said, his eyes narrowing.

Angel stopped him at the door. She looked excited. "Muir knows who did it," she whispered. "I can tell by the way he looks."

"So do I," Piper said, his eyes flicking around the room, and lighting for a minute on one face. Angel followed his glance.

"Why, honey. I believe you do."

"I'll be in at the kill, but I've got a little job of my own to attend to first."

Angel stared at him again, and then a dazzling smile curved her lovely lips.

"Sugar lamb—don't tell me you're crawling back up out of that hole?"

"Maybe I'm not—but I'm going to make a stab at it."

Angel's eyes followed him admiringly from the room.

6:35 P.M.

THE city room of the *News* was quiet save for the pecking of a single typewriter. Piper grunted his satisfaction. This was the way he wanted it. If he flopped, there'd be nobody around to see it. He started down the aisle, intermittently brightened by pools of yellow from the globes overhead.

Arn Cleaver looked up at him, eyes mocking, a dead cigarette stub pasted to his lower lip. He coughed dryly.

Isolationist, was he? Piper thought bitterly. Live in a hole, did he? Cleaver's piercing mocking eyes lifted to his, and Piper met them squarely. There wasn't anything in them to be afraid of, he saw. Not if you knew the cesspool of the mind behind them.

"Something I can help you with, old man?" Cleaver said. "Like telling you how to spell a few four-letter words?"

The smile died from his face. For a moment, a shadow of fear crossed his eyes; and then he seemed to remember that this was only Piper Hamlin. His lips sneered.

Piper couldn't stand that sneer. There was only one way to wipe it off. He gathered up a fistful of Cleaver's shirtfront and yanked the man to his feet. He brought his right hand forward and slapped the back of it as hard as he could across Cleaver's mouth.

"That's for making anonymous phone calls," he said, teeth gritted, sweat sliding down his forehead. He struck again as Cleaver twisted in his grip. "And that's for threatening girls." Another slap. "And that's for scaring them with"—smack!—"pictures that never existed anywhere but in your slimy mind." Slap! "And that's for daring to look at Rhea Vern in the first place"—smack!—"and that's for sticking the needle into me every time you got the chance." Smack, smack!

"And if I can think of anything else to take a crack at you for, I'll be back. And that's a promise."

He shoved Cleaver down into his chair; then wiped his hands on his coat as if he'd handled something unclean.

He looked down at Cleaver's bloody mouth. "Funny, Cleaver. You don't scare grown-ups. You just frighten kids. I'm twenty-one today, Cleaver—big enough to vote. Ahhh—I can't stand the sight of you—"

He turned and bolted down the aisle. When he reached the door, he heard a dry, racking sound from the other end of the room. Only it was not a cigarette cough this time; it sounded more like rasping sobs.

Piper buttoned up his overcoat and pushed jauntily through the double doors.

XXV

7:30 P.M.

THE corridors in City Hall were jammed with frantic job-holders when Piper and Muir ploughed through it after their hour-long conference at the quick-and-dirty beanery across the Square. Piper fingered the tiny gun that Angel had given him, resting in his right-hand coat pocket. Now as never before he felt like Sundown Jim. Riding into town for the showdown.

His mouth was drawn and dry; and there was a flat tightness in his belly. They rode the elevator up to the third floor, and nodded to the militiaman with whom Piper had parked Adam Lake sixty minutes earlier. Muir drew Piper aside just before they entered the main office.

"Got everything straight?" Muir demanded.

"Sure," Piper said. "Only I feel like I'm stealing your thunder. It's been your show."

Muir shook his head. "Not entirely.

And you had it pieced together much as I did. What you really mean is that you want to duck out of it—stay in the background—not make any more enemies."

Piper grinned ruefully. "Once, maybe. Not any more. Hamlin's gone to the war. Isolationism's a damned sour racket."

Muir clapped him on the back, and looked almost jovial. "Good lad," he murmured. "Come on then. This is your town, Piper. I'm ducking out as soon as this is over. You might as well be the hero around here."

Only Adam Lake had been added to the group Piper had left in the inner office. It was a stiff, huddled little collection, each member a prey to his own doubts and fears and inner tensions. And one of those men was a murderer. His tension must be a lot nearer the snapping point than any of the others; but he kept it well concealed. And that was what Muir wanted Piper to do—to harp on that twanging tautness inside the guilty man until it snapped and exploded into tell-tale violence. Because Muir had very little proof—almost none at all.

It wasn't a job for a timid man. Or for one who wanted to live in a hole away from danger and trouble and things that didn't smell right. Piper was worried, and tried not to show it. Angel flashed him a big smile, and Rhea a smaller, more intimate one. Piper grinned back.

His eyes traveled around the room. They were all there, from Mayor Bent to Adam Lake—Fingers and Matti and the commissioners and the D.A. and little Mr. Sneeze, slippery and apprehensive. In one corner of the room Colonel Abbott was trying to look like a Roman edile, and almost succeeding. Donne sat, half slumped over, in a chair between two militiamen; and Captain Kennedy was whispering to Halliday in low, nervous tones.

Muir rapped across the mayor's desk with his umbrella; and his umbrella had never been less a token of appeasement. Piper knew it was time to begin. Everybody looked up, and the tension in the room rose another notch. Rhea sat with her pencil poised, ready to take shorthand notes. Piper hoped that when the trouble started, she'd be out of the line of fire. He glanced calculatingly at where the murderer was sitting, and figured that Rhea'd be as safe right where she was as anywhere in the room.

Muir cleared his throat. "It seems only fitting at this point to speak a few phrases on the passing of Boss Bent's wonderful and almost invincible Machine. Because it is dead, Mayor Bent, and nothing you can do will ever put it together again. It died almost as the result of an accident—an incidental casualty to a murder that was brought about by one man's fear, another's greed, the betrayal of a third and the stupid blundering of a fourth. Or you might say, that Stevens was the percussion cap—his death the triphammer blow that set off the explosion. But I'll let Mr. Hamlin tell you about it."

He turned to Piper, who rose and walked to the center of the room, standing with his back to Mayor Bent's desk, where he could face them all squarely. He nodded firmly at Muir to assure him that he was okay. He wished he was really sure of it. Sundown Jim, he thought briefly, sucking in his breath, rides again.

MUIR sat down and Piper hoped that Muir wasn't quite as carelessly relaxed as he seemed to be.

"William Stevens, as we all know," Piper began somewhat tentatively, "was out to bust the Machine. Any way that he could. That was public knowledge; and any smart Machine man who wanted to make a little extra on the side could have figured out that Stevens would be in the open market for any information he could get.

"Patrick Donne did figure it out that way. Maybe he needed dough—he has a flock of kids to take care of. Or maybe he was sore because none of his pals seemed

to have thought he rated a cut out of the land-condemnation racket. That was careless, Commissioner Maloney. Very careless. It lit the firecracker. Donne was stupid, but he wasn't satisfied with being just a stooge. Donne was ambitious."

Someone tittered nervously. The way they all were hanging on his words increased Piper's confidence. His voice grew surer as he went on.

"Donne had an appointment on Tuesday morning with Mr. Stevens. He'd insisted on absolute secrecy, and the night before Mr. Stevens had arranged for Miss Vern to open the office and then make herself scarce. When Donne got there, the office was empty. But a previous caller, Mr. Scienciewicz, had forgotten his derby somehow on Monday night; and Donne thought it was Stevens' it was initialed with an S—and figured that Stevens was around the building somewhere. So he sat down to wait.

"Stevens had already confided to his friend, Colonel Abbott, that he expected to land something big; and Colonel Abbott had sent over his least enterprising reporter to get the story. Everybody else in the city room was drunk."

Colonel Abbott chuckled and shook his silvery head.

"When I got there, Donne was caught off base until he saw that I mistook him for Stevens. He was rattled. So he let me go on thinking so. He couldn't think of any other way of explaining his presence there, and he certainly didn't want any word of it to leak back to his bosses at City Hall. But when I snapped his picture, he saw what a spot that put him in.

"Being a cautious soul, Donne had previously arranged for a private guard. Any man that doublecrossed the Machine was sure to need one. Anyway, he had his two men handy, so he ordered his little playmates to pick me up and get the plates. That move misfired all around; and Donne, thoroughly scared, took to cover."

"But Stevens died Monday night—what's Tuesday morninng got to do with the price of Liederkranz?" Captain Kennedy demanded.

"Mr. Hamlin is merely gathering in a few loose ends as he goes along," Muir told him. "Go ahead, Piper."

Piper braced himself. The killer was in this room. He surely had a gun. And it was Piper's job to stir him up and keep him that way until he broke. He rested his palms flat against the desk behind him. His spine was a mess of short-circuited wires.

"All right," he said. "Let's get back to Monday." His eyes traveled around the room, slowly, resting no longer on that one face than on any of the others. Even less than the rest did it show any strain. It looked relaxed, even faintly amused.

"Between five and the time of his death, exclusive of Mrs. O'Connor, the scrubwoman, there were three visitors to the Stevens' office. Incidentally, Matti and Commissioner Maloney were in the cocktail lounge downstairs at about this time, and Colonel Abbott was eating his dinner at a grill less than half a block away. Most of the others were attending the political banquet at the Municipal Auditorium.

"Miss Vern left at five. Unless she returned later, she couldn't have killed Stevens, because Sienciewicz saw him alive at five-thirty. As to Sienciewicz himself, if he suspected Stevens might be about to expose the land-racket, he had a motive for killing him. A ten percent motive."

Sienciewicz muttered something outraged in his native tongue.

"But if you'll take a look at Sienciewicz, you'll see that he's hardly big enough or strong enough to have lifted Stevens' body and hung it in the closet where it was found. Same goes for Miss Vern. Nevertheless, his presence and Donne's the next morning, plus the pink gardenia found in Stevens' hand definitely suggested that the Machine was behind the killing somewhere.

"Another of Stevens' visitors was a

woman named Libby La Roche. She arrived at six-fifteen and from correspondence between her and Stevens, it looks as if they had planned to confront some third person. But according to Adam Lake, the elevator man, Libby was late. She didn't get there until around six-forty. And Stevens was already dead."

THE room seemed to be bunching tighter and tighter together. Mayor Bent's cigar was dead between his teeth, its ashes splashed over his vest. But Piper hadn't scratched the surface of the man he was after.

"When Libby entered the office, she was surprised not to find Stevens there. While she waited, perhaps she took out a cigarette and started to light it with her lighter, initialed with an E for Elizabeth. Then she glanced at the closet—and there's Stevens—dead, hanging on the hook.

"Frightened, she ran out. If the lighter was hers, she dropped it then. She knew who had murdered Stevens—and because of that, the same person killed her a few hours later."

The people who hadn't known about the second death gasped. Just to be sociable, the murderer looked startled too. Piper was disappointed. He'd expected at least a flicker from that revelation. He'd have to bear down harder.

"Where's the body?" Halliday demanded, apparently not wanting his precious authority left out of the picture.

"There's a body all right," Muir said, leaning forward. "Fortunately Captain Kennedy realized long ago that his department was never going to get anywhere unless he could keep the Machine from interfering with the way it was run. With his aid, we got Libby La Roche's body into the morgue yesterday. And incidentally, Matti, your boys are under lock and key. They're waiting for you to join them."

Matti snarled.

"Stevens had a third visitor," Piper went on. "The murderer Adam Lake, Matti, Maloney, Colonel Abbott. If we accept for the moment the theory that the red gardenia wasn't deliberately planted, that eliminates the elevator man and the colonel, neither of whom wore gardenias. It seems more reasonable to suppose that the gardenia was torn from the lapel of the killer during his final struggle for his life."

"A Machine man, a Machine murder," Abbott snapped.

Piper nodded. "A Machine man, yes. A Machine murder, no. Otherwise, Libby La Roche would still be alive."

He glanced up as Lincoln Wegg entered, crossed the room to place a neat pile of photographs and papers on the desk beside Hamlin, then took a seat near Muir.

Piper caught and held the eyes of the killer, as if to say: You may be fooling everybody else, amigo—but you're not fooling me. And here she comes. The murderer returned his stare with perfect aplomb.

"The third visitor to Stevens' office Monday night, the killer, was a man who posed as Libby La Roche's long-missing brother."

Ah, he thought. That did it. Got a reaction that time.

HALLIDAY leaned forward as if a back-seat made him uncomfortable. "Is this evidence, Hamlin—or theory?"

"For the moment, theory," Piper admitted blandly. "But Libby La Roche's letters set us on pretty solid ground. They reveal that she'd enlisted Stevens' aid in digging up her brother who'd been wounded in France and missing since 1921 although she'd traced him to somewhere near here. She came to Preston herself when the trail looked hot. But when she got here she found that the man using her brother's identity was an impostor. She brought Stevens proof of her contention—a snapshot of her brother taken in France. There was almost no resemblance."

Things were getting tighter now. Piper's words were eating like drops of acid into the killer's brain. He had shifted to the

defensive; he was getting frightened—and dangerous.

It was one of those "Get out of town by noon, Sundown Jim, or take the consequences" situations. And the clock showed about two minutes before twelve.

Piper's eyes slid over to Muir. Muir looked merely sleepy. Piper felt deserted; but he gritted his teeth, mentally, and plunged on.

"Stevens knew that a man doesn't assume a false identity without a good reason; and since the impostor was a Machine man, he thought he saw still another chance at plugging away at one of the vital spots of Bent's organization.

"So he made an appointment with this guy for 6:15 or so on Monday evening; and planned to have Libby there to confront him. But Libby was late. The impostor and Stevens were alone together. Stevens showed him the snapshot, and his other evidence. He might as well have signed his death warrant. In fact that's just what he did."

Easy does it, Piper. Remember that gun. Maybe he's got his hand on the gun in his pocket now, pointed right at you. His face is tight and his eyes are smeary. He's hating your guts. He's killed two people so far and you're fixing it so that those murders haven't done him a bit of good.

Piper wished he were a million miles away. But he stood rooted. This was some kind of test he had set for himself. He didn't dare flop. It was his last chance to get out of that damned hole before it sealed itself like a tomb over his head.

"The impostor killed for silence, and safety. He killed Libby, not because she saw the murder or the murderer. She hadn't. But she had to die because she knew the same thing Stevens did.

"He stabbed Stevens with a paper-knife from Stevens' desk. Then, realizing that the charwoman would be along any minute, he hung Stevens' body in the closet. Chances were that the cleaning woman wouldn't bother with it. He was right. She didn't.

"And although he overlooked the gardenia Stevens clutched in his hand, he searched the office carefully to see if Stevens had left any other evidence against him. He left a bloody-thumb print in the files—it was too smudged to do any harm—but he forgot the four invisible prints the rest of his fingers left on the back of the paper."

The murderer's mouth popped open a minute, then closed firmly. His eyes were mere pinpricks of deadly light. Piper could feel the backs of his legs wobbling.

"Sometime between six-thirty and six-

forty-five, Adam brought Libby La Roche up to the fourth floor. An office building at that time of day is deadly quiet, and the killer heard the elevator stop. He ducked into the broom closet across the hall—where Donne hid the next morning in a similar instance—and he dropped the snapshot."

Halliday tsk-tsked, as if to protest that this wasn't the kind of case he wanted to have to take to court. "Gardenias, fingerprints, and now the snapshot. Dropping things all over the place," he deprecated. "Your killer was a regular butter-fingers, wasn't he?"

"Yes," said Piper, white-lipped. "He was."

He began to talk faster now, feeling the pressure. "Through the closet door he watched Libby La Roche go into Stevens' office—and he guessed correctly that she

was the sister of the man he was pretending to be. He took a good look at her—he wanted to be sure he'd remember her face. He was too intent on that to worry about the snapshot. He either followed her then or discovered pretty quickly who she was. And killed her.

"The murderer is a man named Edward Frothers." That name would mean something to only one man. The man with a prison record who'd dropped it in France and exchanged his identity with Libby La Roche's dead brother.

"Frothers?" Mayor Bent grumbled. "Not a party man. Definitely! Probably some anarchist." He sounded wistful rather than assured.

"That's right. Libby La Roche was just a stage name—her real name—the one the murderer was using is—"

And there it was. The murderer's gun drawn, its barrel pointing right at his belly. Piper glanced wildly over to where Muir sat, still as motionless and remote as Buddha. Rhea shricked.

THEN everything happened at once. Piper made a desperate lunge right at the killer's gun. It spat fire with a staggering blast of sound, but its bullet, deflected by Muir's last-minute, beautifully timed downward blow with his umbrella, whispered in a rush past Piper's head, only nicking his ear. His lunge carried him against the killer's thighs, upsetting his balance; and the next thing Piper knew he was sprawled out on the floor with the murderer squirming and snarling and spitting beneath him. Denny rushed forward, and so did the two militiamen.

Piper climbed to his feet, and dusted his hands. Sundown Jim had won his spurs.

He picked up a page from Wegg's stack of documents and showed it to his stunned audience, much in the manner of a demonstrator in a store window. "The killer's face is on this reward poster, issued from Tierney, Idaho, twenty-odd years ago. And as I started to say before being so forcefully interrupted—Libby's real name and the one the impostor, ex-criminal, and killer was using was Halliday.

"Take the D. A. away, boys. We're through with him."

Friday, Preston, pop. 300,712

XXVI

9 A.M.

FRIDAY, Election Day, dawned bright and clear. The prospects for the Machine did not. In fact, before the day was over, it was going to turn out that for the first time in years and years, Preston was actually holding an election. People were voting without guns at their heads; and they were voting with a sense of outraged shock.

This year, no boxes of uncounted votes were going to disappear. The opposition's election-deputies were not predestined to vanish into some grim recess of Boss Bent's clink until the balloting was over. By nine the voting was the heaviest in history—and it was lily-white and righteous.

Ward captains all over the city were abandoning the Machine with anxious yelps of self-preservation. The regulars at City Hall chewed their cigars in blank despair, worried as they had not been since some detested genius had invented the voting machine.

The crowd of yesteryear was not massed jubilantly in the mayor's office. In fact, except for a few of the die-hards like Chail, Maloney and the lip-licking Mr. Sienciewicz, the mayor sat in lonely if agitated splendor. Bent and his commissioners were due presently to accompany Captain Kennedy to the Riviera in the city jail, which they had provided so thoughtfully for others but never thought to occupy themselves.

In Bentwood Arms, Rewards Inc. was throwing a party. It may roughly be classified as a beaut. Muir and Angel had been married early that morning at the

City Hall by a justice whom they ascertained had never been connected with the Machine. With her husband shyly beaming at her side, and the two checks—one from Rhea, one from Colonel Abbott, who trembled on the brink of becoming mayor at last—snugly stowed away in the bosom of her dazzling white sharkskin suit, Angel was in a state of bliss which needed no alcohol to build it up.

She was drinking her gin sours just to be sociable. There was a smear of lipstick below her mouth. But this time, it wasn't Angel's fault. Rhea, acting as maid of honor, had planted it there after the ceremony.

"Kennedy phoned to say that Halliday's going to try to cop an insanity plea," Denny announced.

"Butterfingers," Piper mused happily, tightening his arm around Rhea's waist and nursing his rum-gum-and-lime. Between sips, he was humming: "Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf?" Rhea beamed down on him from the arm of his chair as if she had patented him.

"Political editor," she said hazily. "Isn't it wonderful?"

"Sure," said Piper. "Only how am I going to stir up trouble with the administration when the mayor's my boss? Maybe I ought to switch over to the *Chronicle.*"

"Now," sighed Rhea, "he's *looking* for trouble. Unstable character is right. Maybe you stirred him up too much, Mr. Muir."

Gavin looked delighted. The rehabilitation of Piper seemed of far more moment than the incarceration of Halliday. And Angel was the most important of all. She was good enough for any man, and too darned good for him. Only, bless Allah, she didn't think so.

"What made you both think Halliday wasn't Halliday?" Rhea asked, with the determination of the acolyte to see the inner wheels go around.

"Libby's letters hinted at an impostor. And one of Stevens' notes was addressed to her as *LH.* Halliday was the only H man who figured importantly."

"But how did Wegg know that Halliday's prints were the same as the ones you found on the poster?" Rhea insisted. "What did you have to compare— Oh," she said, remembering the day that Wegg had gone around the room quietly collecting glasses.

"And in the letter Libby was supposed to have left her landlady," Piper pointed out. "*Receive* was spelled *recieve.* And it occurred again in the note Halliday sent me yesterday morning, telling me to come down to City Hall. Halliday really did mail that forgery from Chicago, though. Funny, careful about so many things. Sloppy about so many others."

Muir nodded sadly. "There never will be a perfect crime. Because there aren't any perfect human beings to commit it. Piper was the one, by the way, who remembered that Halliday had fought at Belleau Woods, Abbott mentioned it in this room. When we checked the date, October 27, 1918, on which Frothers was reported killed in action with the 51st Infantry, we found that the 51st Infantry had been entering Belleau Bois that very morning. So Frothers' death didn't bother us any more. Libby's brother, the real Halliday, and our Halliday-Frothers were probably buddies. He probably knew Halliday didn't have a large family and wasn't in too close touch with his sister. So when Halliday was killed, Frothers switched identification tags and papers so it would be safe for him to come back to the United States after the war was over. Frothers was dead. His new identity wasn't questioned by his outfit—he was in the hospital safely out of reach. I wouldn't be surprised if his wound had been self-inflicted; but maybe it was just a freak break.

"He came back, settled in Preston, made himself valuable to Bent, and there he was climbing up the ladder again."

A bellhop knocked on the door. Denny answered it, flipped the boy a quarter,

and turned around to Piper. "It's for you."

Piper took the telegram, held it in fingers that shook so slightly that only Muir noticed, and read it quickly. Then with a grunt of satisfaction, he stuffed it into his pocket for future reference. He turned to Rhea, but before he could speak, the phone rang.

Wegg slipped across the room and picked it up.

Angel tossed off the last drops of her gin sour, and took Muir's hand. "It's getting busy in here again," she said. "Let's get out." Muir smiled up at her and nodded.

Wegg gestured Piper to the phone.

"Hello," said a voice, accompanied by a dry little cough. "I'm just leaving town, but I thought you ought to know that Kennedy just found a corpse in your room." Cleaver chuckled.

"Go fry it," Piper rasped, and hung up.

"Who was it?" Rhea wanted to know.

"Just a good, clean gangster calling up to say good-by," he told her and patted her cheek happily. "Look—remember what happened the last time I had too much champagne?"

Rhea blushed. "You asked me to marry you."

"That's papa's smart girl," Piper approved. "Climb into your coat. We're going places." Her eyes shining, Rhea obeyed.

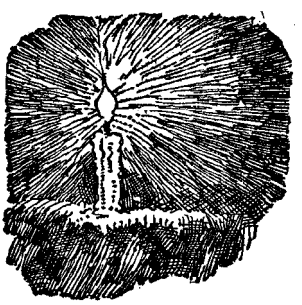
"Where do you think you're going?" Angel wanted to know, shrugging her shoulders into her own fleecy white coat.

"Don't worry," Piper said. "We're not tagging along with you." He put his hand into his pocket just to make sure that Glory's wire consenting to divorce him was still there. "We've got finger fish to fry. We're going out to get sozzled on champagne and then I'm going to ask Rhea the sixty-four thousand dollar question."

The four of them went out together.

Denny started to munch the left-over sandwiches. In the far end of the suddenly quiet room, Lincoln Wegg stood in the window quietly fingering the cord of the Venetian blinds.

THE END



Adventurers All

Life's Worst Moment

IT TOOK years of cave crawling for me to experience the worst moment of my life. Over a period of five years I had explored every notable cavern in New England save one, and it so happens, this one is the second longest in the Appalachian area. At that it is only 450 feet long—but so tortuous and difficult that it takes over two hours to traverse it to its deep end and back again.

This is Eldon's Cave, named for Eldon French, who discovered it in 1875 in the

marble side of Tom Ball Mountain, West Stockbridge, Mass. A party of "Spelunkers" (from the Latin, *spelunca,* a cave), two dozen of us, led by none other than Mr. French, now over eighty, climbed up into the rocky glen on a summer afternoon to the well hidden entrance that opens right in the bed of a brook, dry in summer, and armed with flashlights and rope, crept into the underground world of vari-colored marble, green, yellow, blue, gray, ochre and white. Mr. French made a "token" visit to the first 25 feet on hands and knees and came out. The rest of us crawled on—and on—and on. We crept, crawled, squirmed, rolled and slithered down the twisting wet tunnel, seldom more than three feet wide and high, often less, men and girls, over sharp edges of water-carved marble, a merry band of earthworms, until we came to the famous "lemon squeezer" that would and did, baffle some of the more portly members of the party.

To slide through this slit in the rock one had to twist his body in a certain manner which will be shown, later. The rope was used by some, others ignored it, myself among them, and squirmed through by holding our breaths. We dropped or slid down out of it into a tiny circular chamber where for the first time we could stand erect—in a puddle of water. Then on down, at a slope of twenty degrees, average, Tom, Dick and Harry, Jack and Jills and Abe, the latter an experienced spelunker who had once pushed me through a lemon squeezer in another cave when I was stuck at the hips. A laughing experience, that. This one was to be no laughing matter, for me.

The atmosphere of the cave was humid, temperature 52, everything wet. I wore rubber-soled shoe-pacs, wool shirt, duck hunting coat and body heat steamed up my specs constantly. I had a strong flashlight in hand, a spare in my pocket. The party of youngsters got quite a bit ahead of me, for Abe and I were measuring the cavern with the rope, knotted at each 25 feet.

We got down to the bottom, using the rope at the last drop-off, from a veritable little precipice, onto the clay-covered floor of a chamber fifteen feet in diameter and forty feet high. There we held a gay convention, while Abe managed to climb by a seemingly impossible adit or passage, to a point near the roof, where he taunted us to follow. No one did. Abe disappeared as we were starting to climb back up. I thought he had gone back alone. I helped some of the spelunkers up the rope, re-

mained to the last because I needed rest. I had not had such strenuous exercises in almost a year. My leg muscles were threatening to cramp. I was the oldest in the party by ten years. When I got up the rope I detached it from its anchor stone, coiled it and crept on, dragging it along, wet and heavy.

It had been decided not to use it to get up through the lemon squeezer, for Abe had said it was unnecessary. By standing on tip-toe on a slippery little ledge beneath the squeezer, which was about twelve feet above the floor of the circular chamber, one could get a finger-hold and pull himself up, digging his toes against the uneven wall to help himself. By the time I got there the rest had passed through, helping each other from below and above. I dropped the rope here, finding it impossible to take it with me. I was alone, weary, sweating, half-blinded. I got up, my head and shoulders in the narrow, crooked "squeezer" one arm thrust out ahead of me, the other clamped down at my side—and as I pulled myself up, so that my feet dangled in air, I discovered that I could not move up and forward another inch. I was caught, my chest compressed between marble walls so tightly that I could not take a deep breath—and I needed breath, for I was panting from exertion. I could not change position save to slip back—and perhaps fall a dozen feet, awkwardly, to break a leg or crack my skull.

I had *turned my body the wrong way* to get through upward. I could not turn over. I tried to call for help but my voice failed for lack of breath. I felt myself in the jaws of death, doomed to die of smothering, or to fall back and smash my head against the chamber wall. I had to struggle all the time to keep myself from falling. I thought of a friend who had got wedged in a cave with a brook running in it, his body damming the water until it crept up to his chin, threatening to drown him, until he tore himself loose by sacrificing his clothing. I remembered the time that I was lost with another spelunker in a big New York State cave—for all of fifteen minutes, and we had joked about it. I had never felt the slightest touch of claustraphobia, but I was now in the tightest place I ever had been in my life and I began to be angry at myself with a helpless rage as I dug my finger-nails into little wet crevices and kicked and squirmed and panted until I thought my lungs would burst or my heart would fail. I was slipping back, down, slowly, unable to prevent it—when I felt a hand on my ankle, heard a voice, my good friend, Abe, saying:

"Put your foot on my shoulder. That's it! Step on me all you want to, pal. You're all pooped out. Both feet and bear down. You've got to pull out and go in the other way."

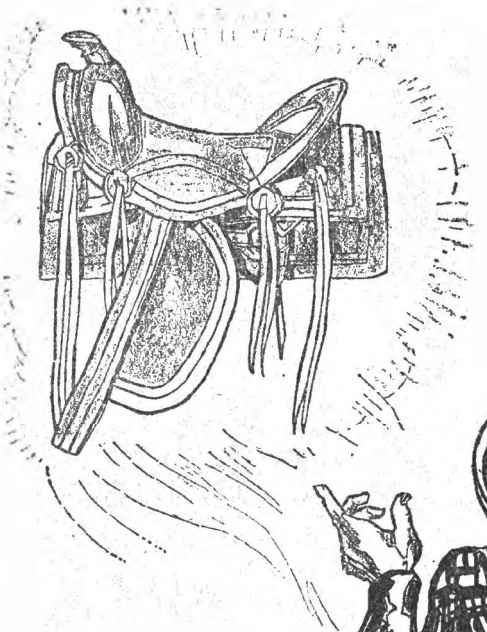
I knew it. I gurgled a rather profane thank you and, gasping, let my weight rest on his bent back, took a brief rest, gulping in air, my flashlight having dropped and gone out, leaving me in total darkness for some minutes. Then I pushed my head in with my left arm forward, twisted, banged my knee badly, lunged, wormed, squirmed and corkscrewed until I lay flat on the wet floor of the next little chamber.

Abe came up through as if on an escalator, the rope around his shoulders. He was the thin man.

I never was so glad to see the daylight, a long hour later, in the shaded glen at the mouth of Eldon's Cave. I do not care ever to go through that infernal tunnel again. It is pretty, but oh, my! I'll take any other part of underground New England that is in my book by that title instead.

Clay Perry.

Of Course You've Heard of Fool Horses and Fool Dogs . . . Ever Hear of a Fool Cowboy?



QUEST OF THE GOLDEN SADDLE

By HAPSBURG LIEBE

OF COURSE you've heard of fool horses and fool dogs and fool this and that. Well, Ike Ritter was a fool cowboy, and always doing something that struck him as being funny. Everybody on the Swinging Double U, from the Old Man down, at one time or another had been the butt of an Ike Ritter prank. We'd have given our shirts to get even with him. But Ike was too smart for us.

Then the Rainbow Kid stopped at the Double U, liked the way we treated strangers, and took it on himself to visit there awhile. He preferred staying in the bunkhouse with the boys, he said, so we found a bunk for him.

He said that he hailed from Kansas City

and had come out to see the wild part of the West. Young and slim, he was, with light cinnamon hair and baby-blue eyes. And his clothes! Pearl-gray Stetson hat, bright-yellow silk shirt, purple silk neckerchief, powder-blue coat and pants, and three-color boots—it seemed to be his idea of what the well-dressed cowboy should wear—and this is why we named him Rainbow Kid. You could see him swell when we called him that. And his gun! It was a .22, and so little it didn't show in his hip pocket.

Green? Just wait and see how green he was.

Right off, Ike Ritter started playing jokes on Rainbow. He put cockleburrs in the Kid's bunk, horned toads in his boots, molasses inside his hat, salt in his coffee instead of sugar, bent pins on chairs for him to sit down on—dozens of such things. But the Kid only grinned. He was a little too smart the wrong way sometimes, I'll admit, but you had to hand it to him in the matter of those Ritter pranks.

So Ike thought up something bigger. He began this by stringing Rainbow with broad tales, and I do mean broad tales. The life histories of Jesse James and Billy the Kid were just ordinary stuff, compared with these yarns. Sinbad, Gulliver, and that ilk weren't in it at all. Mostly, Ike himself was the hero of his yarns.

One morning Rainbow Kid came to me and said:

"Uncle Jim"—all the boys called me that—me, the Double U range boss, nearly as old as the Old Man—"Uncle Jim," the Kid said, "that I. Critter cowboy has just told me one that puts all the others in the shade. I sure don't know whether to believe him or not."

"The name," I said, "is Ike Ritter, and not I. Critter. What did he tell you this time?"

I'd corrected him before about the Ritetr name.

It hadn't made any impression then and it didn't now. He went on:

"Critter told me that once when he was ridin' what he spoke of as 'owlhoot' he had to hide in a cave in the hills, and he said that there in the dark he found a solid gold saddle. Said the sheriffs of six counties was so hot after him that he had to go off and leave it. Said it ought to easy be worth a hundred thousand dollars. Said he'd tried and tried to go back to that same cave, but never could find it any more. Looks like a gold saddle would be too heavy on a horse, Uncle Jim, don't it?"

Though I'd known Ike Ritter for years, that sort of flabbergasted me. I reckon I just stared. The Kid looked off toward the big, rocky hills that stood like a fence between our county and the next county west.

"Many caves in there, Uncle Jim?"

"Hundreds and hundreds," I said. "But—"

"Even if it took me five years to find the right cave, that'd be twenty thousand dollars a year, which would be fine pay," said Rainbow. Then he made a face. "Oh, shucks. I don't believe it. Too thin, Uncle Jim, ain't it?"

AT THAT moment Ike Ritter walked up and took the matter off my hands. Lean and lanky, Ike was, and when he wanted to be could look twice as sober as any judge.

"Hold on there, Kid," Ike said. He'd had time to think up an explanation as to the how-come of that solid gold saddle. "There was something I didn't tell you, Kid, and it's this:

"In them days they was a robber to every square mile, and the jigger which owned the gold mine, any time he tried to take gold out to where he could swap it for money, he was stuck up. So he hit on the idea of hammerin' his gold into the shape of a saddle and paintin' it brown like leather and ridin' it out, to fool the stick-ups. But it was so heavy it broke his hoss down, and he had to drag it into the cave and hide it. And when he went back after

it, with guards, he couldn't find the cave same as I couldn't."

Wouldn't think anybody would be green enough to swallow a yarn like that, would you? Rainbow's blue eyes were round; he was plumb goggle-eyed. Suddenly he turned back to me.

"Uncle Jim, much gold been found back there?"

I told him the truth: "Well, more or less, like in any Western hills. There used to be talk of a big lode, though I don't really know anything about it. It was called the Miraflores lode, after the Spaniard who was supposed to discover it."

"Died before he could work it," Ritter put in, "and hadn't told anybody where it was. He—"

Our Rainbow Kid had whipped around and was heading toward the bunkhouse to start getting ready for the hills. I thought Ike Ritter would bust from laughing inside. He said, half whispering, "Uncle Jim, for a minute there I was afraid you'd spoil my best joke. You mustn't. Anyhow, the Kid needs toughin' up, and that wild goose chase sure will do it."

I decided to keep my mouth shut and let the prank take its course.

Rainbow had a dun pony that would be good in the big rock. He borrowed a couple of canteens from the bunkhouse, got half a sack of hard rations from the cook, and lit out. Back he came, after three days, for more grub. He looked a good deal ragged out, and had little to say; made no mention at all of caves or a solid gold saddle.

So it went for two weeks. Ike Ritter laughed himself nearly sick—while the Kid was gone, that is; Rainbow's baby-blue eyes held an odd glint now, and he carried his little gun stuck inside his pants belt and handy.

Then the Kid vanished in the big hills that rose like a fence between our county and the next county west, and at the end of five days hadn't come back.

On the next day, Ike was helping me mend the wire around a quicksand bog near where the county road east crossed our range creek, when a livery buckboard stopped for watering the horses. In the back seat were two strange men who had on good clothes. The driver knew Ritter and me, and he spoke. There was a funny look on his face.

"Hiyah, Unc' Jim. Hiyah, Ike. I reckon maybe you've not heard about that young jigger who was here on the Double U awhile—Rainbow Kid, I think you called him. Huh?"

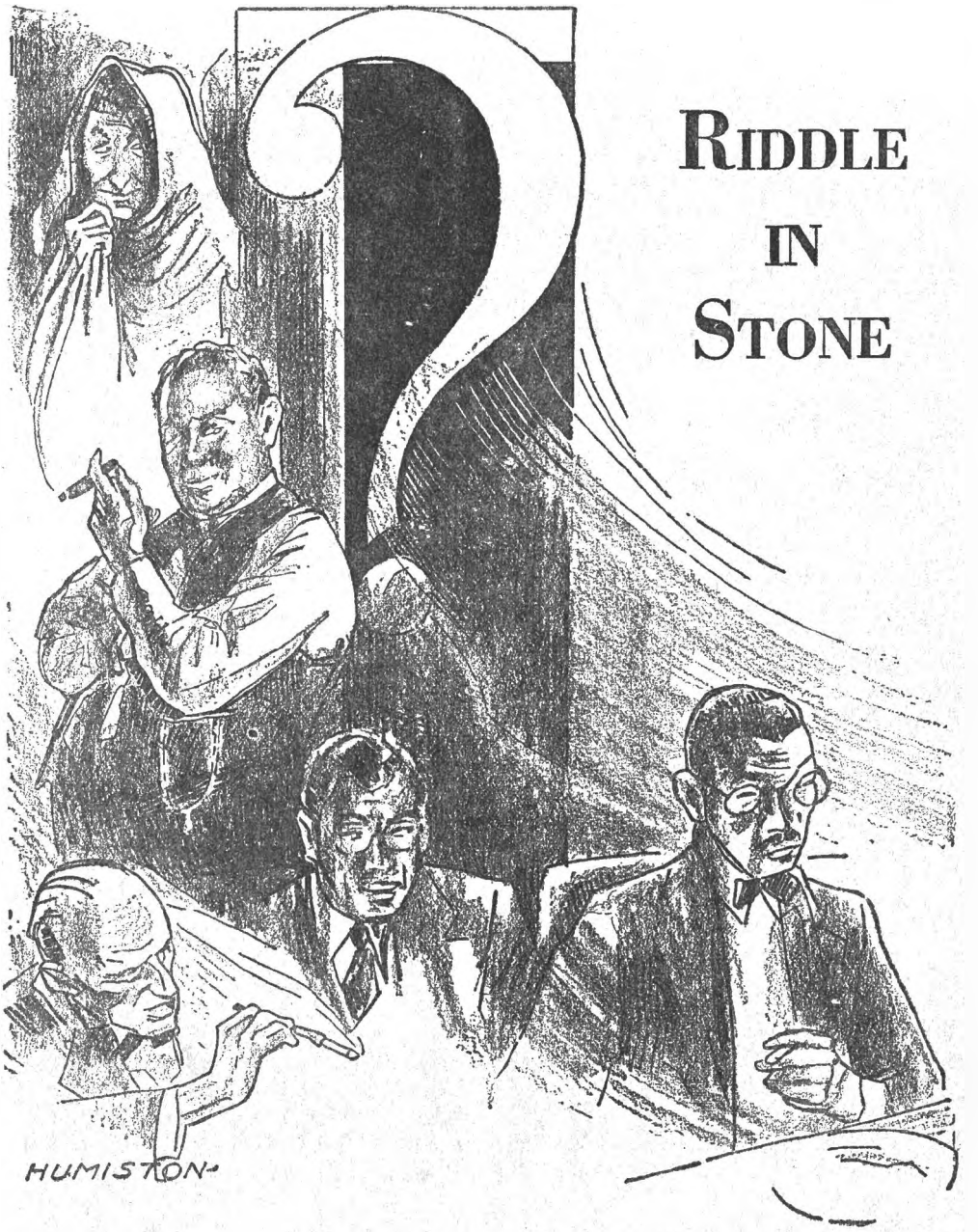
I LOOKED at Ike and he looked at me. Ike was really sober now. He said, "I played a heap of jokes on the Kid, but I thought he—thought he needed toughin' up." Then a new idea busted like a firecracker in the fool cowboy's head. "Say, I had Rainbow lookin' in caves for a gold saddle; he didn't sure-enough find gold, did he—that old Miraflores lode, maybe?"

One of the strangers spoke, and he said plenty. It was enough to put a quietus on Ike Ritter's trick stuff for good. Afterward, when we wanted to shut Ike up all we had to do was call him Critter, or ask him if he didn't want to fix a bent pin for somebody to sit down on, or mention a gold saddle.

"Toughing up?" the stranger said. He grinned and shrugged, and we glimpsed a deputy U. S. Marshal's badge on his vest. "Listen, cowboy, to this:

"The twenty-two gun fooled you. That dressed-up little hellion had a pair of double-action forty-one hookbill guns that you never saw. He wasn't hunting gold the way you thought. Using this ranch as a perfect hideout, he pulled a dozen stickups in the next county, killing three men. Made the mistake of taking a U. S. mail bag. In jail now and sure to hang. All right, driver, let's go!"

And that's how green the Kid was.



RIDDLE IN STONE

"I CAN'T find the landing field at all!" I said into my radio mouthpiece.

"Look for a little dry lake," the operations officer at McReady Field advised me, his voice rasping in my receiver. *"There's a corrugated iron shed at the north end of the playa."*

I pushed back the cockpit cover, and stared down over the side of my plane. From four thousand feet up I searched for a tiny landing field called Dust Lake.

"There it is!"

I sighted it, southward. And toward it I banked the Vultee. My engine coughed and sputtered with the hollow rumble of a powerful motor choked for gas as I neared the playa.

I started down in a smooth spiral.

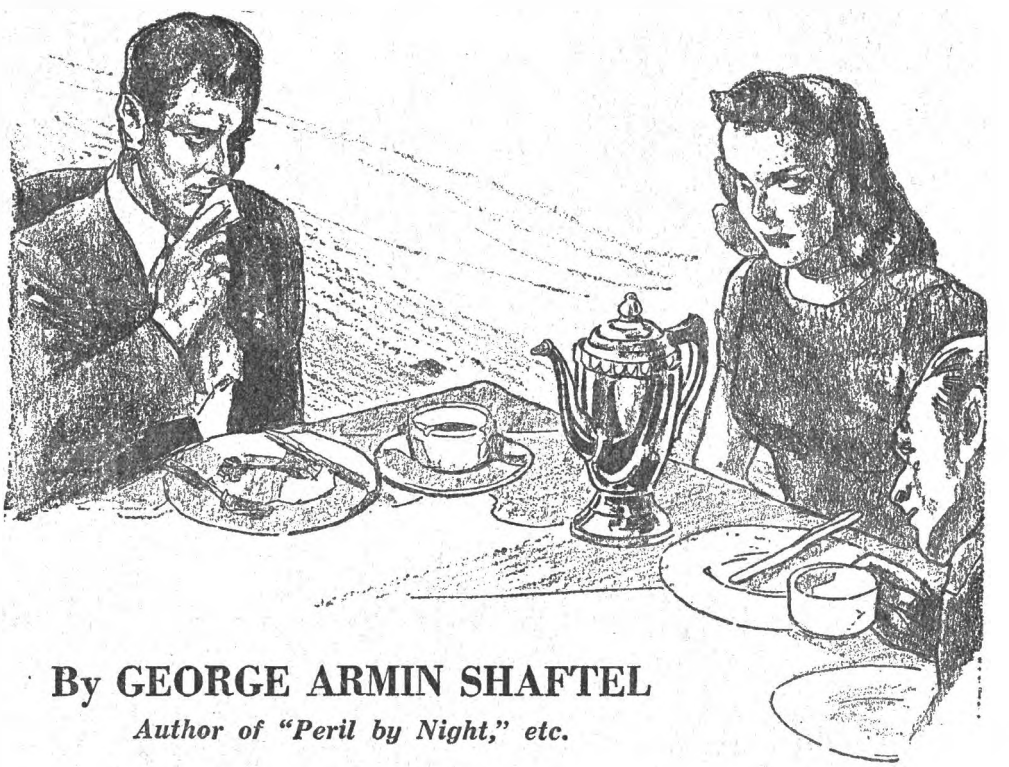
Here scorched desert mountains circled a basin; and, below me, as I lost altitude, juniper and sagebrush flats and Joshua trees and cutbanks took definite character. I could see a little resort beyond the landing field—a half-dozen buildings around a swimming pool hardly big enough to wet a Newfoundland puppy.

I worked my throttle and blipped a blast or two out of my motor. Then it went dead. Watching below, I saw a white figure jump up from a cot behind one cottage and hastily pull a blanket about herself and run into the house. Then a thin man with a dog striding along the road stopped and stared up at me. And out of the front house a fat man hurried and came waddling toward the landing field.

There was no wind sock on the little hangar. Carefully I set the Vultee down, praying no crosswind would flop me over onto my back. None did, and I came to a smooth stop. Sighing with relief, I looked around.

The fat man was running toward me, now. I felt my shoulder-holster to make sure that the .45 was still there; and I felt my vest pocket where I had a fountain-pen that was really a bank-teller's gun with a gas cartridge in it. Maybe I wouldn't need 'em—but if it turned out that way, this trip would have been a failure. My plane had no built-in radio; but I had a "handle-talkie" from the C.A.P. field. I pressed the gimmick and said, "Monahan calling. I've landed at Dust Lake. Stand by."

Then I climbed out of the cockpit, get-



By GEORGE ARMIN SHAFTEL

Author of "Peril by Night," etc.

"Look Under the Collar of the Dog of the Man as Big as a Redwood". . . That Was a Fine Puzzle for an Airman to Solve

ting set for my act—and thinking, reassuringly, that if I had to I could make a radio call that would bring a B-25 racing here with a half-dozen men armed with Tommy guns. But that didn't quite warm the uneasy chill spiderlegging up my spine.

"Motor conk out on you, pilot?"

"Yeah, damn it," I answered the fat man. "Is there a mechanic at this field?"

"Shucks, son, this ain't rightly a flyin' field. No mechanic, no spare parts, no oil or gas and not even a telephone," he informed me regretfully.

Inwardly I congratulated myself. This was exactly what I was counting on. But outwardly I muttered a disgusted, "Damn!"

"But I know lots about engines," the fat man assured me. "By morning I can have your coffee-pot perkin' over swell."

Getting an expert to look over my engine was the last thing I wanted, right now. There was nothing wrong with it. Maybe this nosy Fatso was going to cause me trouble.

I walked around to the front of the motor and studied it like I was puzzled and sore.

That other man—the tall, thin one—was approaching now. And as he got close enough for me to see how tall he really was, my pulse leaped. Maybe this wild goose chase of mine was really going to get results!

Through my mind echoed the baffling words of that message from Neile Corbisson, the last words he had ever uttered—*"Look under the collar of the dog of the man as big as a redwood."* It had sounded half-witted. Screwy as hell. But Neile had been talking into his radio—and the man who was to kill him had been standing right beside him; for over the radio, then, had come the flat hard bang of a pistol shot, and Neile had not uttered another word. He had spoken that crazy message in an effort to tell me something that wouldn't make sense to anybody else—because the thing he wanted me to find "under the collar of the dog of the man as big as a redwood" was something so vital and precious that we had to bend every effort, take any risk, to make sure that it did not get into wrong hands.

When flyers from the Army field at Condor Dry Lake found Neile Corbisson, he was lying on the ground beside the wreckage of his glider, shot through the heart.

THE tall man and his dog reached us, and the big dog came over and sniffed me. He was a bull mastiff, and I had the feeling that he could take my arm between his wide jaws and crush it as if it were a chicken wing—and I'm 190 pounds in heft. The tall man grinned at me.

"Brutus is just getting acquainted."

I patted Brutus's head. Brutus let out a growl that made hair rise on the back of my neck, and turned away from me.

"You'll have to stay overnight," the fat man told me. "I'll rent you a cabin." He gestered toward the half-dozen shacks of his auto court. "Two bucks for a bed with clean sheets, a breakfast of ham and eggs and coffee that's *coffee*—and my help getting your motor running. Fair enough?"

"Fair enough."

"You haven't merely forgot to switch your reserve gas tank in?" the tall man asked.

I couldn't help but flush; all that was wrong with my motor was that I had cut out one wing tank and not cut in the other. But I said hastily, "Of course not!"

The tall man smiled cheerfully at me and I felt my flush deepening. I turned abruptly away and started toward the cottages. The fat man panted to keep up with me.

"Who's that guy?" I asked. "Never saw a man so tall!"

"Oh, Jennison is six feet, seven and a half inches. Nice felluh, but kind of queer."

"What does he do?"

"Some kind of scientific bird. Talks

about everything but his own business."

We reached the cabins, and at the second one the fat man stopped, and fingered among a batch of keys, found the right one, and put it into the lock.

I stared at his thick hairy wrists. He was wearing a wrist-watch. A fine Hamilton stop-watch.

My pulse pounded in my temples. That swell watch—*it was the one that I myself had given to Neile Corbisson as a present the day I finished pilot-training school.* Because Neile had helped me, stuck by me when I was in trouble. . . . The fat man was talking, but I was so shaken I caught just the tag end of his words—

"—and the shower is out back in the Men's. Supper in half an hour. My name is Tom McGaa."

I muttered something and stepped into the cabin. I was afraid to look straight at the fat man. Afraid that the grief I'd felt, and the helpless rage, would show on my face—would make me grab his thick throat between my hands. *Damn it, maybe he got that watch innocently,* I dinned at myself. *You got to be sure!*

APPARENTLY all of Tom McGaa's tenants were in his main house, sitting at table, when I came in for supper.

McGaa introduced me around, like a summer-camp leader trying hard to make a gloomy crowd happy. Though it wasn't much a crowd, exactly—just the tall man, Jennison, and a couple of young Chinese, men whose names sounded like Tsung and Tsao. Then the remaining two tenants arrived—a Miss Joan Frome and her father. I could just feel the temperature rise in the room when the girl came in. My own pulse leaped. She wasn't just pretty and shapely—she had shining coppery-red hair and great blue eyes, and she was *very* pretty and *very* shapely, and to it all she had a glow of vitality that made you feel her presence through your very pores.

Her father was a thin little man who apparently had asthma and circulatory trouble to boot. He was all wrapped up in a sweater and sports jacket and silk muffler, and he wheezed when he breathed; and he was bald and pout-lipped—altogether as lack-lustre a personality as you could possibly overlook in a crowd. It was as if he had bequeathed all the fire in him to his daughter and was left a dull clinker—while she was something of a soaring bright meteor of a gal.

We ate. And as I tucked the grub away, I studied the others. One of them, I hoped, was the black-hearted murderer I was looking for.

I decided that the fat resort owner, McGaa, was a small-time crook only because large time opportunities hadn't come his way. And I decided that the two young Chinese were not Chinese at all. The silent, nervous way they sat there eating had something furtive about it. As if they were a pair of Japanese who had slipped away from the relocation center at Manzanar. Mr. Frome I figured to be a small business man who had retired on a feeble income, and had come to this resort because it was cheap and he needed the desert air for his asthma. His daughter had dutifully come along to look after him. But if I was any judge, Joan Frome had too much life in her to stay buried out here very long.

The tall man, Jennison, I couldn't figure out at all.

Not that he was quiet and retiring. Lord, no! He did most of the talking. About the war. And about his dog. That canine behemoth of his would go out and take on a pack of coyotes and bring one in dead, every so often. Also Jennison talked about flowers he'd found—gravel ghost and Indian fig and mariposa lily and turtle back and desert buckwheat. But there was nothing sissy about the way *he* discussed 'em. There was a hell of a lot of quiet authority about the man. He looked an early forty, but he was so bronzed that he might be older. He had keen gray eyes and lean, hard features, and thick dark hair with a

touch of gray. He didn't look like a killer —but he was the only man I'd seen around here who looked anywhere near "as tall as a redwood." I reminded myself that a smart crook does *not* look like something scared out of a dark alley by the F.B.I.

I HAD a chore to do that was going to be an ordeal.

An hour after supper, I left my cabin. Outside, I looked around. A thin sickle of a moon had risen over the barren mountains to the east, and the desert was eerily beautiful.

I stood there, screwing up my nerve to the job ahead of me. Far off, a coyote was tuning up like a dozen banshees, and a 'poorwill was mourning gently. Nearby, a couple voices were raised in wrath—a woman's and a man's. I frowned, listening. I couldn't make out words, but it sounded like two drunks screeching at each other.

"Every night it happens."

I started violently. It was McGaa, the fat landlord of the cabin court. He had come up to me so quietly in the dark that I hadn't heard him.

He added, "It's Miss Frome and her father."

"Drunk?"

"Yeah. You wouldn't believe it, to look at her."

"They aren't quarreling, are they?"

"They *are* quarreling, and how."

"A father and daughter getting drunk together—"

"Every night, practically. Usually, they're as decent and affectionate people as you could find in a month of Sundays. But when they get the whiskey in them—" He clicked his tongue, and shook his head. "Guess he sets an example for her, and she's so bored and lonely she starts h'istin' the glass, too."

"Odd."

"I don't think so." He chuckled. "In fact, I'd get drunk every night myself—only it takes so much whiskey to set my soul a-wanderin' out yonder that I cain't afford it. Guess I've had too much practice."

He was still chuckling when I said good night and walked off.

Just fifteen minutes it took me to reach the sagebrush flat where Neile Corbisson's body had been found beside the wreckage of his glider.

The wreckage was still here. I stared at the blackened struts and pipes. Somehow, in the dim moonlight, the remains of that glider seemed old and pitiful. Neile had not crashed here. Oh, no! He had deliberately destroyed his glider.

You see, Neile Corbisson was experimenting on rocket propulsion of motorless aircraft. He was getting results so good that the top men of the Air Forces were breathing hard with excitement after he finally told them about it. He had been working on his own, using his private funds and a couple men he had known for years. He had wanted no interference and no publicity.

The problem he'd set to solve was that of getting a glider into the air again, once it had come down. To eliminate the "one way ride." His solution was simple enough, stakes and a shock cord. That is, attach the glider tail to one stake, at the back of a triangle. Across two stakes forming the other points of a triangle, set a shock cord. Hook the shock cord to the glider, then tighten the shock cord with a windlass. Get into the glider, and cut loose the rope to the stake at the back. The shock cord then would straighten out and launch the glider into the air.

That much was mechanical, and one man could do it in fifteen minutes by the ingenious way Neile had worked out.

The catch was—sure, you got the glider a dozen feet high into the air. But that wasn't much use. You had to get a glider half a mile high, if you wanted the pilot to fly any useful distance.

Here was Neile's solution; once the glider's initial inertia was overcome and it

was off the ground and air-borne, then his rocket devices took over, then by rocket propulsion he kicked that glider a thousand, two thousand or more feet into the air, high enough to use the thermals to cover distance—or even to coast far enough to be of military use.

Neile's valuable contribution was the rocket propulsion installations and the formula for the mixtures he used as propellant. Those were the things that were so precious and vital, and which had to be kept out of hostile hands. To prevent the possibility of an enemy grabbing them, Neile Corbisson had fixed a device in his glider by which he could blast the craft into wreckage merely by jerking a handle.

AND that is what he had done. A hundred times I've imagined to myself how he had been killed—

Probably he had been standing by the cockpit of the glider, jotting down performance data, when the killer reached him and held a gun on him, and likely told him to walk away from the ship. Neile had said into his radio, then—*"Look under the collar of the dog of the man as big as a redwood."* And Neile had grabbed the handle of his blasting device even while he talked, and set it—and the murderer, seeing what he was doing, had shot him. Neile had dropped; and an instant after that, the glider had been wrapped in a blast of flame.

I felt certain that the killer had not got what he'd come after—specifications for the rocket installations and the formulas of the explosive mixtures in the rockets. Because Neile was too shrewd to have been carrying the vital data around with him—too shrewd to have hidden it in any obvious place. He would have left the data where only a man keener of brain than himself could find it.

"He tried to tell me where to find the data," I reasoned. "He had to put it into language that the killer couldn't understand at all. That's why Neile said 'Look under the collar of the dog of the man as big as a redwood.' "

But the trouble was that I couldn't understand that riddle, either. I just *had* to figure it out.

Unless I did, Neile's fine work, which could be so precious to us when we started ferrying commandos into enemy territory for the final knockout campaign, would be utterly lost to us.

WITH my flashlight, I started searching the glider wreckage. There were footprints in the sandy loam, all right; but too many to be of use. Everybody in the district must have come to look at the burnt-up glider.

A spurt of light knifed out of the darkness to right of me—and a bullet lashed past my head as a rifle report spat across the night quiet. I flung myself to the ground, switching off my flashlight. Again that rifle whipped a slug at me. Six times that gunman out there sent bullets at the spot where he'd seen me, feeling for me with every cartridge in his weapon. A slug ricocheted off a spar of the glider. A couple bullets thudded into the sand near my head, and several smashed into a group of Joshua trees fifty yards behind me.

The shooting stopped. I waited, my .45 in my fist, lying tense on my stomach.

If that gunman showed himself, I'd empty nine slugs into him! . . . But I heard nothing, and saw nothing. And when I could stand the suspense no longer, I switched my flashlight on—and rolled swiftly aside, to dodge the slugs that would come.

But none came.

And after long minutes, I started crawling toward the spot from which that rifle had streamed fire. But I saw nobody, and no further shots reached for me; and I realized that the gunman had probably emptied his weapon and got away from here *fast*.

Suddenly I felt jubilant. Because this attempt to kill me looked like proof that

the man who'd shot Neile Corbisson was still here at the Dust Lake resort. It was just natural of him to suspect any stranger who showed up of being a cop. And that fact that I sneaked out to look at Neile's glider wreckage as secretly as I had would cinch it.

"That murdering rat is still here, and I'm going to get him!" I told myself.

But I'm not really a fool; and sober common sense whispered that if I wasn't careful, that killer would get *me,* first.

THE obvious place for Neile Corbisson to have stored his valuable data was at his workshop here; in the hangar.

So I started back toward the auto court. I didn't use my flashlight at all, so's not to draw a bullet if that gunman was still looking for me. Neile Corbisson had been my sister's husband. Neile had taught me to fly, and I'd never had as good a friend in my life. I'm red-headed, and reckless, and Neile had had the patience and understanding to straighten me out. But for him, I might have wound up in a reform school—instead of being an instructor at an Army flying school.

I met nobody and saw no lights as I approached the little hangar beside the dry lake.

A big padlock held the big main door closed. But I found a tire iron on the ground, and with it I twisted the door hasp out of the wooden frame and slid the door open.

Inside, I flashed my light and walked to the workbench at the back.

The usual mechanic's tools were arrayed on pegs there, plus a lathe and sheet metal working machines and chemical apparatus. It was a crude shed, though, with a dirt floor instead of concrete, and no ventilation. I thought of how hot it must get during the day and swore under my breath.

Over the workbench was a wooden cabinet. Locked.

But on a nail beside it hung a key. It fitted the lock, and I swung the cabinet door open. Here were stored precision tools; calipers and scales and surface gauges and micrometers.

A small wall safe was built into the cabinet. The door had been jimmied open and the safe was empty.

I bit my lip, thinking hard.

Neile had been a careful, careful guy—

The door of the cabinet was made of plywood, painted green. Studying its edge, I found a line of white.

With my pocket-knife, I pried the top layer of plywood, on the inside, off the door. It lifted away readily. And, underneath, I found a shallow recess that held papers—flimsy onionskin sheets, stapled together.

"Good Lord! Here's the stuff!" I gasped.

Here were drawings of the rocket installations on gliders. Pages of performance data. Lines of chemical formula.

I studied them, so excited I hardly breathed at all.

I'm no chemist, so the formulas made no sense to me. I flipped the pages. On the last one I found something that looked out of place on a sheet of specifications. Some letters, penciled in, that looked like gibberish—

I had a split-instant of warning; behind me, I heard the faintest sound of a careful footfall.

I whirled, jerking my flashlight around. But a blackjack came swinging down at the back of my head, hit a glancing blow and cracked down on my arm. My arm dropped limp and the flashlight crashed to the floor and went out. In the darkness I flung the sheaf of papers away from me and charged at the man I'd glimpsed so dimly before the hangar went pitch-dark. I shouldn't have done that. I should have jumped back, and pulled my .45 from shoulder holster.

My swinging fist seemed to brush along a man's ribs. And then that blackjack was swung again—and this time it connected; for it seemed as if the hangar room had caved in and cracked me back of the ear.

My senses blacked out. I didn't even feel myself hit the floor.

The next thing I knew, a light was dazzling against my eyes; and I raised myself up and looked around and almost screamed. A hairy face with two glowing eyes and slavered lips was breathing a fetid breath right against my cheek.

A dog. Jennison's big dog!

"You able to stand?" Gorham Jennison asked.

I mumbled something, and the tall lean man helped me onto my feet. I'd have fallen if he hadn't braced me. Pain beat like a riveter in my skull. But then anger was a counter-irritant as I remembered what had happened.

"I lost s-something!" I stammered wildly. "Lend me your light."

I looked around with his flashlight, and my heart slipped back into place as I found those sheets of onionskin paper lying almost at my feet. I had fallen right down on top of them.

"I was out walking the dog," Jennison said mildly. "Brutus heard a commotion in here and came running. I followed. What happened?"

"I got knocked on the head. You see anybody leave here?"

"No, but the side door is open, too. You were robbed?"

"No. You must've scared the lousy-so-and-so away before he could frisk me."

Jennison helped me back to my cabin then. I lay down on the bed and tried to think. My brain was hazy and aching. There was something I wanted to recall, but it just wouldn't come back to me—

Back in the hangar, just before that blackjack bonged my skull, I'd had a shadowy glimpse of the man attacking me. A *little* man, he was. And his face was—odd, somehow. I couldn't really see well, but—the man's color was off. As if he'd pulled a sock over his head and cut holes for the eyes?

"Say, maybe he was one of those Japs stayin' here?"

Then I heard it.

Outside. A motor barking into life.

It coughed, then caught and ran steadily, its roar deepening. An airplane motor.

I jerked upright on the bed.

"Good Lord! That must be my own plane."

I was still unsteady on my feet, and I lurched across the room as if I were going to dive through the closed door. But I got it open, and ran toward the landing field.

There was my Vultee! Exhaust of the roaring motor was a streak of blue fire as the plane taxied to pick up flying speed. I shouted, triggered my automatic. *That's the guy who sapped me,* I was thinking.

The Vultee's engine was still cold and wasn't running smoothly. Besides, the rough field had no lights. From the way the dust was blowing off to the left in the dim moonlight, the pilot was evidently taking off across-wind. He must be pretty damn desperate, I figured, to be trying that kind of take-off. By God, he isn't going to make it!

The Vultee hit a bump, and bounced, and the wind got under one wing, and the opposite wing went down, and touched the dirt—touched hard. Around the plane whirled, in a vicious ground loop, crabbing sideways as it spun. Two reports banged out. The landing wheel tires, blowing out.

"Now he can't take off!"

In the dim moonlight I saw a man jump from the plane. Then a second figure leaped down. I yelled "Halt!" and sent a bullet over their heads. But they didn't stop. They darted around the plane and fled away into the brushy flat of sage and juniper just beyond the landing field.

I couldn't see too well in the dark, of course, but I did see well enough to realize who the pair were. The two fake Chinese who called themselves Tsung and Tsao. McGaa's two Jap tenants.

"So it *was* one of them who sapped me in the hangar! Now they're scared, and figured it would be smart to steal my plane

and get away. Probably intended to cross over into Mexico tonight."

By the time I reached the Vultee, the two men had vanished into the brush. It wasn't any use trying to chase them farther in the dark. But after daylight it would be simple enough, I promised myself, to find them from the air.

Footsteps were pounding toward me. It was McGaa. Wheezing hard, the fat resort owner came up to the plane.

"Good Lord, Monahan, somebody try to steal this crate?"

"Yeah. Those two tenants of yours, Tsung and Tsao."

"They must've repaired your engine first."

"Yeah," I retorted hurriedly, "but now I got to repair those tires they blew out for me!"

"Now why would they try to steal your plane? They looked like such nice boys."

I thought of Neile Corbisson, shot dead beside his glider. Of the bullets that had reached for me out of the dark, earlier this evening; and the blackjack that had knocked me senseless.

"*Nice boys*—hell!" I said, and I vented a hearty heil-in-der-Hirohito's face for each of them.

THE motor roar and the pistol shots had, of course, been heard at the cabins. As we walked past, I saw the Frome girl standing on the porch of her cabin, staring. The light was behind her, and she was wearing a negligee; and— Well, I said before that she was more than just pretty, more than just shapely. McGaa stopped to talk to her, but I hurried on to my own cabin. I was remembering that I'd left Neile Corbisson's data thrust hastily under the bed blankets when I left.

Inside, I looked under the blankets—and swore with relief. The precious sheets of paper were still where I had left them.

I thumbed through the pages, to make sure they were all here; and on the last sheet, those penciled words of gibberish caught my eye again and I squinted at them, wondering.

Knuckles rapped on my door. I jumped, startled. Shoving the notes under my bed blanket, I stepped to the door and opened it.

Joan Frome stood there.

"Father sent me, Mr. Monahan," she said breathlessly.

"Come in, come in," I stammered, I was so surprised.

"All that noise, the motor and gun shots, left dad sleepless," she explained. "He'd like you to come over and have a drink and talk a bit. It isn't so awfully late, and— Maybe you know how an invalid counts on favors from people? I'd appreciate it, if you'd come."

She smiled kind of shakily and her blue eyes were pleading. Close to, she was even lovlier than she'd seemed earlier in the day. She had put on a polo coat over the negligee. She didn't look as if she, herself had been drinking much if at all.

I grinned and said, "He was smart to send you. You're so pretty a man couldn't refuse you anything."

"He's not smart, and he didn't send me!" It burst out of her. Her face was suddenly flushed. "He's drunk—he's mean drunk, and I came to get you because I just c-can't stand him any more!" Then she had her face buried in her hands and she was crying as if her heart would break.

Well, I'm not exactly a cigar store Indian. "Look, it can't be as bad as all that," I said, and put my arm about her shaking shoulders. She leaned against me, soft and warm and sweet, her shining coppery hair fragrant against my chin. I patted her shoulder, and tried to say sensible, reassuring things; and presently she got control of herself. Without lifting her head, she tried to explain.

"Every night after dinner, he drinks and drinks. I tried it, too. I thought maybe then I could bear it a little easier. But he gets me mad and I—I scream at him. He's

so—so *mean* when he's drunk. He sits there staring, and he sneers and he says such awful things about mother and—says I'm going to be like her, and— If he would just go to his own room and shut the door! But he won't. He wants company. He won't let me sleep at all. If you'll come over for just a few minutes. You see, when a stranger is around, you wouldn't even guess he's so awfully drunk at all. He'll be polite and he'll listen and he won't be so mean to me—"

"Good Lord, you're free, white and twenty-one," I burst out. "Why don't you just up and leave him?"

She looked up at me, her lovely eyes wild with hope.

"Take me away from here! Take me with you somewhere. I'll make it up to you. Please! I haven't any money and I just haven't the courage to start alone, but if once I got away from *him*—"

She meant it. Just the hope seemed to lift a cloud off the soaring vitality in her. For some dozen seconds I faced the awfulest temptation I'd ever known. She was clinging to me, looking up at me, her eyes shining and her sweet lips parted. She slipped her arms around my waist, and she whispered, "You won't be sorry. *Please.*"

I said, "I got to think, honey. Meanwhile, let's go visit your old man."

She pulled the polo coat tight as we stepped outside, and shivered as if cold, and clung to my arm. As we walked to the Frome cabin, across the court, something gnawed at the back of my mind. Maybe I was just overly suspicious. But it seemed to me that Joan's slim, appealing hands had very slyly, very knowingly located the gun I carried in my shoulder holster. But maybe I was just seeing spooks—

Like I've said before, Mr. Frome was a bald, pout-lipped, colorless little man who had asthma and looked as if he had hardening of the arteries, too. He was sitting in front of the fireplace when we walked into the cabin, a tumbler half full of whiskey in his hand, a plaid auto blanket wrapped Lincoln-like around his scrawny shoulders.

I said, "Evening, Mr. Frome."

He looked at me glassily. Then he actually stood up and managed the first part of a bow. For an instant I thought he'd fall flat on his face, but he got hold of his chair.

"Have a seat," he said. "Joan, a drink for Mr. Monahan."

"Yes, Father," she said in that hushed tone she'd used when she first came to my cabin.

"Make mine a highball," I said.

She went out into the kitchen. I sat down.

"The Chinese lads—they try to steal your plane?"

"Yes, and a bum try it was, too," I said. "I suspect that they aren't Chinese at all, Mr. Frome, but Japs who've gone A.W.O.L. from the Relocation Center at Manzanar."

It took a moment for the words to penetrate his alcoholic haze, then he blinked and echoed, "Japs?" And then, as it finally percolated, "*Japs?* Good Lord!"

Looking at him close like this, I got uneasy. Suspicion was a chilly crawling under my skin.

He was small, but pretty well built. True, he was bald, and lines were deeply etched into his face. But maybe that was from worry and sickness, not from middle age. And I thought of something which had struck me as queer, before—

This thing of Frome and his daughter getting drunk and quarreling; yet being decent and affectionate when they were sober. Damn it, it didn't ring true!

Could be, I decided, *that Papa Frome and Daughter Joan are phonies. He ain't her old man at all. He's her husband. The papa gag is a cover-up for something.*

And I also decided that I'd better watch my step.

The girl came from the kitchen with two glasses, handed me one, lifted her glass and looked straight into my eyes

with that shadowed pleading in her own, and gulped her drink. An icy prickling down my spine, I started sipping my highball.

"Your plane badly damaged?" Frome asked.

"No. Just the tires blown out. McGaa offered to repair 'em for a buck apiece, and got right at it. He must be hard up."

"Finish your drink. Did you know that glider pilot who was doing experimental work here, Monahan? Man name of Neile Corbisson?"

"Yes," I said, and shut up.

"A nice chap. Rather secretive. You think those two Japs might've killed him?"

I stiffened. "Got no idea," I said.

"Finish your drink, and Joan'll get you another. You know, those Japs weren't living here when Corbisson was killed."

"Is that so?" I blurted.

"They arrived some days later. But they had been camping out in the brush nearby Dust Lake. Guess they came in and rented a cabin when they ran out of groceries."

"Uh-huh," I mumbled, thinking.

"We didn't know that until later—I mean, that they had been living nearby. I've often thought that we should inform the local sheriff's office so that the two Japs could be picked up for questioning."

"That'll be tended to," I said, and meant it.

I don't know what made me suspect my drink.

Maybe it was a sudden realization that Joan and Mr. Frome had been eyeing me intently for some long moments; that nobody had spoken for quite a while; that Mr. Frome, strangely, didn't look drunk any more, didn't look nearly as drunk as I myself felt. I sort of shivered and straightened up and took another pull at my glass.

And almost choked as I thought of something.

My senses were dimming, my head was dizzy, I was slowly fixing to pass out—as if a mickey finn had been slipped into my highball.

"Finish your drink," Frome said, "and Joan will get you another glass."

I flung my glass to the floor—I mean, I tried to. It seemed to take long minutes of violent effort to lift my glass, to stretch my arm out, just to let go of the drink so it would fall on the rug. I jumped to my feet—but there again, intention was way ahead of the doing. Somehow, I arched out of my chair; and would have fallen flat onto my face if Frome hadn't sprung up to catch me. Yeah, *he* got up quick and lively, and had the strength to hold me. He wasn't drunk at all.

"You've doped me," I choked out.

"Why, Mr. Monahan," Joan Frome said softly, "you must be ill!"

"Easy now," Frome said. "We'll take you to your cabin. Don't worry. Anybody can get sick."

Joan took one arm, Frome the other. Between them, they got me out of the house and moving across the court. I tried to resist, and couldn't. It was as if I were in a waking dose. I didn't quite know what I was doing; my senses seemed numbed. I caught just dim flashes of things. Then I was on my bed in my own cabin, and Frome was pulling off my shoes—and Joan was ransacking the room, searching the bureau drawers, searching my coat pockets, searching the closet shelves.

"The stuff has got to be somewhere around, Joan," I heard Frome say. "I *saw* him get it."

"I'll find it, Dad, I'll find it," she said breathlessly.

She did, too. She found those sheets of performance data and formulas which I'd thrust under the bed cover; and she cried out, her voice low but exultant, "Here they are, darling!"

I tried to get up, but couldn't move my muscles and the fogginess was gather-

ing thicker over my eyes. I was going to pass out cold and stay passed out for hours, I realized. Joan handed the sheaf of notes to Frome. He glanced at them, then folded them and stuck them carefully into an inside coat pocket.

They were facing my bed, and the outer door was behind them. Doped as I was, it took me several moments to realize what I was seeing—the outer door had opened, and a tall man stood there, and at his side was a big dog.

Gorham Jennison said, "I saw you bringing Mr. Monahan home. Did he get sick all of a sudden?"

Frome said easily, though the way he whirled around was wild with surprise, "Yes. He—came over to visit us and downed some drinks. Too many for his capacity, I guess."

Jennison chuckled. "Drowning his troubles, no doubt. Well, I'll look after him."

"Good. We'll leave him in your hands. Goodnight."

But Jennison did not move out of the way as Frome and the girl moved toward the door.

Jennison said, "Before you leave, maybe you'd better give me that sheaf of papers you took from under Monahan's blankets."

Well, I was in no shape to observe things closely, but it seemed to me that Joan Frome caught a sharp breath, that Frome's wiry body stiffened.

Jennison added, in that same easy tone, "I couldn't help but see. That window shade yonder is but partly drawn."

"What the hell," Frome said thickly. "Look, we'll split with you—"

"No. I'll take it all." Jennison's voice was suddenly hard.

The Fromes moved then, moved fast, as if used to teamwork. The girl struck out at the kerosene lamp on my table, and knocked it crashing to the floor. It went out—and in the darkness, Frome sprang to the little kitchen and out the back door, going through so fast that the door slammed as if it was coming off its hinges. But already a flashlight was bright in Jennison's fist.

And Jennison snapped, "Go get him, Brutus!"

And the big dog leaped away.

I still had enough savvy left to feel a dim horror at thought of that awful animal loose on a man.

Then I heard Frome cry out—and I heard a shot.

Abruptly Jennison had a gun in *his* hand; and Joan Frome was screaming, "Dan! Dan!" And she turned on Jennison. "That dog will kill him! Call him off, call him off—you can have those papers. Call off that dog!" And then her voice was a crazy shriek—that faded out thinly as I lost the fight against the dimness blacking out my senses.

IT WAS daylight when I was conscious again.

Opening my eyes took an agony of effort. Looking out the window, I saw that the desert was rosy with the level red gleam of the rising sun. I sat up, the effort making sweat pop onto my forehead, and I shut my eyes and waited for my head to quit spinning and my stomach to unknot. I felt like a hangover after a binge on canned heat and hair tonic.

Then I began remembering. Excitement slashed through my mental fog. The Fromes had stolen the rocket propulsion data—and Jennison had taken the precious records away from them.

I scrambled out of bed. I was still in my clothes, all except my shoes. Wildly I stared out the window.

That maroon Buick of the Fromes was gone, but Jennison's Pontiac station wagon was still behind his cabin.

Maybe he's still here! Likely it looked as if I was out cold when he anted in on the Fromes' robbery—and he figures I'll still believe that the Fromes have my stuff. Especially since they lammed out of here.

I pulled on my shoes and started out in such a hurry that I forgot my gun. But I didn't take four steps out of my cabin before my innards started heaving and my head to whirling. I sat down, hard; and my stomach did nip-ups for a good five minutes and I thought sure I'd turn inside out. I must've retched like a hound with a T-bone in his gullet, because the fat-paunched landlord, McGaa, came bursting out of the front cabin, goggle-eyed.

"You sick, Monahan?" he gasped.

"I been doped," I said, "and robbed!"

His jaw dropped. "Who done it?"

"Jennison," I said. It was Jennison who had those vital records I had to get back. "For God's sake, McGaa, help me stop him!"

"Jennison?" he echoed bewilderingly. "I came runnin' from the hangar last night when I heard a shot. But Jennison said it was the Fromes who'd pulled a hold-up, and they shot at the dog, and jumped into their coupé and—"

"That's Jennison's cover-up. He's got my stuff. Help me up. I left my gun in my cabin. Get it!"

He ran into the house and came out with my .45.

I took it, as he helped me up; but I was so shaky that I had to lean on him. He reached for my gun, swearing, "Damn it, you ain't safe with that."

"No, I'll keep it! Come on, before Jennison tries to pull out."

WE walked around to the back of Jennison's cabin, McGaa helping me. Out in the rear shed Jennison used for a laboratory we heard Jennison talking. Carefully we walked around to the shed doorway.

Jennison was sitting on the floor, with the big dog Brutus stretched out on his side before him; and Jennison was taking a soaked dressing from the big dog's side, and sort of crooning to him, "Easy boy. We'll put on a fresh clean bandage and that'll be lots better. Don't move, now—"

Then Jennison heard us, and looked around—and he stiffened up taut at sight of us.

"Stick 'em up," I snapped. "I'm takin' no chances with you, Jennison. Do as I say!"

"Careful with that gun," he blurted, and jumped to his feet so fast it panicked me.

"Don't move," I yelled. "You're under arrest!"

"All right, all right, but put that gun down before it goes off, man. You're in no shape—"

He was taking a step toward me, hand outstretched; and I yelled something, but I didn't even hear it myself because the pistol kicked in my fist and the roar was a deafening concussion in the little shed. Jennison yelled, too, as the slug thudded into the wall behind him, and leaped forward and with a sweep of his long arm knocked the gun from my fingers.

It clattered onto the floor, and he swooped to snatch it up. "McGaa!"—I bawled—and the fat landlord snatched up a small prospector's pick lying on a bench of mineral samples nearby and brought the pick down flat onto Jennison's head as the tall man was straightening up with the .45.

Jennison slumped prone onto the floor, out cold.

The dog, Brutus, growled and tried pitifully to get at us; but he'd evidently lost much blood and couldn't get onto his feet. Frome's shot, last night, had wounded the dog badly.

McGaa bent over Jennison.

"Lord! Wonder if I killed 'im?"

"Of course not. Drag 'im outside," I said, with a lot of certainty I didn't feel at all. What's more, doubt hit me, too. I'd heard Joan Frome beg Jennison to call the dog off, saying they'd give the papers to Jennison. But maybe the Fromes had got away with Neile Corbisson's records?

Jennison stirred and moaned, and McGaa swore in relief.

And then *I* swore in relief, too—for,

searching with shaky hands through Jennison's pockets, I touched crisp paper and pulled out that familiar sheaf of onionskin records from the tall man's coat pocket. Wobbly as I was, I almost cried, I was so damned thankful!

"Don't look so blamed conscience-stricken," I rapped at McGaa. "Jennison is breathing. But even if he was dead, you'd deserve a medal. That's how valuable is this stuff he took off me. Come on, haul him over to my plane. I've got to take him to the authorities."

The tall man *was* breathing; but he stayed out cold. In fact, he stayed so dead to the world that I began to wonder if maybe he didn't have a concussion or a fracture.

He didn't come to as McGaa half-dragged, half-carried him out to the flying field. I was able to help a little, and between us we hefted Jennison into the front cockpit of the Vultee.

"You going to fly this thing, shape you are in?" McGaa demanded of me.

"Yeah!"

"Look, I was making coffee—"

"For Lord's sake, run and get me some," I said.

JENNISON was still senseless; and as I gulped hot black coffee, I decided I'd better fly him to the nearest hospital in a hurry. I had McGaa boost me into the rear cockpit, and started my motor.

"Thought it needed repairin'," McGaa muttered.

But I was too busy to explain to him now; and he backed away as the prop kicked up a cloud of dust.

I swung the tail around and pushed the throttle open and picked the smoothest path across the playa and thanked my lucky stars as the Vultee lifted off without any shenanigans.

I'd taken off into the wind, coming from the south; so I started a slow climbing turn northward, taking it easy and letting the fine ship practically fly itself.

Then I saw Jennison's head roll, as if he was uneasily coming back to consciousness. Presently he straightened in his seat. Guess he got one hell of a shock to discover where he was. No doubt he shut his eyes and counted ten and looked again. Then he turned and looked around at me. He didn't seem scared, but plenty groggy and surprised.

I throttled down the motor and shouted at him, "Put the intercom phones over your ears."

He did so, and asked unsteadily into the mouthpiece, "Where are you taking me?"

"McReady Field. To a hospital if you are hurt—to a jail if you're not."

"You—you're making a mistake, Monahan."

"No, you did, when you robbed me."

"Of what? What've I stolen from you?"

"That sheaf of experimental records you took from Frome."

"Oh, that! But I took it from Frome to save for you."

"Which is just about the most obvious alibi one could think of," I snapped. "You can tell it to the judge, along with a few other things. Maybe you got an alibi to clear you of shooting Neile Corbisson, too."

"I didn't shoot Corbisson, and if I had robbed you, I'd have taken something of value."

"That data is as valuable as a fleet of fighting planes!"

"No. If you're under the impression that those records are specifications and formulas for Corbisson's rocket propulsion of gliders, you're mistaken."

"Oh, hell, save your breath," I said. "I suspected you from the start, only I got sidetracked by the other crooks who anted into the game. Maybe the Fromes were partners of yours?"

"Suspected me? Are you drunk, man?"

"Listen, you." I was feeling pretty mad by now. "Just before Corbisson was killed, he radioed a message. He had to

make it sound screwy, so that the wrong people wouldn't get help from it. He said, *'Look for the man as big as a redwood.'* Not exactly that, but that's the sense of it."

For a long half-minute Jennison was quiet.

"I didn't kill Corbisson," he said then. "I *am* unusually tall, but if you take those words literally, I'm far from being as tall as a redwood."

"So I don't take it literally—and it's just a figure of speech, but it fits you swell!"

"You know, even a redwood tree isn't very tall—when it's lying flat on the ground."

"Nor were you, when McGaa laid you out like a rug."

He chuckled at that, actually. But, seriously, he said, "Come back to those records which you believe to be so valuable—"

"They're so precious that somebody killed Corbisson in an effort to get them, and that somebody is likely *you!*"

"Those records that you nearly killed me in recovering," he went on quietly, "are something that Corbisson must have hidden in a likely spot for thieves like the Fromes to find and run away with."

"Oh, yeah?" I sneered.

"Yeah. What you'd call sucker bait."

"Your wits are still scrambled."

"If you'll look on the last page," Jennison insisted, "in the bottom row of equations, you'll find some faint penciled notations. Look at them closely."

"All right," I said—and I slid back the canopy over his cockpit. I hadn't fastened his safety belt, and I told him now, "Remember that I've got a gun—also a yen, if you make a wrong move to flip this plane over onto its back and dump you out like a load of ashes!"

I took the sheaf of onionskin records from my pocket, spread them on my knee and leafed back to the last page.

Written into the bottom line of figures were those couple words of gibberish I'd noticed before and wondered about.

"Found them?" Jennison asked.

"Yeah."

"You know," he said, "I had become friendly with Neile Corbisson. We were both of a scientific turn of mind. I'm a soil analyst. I found him a very pleasant man, cautious, and shrewd, but with a streak of quiet humor."

"He was swell," I mumbled. For a moment my eyes blurred hot and my throat tightened, Neile was so plain in my mind.

"Don't try to read that whole line. Just put the separate penciled letters together."

I did that, and stared at the result—and abruptly the letters took meaning. I blinked, incredulous, and stared again. And the meaning of those two words of gibberish shouted in my brain like a wild guffaw.

Those scrambled letters spelled: *Ixnay, akefay.*

"'Good Lord!" I blurted. "It's Pig Latin."

"Yes," Jennison said. "Get their meaning?"

Yeah, I got it, all right, all right.

Ixnay, akefay. Nix, fake!

Jennison was right. This sheaf of records of Neile Corbisson's experiments had been deliberately planted by him. So that any thief trying to steal his precious information would take these and run—and hunt no further for the *real* records of the rocket-propulsion experiments.

"Those real records," I told myself, "I won't find them until I actually *do* look under the collar of the dog of the man as big as a redwood!"

JENNISON asked, "You want to see the man as big as a redwood?"

"Wha-a-at?" I gasped.

"I can show you the man as big as a redwood."

"For Lord's sake, *show me!*"

"Swing southeast and go down to 1,500 feet."

I banked the Vultee around, as directed.

My brain still felt as if it had been kicked about like a football; and I wondered if I was half-nuts or if Jennison was the one who was addled. And added to the aching confusion in my thoughts was heartache—for I'd failed. These papers I had recovered were not the real record of Corbisson's work. Unless his real data was found, all his splendid pioneering work in rocket propulsion of gliders was lost; and he had died to no purpose, tragically and wastefully.

Jennison said, "Bear in mind that Corbisson did a lot of flying over this desert. He knew it well."

"Come to the point. *Is* there a man as b-big as a redwood?" I stammered foolishly.

Jennison chuckled. "Lying down," he said.

"I don't get it."

"You will. By the way, what right have you to any belongings of Neile Corbisson?"

"Neile married my sister. He practically brought me up, and—" Well, I couldn't quite say it; that I'd hero worshiped Neile Corbisson.

"I, too, admired him," Jennison said gravely.

Abruptly, then, he pointed overside.

"Look! There's your man as big as a redwood."

We were flying over wind-swept desert plateaus. I banked the Vultee, and looked down, my heart in my throat.

At first I didn't see anything, because I had no idea of what to look for.

"Lying down," Jennison repeated. "Directly below."

Then I saw the man! As big as a redwood. Bigger!

Directly below, on a mesa top, I recognized a sort of desert pavement we call a *pedregal:* it's covered with pebbles and small rocks of jasper and carnelian and agate that's all been smoothed and rounded and polished by wind and rain. On this plateau the pavement had been weathered a rich gravy-brown. And against this background, shaped in the lighter color of the soil underlying the *pedregal,* was the gigantic figure of a man.

It looked like the sort of crude drawing that a kid will make on a slate with chalk. Just simple long lines. Straight lines for legs, straight-out lines for arms stretched east and west, the body just a long oval, with a smaller oval perched on it for a head.

And then, as I looked, my heart yammered in wilder excitement. For, to the southwest of the figure of the man, just as crudely drawn, was the shape of a huge dog. *With a collar around its neck!*

"Colossal pictographs," Jennison was saying. "Yet, unless you have a trained eye, from down on the ground you might not see those forms at all, they are so large and in such low relief. They are ancient in origin. Notice the large circle that crosses the man's legs? That's an Indian dance ring, which is itself very old. Yet it's superimposed on the other figure. Those dancing Indians likely weren't aware they were crossing the legs of the man's figure." *

"The dog!" I blurted.

"The other figure? Probably a deer."

"That's a dog," I said hoarsely.

"More likely a burro deer."

I had no yen for argument. I demanded, "Can you find those figures once we're on the ground?"

"Of course. So could you, once you know they're there."

"Here we go!" I shouted, nosing the Vultee earthward.

* These giant pictographs are located in the California desert north of Blythe. Recently published have been photographs of them taken by the 23rd photo section of the U. S. Army Air Corps. . . . In the desert, at this point, are wind-swept mesas covered with a layer of smooth, water-worn pebbles which through the centuries of sun and wind have taken on a rich dark patina. It is supposed that some primitive Indians scraped away the pebbles, leaving the surface below to show light and clear in the shape of these figures. . . . From the ground, these figures do not present a very definite outline; but from the air, they stand out in clear form and proportion against the darker background. The figure of the man actually is the length of a medium-sized redwood, as it measures 167 feet tall.

JENNISON said, "That tall man has been down there a long time. He isn't going anywhere. Are you anxious to catch the Fromes?"

"I sure am!"

"They've had about four hours start. But there's just one auto road, and it's unpaved, so they can't have got far. I'd head east if I were you."

Eastward I banked the plane, and looked for the highway.

Suddenly Jennison pointed overside again.

"Quick, look!"

I looked, and I saw two slim figures trudging along the road. At that moment they heard my motor, and they dived into the brush after one wild look over their shoulders.

"The Japs."

"They'll keep," I said.

Swooping down to 500 feet, I leveled off and followed the twin ruts in the sand with my motor opened full out.

On that road, you might average thirty miles an hour if you didn't care how you banged up your car. In the air, I was doing over 240. The Fromes, I figured, would head for the Mexican border. But they couldn't cut across country to it. They'd have to drive east until they found a passable track south. Such a road branched off from this one beyond Condor Field, about a hundred miles farther on.

Below us, the desert streamed past.

We passed a couple of prospectors in their battered jalopies. We winged over roadside gas-and-hot-dog stands that were boarded up, frozen out by gas rationing. We whipped over a county road gang, grading the ruts smooth; and once I detoured around a half-dozen tank destroyers deploying in a practice maneuver. I didn't like intruding unannounced over any military operations. Every car we sighted, I swung low for a good view. But none was the maroon Buick I was hunting. We passed a railroad junction with the name Klondike painted on a shed roof; then a colony of date farms, and a couple of desert cabin resorts. Uneasily I realized that soon we'd be inside an army bombing range.

Up ahead, then, I saw the road junction beyond Condor Field. And nosing down, I spotted a maroon coupe in a gas station.

Jennison said, "That may be the Fromes."

At that moment, as if my motor had been heard, the coupe pulled away from the gas pumps and lurched out onto the roadway, gathering speed. And we saw the station attendant run after it, waving his arms.

"Frome didn't wait to pay for his gas," I said.

I swung to the side of the road. Luckily, there were no telephone poles fringing it. In that car were two people. There was no mistaking the shining coppery-red hair of the girl at the wheel. What's more, Frome actually leaned out the car window and shot a pistol at us—once. He must've been panicky, but realized at once he was wasting lead.

I zoomed, thinking fast. I had no machine-guns on the Vultee; and my "handie-talkie" didn't have the range to call any deputy-sheriffs from here.

Banking around, I nosed down and came in low behind the swaying, racing Buick. Lower still I nosed, and swept over the maroon coupe, low enough to roll my wheels on its roof if my landing gear had been down—and on along the road I swept like I was mowing grass off the shoulders. Then up I zoomed, and banked around for a look.

My prop stream had kicked up a cloud of tawny dust that engulfed the car for a long half-minute. When we saw the coupe, then, it was lurching along the ruts as the girl fought blindly to keep it on the road.

Down I zoomed again, and repeated the stunt. For up ahead was a jog in the road. Again the gale of wind from my prop

kicked up a dozen acres of sand and grit like a miniature *santa ana* fogging out the countryside. The car was completely lost in it.

I circled in a steep bank, and we watched as the wind gradually blew the dust aside —and then we saw the maroon Buick lying on its side in the ditch. Where the road turned, the girl—blinded by the dust —had driven straight ahead, and gone off the track.

Neither Joan nor Frome seemed to be hurt, though. We saw them crawling out of the car, and start running across a grassy flat toward a little ranchhouse.

Jennison asked, "Got your gun?"

"Yeah," I said, and I cut the motor and glided down to land.

AND as we came in, I saw that the field was quite level. I got my wheels down, and touched. But I kept the tail up. Tail high, I gunned the motor and taxied in a roaring rush straight at Frome and the girl.

Running, they looked back over their shoulders. They saw us, and Frome stopped and shot at us again.

But I headed the plane straight at them, as if I intended to cut them down with the prop. Terrified, they flung themselves flat to the ground—but at the last moment I horsed back on the stick and lifted the Vultee over them, my slipstream banging them into the dirt like the wallop of a giant hand.

Up I came, and swept around in a tight bank, and nosed down and touched wheels again, and again I roared at them as they scrambled to their feet, as if to repeat my maneuver.

But this time Frome flung his gun away. Hands high in the air, he bawled quits. I couldn't hear him, but the look on his face and the girls' was plenty eloquent. I throttled back and stopped the plane a few yards from them and I jumped to the ground, my .45 leveled in my hand. I didn't need it; they were really licked. I could hardly bear to look at Joan. Somehow she didn't seem lovely to me any more.

I'll say this for bald, pout-lipped little Frome. After we marched the two of them to that ranchhouse and sent a man on horseback to the nearest town to wire the sheriff, Frome offered to make a deal. He would talk, if we would promise to try to get leniency for the girl.

"All she did is tag along," he told us. "Joan is my wife, not my daughter. My right name is Maurice Raffe. I shot Neile Corbisson, but Joan didn't even know that until the deputy sheriffs were there investigating?"

"Raffe?" I blurted. "Are you the Raffe who—?"

"Yeah," he snapped. "I'm wanted in Chicago. Like I say, I shot Corbisson. I followed you and I sapped you in the hangar when you found those records of specifications and formulas in Corbisson's cabinet. But before I could find the papers where you dropped them in the dark, I heard Jennison coming and had to beat it out of the hangar. Joan helped me, later, by putting a mickey finn in your drink, but I made her do that."

"No," she protested. "Maurice, I'm just as—"

"Shut up!" he snapped, and she obeyed.

She loved the ugly little crook; and that was probably the most honest thing about her. Mr. and Mrs. Maurice Raffe were wanted in Chicago for swindling an impressionable old dotard out of a flock of bonds, and for giving him an overdose of sedative when he squawked. That murder was pinned on Raffe cold; I realized that was why he was willing to talk. He was going to pay the murder penalty whether I convicted him of killing Neile Corbisson or not.

"One thing more," I asked. "Were those two young Japanese working with you?"

"No. I talked friendly with them and they admitted to me that they had run

away from the Manzanar Relocation Center. One of them had been a C. A. A. flying student at a junior college along the coast. I suggested to 'em that they steal your plane and get across into Mexico in a hurry. So they tried it, but—" He shrugged. "Guess he wasn't a good enough pilot." Raffe's eyes burned into me, then. "I'll sign a statement of everything I've told you, if you'll get the girl an easy out. Promise that—or I'll shut up and deny everything."

"Okay, I'll do what I can," I said.

I looked at Joan. The sun was bright in her hair. She was sobbing, her face in her hands. Raffe reassuringly put his arm about her shoulders. He was an ugly little rat, but he had courage enough for the two of them.

The deputy-sheriffs arrived, finally. They took the Fromes into custody. We told the deputies where to pick up the two A.W.O.L. Japanese. Then Jennison and I borrowed a shovel from the rancher and we left.

We flew back toward Dust Lake, and detoured north until we sighted that wind-swept mesa and found the giant pictographs again. I set the Vultee down gingerly on the *pedregal* of polished pebbles. The stuff flew up and rattled against the wings but there wasn't any damage done.

I jumped to the ground, my pulse hammering with excitement. Jennison unfolded his long length from the cockpit and got busy.

Here, with your eyes less than six feet above the soil, the outline of the colossal figures was hard to make out. I was so worked up that I started down the line of the Indian dance ring. But Jennison called me back. After all, he was a soil analyst, an expert. He led me to the huge, sprawling figure of the giant's "dog."

"Where's its neck?" I said. "We got to find the collar!"

"Just a minute."

It was a crude figure of a dog—or deer. The neck was thin and long. But vaguely, as if with a stick, a studded collar had been marked low on the neck.

"Dig here," Jennison suggested.

But I was already flying at it.

A COUPLE feet down I dug, and got nothing but sweat and blisters. Doubt began growing in my mind.

A foot deeper—and my shovel rang against metal.

And then, hands shaking, I pulled a flat container of green metal out of the hole. On it was painted the name *Neile Corbisson*. It was not locked, but shut with a catch. I opened it.

Jennison stooped down beside me, and together we took out a thick pile of blueprints, detail and assembly drawings of the rocket-propulsion installations for gliders as Corbisson had worked them out so effectively—and pages of chemical formulas and records of performance.

I let out a long slow breath of relief, and looked at Jennison. His face broke into a warm smile.

"Ealray akemacfaycoy," he said, "if I remember my pig Latin correctly!"

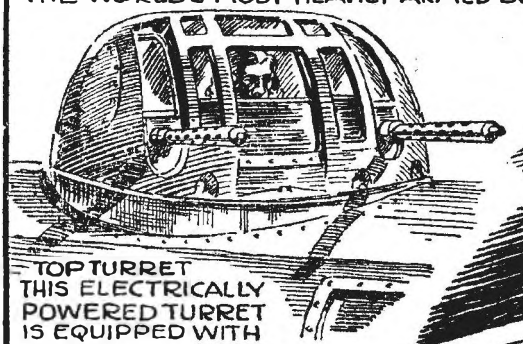
"Yeah," I breathed. "The Real McCoy!"

And I fondled those papers with my fingers, my eyes blurring as I thought of the fine, careful man who'd worked out these pages. And I made a pledge to myself, a solemn promise. My friend was dead, but his good work would live on—and, into the lands of the earth that were dark and grim under the shadow of the swastika, Neile's work would help bring a stern, avenging justice.

PLANE FACTS

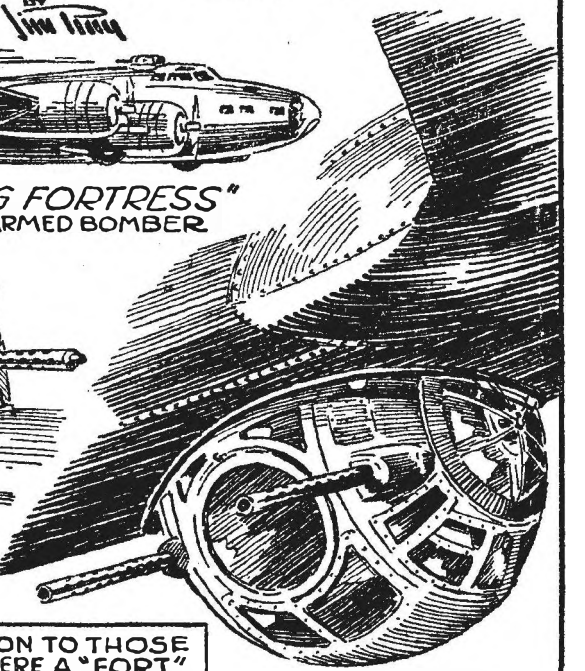
BY Jim Tilley

BOEING B-17 "FLYING FORTRESS"
THE WORLD'S MOST HEAVILY ARMED BOMBER

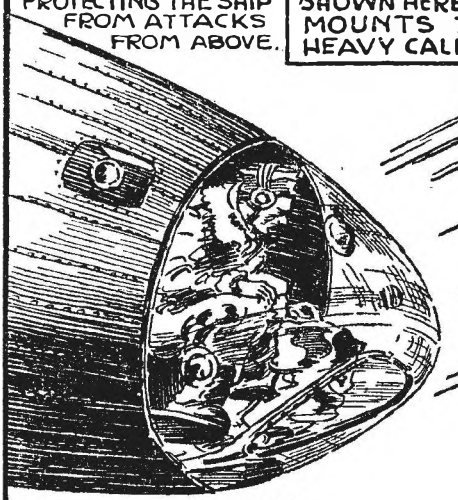


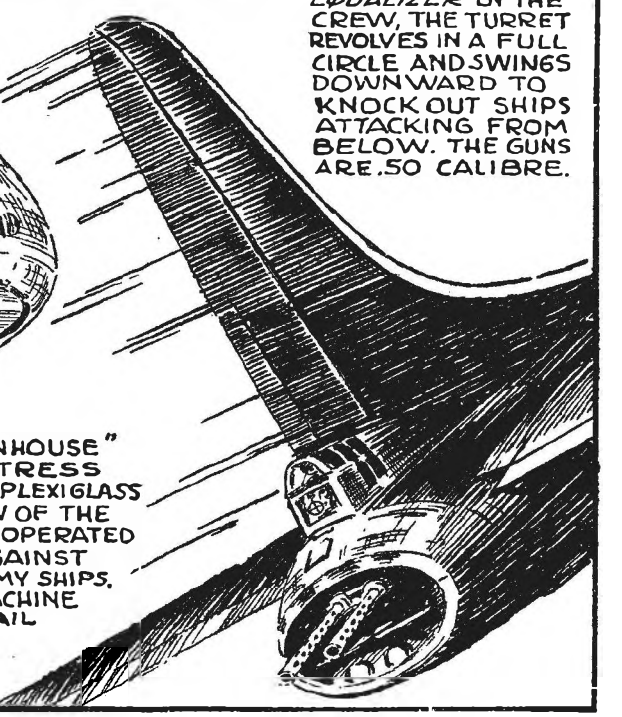
TOP TURRET
THIS ELECTRICALLY POWERED TURRET IS EQUIPPED WITH TWO .50 CALIBRE MACHINE GUNS AND SWINGS IN A 360 DEGREE CIRCLE PROTECTING THE SHIP FROM ATTACKS FROM ABOVE.

IN ADDITION TO THOSE SHOWN HERE, A "FORT" MOUNTS 7 OTHER HEAVY CALIBRE GUNS.



BALL TURRET CALLED THE *EQUALIZER* BY THE CREW, THE TURRET REVOLVES IN A FULL CIRCLE AND SWINGS DOWNWARD TO KNOCK OUT SHIPS ATTACKING FROM BELOW. THE GUNS ARE .50 CALIBRE.





THE BOMBARDIER'S "GREENHOUSE" IN THE NOSE OF THE FORTRESS IS BUILT OF TRANSPARENT PLEXIGLASS GIVING HIM A CLEAR VIEW OF THE TARGET. HE HAS A HAND-OPERATED GUN FOR PROTECTION AGAINST HEAD-ON ATTACKS BY ENEMY SHIPS. THE TWO .50 CALIBRE MACHINE GUNS IN THE "STINGER" TAIL ARE DEADLY AGAINST FIGHTER PLANE ATTACKS FROM THE REAR.

DEATH RIDES THE HIGH WIRE

By BILL GULICK

It Was to the Rawest Sort of Boom Town That Joe Goodwin Was Bringing Electricity!

MOTORS idling, the two trucks sat facing each other on the narrow country road. There just wasn't room to pass. Cursing, the driver of the oil field truck swung down from the cab of the White and stared at the long trailer-load of casing behind. Then turning, he stared at the trailer-load of creosoted poles strung out behind the high-line truck. He shook his head. The road just wasn't wide enough.

In the cab of the high-line truck, Happy, its runty, sawed-off driver, muttered, "Damn," and looked inquiringly at the man sitting beside him. This man, a lean, hard-faced individual, kept staring straight ahead, puffing savagely at his cigarette.

"What's that egg think we're going to do," he said, "fly over?"

Happy grinned a slow, lazy grin. " 'Bout the only way we could get past."

The hard-faced man got down from the cab and walked to meet the oil field truck driver. With a quick glance, his eyes measured the width of the two trucks, took in the steep-banked ditch at one side of the road and the red clay-bank at the other. He waved a commanding hand.

"You can make it. Swing her into the ditch and she'll clear by a hair."

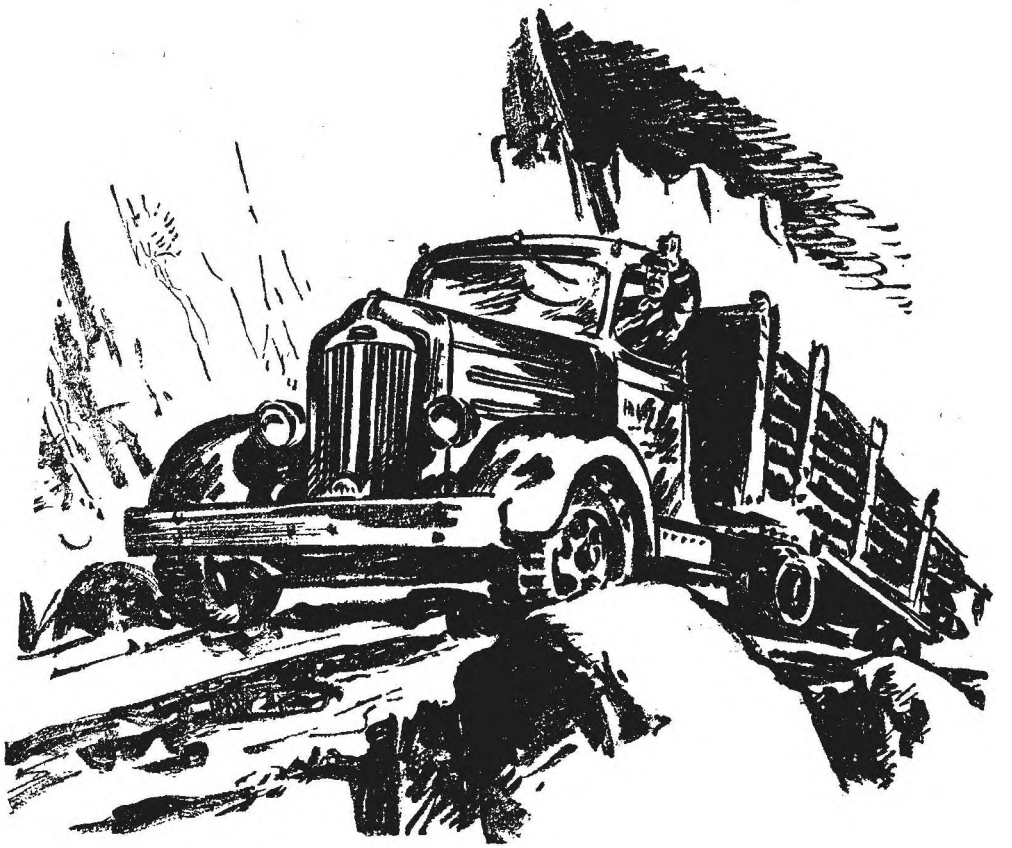
"Yeah?" The driver of the oil field truck stared doubtfully. "I ain't wantin' to dump a load of casin'—and me under it, maybe."

The lean man shoved the truckie aside. "If you can't drive that crate, I can."

"Keep outa that cab. Or I'll—"

"You'll what?"

The burly truckie stood there a moment, shifting uncertainly, big fists opening and closing. He outweighed this man by a good fifty pounds; he could break him in two with his bare hands. Yet something about the man's eyes—



He shrugged. "Give it a try if you want. I'm gettin' outa the way, though."

He moved off to one side of the road where he wouldn't catch a length of casing in his lap should the load go, and watched. The motor of the White roared and its gears clashed harshly. Hugging its side of the road, the truck moved forward. Then with a throbbing roar it swerved, hit the ditch with a solid thud, bounced crazily.

The big truckie heard a metallic sound as the casing shifted against strained boomers. He closed his eyes and flinched. Then he heard the sound again as the load shifted back, and it was all over. Opening his eyes cautiously, he saw the White sitting up-

right in the road, past the high-line truck, not a length of casing disturbed. He whistled out his breath.

"Lord—that's drivin'!"

Before he went back to the White, his curiosity made him ask the driver of the high-line truck a question. "Who the hell is this hard-boiled egg?"

"Who?" Happy grinned. "Name's Joe Goodwin. Foreman of Plains States Power Company's construction crew. We are buildin' a high-line."

"High-line? To Deep Sands?"

"Twenty-five miles of it. A rush job. And if Joe Goodwin has his way, he'll beat her up on schedule."

The burly truckie turned and stared at the foreman striding toward him. There was something about that walk, something about the lean, hard thrust of that jaw, that made him nod his head and mutter:

"I bet he will. I'll bet my interest in hell he will."

ROME may not have been built in a day, but the lusty boom-town of Deep Sands was. On a Monday evening, the town—called Scottsville then—consisted of half a dozen drab gray buildings sleeping alongside a dusty country road. Then at eleven p.m. Harvey Number One blew in, spewing black liquid gold high over the crown block. For forty-eight hours the well ran wild, and before it was ever closed in, the peaceful Oklahoma town of Scottsville was dead. And a boom-town was born.

They decided to call this new town Deep Sands. That's where the pool was. Deep. Apparently without end. And it was a fortunate time to tap this new play, everybody said, what with the nation at war and needing petroleum products so badly.

Promoters, drillers, roughnecks, lease brokers—all those trades that go with the oil game—joined the trek to this new Mecca. By the end of the first month Deep Sands boasted a population of six thousand souls. It boasted, too, that this was the biggest pool ever struck in Oklahoma, perhaps the biggest in the entire country.

It did not boast of another record, that of a man a day dying violently since the town came into existence; it just quietly fitted these men out in pine coffins and buried them in a potters' field which, fifty years earlier, would have been called Boot Hill, but now was undignified by any name.

IT WAS to this raw boom-town that Joe Goodwin was bringing electricity. The job held preference over all other projects for Plains States, and his orders were to push his men to the limit, to drive the twenty-five miles of high-line through in the least possible time.

Chill autumn dusk was settling down over Deep Sands when he came into the ramshackle barn which served as storeroom and office to find a portly, gray-haired man warming his hands over the pot-bellied stove. Joe nodded to him.

"Howdy, Skipper. How are things in the city?"

The superintendent lit a cigarette and ground the match into the dirt floor. "It's how things are on this job that's bothering me. How long before you can heat the line up?"

Joe had the answer on the tip of his tongue, all right, but he took his time giving it. He didn't like to be glib about these things. You were smart, he figured, to let the other fellow fidget a bit, even though that fellow might be the boss.

"Well," he said, "we got a couple of sub-stations to build. Something over twenty miles of line to stick up in the air. The country's rocky and pretty heavily timbered—"

"How long?" the skipper snapped.

"We're short on linemen. Need a couple more trucks."

The skipper shook his head like a shaggy bear. "You know how priorities have got us tied up on trucks. You've

got all the transportation we can spare. And linemen—" His face twisted sourly. "There ain't no such animal running loose these days. With what you've got, how long will it take you to cut her hot?"

Something in his voice caught Joe up. He said crisply, "Six weeks."

"Make it four."

"Have to work a lot of overtime."

"What of it? You're not paying the bill."

Joe shrugged and remained silent. The skipper threw down his cigarette. "Maybe this will put fire in you. I'll pay you an extra month's salary for every week you trim off six."

Joe permitted himself a piece of a grin. This was the kind of talk he liked to listen at; this was the only kind of talk that made sense to him. "Skipper, you've made yourself a deal. Four weeks it is."

"Good." The superintendent thrust out a hamlike paw. "This means a lot to the company. Don't let us down, son."

Taking the hand, Joe grinned a slow, hard grin. "For the bonus you've offered me, Skipper, I could build a high-line to hell."

He talked it over with his straw-boss, Lee Parsons, that evening, and the two of them figured out ways and means. They made a good team. Lee was tall and gaunt, easy-going of nature and quick of smile. He was Texas-born and proud of it, and the Texas showed in his slow drawl and his lazy, shambling walk. He never appeared to be working hard himself, but he had a knack for getting work out of the men. Whenever anything came up that demanded sure nerve and a steady hand, it was to Lee Parsons that Joe turned.

Sitting on an empty insulator crate, Joe spread the blueprints out under the smoky yellow light of a kerosene lamp and studied them again. "A sloppy job," he mumbled.

"One thing you got to remember," Lee drawled. "Those prints were drawn up in a hurry, so the engineers are bound to have lots of mistakes. Best thing to do is hang the damn wire the way that suits you and let it go at that." He stood up and yawned. "Put that stuff away and let's go get a beer."

Concentrating on a vague corner construction, Joe snapped absently, "Can't. Got to figure this out."

Lee muttered, "You're gettin' like an old woman."

Joe frowned. "What?"

Lee shrugged and turned away. Joe stood up and took hold of his arm. "What's eating you, Lee?"

The straw-boss looked at him for a moment without speaking. The easy-going smile was gone from his face and his eyes were cold. "I don't reckon I can draw you a picture. Except, Joe, that things ain't like they were when we were hittin' the big sticks together in the old days. Since you started ramroddin' a crew, you've changed plenty, and I ain't at all sure it's for the better." He broke off, and silence hung heavily between them. "I'm goin' after that beer. See you *manana.*"

He bit the last word off short and shambled across the storeroom toward the door which gave on the street. Somberly watching him, Joe thought of how it was in the old days. They'd climbed poles together, back when, drunk together, fought together. He'd changed, all right, and maybe, like Lee said, not for the better. He'd got hard of late years, brittle, because he figured you had to be that way. Yet sometimes—like tonight—he wondered.

Suddenly he shoved the prints aside and called, "Lee!"

Lee paused at the door. "Yeah?"

"I've changed my mind. Think I'll take a beer, after all."

THEY went to a place called the Blue Light, a sawdust-floored honky-tonk, which was unofficial headquarters for every promoter and get-rich-quick operator in town. Following Lee to a table in the

crowded, low-ceilinged room, Joe mused that if ever he needed to round up his men after hours he could find them all here. The joint seemed to be their headquarters, too.

Drinking beer at the bar were Happy, Slim, and Dog-Ear, evidently enjoying themselves from the way they were pouring the belly-wash down. At a table, Soggy—dead-pan as usual—was entertaining Dutch and Specs with one of his innumerable yarns. The other members of the crew were scattered about the room.

Lee gestured at a couple of men who stood, arguing vehemently, directly in front of the raised platform where a five-piece orchestra scraped and bowed. One of them was massive, heavy-limbed, built like a draft horse. The other was tiny, pint-sized—and a short pint, at that. "Big Hoot and Little Hoot are at it again," Lee said, smiling.

Joe chuckled. They were always arguing about something, those two. They had never come to blows—excepting, of course, the time Big Hoot had dropped a wrench off a pole onto Little Hoot's head, and Little Hoot had kept him treed till dark, chunking bolts at him—yet they always acted as though they were on the verge of homicide.

"Beer," Lee ordered when they'd finally found a vacant table. Drinking the stuff, Joe gazed around the smoke-filled room, listening with a trace of amusement to the big-money talk in the air. Every boom-town was this way: earnest men arguing, scratching frantic figures on paper, dreaming million-dollar bubble-schemes, figuring ways to start out with nothing and end up on velvet.

"Big talk," he muttered sarcastically. "Wish I had a tenth of the money that's dreamed up here every night."

Lee nodded. "Yeah." He pointed a casual finger at a nearby table. "See that guy? There's an egg won't talk much, but you can bet your pants he'll get his share of any jack to be made."

Joe looked at the man. He was round-faced and fat, and wore a well-cut business suit; across his bulging vest-front hung a gleaming silver watchchain, one end of which he kept twirling around a stubby finger. At first glance he had the appearance of a good-natured traveling salesman—until you looked at his eyes. They were not the sort of eyes a traveling salesman should have. They were too wide-set, too dark, too harsh.

"Who is he?" Joe asked.

"Name of J. Edward Cooke. Promoter, speculator." Lee shrugged. "Some call him worse. Down Texas way, they say he skinned out just before the law caught up with him. Phony oil stock."

"Why didn't Texas extradite him?"

"Funny thing. Something happened to the two star witnesses. They died, accidentally."

Joe glanced over at Cooke again. It was difficult to picture him as capable of murder. Until you looked at his eyes. Then you could believe 'most anything.

While he was staring at the promoter's table, a tall, white-haired man walked across the floor, a man whose distinctive face was made even more arresting by the bristling, snow-white mustache above his mouth. He wore high-heeled boots and a wide hat, and in his walk was the stiffness of one used to stirrups under him rather than a sawdust floor. He limped heavily, leaning upon a cane which at first Joe had not noticed.

When he was part way across the crowded floor, a half-drunk roughneck stumbled into him and knocked him off his feet. The old man fell in a heap. The roughneck stopped dancing and bawled hoarsely, "Hey, grampaw, don't you know it's late for you to be out?"

On the other side of the table, Lee started to rise from his chair. "Why, that dirty—"

Joe put a hand on the straw-boss's shoulder. "Easy."

Painfully, the old man got up. He

brushed off his clothes with deliberate motions and glared icily at the roughneck.

"I'm ready, young man, to accept your apology."

The roughneck guffawed. "Apology? Hell, grampaw, I never apologized to anybody in my life. Reckon I'm too old to learn how."

Sudden quiet fell in the room. A curious circle of men and dime-a-dance girls formed around the two antagonists. Anger colored the old man's cheeks. Without warning, he raised his cane, brought it down sharply across the roughneck's shoulders. Stunned but not hurt, the roughneck roared and charged forward.

Joe heard a movement on the other side of the table and managed to seize Lee Parsons just in time. "Stay out of it, you fool! It's not your fight!"

Lee shook the restraining hand off. Anger and a sort of unholy joy were mixed in his voice. "Reckon I'm makin' it my fight. We ain't on the job now, Mister Big-Pants, and I ain't takin' your orders!"

He went piling through the crowd, forcing his way into the middle of the circle. Joe cursed silently. Lee would have the whole drilling crew on him now, and dammit, mixing in rough-house brawls didn't get any high-line built.

Lee jerked the roughneck away from the old man and swung. Bone crunched solidly against bone, and the roughneck went down. Struggling up, he yelled drunkenly, "C'mon, boys! We'll teach this cookie to horn in!"

From all directions, the drilling crew moved in. Then Joe heard somebody yell "Headache"—the war-call of the high-line crew. His own boys started mixing it up, giving Lee a hand.

Happy chose him a roustabout twice his size and commenced trimming him down to fit, and he was grinning, because next to truck driving, fighting was what Happy liked best. Slim made his stand beside Happy, a ball of fire, throwing more fists than three men could count. Specs, the timekeeper, laid his glasses aside and waded in, fighting scientific like they'd taught him to do in college.

Joe cursed again. The fight out there was turning into a first-class brawl. At this rate they'd mess up his whole crew. He heard a whoop from the bar. Dog-Ear and Dutch eagerly joined the fray; then Soggy—dead-pan as always—and Big Hoot and Little Hoot made the party complete.

A squat-built roustabout picked up a chair and heaved it at Dutch, knocking him flat. Joe groaned. He couldn't stand it any longer. He wanted to be in there. Of a sudden, he forgot that he was a foreman with a good-sized chunk of high-line to build, and slipped out of his coat.

"Hey, boys—I'm coming too! Save three big ones for me!"

WHERE Joe lay, it was very quiet. Except his head. His head, when he came around, felt like Monday morning after a week-end binge. One eye wouldn't open at all; the other was half shut. Blood oozed from a long gash in the top of his head where somebody had given him a beer-bottle massage.

Gingerly, he sat up and looked around. He was outdoors—evidently in the alley where the bouncers had tossed him. Hearing a groan in the darkness beside him, he reached out, felt a body.

"Lee?" He didn't know why he figured it would be Lee, unless maybe it was because he was remembering the way they used to get in brawls together, back when, and get thrown out of joints together.

"Yeah." The voice was uncertain. "Leastways, what's left of me."

There was a silence, broken only by small groans and painful sighs. After a while they both stood up, carefully testing one bone at a time to see if any were broken. On their feet at last, they crippled along the alley toward the storeroom. Joe allowed himself a chunk of a grin.

"Lee," he said, "it was kinda like—"

Beside him, he heard a chuckle and didn't finish what he had started to say. He let Lee finish it for him.

"Yeah. It was, at that. Kinda like the old days."

STRADDLING the barren ridge top a hundred yards away from Joe Goodwin, a 66,000-volt steel tower line cut a clean, symmetrical pattern against the dull autumn sky, each tower standing straight and tall under the looping spans of aluminum wire. To the east of a gleaming, narrow-based tower, half a dozen men dug in the frozen earth preparing foundations for the sub-station transformers.

Here, Joe knew, the trunk line would be tapped and the voltage stepped down to the 22,000 which the Deep Sands line would carry. Already, outside the sub-station enclosure, the first pole of that line was set, and beyond it as far as the eye could see, other 50-foot creosoted poles marched dark against the rolling horizon.

Joe parked the pick-up truck and got out, wincing as a sore knuckle glanced against the door handle. Lighting a cigarette, he cast an approving eye about the station enclosure. Lee was moving along on the sub, just as he'd promised he would.

"Anything bothering you today, Lee?" he asked. The straw-boss shook his head and grinned.

"Nothin' but these eyes of mine."

Joe didn't grin. Beneath each of Lee's eyes was a puffy, yellowish-blue knot, swollen so that the eyes were no more than slits.

"Tough. Have you put beeksteak on them?"

"Hell, if I could find a good beefsteak in Deep Sands, I'd eat it, not waste it on my eyes."

"Maybe you got something there. By the way, did you find out who that old man was?"

Lee shook his head. "It don't matter a whole lot."

"Hell of a thing, getting mixed up in a brawl over somebody you don't even know."

Lee stiffened. "I ain't sorry. Are you?"

Joe looked at his straw-boss a moment, and did not answer. He hadn't meant to to bring the subject up. He turned away. "Reckon I'll amble on down the line and see how the rest of the boys are making out. Keep things moving here."

"Yeah," Lee said, and his voice had a flat sound. "Yeah, Joe, I'll do that."

Driving slowly along the road, Joe inspected the new high-line with a critical eye. Five miles of copper in the air now, pulled up to sag and tied in. Not enough. They'd do better next week. He'd see to it that they did better.

He passed the wire-stringing truck and waved at the boys handling the reel but did not stop. They were getting on all right. With Slim pushing the gang and old-timers like Dog-Ear and Big Hoot climbing the poles, they'd walk the dog without any trouble.

It was the hole-digging crew he was worried about. They were behind schedule, way behind. He caught up with them just as they were knocking off for lunch. Dutch, an old-fashioned, methodical gang-pusher with some old-fashioned ideas about building high-line, came over to the pick-up and got in at Joe's invitation. He offered to share his sandwiches with the foreman.

"No, thanks," Joe said. "I'll eat when I get to town. What's slowing you up? The pole-setters are right on your heels."

Square face imperturbable, Dutch took a solid bite out of a sandwich. "Nothin'. It takes time to dig holes an' dig 'em right."

"Hitting much rock?"

"Plenty. Usin' rock bars most every inch of the way."

JOE pounded on the steering wheel in exasperation. "Ever hear of such a thing as dynamite?"

"Sure. But it's dangerous stuff to use when you ain't got an experienced powder-monkey in the crew."

"*You* know how to use it, don't you?"

"Huh?" Dutch's pale blue eyes turned on the foreman and regarded him gravely. "You mean I should set that stuff myself?"

"You're damn right! Just because you are pushing a crew, Dutch, is no reason why you shouldn't get your own hands dirty. I'll have Specs order you some dynamite—and I'll expect you to use it. Or I'll find me a gang-pusher who will."

Dutch closed his lunchbox with a snap and got out of the pick-up.

"All right, Joe," he said heavily. "I'll use it. But I won't be responsible for no accidents."

"I'm not asking you to," Joe snapped, and kicked the starter. Suddenly, behind him, an automobile horn blasted out. He turned off the motor. "What now?" he muttered, and got out.

A dilapidated old-model roadster had pulled up behind him. At its wheel sat a girl, waving at him and calling, "Mister Goodwin?"

He nodded and walked to the car. "That's me," he admitted. "And you?"

"Marta Scott. I live near Deep Sands."

"Oh," he said, as if that explained everything. Waiting for her to state her business, he sized her up. She was slim and brown, and her eyes were decidedly blue —the kind of frank, slightly squinting eyes that a person gets by spending a lot of time outdoors. Her hands were long and well made; capable hands, he thought. There was something about her that looked familiar. He frowned, trying to recall who it was she resembled.

"What can I do for you?" he asked.

She ran a nervous hand over the steering wheel and gestured at the newly cleared right-of-way. "You're building a high-line to Deep Sands, I understand."

"Right."

"When will it be finished? I mean, when will the current be available for use?"

He grinned slightly. "Were you wanting to do some ironing? Or maybe to toast some bread?"

The blue eyes snapped. "I asked you a civil question," she flared. Then in a lower tone, she added, "It's awfully important."

"So? Well, ma'am, if nothing goes wrong and if the weather doesn't get too bad, we ought to heat up the line inside of four weeks."

"And if things go wrong and if the weather does turn bad?"

Something in her voice held a challenge. His grin widened a piece. "Why, I guess we'll heat her up in four weeks just the same."

It wasn't until he saw her mouth relax into a friendly smile that he realized what a taut, strained expression her face had held. He wondered about it. She laughed suddenly. "That's wonderful, Mister Goodwin. You'll never know what a load you've taken off my mind."

"Forget it," he said, and stepped back while she started the motor. The gears meshed and the roadster had started to move away when she turned and called back. "Thanks for what you did last night. It was swell of you."

Frowning, he stared after her, trying to figure out a couple of things. He stuck a cigarette into his mouth and lit it. "Now, why in the hell is she so excited about this high-line? And what in the hell did she thank me for?" He shook his head and got in the pick-up, mumbling, "Marta Scott. Where have I heard that name before?"

WHEN he pulled up in front of the storeroom in Deep Sands later that afternoon, a shiny black sedan was parked before the shabby building. Staring curiously at it as he opened the storeroom door, Joe bumped into a man coming out. He stepped back and started to apologize,

then recognized the man and clamped his mouth shut tight. It was J. Edward Cooke, the big-time promoter.

Cooke flashed a brittle smile. "I was looking for you, Goodwin."

"For me?" Joe said. "Why?"

"Wanted to have a talk with you."

"I'm listening."

Cooke shook his head amiably. "This isn't much of a place to talk. And what I've got to say may take quite a while."

"Then just give me the gist of it and I'll try to figure out the details. I've got a high-line to build."

J. Edward Cooke's wide-set eyes contemplated Joe, measuring him as a buyer measures a piece of merchandise. Under the scrutiny, Joe felt cold. The smile left Cooke's face.

"This high-line you mention—how long will it be before you complete it?"

"Does it concern you?"

"Yes," Cooke said softly. "It concerns me a great deal."

Feeling a growing irritation, Joe turned and pointed at a vacant lot diagonally across the street. "See that lot, Cooke? That's where the Deep Sands line will end. That's where the sub-station will be built to turn the line-voltage into usable kilowatts. If you'll sit down and listen close, you'll hear those kilowatts start humming through the sub-station transformers before long."

"Yes?" Cooke prompted.

"Four weeks from today you'll hear them hum. Does that answer your question?"

Cooke nodded. With a chubby finger he fished for his silver watchchain and twirled it carelessly. "I think, Goodwin, that it would be worth your while to talk to me at length. Suppose you drop over to the hotel tonight about nine?"

"Don't know what I'd have to talk over with you."

"I said it would be worth your while."

Staring at Cooke, Joe saw a dare in the promoter's eyes. Curiosity began to stir inside him. A hell of a lot of people were interested in the completion of this high-line, it seemed to him. He'd like to know why.

He grinned a slow, hard grin. "All right, Cooke. Nine o'clock."

MAIN STREET was dark but far from being deserted. Heavy trucks rumbled by continuously, hauling clanking loads of casing and tools to the new field. Roughly dressed men jostled against one another as they moved along the boardwalk from one place of entertainment to the next. From the cheap frame buildings which flanked the walk came sounds of tinny music and laughing voices, punctuated from time to time by the clink of glassware as a bartender stirred up a drink.

Joe Goodwin smiled. Liquor was outside the law in dry Oklahoma, but what little law there was in Deep Sands made no attempt to check its sale. Not when the officers could ignore it so profitably.

He reached the two-storied, weather-gray hotel and had one foot on the rickety step leading into the lobby when he heard somebody call his name. Pausing, he stared down the walk. Running toward him was Marta Scott, the girl to whom he had talked that afternoon.

"Mr. Goodwin!" she called breathlessly. He touched his hat.

"Evening, Miss Scott."

Silent, she stood before him, and he noticed that the tautness which had been in her face this afternoon was there again. The silence became awkward. Suddenly, she blurted, "Where are you going?"

"Where?" he lifted his eyebrows. "I should be the one asking that question, shouldn't I? A girl like you has no business out after dark in Deep Sands."

"I asked you where you were going?" she repeated angrily. "You don't seem to realize——"

Without letting her finish, he cut her off. "I'm going to see a man on a private matter that concerns nobody but me

and him." He touched his hat again. "Good night, Miss Scott."

Turning on his heel, he left her and walked into the hotel lobby. He told the desk clerk whom he was looking for and the clerk nodded patronizingly.

"I'll take you up."

They walked the two short flights of stairs, and the clerk left him before a half-open door. "Just go in. He's expecting you."

Joe pushed the door open and entered. Though the room was small, it was fairly clean and evidently the best Deep Sands had to offer. It was a corner room, furnished with an outdated red plush sitting room suite and a desk. Off to the right, heavy draperies hung down nearly to the floor, closing off the bedroom of the suite, Joe guessed.

J. Edward Cooke was sitting in a deep arm chair. He got up and extended a hand. When Joe ignored it, he shrugged lightly.

"Sit down, Goodwin." He offered cigars. Joe refused them and lit a cigarette.

"Come to the point Cooke. This isn't a social call."

The promoter nodded. "As you like. Briefly, here it is: You're building a high-line to Deep Sands. Now, I'm all for the conveniences of civilization, such as electricity, but for the time being I'd hate to see Deep Sands change."

"You're talking in circles."

Cooke smiled with only his lips. "I don't want electricity to become available in Deep Sands for at least two months."

Joe sucked deep at his cigarette, studying the ceiling intently. "Why not?" he said.

"My reasons aren't for publication. Nevertheless, they're urgent."

Joe blew a smoke ring upward. He was beginning to see Cooke's angle. Part of it, at least.

"And where do I fit in?" he asked softly.

Cooke spun his watchchain around a stubby finger. "Goodwin, I know something about high-line construction. I know that a job like this one usually takes six weeks. It can be done in four. Or it can take two months." He paused. "It's worth two thousand dollars to me if it takes two months."

Joe blew another smoke ring ceilingward, keeping his eyes fixed on the blue swirls as they drifted upward. He sensed that Cooke had leaned forward in his chair, the smile gone from his face and his eyes hard and brittle.

Joe stood up. So did Cooke.

"Well?" Cooke said. "What's your answer?"

Joe grinned disarmingly. "This," he said, and hit Cooke hard. The feel of his bruised knuckles on the big man's jaw was good, mighty good. Cooke grunted with surprise and went reeling back, landing sprawled out in the arm chair. Joe grinned down at him.

"Did you hear me? Or would you like my answer in a louder voice?"

Eyes blazing, Cooke wiped a trickle of blood from the corner of his mouth. Joe felt like laughing, but didn't. "Keep out of my way from now on, Cooke. I don't like your breed."

He had a hand on the doorknob when a rustling of the draperies behind him made him whirl around. He wasn't quick enough. Hands seized his arms, and he went cold as he felt a hard object thrust against his spine.

"Take it easy, big boy," somebody growled. "This here ain't no umbrella touchin' your back."

"Don't hurt him, Mike," Cooke purred. "Don't hurt him—yet."

Standing immobile, Joe inspected the two men who held him. The one called Mike was evidently an ex-pug; he had a prominent nose which was twisted to one side and his breathing came hard. The other man was dark and swarthy, Indian-looking; it was he who held the gun.

Cooke was smiling now but there was nothing pleasant in the smile. Applying a handkerchief to his bleeding jaw, he moved closer to Joe. "You made a mistake, Goodwin. Nobody bucks me and gets away with it."

Joe laughed shortly. "Yeah. I made a mistake, all right. My mistake was in not watching for the hired plug-uglies a yellow-belly like you always has around."

The words were cut off as Cooke lashed out with the flat of his hand. The hand smacked sharply against Joe's mouth. His lip started bleeding; the salt-taste of blood was on his tongue. He kept staring levelly at the promoter.

"Be smart, Cooke. You can't get away with anything raw."

"I can get away with anything I'm big enough to do," Cooke answered. "I make my own law in Deep Sands."

"You buy your own law, you mean."

"It adds up to the same thing." The promoter waved an impatient hand. "Let's get him out of here, boys. Down the back way—my car is in the alley. We're going to arrange a little accident—all for the benefit of Mister Goodwin."

The Indian-looking man jerked at Joe's arm. "C'mon, you."

The foreman did not resist. He let himself be turned around so that he faced the door. For a brief moment, he felt the hands on his arm relax. Suddenly, he kicked out with his left foot, and it landed solidly on Mike's shin. Mike howled in pain and let go of the arm.

Whirling, Joe swung a sharp left on the gunman's chin. The swarthy man gasped once, then went down like an empty sack. Behind, Mike roared with rage and pain, and Joe turned swiftly to meet his charge. The brute weight of it shoved him backward and he stumbled into a chair leg. He fell heavily. Cursing, he tried to get up, but Mike pounced upon him, pinning him down, smothering him so that he could not move.

Mike thrust a gun against Joe's temple. "Lay still, damn you, or I'll blow your brains out."

Joe quit struggling. He'd gambled and the odds had been too big. If it hadn't been for that damn chair leg——"

"Seems to me that you boys are a little old to be playin' games," came a brittle voice from the doorway. "No, Mr. Cooke, I wouldn't put my hand in my pocket if I was you. An' you, big-nose, drop that gun and stand up."

Joe felt the pressure of the gun barrel against his temple ease off. Mike got up. Cooke cursed. Joe stood up and stared at the open doorway. Framed in it was the tall figure of the old man who had precipitated the fight in the Blue Light the night before, and in his right hand, held unwaveringly, was a huge single-action Colt .45, the hammer at full-cock, held there by a caressing thumb. The cane was in the man's left hand, and he leaned heavily upon it. Behind him stood Marta Scott.

"Are you all right?" she asked Joe, anxiously.

He conquered his amazement long enough to allow himself a piece of a grin. "Never better," he grunted. "Thanks, old-timer," he told the old man. "Now, you better give me that gun. I can take take of myself from here on out."

Casually, he reached out for the gun, then stopped as the old man roared, "Get yore hand away, youngster! I don't pass my shootin' iron to nobody!"

Marta Scott smiled. "Dad means it," she said. "Let's get out of here."

Joe kept staring at the old man. Things were adding up now. This was Marta's father. That was why she had thanked him this afternoon. With a shrug, he followed her down the hall.

Glancing back, he saw Scott step out of the room and pull the door to, pausing for a crisp warning. "If any jasper sticks his head out before we get downstairs, I'll blow it off."

Then limping slowly along, he retreated

with them down the stairs, through the hotel lobby and out onto the street. The battered roadster was parked in front of the hotel and they got in, Marta behind the wheel, Joe in the middle, and old man Scott on the outside, where he sat, gun in hand, watching the hotel windows until the girl had started the car.

It wasn't until they'd driven several blocks that Joe found his tongue. "I guess," he said, "that I owe you some thanks now. You got me out of a tough spot."

Scott merely grunted. Marta flashed Joe a friendly smile. "I tried to warn you before you went inside but you wouldn't listen. Then I got to thinking that maybe——" She broke off.

"That maybe I was playing on Cooke's side?" Joe supplemented.

She nodded. "I knew better after I'd thought it over. So I got dad and brought him to the room, just in case."

She stopped the car when they reached the storeroom, and Joe got out. Scott was still holding the gun, and seeing Joe looking askance at it, said he guessed he wouldn't need it any more tonight. Pushing back the tail of his long coat, he thrust the Colt into a holster on his right hip.

Joe's eyes widened. The holster was supported by a heavy, cartridge-studded belt and tied down by a leather thong—the kind of rig he hadn't seen in years, outside of western movies.

"Were you wearing that in the Blue Light last night?" he asked in amazement, and Scott grunted testily.

"Only take it off when I go to bed."

"Then why didn't you use it?"

"On that kind of trash? Fiddlesticks!" Scott got in the car and slammed the door. "See that you stay out of trouble from now on, youngster. Good night."

The car moved away, leaving Joe standing there, shaking his head. The puzzle got worse. The only things he could figure out for sure were that he had a chunk of high-line to build, that Cooke didn't want it built, and that the Scotts did.

He shook his head again, and lit a cigarette. For a long time he stood in front of the storeroom in the chill autumn night, smoking, thinking.

THE afternoon air was crisp and sharp, bringing a rushing tingle to Marta Scott's face as she slackened rein on the black stallion and let him run.. Head high and proud neck arched, he played with the bit and snorted from sheer excess spirit as he raced across the rolling, short-grassed hills. For a half a mile Marta let him have his fun, then pulling him down to a trot turned him toward the corral.

Her father was leaning on the corral fence, watching, when she brought the black to a stop. "Hi, Dad," she called.

Colonel Scott smiled affectionately. "How does he run?"

"Like a thoroughbred."

A young colored boy came out of the stable, broom in hand, and Marta turned the black over to him. "Rub him down good, Sammy."

"Yassum. Ah'll do him up right."

Taking her father's arm, Marta started walking with him to the ranchhouse. He was unusually silent, and wondering at that silence, she glanced up at his weather-seamed face. The old bitter lines were there about his mouth again. Her heart bled for him. She knew what they meant. After nearly a lifetime spent in the saddle, he hadn't straddled a horse for two years, not since the day that outlaw mustang fell on him. She knew it hurt, hurt deep. Impulsively, her grip tightened on his arm.

As they neared the house, Marta saw a car turn into the driveway. She and her father waited while it pulled around the long, tree-sheltered approach to the house. A stocky man carrying a briefcase got out and waved. "Hello, Colonel. Hello, Miss Scott."

Marta's father squinted at the man as he

approached, then recognizing him, smiled and put out a welcoming hand. "Frank Barlow! We been wondering if you wouldn't pay us a visit soon. Come inside out of the weather."

They went into the house and drew up chairs in the long, low-ceilinged living room. A fire burned cheerfully in the stone fireplace, shedding a pleasant glow of warmth over the uncarpeted floor. Frank Barlow put down his briefcase and talked with Colonel Scott about the weather and prospects for the cattle market for several minutes.

FINALLY, Scott said, "You might fix some drinks for us, Marta. Scotch and soda, Frank?"

"Fine," Barlow said.

Marta went to the liquor cabinet and prepared the drinks. It was a time-honored custom in the Scott home that no business could be discussed or transacted until thirsts had been allayed. No guest who knew of this unwritten law ever risked the colonel's wrath by breaking it.

When Barlow had put down his drink, Marta's father gave him a light for his cigar and said, "Anything new on the oil refinery, Frank?"

Barlow nodded briefly. Marta leaned forward in her chair. This meant a lot to herself and her father.

"I think we can swing the site to Deep Sands," Barlow said.

Colonel Scott grunted in approval. Marta burst out. "That's wonderful! It's all settled then?"

"Not all, Miss Scott. To be frank, there never has been much choice between locating the plant here or in Central City. Deep Sands is closer to the raw oil supply, but Central City has better transportation facilities. It was a fifty-fifty proposition between the two towns—until you and your father made such a splendid offer on the land."

"The land wasn't good for pasturage anyhow," Scott deprecated. "And three hundred acres less on the ranch won't make much difference to us."

"But it makes a big difference to my company," Barlow said emphatically. "That much land in Central City would cost upwards of fifty thousand dollars." He grimaced wryly. "I know—I priced it."

Marta caught a short breath. That land in Central City belonged to J. Edward Cooke, she knew. He'd bought it for a song, figuring that the refinery would be built upon it. He certainly wouldn't let the chance of making himself a nice piece of money pass without a fight.

"There's just the one hitch," Barlow continued. "We'll be ready to start preliminary construction work in thirty days. That work will require electric power and lots of it." He looked questioningly at Marta. "Do you suppose the high-line to Deep Sands will be completed by then?"

Marta stared down at the tip of a dusty riding boot and did not answer for a moment. She knew that Cooke would go to any lengths where money was concerned; she knew that the odds were all against anybody who tried to buck him. And yet, right now, she couldn't think of a single person she'd rather stake her all on than Joe Goodwin. She didn't know why she felt that way. Perhaps, she thought, it was this hardness in him, this cold, remorseless drive which she sensed about the man. Perhaps it was something else.

"Yes," she answered softly. "I'm sure the high-line will be completed on the minute. Very sure."

TURNING up the collar of his mackinaw against the chill wind which swept across the hill-top, Joe Goodwin shivered and stared up at the sky. Clouds scudded across it, dull gray, leaden with the threat of snow. The crew would have to move along, he knew, if they completed the high-line before bad weather caught them.

He cupped his hands about his mouth and shouted at the man perched on the

pole above. "Ready, up there, Dog-Ear?" The lineman shifted in his hooks and waved a gloved hand.

"Give 'er hell."

Turning, Joe gave Happy the high-sign. The winch line started reeling in, sucking up slack in the half mile of copper. Standing where he could be seen from the truck and himself see the wire coming up to sag, Joe kept waggling his fist, watching. Slowly, the copper lifted off the ground, looping upward higher and higher as the winch pulled it in.

A rusty snatch-block creaked. A chain twanged sharply as a kink kicked out. Beside Joe, Lee Parsons drawled, "Pretty heavy load, there."

"Yeah." Joe slowed his waggling fist and called up, "How's she looking, Dog-Ear?"

"Almost on the money. Keep 'er comin'."

The truck motor throbbed deeply as the load increased. Glancing warily at the taut winch line, Joe moved farther away from it. A broken winch line could cut a man in two.

"Easy, Happy," he warned.

ABOVE, Dog-Ear was shading his eyes, staring down the line to see if the copper had come up level with the sag-boards. Suddenly, he raised his hands above his head.

"High!"

The crawling winch stopped. "Make her up!" Joe shouted, and then stood watching while Dog-Ear swung around on the pole and fastened the wire into its dead-end clamp on the end of the suspension insulator string.

"All off!" the lineman yelled. The winch line slackened. Joe saw the insulators straighten out from the pole top, taking the strain. Then, as he stared up, he heard a warning creak, an unmistakable sound that froze his blood. *The pole was going!*

He screamed something, and never knew what the words were. He heard a temporary guy-wire snap with a metallic twang. Sharp, rending sounds of the pole splintering cracked on his ears like pistol shots.

"She's falling!" Lee breathed.

"Get clear, Dog-Ear!" Joe heard himself yelling. "Get clear!"

The picture burned itself indelibly into his mind in that brief, swift instant—the pole toppling, jack-straw-like, Dog-Ear fumbling desperately at his safety catch, struggling to unfasten his safety and jump clear.

With a ground-shaking thud, the heavy pole struck the ground. The sound muffled a smaller thud as a rag-like body struck the hard earth nearby. Lee kept screaming in Joe's ear: "He got clear! He got clear!"

Then Joe was racing to Dog-Ear, bending over him. The lineman was limp, inert. Removing a glove, Joe fumbled for his pulse.

"How is he?" Lee asked.

"Alive," Joe mumbled. Yet he knew that just being alive didn't count for much. Sometimes, in a fall like this one, it was better to have it over with quick and clean, what with the things such a fall could do to a man's insides.

Feeling a hand touch his shoulder, he turned his head. Lee was staring down, face gray.

"His legs, Joe! God! *Look at his legs!*"

Joe did. Suddenly, a hard knot formed in his intestines. He felt sickish. Rising slowly, he said in a voice that weighed each word as if it were solid, "Don't move him. Get blankets. Whiskey. Somebody go to Deep Sands after a doctor."

The knot tightened in his stomach, he turned away and walked down the right-of-way, staring at the snarled, twisted wire on the ground. He shivered. He'd seen men hurt before, seen men die, even. Yet you never got used to it; it was always the same. Always this tight-drawn knot in your stomach and this sickish feeling inside.

WHEN the doctor had driven out from Deep Sands and set Dog-Ear's legs, Joe helped load the lineman into the truck. He told Happy to take him to the Central City hospital. After the truck left, he called the doctor off to one side and asked him how bad it was.

The doctor, a red-skinned man with a three-day stubble of beard on his face, rubbed his chin. "If there's no serious internal injuries, he'll pull through. But with those legs—" He shook his head. "He'll never climb another pole."

Joe nodded. He'd guessed that. It was a tough break for Dog-Ear. A hell of a tough break.

Back to the wind, he stood and watched while the doctor got in his coupe and drove off. He felt weak and nauseated. When he tried to light a cigarette, he was so shaky he dropped the pack. Finally, he shrugged and tried to push it into the back of his mind. These things went with the game. He had a chunk of high-line to build.

"Lee," he called. "Slim."

The two men came over to him. He looked from one to the other a moment, then said, "Slim, you've been pushing the wire-stringing gang. I'm going to have to put you back in hooks in Dog-Ear's place."

Slim nodded. "Sure. I know how it is."

"Lee. I reckon you'll have to take over the wire-stringers."

"How about the sub-station crew?"

"I'll take care of them myself," Joe said. He paused. "All right, boys. Let's hit it."

Slim moved off to put on his climbing tools and belt. Lee stood there a moment, silent, then said quietly, "C'mere, Joe. I want to show you something."

Wondering, the foreman walked with him to the fallen pole. Lee knelt down and pointed at the pole butt.

"She broke off clean with the ground, Joe."

"Yeah?"

"Look at that break."

Joe stared at it. The break wasn't ragged—not all the way across. It was smooth part way, as if it had been cut with a saw. The blood in his temples started pounding. "Hell!" he muttered.

Lee's gray eyes were hard, pinpointed with a savage light. "Neat, wasn't it? Somebody sawed her part way in two, close to the ground where it wouldn't show. And when the strain got heavy on one side—" He shrugged and did not finish.

Laying a hand on the broken pole butt, Joe ran it slowly over the rough surface. He thought of Cooke and the threat the promoter had made. He thought of Dog-Ear, falling, riding the broken stick down. He saw again those shattered, grotesquely twisted legs.

Fists closing and unclosing, he stood up. "Lee," he mumbled, "I reckon we got a fight on our hands. A hell of a tough fight. You want to be counted in?"

The straw-boss looked at him, not speaking for a long, long moment. Then the unholy joy gleamed in his eyes, moved down to touch his thin lips with a light smile.

"All the way," he said.

THE skipper was waiting at the storeroom when Joe came in from the job a couple of evenings later. From his actions, he was worried. Joe nodded to him.

"How's Dog-Ear?"

"Going to be all right, they say. Except for his legs." The superintendent lit a cigarette, blew a narrow stream of smoke out of his nostrils. "You're up against a mean bunch, Joe."

"You don't have to tell me that."

"I'd like to give you a hand, some way. What can I do?"

"Send me more linemen. Half a dozen more."

The skipper laughed without humor. "You would ask for the one thing I haven't got. Linemen are scarcer than hen's teeth."

Joe shrugged. The job was moving on

schedule, but he didn't know how long he could keep it that way. He needed men, needed them badly. The skipper was staring down at the floor, a thoughtful light in his eyes.

"Maybe," he grunted, "I could scrape up a man or two. I'll see what I can do."

"Good enough," Joe said. "I'll be looking for them."

Two days passed before he saw the promised men. One of them, a middle-aged, stove-up lineman by the name of Lacy, drifted into the storeroom early one morning. He introduced himself and said the skipper had sent him over. Though Joe had his doubts that Lacy could hold out long under the grueling work, he signed him up as a first-class hand. He couldn't afford to be choosy now.

Toward evening, another man drifted in. He was dark, compact of build, solidly made. "You ramrodding this crew?" he asked Joe.

"Right."

"My name is Massey. Sam Massey. Need a first-class hand?"

Joe grinned wryly. "In the worst way." He turned and called to the timekeeper. "Specs, here's another one for you. Sign him up at top wages. See you in the morning at seven, Massey."

The new hand frowned and muttered, "Seven o'clock's a pretty early start, ain't it?"

Joe stopped grinning. "Are you hiring out to work or not?"

"Sure, sure. Seven's okay. Just so I get paid for it."

"You'll get your pay, all right. See you in the morning."

The bad weather which had been threatening all week struck with a vengeance that night. The howling of the wind awakened Joe, and he lay listening for a time, hearing the hard-driven sleet and snow peppering against the sides of the building. This would add to his troubles, he knew, make the work go slower. He swore softly, and turned over to go back to sleep. He'd have to drive his men twice as hard now.

By dawn, half a foot of snow covered the ground. When he got to the storeroom, the men were huddled around the stove, dressed in every stitch of clothes they owned, grumbling. Lee grinned and drawled, "Why'd I ever leave the peaceful Rio Grande country? No such thing as blizzards down there."

"Nice day to lay off an' have a session with a bottle an' a poker deck," Big Hoot said hopefully.

"Yeah," Little Hoot echoed. "Perfect day for that." I'll get the cards if somebody'll get the bottle."

Joe shook his head and snapped out, "A little cold weather never hurt anybody. Let's hit it, boys."

Grumbling and reluctant, the group around the stove broke up and filed out of the storeroom. Nobody wanted to work today. In a way, he couldn't blame them; line work was bad enough in decent weather, and when you had to fight cold and ice and snow, it could be downright unpleasant.

Lee said carefully, "Going to be nasty, workin' today."

"I don't make the weather," Joe barked. "We got a high-line to build."

"Yeah, I know. First time I even seen you in such a hell of a hurry, though."

"You'd be in a hurry too, if—" He broke off. That bonus the skipper had promised him was none of Lee's business. None at all.

"If what?" Lee asked.

"Nothing. Let's go to work."

They made it through the day somehow, but it was a miserable, weary, frost-bitten crew that called it quits when the early darkness closed down. In town, Joe ate a hot supper washed down with two cups of steaming coffee, then went to the storeroom.

He'd been working for an hour or so when Lee came in. The strawboss pulled up an insulator crate and sat down on it,

leaning forward to warm his hands from the stove. After a while, he said, "How did you get along at the sub-station today?"

"All finished up." Joe raised his tired eyes from the prints and closed them for a moment's rest. "Transformers set, wiring completed, switches installed. She's ready for the juice as soon as the line is finished."

"Good." Lee looked down at his hands, turned them over to warm the backs. "How about relaxin' for a while over a beer?"

He spoke casually enough, yet Joe sensed something guarded and strange underneath the words. Opening his eyes, he realized suddenly how dead-tired he was. He'd been pushing himself too hard lately. He'd like to knock off for a while. Wearily, he shook his head.

"Thanks. Not tonight. Some other time."

Lee stood up. "Okay. Be seein' you."

Alone in the flickering lamp-glow, Joe sat staring down at the blueprints. It had been growing for a long time, he knew, this estrangement of himself from his men. He couldn't remember exactly when or how it had started. He knew only that it was there, a tangible thing, that since he'd started ramrodding a crew, he'd changed.

He knew, too, that the grapevine among the men said that he was the hardest foreman in the company to work for. A man-driver. Maybe it was so. It didn't matter. A man had to be that way, he figured. A man had to look out for number one. And yet—

Suddenly, he shrugged and turned back to his work. "Damned ignorant engineers," he muttered, and scribbled a correction on the print with a yellow-leaded pencil.

THE squat man moved quietly along the dark alley, avoiding those spots where lamplight spilled out into the night. Reaching the back entrance to the hotel, he paused and stood for a time in the shadow, immobile, watchful. Then satisfied he had not been followed, he mounted the two flights of outside steps to the second story. The wooden door screeched as he opened and closed it, and the sound was immediately lost in the howling of the bitter north wind.

J. Edward Cooke was sitting in the deep chair, waiting, when he entered the room.

"Anybody see you come here?" Cooke snapped.

Sam Massey shook his head. "Nobody."

"Good. Did Joe Goodwin give you a job?"

"Snapped me up without a question."

The promoter nodded. Eyes contemplative, he sat toying with his watch chain. At last, he said, "Well, you've seen how the job is moving. Got any more ideas on how to slow it up?"

"Yeah." Sam Massey wiped the back of a nervous hand across his mouth. "We can't do a hell of a lot of damage to the line—nothin' that couldn't be fixed in a hurry, anyhow. But the big sub-station where the Deep Sands line ties into the steel tower circuit—that's the place."

"Yes?"

"Lots of equipment there that'd be hard to replace. Switches, lightning arresters, transformers. If a guy would bust up the bushings on those big pots—"

COOKE waved a hand impatiently. "I don't care how you do it. Just so you tie the job up in knots. Any danger of running into trouble at the sub-station tonight?"

"No. Won't be nobody around, what with this blizzard and the way the roads are drifted over."

"Good." Cooke stood up. "Mike! Injun!" he called. Waiting for the two men to come into the room, he turned to Sam Massey and snapped tonelessly, "No slip-ups, understand? And you're to go right on working with the crew tomorrow, just as though nothing had happened."

"Sure," Massey said, nodding. "Leave it to me."

JOE GOODWIN put aside the pencil with which he had been jotting down notes and studied the piece of scratch paper. Two of his four weeks were gone. But they'd make it. It was going to be close—too damn close—but they'd make it, all right.

The sub-station at the high-voltage tap was completed. The Deep Sands line itself was walking right along. The sub-station at Deep Sands was under construction; it would be ready on time. Everything was moving according to schedule. Yet he was worried. No matter how you figured it, there just wasn't an extra day or hour leeway.

Hearing the storeroom door swing open, he looked up and saw Lee Parsons. The Texan's face was tense.

"What is it?" Joe snapped.

"Somebody had 'em a little fun at the sub-station last night. Busted every bushing on those big pots."

"No!"

"Yeah. With a hammer, most likely."

"Couldn't have been lightning?"

Lee laughed sarcastically. "I know a deliberate job when I see one."

Unmoving, Joe stared at the straw-boss while the gravity of it registered on his mind. Bushings for those big pots were items that were well-nigh impossible of replacement. Whoever had busted them up had known what he was about, known where to hit so it would hurt the most.

"Well," Lee said, "what are we going to do?"

"Do?" Joe knotted his left hand into a fist and stared down at the way the arm muscles flexed. The old eagerness for action was in him. He laughed softly. "How'd you like to go over to the hotel with me?"

A smile tugged at the corners of Lee's mouth. "I was hopin' you'd say that," he drawled.

They started walking across the storeroom and had almost reached the door when reason began to cool Joe's anger. This was the fool's way, he realized—this was the old, direct way of dealing with things. It wasn't the smart way.

He halted abruptly, reaching for Lee's arm. "It won't work. We got no proof of anything."

"Hell, what do we need with proof? We *know*, don't we?"

"It won't work, Lee."

The straw-boss stood by the door, stubborn, angry. A muscle in his lean face twitched. "What do we do—take it layin' down? That ain't my style, Joe. Nor yours."

Wearily, Joe shook his head. "We've got to get bushings for those pots. I'll call the skipper and see what can be done. Maybe he can scrape up some, some place. We'll assign a couple of men to patrol the high-line every night from now on."

"Is that all?" Lee said softly.

Joe turned away from the straw-boss and started back to the desk. "Yeah," he answered, "reckon that's all."

THE weather stayed bad. Day after day there was no sun, only a gray dreary light filtering down from the dead sky. Joe kept the crew on the job from the first light of each dawn till early darkness fell. So that they could work at night, he rigged up a portable generator which furnished enough kilowatts to operate several big searchlights, and by the illumination of these the men put in many a long night's work.

They didn't like the way they were being driven, Joe knew. They grew sullen, untalkative. That was a bad sign. When you worked a man too hard it always showed up in the kind of job he did. You had to watch him closer, drive him harder—and the results were never what they should be.

Occasionally, he would see Marta Scott, driving the battered roadster in a haphazard fashion over the frozen, deep-rutted streets. She always waved at him and a couple of times stopped to talk briefly.

More and more he got to thinking about her, remembering the way her hair blew in the wind, the funny way her eyelids crinkled up when she laughed.

If things were different, he mused, if he had the time—he shrugged and tried to laugh the thought away. Yet it stayed in the back of his mind, bothering him some, in spite of all he could do.

He was going to supper one evening when the roadster pulled up alongside him and stopped. "Hello," Marta said. "Give you a lift?"

"No thanks. I was just headed for the cafe for a bite."

He should have walked on down street then, but didn't; he stood at the side of the car, looking at her. She smiled and said, "You look tired."

"When I finish this job," he muttered, "I'm going to bed and sleep for two weeks."

Her eyelids crinkled up and her laugh rang out. Impulsively, she opened the car door. "Get in. You're going to eat supper with dad and me. I've got some big steaks in the oven, waiting."

He hesitated for perhaps a moment, no more. Then he got in the car and relaxed against the cushions with a sigh. "Been a long time since I had a decent steak," he said.

The meal was fine. He couldn't remember when he'd enjoyed one so much. Afterwards, they went into the living room for coffee. Sipping at the fragrant liquid as he stared into the red-embered fire, Joe felt the tension which had been in him for these past weeks drop away as a coat drops from sagging shoulders. He felt at peace. This was the way it was meant for a man to live, he thought. Good talk, good coffee, good friends, and a fire in which to stare.

Colonel Scott excused himself after a while, and Joe and Marta sat before the fire, talking. At last, she said, "How is the high-line coming along?"

"Okay." He took a drag at his cigarette and watched the smoke curl in a thin blue pattern toward the fireplace. "You seem a lot interested in it."

She nodded. "Naturally."

"Why?"

She told him about the refinery which was to be built near Deep Sands. "It means a lot to dad and me," she said. "And to the town."

He looked at her for a long, silent breath. He had known about the refinery but had never given any thought as to what its coming to Deep Sands would mean. His job was to get electricity to the town; after that, he wasn't interested. Now he was beginning to see that several people might be vitally concerned about it.

"They're building this plant on your land?"

"Yes."

"Mean quite a chunk of cash to you, I suppose."

She shook her head slowly. "It's not the money. It's something bigger than that."

"Yeah?" He laughed, and the laugh had a harsh sound. "What would be bigger than money?"

Anger flashed in her eyes. "Lots of things. A home, for one. Permanence. I was born on this ranch, in this house. So was dad. My grandfather settled here when this was still Indian Territory. The town was named after him, in fact. All our roots are here. We want to see this country grow, with a permanent growth, not a false, mushroom sort of thing like . . ." She waved a hand in a seeking gesture, as if groping for the comparison.

"Like Deep Sands?"

"Yes. What will it be five, ten years from now—when the war is over, when all the discovery wells are sunk, when the promoters and speculators and shoestring drillers move on? I've seen boom-towns come and go. I don't want Deep Sands to be that way." She was silent a moment, gazing into the fire. "Do you see what I'm driving at?"

He looked at her for a time, trying honestly to see it from her viewpoint. He

thought of his own life, of the struggle to exist that he'd always known, of the things he'd come to accept as important, of the way of life he'd learned. He shook his head.

"Afraid I don't. You can have the permanence—and all those other things you talk about. I'll settle for cash."

"You don't mean that."

"Reckon I do."

There was a silence, and he sensed that a gap had opened between them, a chasm which their understanding could not bridge. He flipped his cigarette moodily into the fireplace.

"You'll change," she said softly. "You'll see it my way some day. I know you will."

A TRUCK driver from the city came into the storeroom late one afternoon toward the latter part of the week and told Joe he had a load of material for him.

"What kind of material?" Joe asked. The driver yawned and said carelessly:

"Transformer bushings."

Joe couldn't believe it until he had gone outside and inspected the bushings where they rested in crates on the truck bed. There they were—shiny, glittering, real. He shook his head. The skipper had somehow accomplished a miracle.

"Shall I unload 'em now?" the truck driver asked.

"No. Leave them on the truck. We'll install them tonight."

Lee Parsons, who had come up, protested, "Be an all-night job. The boys are just about fagged out."

"Can't help it. Tell Happy to tote the generator out to the sub-station right after supper. Tell him to take the searchlights and some flares. Round up the gang. Have them ready to go to work by eight tonight."

Lee shrugged. "You're the boss."

It was a cold, bitter night to work. The wind swept through the sub-station with savage, biting force, moaning eerily through the steel girders and network of wires. Two big searchlights were placed on the ground at opposite corners of the station, giving out a flat, brilliant glare that illuminated the yard with an unreal light.

Pacing up and down the station yard, Joe kept stomping his feet to drive the numbness from them. The men working upstairs were suffering, he knew. Little Hoot chopped up some empty insulator crates and built a bonfire in the lee of one of the transformers over which the men could warm their hands when they grew too numb to hold a wrench.

Big Hoot lumbered up to the fire and shucked off his gloves. Playfully, he shoved Little Hoot away from the flames and hunkered down, turning his rough, calloused hands over and over.

"Reminds me of when I was a kid," he grunted. "If we had some marshmallows to toast we could have a party."

"Marshmallows are your speed," Little Hoot said. "Me, I'd druther have a nice juicy pig to barbeque."

Turning his massive head, Big Hoot looked his partner up and down carefully, then started nodding. "Amazin'," he grunted. "Downright amazin'."

"What?"

"The resemblance between you an' a pig. Only you're a mite uglier. Just a mite. Now, I had a shoat once—"

Face darkening, Little Hoot picked up a crescent wrench. "Look who's talkin'. Why you misbegotten, bow-legged ape—"

For some reason, their usual horseplay rubbed Joe the wrong way tonight. "Break it up," he snapped harshly. "We got no time for fooling around."

Big Hoot turned and looked at him. The good-natured grin slowly left his face. Slipping on his gloves, he shrugged and mounted the ladder which led to the top of one of the transformers. Joe jerked his head at Little Hoot.

"Give me a hand with this searchlight."

All through the endless night they worked, and shortly before sunup the job

was done. Joe had never known what it was to be so tired. His mouth had a foul taste from the cigarettes he'd smoked; his left eyelid twitched from nervous fatigue; there was a dull ache in the back of his neck from long hours of staring up.

In the gray dawn, he inspected the job for the last time. Beside him, Lee said, "Well, it's all ready for whoever busted those bushings to do it again."

"It won't happen again," Joe said.

"How you goin' to prevent it? Keep guards here day and night?"

"No." Joe kept staring at the line switch on the sixty-six thousand volt side of the transformers. If that switch were closed and the Deep Sands switch opened, the sub-station would be energized. Nobody would be fool enough to bust up bushings or any other kind of equipment in a hot station. He turned to Lee. "Get the men in the clear. I'm going to shoot her hot."

Walking to the east side of the station, he opened the Deep Sands switch and slipped a padlock into the switch handle bracket. He clicked it shut. On the west side of the station, he paused beneath the incoming line switch. "All clear?" he asked. Lee nodded.

"Yeah."

Slipping on rubber gloves and leather protectors, Joe squinted at the big copper switch blades above. His eyes followed the wires which led away from the sub-station, followed them across the two short spans between the station and the steel tower circuit. Everything was in order. He took a firm grip on the wooden handle.

"Here we go."

Briskly, sharply, he swung the handle around. Above, the copper blades slammed home with a clank. Stepping back, he slipped a padlock into the bracket, snapped it shut. Then he stood listening.

The low, distinct humming of the transformers came to his ears and made a not unpleasant chill play over his skin. The current was flowing into those pots now, he knew; it was there, quiescent and unused, but waiting to be tapped. Give him another week or so and that current would be flowing through the line itself, into the sub-station at Deep Sands.

Turning to his men, he allowed himself a piece of a grin. "There she is, boys. And nothing burned down."

Lee was the only one who smiled. The other men stayed silent, dull-eyed, indifferent. They were too dead for rest to care one way or another.

Big Hoot yawned. "I'm goin' home an' sleep for a month," he said.

For a moment, Joe hesitated. He knew how badly the man needed rest. But the timetable which he'd figured out for the job didn't allow of a wasted hour. He shook his head and laughed, trying to make it light.

"Take a couple of hours off for breakfast and a nap, boys. Then report to the storeroom at nine o'clock. We've got a day's work ahead of us."

Somebody—Joe couldn't tell who—cursed deep in his throat. Big Hoot shifted on his heels and scowled. Lee said, "That's a shade rough, Joe."

"Is it?" Tautness crept up along his spine, centered in his aching neck. "Anybody that thinks it's too rough can draw his time." Waiting stiffly, he lit a cigarette and broke the match in two. It made a small snapping sound. Nobody spoke. At last, he turned wearily away. "See you at nine, boys."

IT WAS past midnight, yet the Blue Light was noisily alive with laughter and loud talking and brassy music. Two sweating bartenders worked at top speed, quenching thirsts for overall-clad men. Dime-a-dance girls shuffled around on the sawdust floor with clumsy, stumbling roughnecks. The low-ceilinged room was crowded to suffocation.

Sitting at a corner table with Mike and Injun, J. Edward Cooke toyed with his

drink, coughing as the stale air irritated his throat. Mike leaned forward in his chair and said out of one corner of his mouth, "There he is."

Cooke's eyes flicked to the squat man standing at the bar, stayed on him. He didn't trust Sam Massey. The man was too jittery, too nervous acting. In a tight pinch Cooke thought, he might not be dependable.

Massey finished his beer and flipped a coin on the bar. Turning, he caught Cooke's eye. The promoter took a large white handkerchief from his pocket and blew his nose, nodding toward the door. Without changing expression, Massey answered the nod with a movement of his shoulders, then ambled casually across the room toward the exit. Mike started to get up.

"Ready, boss?"

Cooke shook his head. "Give him time to get to the hotel. We don't want anybody getting suspicious."

Sam Massey was pacing up and down the room when Cooke and his men reached the hotel ten minutes later. The promoter sat down and lit a cigar. He looked up at Massey.

"Well?"

"Things ain't goin' so good. They got some transformer bushings some place. Worked us all night installing 'em."

"I thought you said they couldn't be replaced that easily."

"Just a lucky break. The skipper must have stripped some pots that weren't in service."

Cooke felt an irritation. Time was growing short, and work on the high-line had not been slowed up appreciably. "Anything more you could do at the sub-station?"

Massey shook his head. "I ain't messin' around that sub any more. They threw in the switch yesterday. She's hotter than a pistol."

"Hot? But the line isn't finished yet."

"They opened the Deep Sands switch. Locked it open till the wire-stringing is finished."

Cooke toyed with his watch chain for a moment. Suddenly, he got up and fished a sheet of stationery out of a desk drawer. He turned to Massey.

"You know the layout of that sub?"

"Yeah."

"Draw me a diagram of it."

"What for?"

Cooke jerked the lineman to the desk. "Draw it! I'll show you why in a minute."

Watching closely, he leaned over Massey while the lineman drew a crude sketch of the sub-station. When it was finished, Cooke stared at one of the switches on the diagram—the one marked "Deep Sands 22kv." After a moment, he nodded in satisfaction.

"This switch is open?"

"Yeah."

"And the crew will be working on the line tomorrow, stringing wire?"

Massey started to nod, then a sudden horror came into his eyes. He muttered, "You ain't figurin' to close that switch?"

COOKE kept staring down at the piece of paper. He laughed softly. "It could be done," he said, half to himself. "A man could saw the padlock off, swing the switch shut—"

"You'd burn up every man on that wire. It'd be murder."

"You're chicken-hearted, Massey. "

Sweat popped out on the lineman's forehead, beaded on his eyebrows. His mouth started twitching. "But murder—I ain't used to——"

"Don't say that word again," Cooke snapped. He pushed Massey into a chair, leaned over him. "Listen. You're in this deeper than any of us. You sawed that pole in two and there's no way you could pin that on us. So you better play it our way and quit whining."

Massey shuddered. "Burnin' a man up—" He tried to stand up. "I won't close

that switch!" Cooke shoved him back into the chair.

"You won't have to. I'll close it myself. Tomorrow evening at five o'clock sharp."

Massey seemed not to have heard. He sat staring straight ahead, hands clenched tight on the chair arms. "What do I do?" he said mechanically.

"Nothing. Keep on working with the crew. Act natural so they won't be suspicious. Then get in the clear by five."

Massey nodded, got up and went to the door. With his hand on the knob he paused. "If you'd close that switch some night when there's nobody on the line, it would do damage enough. Melt a lot of wire, maybe blow up a transformer."

"We'll do it my way," Cooke said.

For a few seconds longer, the lineman stood in the doorway, hesitating. His mouth twitched. "Five o'clock," he muttered. Then he stumbled along the dark hallway, down the back stairs, out into the chill, bleak night.

THE clouds broke up toward noon and the sun came out, pale, without heat, yet just the sight of it made the day seem warmer. Joe Goodwin took advantage of the clearing weather to step up the wire-stringing gang. The pole-setters had completed their work and that freed an extra man for the wire-stringers. Lee had donned hooks and started climbing. Joe knew he was liable to need these extra men. Some of the others were just about done up.

Shortly after lunch, Lacy, who had been finding it more and more difficult these past few days to keep up with the rest, folded. Climbing stiffly down the pole on which he was working, he came to the truck and started shedding his tool belt and hooks.

Joe walked over to him and said, "What's the trouble?"

Lacy looked up from the hook he was unstrapping and shook his head. He had the appearance of a man who is finished and knows it. "Reckon I can't cut it like I used to. Gettin' too old."

"Nonsense. Sit in the truck and rest for a while and you'll be all right."

"No. You better give me my time."

For a moment, Joe felt at a complete loss. This was something you couldn't fight —age, and the thing age does to a man. He reached out for Lacy's hooks.

"Let me have your tools. I'll finish up for you upstairs."

Strapping on the lineman's hooks and belt, he walked to the pole on which Sam Massey was making up a dead-end. He climbed slowly, getting the feel of the gaffs again, feeling the solid *chock* as each hook went home in the hard wood. He couldn't help thinking about the old days when he'd been hitting the tall timber with Lee. He laughed silently. Things had changed since those days.

Curiosity flickered in Massey's eyes when he saw Joe but he asked no questions. For several hours, the two men worked together, teaming up on the heavy stuff. Massey was a fair hand, Joe noted, only he dropped his tools a lot oftener than a top hand should. The second time he dropped his pliers, Joe asked caustically, "Out on a party last night?"

Massey's head jerked around. "What makes you say that?"

"You got a nice case of jitters today."

"It ain't nothin'. Just the cold—hands get numb."

Joe laughed. "That's an old stall, Massey."

In the west, the sun was getting low. The wind came up stronger, biting deep through Joe's denims. He beat his gloved hands together to stimulate the circulation. Massey wiped a hand across his mouth and squinted at the sun.

"What time is it?" he said.

Joe glanced down at his wrist watch. "Quarter till five. We can still get in another hour before dark."

"Yeah," Massey muttered. "Thanks."

They worked a few minutes longer and

had the job almost finished when Massey again asked what time it was. "About five o'clock," Joe snapped. "What difference does it make—you're not going any place."

Massey didn't answer. Reaching around the pole, he started to unbuckle his safety. "I got to get down. Somethin' I left in the truck."

"It can wait. C'mon, give me a hand here."

Shifting in his hooks, he leaned out from the pole and stared down the line. The other boys were about to button up their jobs, he saw. A span away, Big Hoot was tying in the center phase; farther on, Lee and Slim were already finished and on the ground.

Behind him, he heard one of Massey's gaffs jerk out of the pole. Turning, he saw the lineman starting to move down.

"Hey—you ain't running out on me?"

"I got to get down," Massey said thickly.

Joe stared at him, noticing a peculiar fear in his eyes. He saw Massey glance up at the copper wire hanging a few feet above. Of a sudden, he felt a cold chill of premonition, and seized the collar of Massey's mackinaw.

"What's eating you?"

Massey jerked at the hand. Joe held onto the coat. Massey's hand snaked down to his tool belt, seized a heavy wrench. He swung it hard.

The wrench landed solidly on the fleshy part of Joe's forearm, and a nerve-paralyzing shock ran through him. He saw the wrench lift again, glittering as the sunlight caught it. He tried to ward off the blow. His effort was too feeble, too late. Suddenly, the pole seemed to rock; his brain burned with a white, unbearable flame that drifted swiftly into blackness.

A humming dinned in his eardrums, and for a moment he thought that he was lying in a sub-station beneath a huge, glittering transformer that kept singing, singing, in a tone beyond enduring. The illusion faded gradually. The noise was in his head, he discovered. He was still on the pole, hanging in his safety. The pole was swaying back and forth in the wind. Instinct kept him from shifting his feet as he opened his eyes and stared toward the west.

Massey was gone. Down the right-of-way, not a single span of copper was still up. The pole upon which Big Hoot had been working was leaning crazily; beyond it, poles were splintered and down. Fumbling at his safety belt, Joe cursed and wondered if a freak bolt of lightning had struck the high-line.

As he started down, he noticed a knot of men gathered on the ground a span away. The sickish feeling knotted up in his stomach.

Somebody was lying stretched out there, inert, unmoving.

The instant he touched the ground he started running toward the group of men. They opened up when he approached. Nobody spoke. He knelt over the still figure. It was Big Hoot. Joe looked up at Lee Parsons.

"Dead?"

White splotched the tan on Lee's jawbones. He nodded. "Dead."

"How?"

"Somebody closed the line switch. Big Hoot was tyin' in upstairs. The stuff grounded through him—twenty-two thousand volts of it. He never knew what hit him."

The sickish feeling in Joe's stomach moved upward, butterflied through his chest, settled in his throat. His mind flashed down the high-line to the sub-station; he pictured that switch closing, heard the thunder-crack as the stuff flashed over in a dozen short circuits, saw the eye-searing flame that could burn copper and steel and flesh in a fraction of an instant.

He put a hand over his eyes and shuddered. It was a nightmare. It hadn't happened.

Little Hoot was hunkered down, staring at his partner. Joe laid a hand on his

shoulder. He couldn't think of a word to say.

Little Hoot took the pliers out of his partner's tool belt, opened and closed them without appearing to realize what he was doing. His face was wooden.

Joe stood up. He knew now why Sam Massey had been so anxious to get off that pole. "Where's Massey?" he said.

"Gone," Lee answered. "Last I seen of him he was running across the fields like all hell was after him."

"He knew about this. Cooke must have planted him on the job."

"Hell of a time to be findin' that out."

Joe turned away and stared down the high-line at the fallen poles and twisted wire.

It would take plenty of extra hours to get that wire back up in the air. He didn't know if he had it in him to ask it of the crew.

"Well," Lee said. "What happens next?"

Joe gazed around the circle of waiting men. Fumbling in his shirt pocket, he found a cigarette, stuck it in his mouth.

"Got a match, anybody?"

Somebody scratched one for him and he leaned toward the flame. His eyes fell on Little Hoot. The man hunkered there, dull-eyed, expressionless, staring down at his partner.

"He told me I looked like a shoat," Little Hoot mumbled. "The big, ugly ape—"

There was no sound for a long time. The pliers kept clicking open and shut. Joe threw his unlighted cigarette to the ground.

"C'mon," he said.

"Where?" Lee drawled softly.

"To see Cooke. With me?"

Lee didn't bother to answer. Neither did anybody else. There was a quiet, grim eagerness in every face that was answer enough. Joe touched Little Hoot on the shoulder.

"We'll help you carry him to the truck."

Little Hoot shook his head. "I can carry him." Staggering slightly under the weight, he lifted his partner up and placed him on a blanket in the back end of the truck. Then he got in and sat down beside the body, silent, patient, expressionless.

"You know," Lee said softly, "I'd hate to say what would happen to Cooke if Little Hoot should run across him."

DARKNESS had fallen by the time they reached town. In the east the moon was rising, orange, weird, huge. They carried Big Hoot's body to the storeroom and left it there. Then they headed for the hotel.

Outside the building, they parked the pickup and the line truck and got out. Pausing on the boardwalk, Joe stared up at the front window of Cooke's suite. No light showed.

"Maybe he's playin' possum," Lee said. "Maybe he's waitin' for us."

"Maybe," Joe answered, and hoped it was true.

Lee climbed into the back end of the line truck for a moment. Joe heard the rattling of a tool box, then the straw-boss reappeared, sticking a long Colt into the waistband of his denims. "Might need this," he drawled.

They clumped through the lobby, up the two flights of rickety stairs. No attempt at silence was made. Pausing before the door, Joe rapped sharply upon it, then stepped back, waiting.

There was no answer. "Let's break it down," Lee said. Joe put his hand on the knob and tried the door. It swung open easily. He peered into the blackness, sensing that the room was empty. To verify the feeling, he went inside and lit a lamp. When it flickered up, he saw he had been right. The room was empty.

"Look in the bedroom," he snapped. Slim and Dutch pushed the draperies aside, stared in.

"Nobody here."

"Do you reckon he's flown the coop?" Lee said.

"He's not the type." Crossing the room to the lamp, Joe leaned down to blow it out.

"Where now?" Little Hoot asked softly. Joe turned and looked at him. The wooden expression was still on his face.

"The Blue Light. Sooner or later, everybody in Deep Sands shows up there. If he isn't around, we can wait."

"Yeah," Little Hoot murmured. "We can wait."

Out on the street once more, Joe discovered Marta Scott's roadster double-parked behind the pickup. She and her father were sitting in it, waiting. When she saw him, she said tensely. "What is it, Joe? Something's happened—I know it."

He sensed that no evasion would satisfy her; she would know if he were lying. He looked away, staring at the orange patch of moon visible between the dull blobs of two frame buildings.

"Big Hoot was killed today."

"Oh, no!"

"Murdered."

"Cooke?"

"Yeah."

One of his hands was resting on the car door, and suddenly she reached out for it, her fingers clamping down with an extraordinary strength.

"Don't fight him, Joe. This is a job for the law."

"There's no law in Deep Sands. You know that."

Colonel Scott grunted testily, "Back in the old days, we made our own law."

"That," Joe answered, "is just what we intend to do tonight."

The hand gripping his relaxed, was limp now, cold. He started to turn away. A low quick sob, almost inaudible, came from the girl. Pausing, he stared at her, trying to read what was in her face.

"Scared?" he muttered. She nodded and gripped his hand again.

"Why?" he asked.

"I don't know. It's silly."

"Why?" he repeated inexorably.

She looked at him for a long, long moment. Then she said, "Because you might get hurt." She took her hand away and added in a low tone, "Now are you satisfied?"

"Yeah," he said. "Yeah. . . ."

From the pickup, Lee called out. "What are we waitin' for?"

"Nothing." Joe turned away. "Nothing at all. Let's go."

The pickup took the lead down the frozen, deep-rutted street, the line truck rumbling along behind. Pulling up in front of the Blue Light, Joe saw a black sedan parked there.

"He's here," Lee said.

They got out, and side by side pushed through the door of the honky-tonk, pausing on the threshold to look around. It was too early in the evening for the oil field crowd. A portable phonograph was playing an old jazz-day tune with a fuzzy needle that needed changing. A solitary couple danced on the sawdust floor. The tables were empty, the bar was empty.

Joe's eyes centered on a booth in a dimly lighted corner. Blood started dinning in his eardrums. There were his men—all of them. Cooke, Mike, Injun, Sam Massey.

For perhaps five seconds, he stared at the booth, waiting for he knew not what. Lee drew the Colt. Mike and Injun dropped their right hands into their pockets. Cooke stood up.

"Well?" he snarled. The pounding in Joe's eardrums ceased. Only the old eagerness for action was left.

"C'mon, boys!" he called, and leaped forward. Before he had taken two steps, he tripped up and sprawled into the sawdust. An automatic roared; he heard the wicked *eyeeehhh* as a slug tore into the floor nearby, ricocheted up into the ceiling.

The room vomited crashing sound. Be-

side him, Lee's Colt dwarfed the lesser sounds of the automatics. Joe cursed, and burrowed lower in the sawdust. They'd walked into this thing the fool's way—only one gun in the crowd and Cooke and his men all armed.

Rolling to one side, he found a table and overturned it so that it formed a thin shield. "Lee!" he called. "Behind here!"

Lee didn't seem to hear. Kneeling, he lifted his gun, caressed the hammer. The unholy joy was in his eyes. The gun bucked. Mike clutched at his throat, went sprawling down across the table.

Cooke glanced at the fallen gunman, snapped out an order to Injun. Both their guns turned on Lee. Fear was a cold knife in Joe's stomach. Three guns were too many for Lee to fight. Against his hand he felt the solid oak leg of the table. At the same instant, he stared at the hanging kerosene lamp which illuminated the room.

His hand closed on the table leg, jerked hard, and with a ripping sound the leg came loose. Standing up, he swung it around his head as a weight thrower swings a hammer, let it fly. The missile sailed true. Glass tinkled, the bracket gave way, and the lamp went crashing to the floor.

Complete darkness enveloped the room. From time to time, a gun roared, its orange stab of flame drawing an answer from the opposite side of the room. Suddenly, nearby, Joe saw two simultaneous stabs of flame, heard two deafening reports. Somebody was helping Lee out, he realized.

A scream rose from the direction of the booth, died away.

"One more we won't have to fool with," said Colonel Scott's crusty, brittle voice.

"Yeah," Lee drawled. "Thanks, *amigo.*"

A fusillade of shots broke out from both sides, kept up for a time. Then, the firing ceased, and a desolate, complete silence fell. Straining his ears, Joe heard slight scuffing noises of men moving around, and cursed the darkness which blanketed his eyes.

He started moving carefully across the floor toward the booth. Somewhere a door slammed. The sound startled him more than a shot would have.

"A light!" somebody yelled. "Give us a light. He's getting away!"

The voice was Lee's. Stumbling over tables and chairs, Joe fumbled his way to the bar. He heard the door slam again.

Then a light went up, a flickering smoky lantern held by the white-faced bartender. "Is it over?" he whispered hoarsely.

"Here with that light," Joe ordered. The lantern moved toward the dark booth, sent black shadows scurrying up the wall. Mike lay sprawled out on the table, unmoving. Sam Massey was huddled on the floor. Dutch turned him over, and pointed at a hole in his chest. "Won't have to worry about him."

A MAN moaned somewhere nearby and Joe took the lantern from the bartender. A dozen feet from the booth he found Injun, sitting cross-legged, clutching at a bleeding shoulder.

"Do something quick," the man muttered. "I'm bleeding to death."

"Where's Cooke?" Joe snapped.

"Don't know. He skinned out."

Joe handed the lantern to Dutch. "Tie this guy's shoulder up. You help him, Slim. Lee, come with me."

They went outside. The moon was higher now, hanging clear and white in the cloudless sky. The sedan was gone. So was the high-line truck. Lee clutched Joe's arm.

"Who took the truck—Happy?"

Joe shook his head. Happy was still inside. All the boys were there, he was sure. All but one. "C'mon," he said, and ran toward the pickup. "Little Hoot's got the truck."

Kicking the starter, he wheeled the pickup around, headed it west out of town, giving it all it would take. The road was rough and bumpy, deep-rutted by the innumerable heavy oil field trucks which had driven over it for the past months. A dozen times the pickup hit high-center on the

frozen ruts, bounced crazily around in the deep wheel-tracks.

"They didn't get much of a start," Lee said, clutching for a handhold as the car jumped frog-like. "Reckon we can catch 'em?"

"Maybe. Cooke's car won't be able to make as good a time over this road as we do. But if he ever gets to the highway, he's long-gone."

Lee nodded. They rode in silence for a while, Joe fighting the wheel till his arms ached, crowding for every iota of speed the road would allow. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Lee lift up the Colt, fumble with it. The Texan swore softly.

"Has Little Hoot got a gun?"

Joe shook his head. "That's why we got to catch him. He wouldn't have a Chinaman's chance with Cooke."

"Neither would we, then. I fired my last cartridge back there in the Blue Light."

Joe shot a quick glance at him. Then he shrugged and brought his attention back to the road. "Can't be helped, I reckon."

THE road grew worse. On the right hand side, Joe caught glimpses of the new poles of the Deep Sands high-line as they flashed by in the darkness. It couldn't be far now, he knew, to the sub-station. And if Cooke reached the highway, a quarter mile west of the sub, they wouldn't have a chance of catching him.

Topping a hill, he saw the headlights of two cars below. "There they are!" Lee shouted.

Joe nodded silently. The road down there was almost impassable. He could see Cooke's car jolting from side to side over the heavy ruts. The truck was closing in, drawing up alongside the sedan. Little Hoot was evidently trying to run Cooke off the road.

An orange spot of flame stabbed from the car window. Cooke was firing at Little Hoot. At that close range, Joe didn't see how he could miss. Yet the truck kept crowding the sedan over, closer and closer to the ditch. Joe wondered why no more shots came from the sedan, then the obvious answer came to him. Cooke's gun must be empty.

Suddenly, both car and truck went careening off the road, bounced over the ditch, sloughed along through the heavy going of a field. Even above the roar of the pickup motor, Joe could hear the crash as the truck piled into a pole, stopped as though it had hit a concrete wall.

The sickish feeling knotted up in his stomach. He brought the pickup to a halt, started running toward the wrecked truck. Beyond it, he could see Cooke's car also stopped, undamaged, apparently.

The truck sat like a spent engine of destruction, the splintered pole half resting upon it, the top of the metal cab smashed in. No man could live through that, Joe knew. Yet as he approached, Little Hoot crawled out, stood up. Joe halted and stared.

Little Hoot was weaving slightly. A thin stream of blood trickled down his forehead. He wiped it off and grinned. "Sure do build these trucks solid," he said.

Joe turned his attention to the sedan. The left hand door was open, and Cooke was lying on the ground a short distance away. He had evidently leaped or been thrown clear before the car stopped. He got up now, stood there uncertainly. Joe moved toward him.

"Careful," Little Hoot said. "He's got a gun."

Joe stopped. He had no way of being sure that Cooke's gun was empty; he could only play a long hunch. "An empty gun never hurt anybody," he grunted.

Cooke laughed. He lifted his right hand and Joe caught the glitter of moonlight on blue steel. "If you want to find out whether this gun is empty or not," Cooke said, "just move one step closer."

Slowly, he backed toward the car, holding the gun on all three men, watching them. He took one step backwards, two, three. When he had almost reached the sedan,

Little Hoot said softly, "Better keep away from that car, Cooke."

The promoter laughed. "I'd like to see any of you stop me."

"We won't stop you. But you better take my advice."

Something in Little Hoot's voice made Joe turn and stare at him. His face betrayed nothing. Joe's glance turned back to the sedan, studied it for a moment. A chill ran over him. Cooke reached for the door.

"Stop!" Joe croaked, and stumbled forward. Little Hoot seized his arm.

"Wait."

Cooke's hand touched the door. Suddenly, he stiffened, writhed horribly, soundlessly. Then like a rag doll, he sagged and tumbled to the ground.

"God!" Lee said.

Cold, numb, Joe stared up at the broken pole, traced the dangling wire down from the crossarm to where it lay against the metal car top. He shivered, and wondered if Little Hoot had seen that wire, too.

Little Hoot lit a cigarette. The match flared yellow, illuminating his leathery, wind-burned face. He sucked deep at the cigarette.

"Funny," he said, "how quick sixty-six thousand volts can do its work."

Then he quietly collapsed in a dead faint.

SHE was standing at the corral fence watching the sun sink behind a far-off hill when Joe came up. "Hello, Marta," he said.

She smiled and said hello. For a moment he gazed at the funny way her eyelids crinkled up, wondering if a man would ever get tired of watching them.

"How's Little Hoot?" she asked.

"Okay. A few busted ribs and a scalp wound, but the doc says he'll be all right before long."

"I'm glad."

The sun was almost gone now. The chill of evening was in the wind, sharp, biting.

"Cold?" Joe said. She shook her head. "No."

He looked down at her hand where it rested on the fence rail. "Guess I'll be pulling out in another week or so."

"The high-line will be finished?"

"On the minute. I told the boys they could ease up, that there was no sense killing themselves with work. But they just laughed at me. Said they were getting used to not sleeping. Said I was going soft."

"Are you?"

"Maybe. A man changes. Things happen to a man that make him change."

She was very close to him; he knew that he should tell her now. Yet he stood there frozen, dumb. She touched his arm.

"Joe—" she said softly.

Struggling to make the unfamiliar words come right, he took hold of her shoulders. "Listen. You told me once that some day I'd see things your way. That I'd want a home, permanence, all the rest. Well, you were right. Only I went too far. I fell in love with you."

She laughed. "It isn't as bad as you make it sound—once you get used to it."

She was even closer to him now. The words were beginning to get mixed up.

"Listen. I've got to be moving on when this job's finished. There's a war going on, and it changes things, postpones things. My job is to build high-line—that's what I do best. But the war won't last forever. And afterwards—maybe a year, maybe two—"

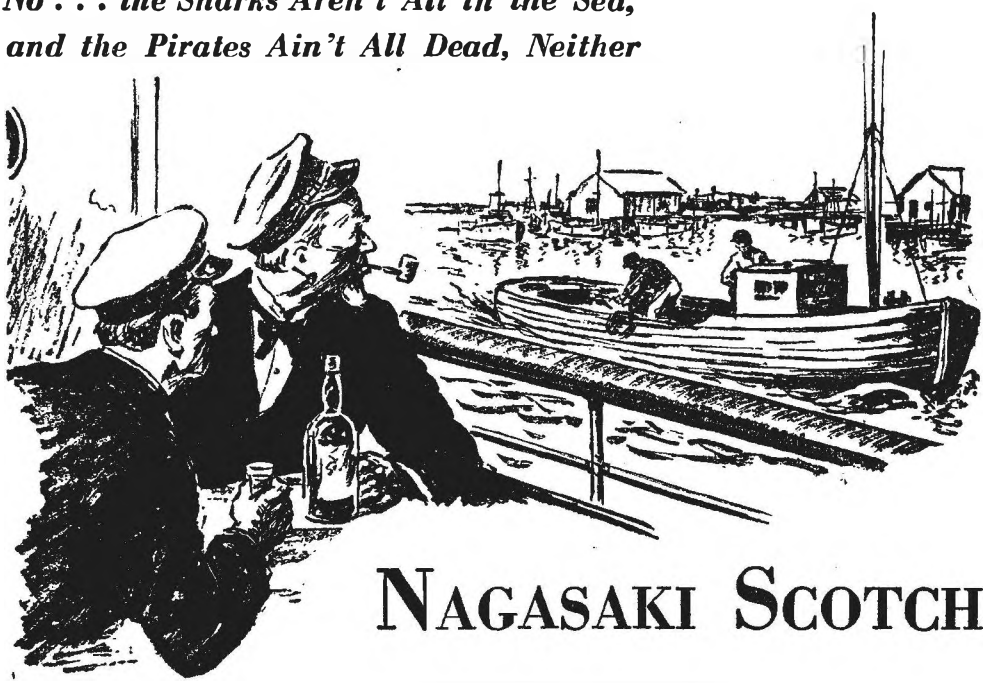
"That's a long time," she murmured, "for a girl to wait to be kissed. Does that have to be postponed, too?"

He thought it over for maybe three seconds. Then he shook his head.

"I can't think of any reason why it should be."

So it wasn't.

No . . . the Sharks Aren't All in the Sea, and the Pirates Ain't All Dead, Neither



NAGASAKI SCOTCH

By H. BEDFORD-JONES

SCOWLING, Cap'n Wingo tamped his pipe and refilled his glass.

"If you ask me," he observed darkly, "the sharks ain't all in the sea, and the pirates ain't all dead, neither. If I was your age I'd do something about it. Not to mention this piffle about men too old to serve. Too old! Me! It's a lie and a calumny!"

Cap'n Eben Wingo was a wispy little man, bent and shrunken. With his white gallagers fluttering, he looked as though a stout breeze would blow him away, till you saw his alert, bright blue eyes. He was caretaker aboard the palatial yacht *Whatcheer,* now laid up for the duration unless the Navy took her over.

His guest, Cap'n "Red" Ketch, had rowed down for the evening from his own floating home, the *Arethusa,* bringing a bottle of Scotch along. He was a picture of youth and robust energy, comparatively speaking, if one did not count his wooden leg. His grizzled red thatch framed gnarled, salt-weathered features, but he was far too easy-going to suit Cap'n Wingo.

"You should worry," he said, glancing around the cabin. "You're setting pretty."

Cap'n Wingo snorted. "Dang it. I should be in service! Coastguard turned me down again today, durn 'em! Blasted age limits. Why, I'm a better man than half these goldbraid snippets in uniform! What's more, the fighting ain't all in foreign parts. Right here on the home front we're liable to have shooting any day, yes, sir! All them Japs want is to get next to some o' these shipyards. I can see it coming right here on the West Coast."

He brooded for a moment, then added, "What's more, I don't get took in like you, neither, which goes to prove my words."

"Meaning what?" demanded Cap'n

Ketch. "You ain't lost your berth. I hear the Navy won't take over this craft, and her owner ain't getting his gold braid. So what's worrying you?"

"Your doings."

Holding his visitor in suspense by this accusation, Cap'n Wingo held a match above his pipe, with due degard for his chin-fringe of white whiskers. A drift of music came in from the yacht club. All yachts, even this elegant craft with her twin Diesels, were laid up for the duration in San Ysidro channel, but the club still functioned.

The two old cronies sat at the festive board which not so long ago had been graced by millionaire sportsmen. Few millionaires, these days, could afford the upkeep of a yacht like the *Whatcheer*. Cap'n Wingo, thanks to his master's ticket and his unblemished reputation, got a hundred and fifty a month for caretaking her.

"Bilge, that's what it is!" He pointed the dead match to the bottle on the table before them. "Bilge!"

Cap'n Ketch reddened at this insult to his liquor.

"There's a proverb about gift horses," he said acidly. "And I give Tony Sung two seventy-five for it as prime Scotch. And he's an honest Chink."

"Huh! Don't call him no Chink!" sniffed Cap'n Wingo. "He's a Korean and one of our allies, and his wife's a China woman; they got papers to prove it. And he's allowed to go to sea with his stinking old fish tub, while you'n me got to stay in harbor. A spy, that's what he is, a Jap spy!"

"Don't try to change the subject," broke in Cap'n Ketch. "What's wrong with my Scotch, anyhow?"

"Look at the bottom of the bottle."

Cap'n corked the bottle, turned it upside down, and looked at his host.

"I don't see anything. What about it?"

Cap'n Eben Wingo pointed to a tiny protuberance.

"See that pimple? If you was an old China hand like me, instead of being a lumber-barge skipper from Seattle, you'd know by that pimple and by the taste. The Japs cut a pin-head hole in the bottom of a bottle, steal out the whiskey till air-lock occurs, fill it up with rotgut, and seal the hole with hot glass. There's the living proof that Tony Sung's a Jap spy. And something had ought to be done about it, is my idear, before he blows up the shipyards!"

Cap'n Ketch, disconcerted by the undeniable evidence, tried to shift the topic.

"Yeah, you Boston guys always say idear for idea—"

"South Boston!" snapped Cap'n Wingo.

"It's all the same out here on the West Coast. Now, I'd like to get the rights of your brush with the Navy yesterday. I hear all sorts of rumors about it."

"Rumors be danged!" said Cap'n Wingo. "I give them fellers a piece of my mind, that's what. Too old to serve, they says to my face. Too old—me!"

"I don't mean that," said Cap'n Ketch. "I mean about this here craft and its trial run. I hear your owner had a run-in with the Navy examiners, and somebody had sabotaged your Diesels and they blew up. And in consequence the Navy won't take over your floating palace."

Cap'n Wingo let out a blast of Cape Horn profanity that curled his white whiskers. He was furious at the Navy anyway, because he was sitting in a retired berth instead of employing his talents at sea.

"It ain't so!" he stormed. "I told him not to push her! I warned him and the engineer warned him. Like most owners, he knew it all; he was anxious to show off her speed to them Navy examiners. He kep' calling for more revs until one engine was burned out, the stubborn fool! However, the Navy wants her just the same; they'll take her over and make the repairs."

"Wish 'em joy of her." Cap'n Ketch ran his eye over the red teak paneling

and brasswork. "Varnish palace full of chromium and lady gadgets. A reg'lar workhouse to keep in shape, what with scraping and varnishing and spit polishing, and one of them damned patent electric air suction sweepers on carpets—"

"Where," broke in Cap'n Wingo firmly, "did Tony Sung get this here Nagasaki Scotch?"

"How do I know?"

"How you ever got a master's license, I don't see; must ha' bribed the examiners. Well, there's no such stuff in this country. Therefore, it come from a Jap submarine. And Tony Sung made the contact with the sub. And that proves everything."

"Says you. Naturally, you know more'n Navy Intelligence and all the authorities who have given Tony the okay. He's got papers to prove what he is, too."

"Every danged spy has got papers to prove what he ain't. That reminds me. Your old tub, the *Arethusa,* can run out to sea any time; your owner, Dibble, has got permission."

"How you know?" demanded Cap'n Ketch suspiciously.

"I was talkin' to Dibble today, uptown, and a couple Navy men. They may take her over to use for a tender and give Dibble a commission."

"So you talked to 'em! I've been afraid of that." Cap'n Ketch regarded Cap'n Wingo gloomily, and sipped his drink.

"Trouble with you is you want to hang on to your caretaker's job," said Cap'n Wingo. "You got no patriotism. You know good'n well what would happen to the shipyards if a Jap sub ever got into this here channel and opened up with her deck gun."

"Might's well talk about a sub warping up alongside the moon," Cap'n Ketch said sourly.

"Sure. Thoughtless people like you would soon ruin this country. Just because Tony Sung claims to be a Korean and has papers to prove it, you take for granted he's okay."

"Well, you claim to be a master in steam," Cap'n Ketch said softly, "and you got a ticket to prove it, too."

Cap'n Wingo looked hard at him. "So what?"

"So everybody takes it for granted you're okay, in consequence."

Cap'n Wingo pondered this for a moment, but let it pass.

"Well, he looks Jap and he talks Jap and he acts Jap. Now he sells you this here whiskey, which could only have come off a Jap boat. Ain't that enough?"

"Not on your sayso. Even s'posing he is a Nip, which he ain't, how can he do any hurt?"

Cap'n Wingo sucked noisily at his pipe, made a wry face, caught up his glass and drained it, then attacked his pipe stem with a cleaner, savagely.

"When your owner, Dibble, bought the *Arethusa* last year, I taught him navigation. He's got sense, even if you haven't. Anyhow, if the Navy gives you a trial run, sniff around the Todos Santos islands, and see what can you see."

"The islands?" Cap'n Ketch stared at him. "The coast is patroled, ain't it? Ever since you seen that cockeyed reporter's dream in the newspaper, about how a sub could shell the living blazes out of the shipyards if she ever got into the channel, you been nuts on the subject. You and your Jap subs and your Nagasaki Scotch! I'm going home."

He did. He had to row home, as the *Arethusa* lay at moorings down the channel. The two men parted grumpily, and Cap'n Ketch took his bottle with him.

THE *Whatcheer* lay at her slip, not at moorings. Cap'n Wingo could get away whenever he liked, by making sure the dock watchman kept an eye on things. So, next morning, he was sitting in the rather dingy office of a young man who wore the stripes of a lieutenant-com-

mander, and who was very much in charge of San Ysidro harbor. After a good deal of time and talk, the young man stopped being polite and took a firm grip on the situation.

"Cap'n Wingo, it's all nonsense to resent the fact that none of the services can use you. When a man is seventy-three, he's off the active list—definitely."

"I've got more sea sense than all you younger whipper-snappers put together," said Cap'n Wingo in a positive way. "I'm hale and hearty. I ain't afraid to take action, neither, like you brass-stripes who are scared to get a mark on your records!"

"No doubt, no doubt," agreed the young man. "But you lack sufficient sea-sense to know that at seventy-three a man can't stand up to the demands of an active job."

"It ain't so," barked Cap'n Wingo. "I can take a ship around the Horn this minute!"

"If there's one to take around the Horn, I'll see that you get it," the young man said with crushing finality. "Now, as to your spy scare, you're barking up the wrong tree. Tony Sung has been thoroughly investigated. He's been here for years, and is the only Oriental remaining around here. He came to this country long before Japan seized Korea; his people there were killed by the Nips. You haven't one particle of evidence for any accusation and I strongly advise you to button your lip. Your whiskey bottle story means nothing; others than Japs can needle a bottle."

Cap'n Wingo rose, bitterness personified.

"You know best, of course. Only, if I was a Jap and fixing for a spy or sabotage job, you bet I'd be able to stand all sorts of investigation by young gentlemen of the Navy! If anything at all was to give me away, it'd be some little thing—like, maybe, Scotch whiskey from Nagasaki. It's got a flavor an old China hand can't mistake."

The young man laughed. "So has Tony Sung, Cap'n—a regular aura of fish!"

Cap'n Wingo stamped out stiffly, pausing at the door for a final Parthian shaft.

"Every morning afore dawn, he takes out his fishboat. Time after time, like I say, I've watched him. And he's always loaded up with gasoline tins that don't come back, too—"

"Nothing to it, Skipper," said the young man hastily. "Forget it, forget it!"

Muttering in his white whiskers, Cap'n Wingo walked over to Sixth Street and had noon dinner with his grand-daughter, Minnie Leary, whose husband was an inspector in the shipyard. He had lived with the Learys until the war sent him spurting back into harness as caretaker.

"Why didn't you fetch Cap'n Ketch for dinner, like I told you?" demanded Minnie.

"Too far for him to walk with that wooden peg." Cap'n Wingo champed his hash vigorously. " 'Sides, he's feeling brash and uppity. Not that he ain't a good man in his way—"

"So you've had another row, eh? That reminds me. Here's a call for you."

CAP'N WINGO glanced at the telephone number. "That's Dibble's law office. He owns the *Arethusa,* y'know."

"Is he the one you taught to navigate, last year?"

"Yep. Lemme at that phone, now."

He hunched over the phone and soon had Dibble on the wire.

"Oh, hello, Skipper! Remember what we were talking about yesterday—the Navy taking over the *Arethusa?* Well, they're going to try her out sometime next week; since your hooker burned up her Diesels they'll give me a chance. But I want to take the boat out for a couple days. I have a crack engineer who thinks he can get her a few extra knots by tinkering with the engines under sea conditions. Cap'n Ketch doesn't get around very spry, you know, and I wondered if you could come along too."

"Sure," said Cap'n Wingo promptly.

"Don't blame you for wanting one real sailor aboard. When you going?"

"Monday's a legal holiday. How about leaving Sunday morning and coming back Monday?"

"Okay. Might run over to the islands and outside, if you can get Navy permission. It's a half-day trip each way and you might want to shoot some goats. Does Cap'n Ketch know about it?"

"Haven't seen him yet. "

"Good." Cap'n Wingo's eyes glittered. "I'll break the news to him."

LATE that afternoon when Cap'n Ketch went uptown for his mail, Cap'n Wingo hailed him and he came aboard the crippled *Whatcheer* with an eye cocked for weather. To his surprise, Cap'n Wingo set out a bottle of rum and was exceedingly cordial; and presently was going on his favorite topic of Tony Sung once more.

"Y'know, he heads due south every morning he goes out; where does that take him? Smack into Point Reyes, if he holds it long enough. It's a blind; twice I've thought I seen his light shift west'ard. If he shifts to a course sou' by west, where'd he get to? The middle of Todos Santos islands and reefs!" he concluded triumphantly. "And outside the kelp beds. And all them Japs know the kelp beds like they know the palms of their hands."

"So what?" asked Ketch.

"So come Monday morning, you and your mate, which is me, will be out where them reefs give cover from the currents and prevailing winds, a hell of a ways off the coast. Yes, sir, we're going to sea on Sunday, with me along to keep an eye on your seamanship."

So he spilled his exultant news and savored it exceedingly, and waxed the more affable in view of Cap'n Ketch's chagrin. Another drink and he was in high good-humor. Then along came Tony Sung's bluff-bowed boat heading for the fish-wharf, with dish-faced Tony at the wheel and his son, an equally dish-faced boy of sixteen, ready with the lines. Tony waved at them in passing.

"Man and boy working that boat!" snorted Cap'n Wingo. "Should have a crew o' three."

"Help's hard to get," said Cap'n Ketch. "He brings in quite a bit o' fish, too. With things quiet, they let him and them sardine boats down to Pedro keep working."

Things were certainly quiet; the scare about Jap subs off the coast had long ago died away. San Ysidro, being distant from the canneries, had never attracted fisher-craft. Even before the war, a bare half-dozen had been located here; now all were gone except Tony Sung.

Cap'n Wingo had watched that dish-faced man during weeks and months; he knew that the Korean came in with his catch on Saturdays, spent the night in town, and took his wife and dish-faced son to church on Sunday, being a convert of no little renown. But on Monday, well before dawn, as on every other day, Tony Sung's fishboat chugged out of the channel and never varied her course. Having nothing else to do but scour brasswork, Cap'n Wingo had plenty of time for his fixed idear.

On Saturday night his shoulder hurt him, and still hurt on Sunday morning. That shoulder had been broken long years ago; ever since, it had been an infallible weather prophet. Off this coast a blow could come up very suddenly. So, although the glass showed no appreciable drop and the morning was fine, Cap'n Wingo knew what was what, and prepared accordingly.

His relief watchman came on Sunday morning. Dibble and the engineer showed up, and laughed to see Cap'n Wingo loaded down with oilskins and sou'-wester this grand sunny day.

"Afraid of spray, Cap'n?" the lawyer asked jovially. He was a well set-up man of forty, out of the war with heart murmurs but now hoping for a Navy place. "Coastguard tells me there's no sign of any weather making."

"Well, I got m' reasons," Cap'n Wingo said dourly. "Let's go."

The *Arethusa* was a forty-footer, of no particular luxury but built for comfort. Cap'n Ketch ventured no comment on the oilskins. Dibble, very much the owner-yachtsman, took the wheel and they went gaily down the channel. The course and objective was left entirely to Cap'n Wingo, who, as a matter of professional courtesy, deferred to Cap'n Ketch as skipper. Both owner and engineer had fish at the back of their minds, and the idea of lying up among the islands was quite satisfactory.

Outside the lee door of the wheelhouse, Cap'n Ketch gave Cap'n Wingo a nudge.

"I ran into a missionary uptown yesterday," he said softly. "He had been in Korea, too. Asked him about your private nightmare. He says sure, Tony is well-known as a Korean convert. He's the only one in these parts and they handle him mighty proud and precious. The sky-pilot says there's no more chance of Tony being a Jap than of him running a honky-tonk."

"I never said he run a honkytonk."

"I'm talking about the preacher."

Cap'n Wingo's chin-whiskers jutted forward as he set his teeth on his pipestem.

"Well, you ain't got around that Nagasaki Scotch! And you'd better keep an eye on your owner-master and sheer off from them kelp-beds ahead."

The day passed in lonely futility; they saw no gulls, hence no fish. The engineer laid them up an hour at a time, readjusting engine gadgets. The seas were empty; even the kelpboats that had once worked so steadily along the coast were no more, since only the Japs knew what depth of kelp held the magic agar, and they had kept their knowledge secret. No more slim yachts and spidery fishing-craft and squat fishboats; all gone. Made you think twice, said Dibble rather vaguely.

The Todos Santos were a group of reefs and islets, barren, raising nothing except a few occasional goats. They were thoroughly charted, with every depth and shoal known. Cap'n Wingo had no use for his oilskins; with them he had deposited below a long package wrapped in newspaper. By sunset, Dibble said they might as well lie up for the night, because the engineer wanted to get in an hour's work before darkness and supper.

SO Cap'n Ketch headed for San Tomas, one of the larger islets. A haze had lifted to the southward and the glass had fallen a trifle; not much, however. Under the north shore of San Tomas, in fair shelter, they dropped anchor in eight fathoms on account of currents, and Dibble went to work with the engineer at what they hoped were the final adjustments.

Cap'n Wingo broke out a bottle below. Cap'n Ketch stumped down and joined him.

"I figure," said Cap'n Wingo, "that if Tony Sung's making for these rocks, he'd ought to reach 'em at six forty-five tomorrow morning. I'd like to take the boat and look around on shore. It's a fine lonely spot, fitted to land saboteurs and dynamite or leave messages."

"If it'll put your mania to sleep, let's do it," volunteered Cap'n Ketch. "I notice we're anchored off the one place a body could land on San Tomas. You prob'ly had in mind to make a landing."

"Yep," said Cap'n Wingo.

So they rowed ashore. It was ebb tide. Cap'n Wingo landed on the barren, slimy rocks and clambered around and peered and searched, finally coming back to the boat with nothing to report.

"No buried treasure?" asked Cap'n Ketch. "No dynamite, no gun emplacements, no airplane field, no Japs?"

"No," Cap'n Wingo replied unpleasantly.

"Haze is thickening to the south'ard." Cap'n Ketch nodded at the next islet, a craggy rock fifty feet above the sea and half a mile long. "We might look at High

Rock, yonder. The only landing's on the west side—ain't in sight from here, but it ain't far. I hear tell there's a wide ledge by the landing, ten foot depth, where abalones are thick, and it's steep-to. A Jap sub could lay along that ledge and haul in abalone steaks—"

"Go to hell," said Cap'n Wingo. They returned to the *Arethusa*. The haze was thickening with night, and the glass was down a point, but they were well moored in the lee of San Tomas.

That evening Cap'n Wingo, whose shoulder was really hurting, retired early from the seven-up game. The sea was kicking up a bit, and nobody said anything about an early start next morning; he had a distinct notion that Cap'n Ketch resented his presence aboard, and he was more than cool toward Cap'n Ketch, and the engineer, by all the signs, was going to be seasick before the night was over. The *Arethusa* was kicking a bit at her moorings.

So, when Cap'n Wingo turned out on deck at two bells, or five o'clock, he had the whole wide world to himself and plenty of it. He got into oilskins with supreme satisfaction; a drizzle was blowing up out of the southeast, and dirty lay the sky in that quarter.

Night and subconscious cogitation had come to Cap'n Wingo's aid. As he got himself a quick bite and a mug of java, he reviewed the situation very happily. He had been a fool to waste time landing on San Tomas. Thanks to the rain and scud, the *Arethusa* would be invisible to anyone coming from San Ysidro; the islands covered her, too. And anyone coming would probably land on High Rock's western shore, protected from this southeast wind.

"Yep, I'd better take Red Ketch's tip and land there," he soliloquized. "From seaward, too, it has a good approach with plenty of depth; anybody could steam up slap alongside, where it's steep-to by the chart!"

So he tumbled into the boat and made for High Rock, after first getting his long package wrapped in newspaper. Getting there in the dinghy was a job, but the lee of San Tomas helped, and the current favored. As he toiled in to the landing, he was rejoiced to see that the end of the island quite hid the *Arethusa* from sight.

There was no surf here, but ill-luck assailed him. Newspaper parcel in hand, he stepped ashore, to slip suddenly on the wet rocks. He lost balance; his parcel shot forward to the dry beach, but he toppled and went down on hands and knees. To an old man, the shock was excessive. He struggled upright, and then saw that the kickback of his fall had sent the dingy out from shore. The current had already seized it.

"Condemn it!" said Cap'n Wingo in acute dismay. To swim out, overtake the boat and row it back was for him impossible; a tide-rip swept about these rocks. The dingy went on out and whirled around and started for the North Pole.

Bruised, miserable, marooned, Cap'n Wingo picked up his long package and sought shelter among the jutting rocks from the bursts of rain and chill wind that swept up from southward. Sea and sky were gray, the air was filled with flying spume and rain, and Cap'n Wingo had no recourse or solace save his pipe. Yet he was here, where he had designed to be, and consulted his watch methodically.

He was in no danger; by noon, at latest, those aboard the *Arethusa* would be searching for him. He had an unhappy vision of a white-bearded figure capering on the rocks at the south end of the island and waving a sou'wester to attract their attention. The thought of Tony Sung's fishboat, by this time close aboard the islands, cheered him. Six-thirty; yes, not long to wait now!

HE EXAMINED the landing. This was a long strip of shingle which ran back from the water for a few yards and ended in upheaved masses of ancient rock;

not much of a landing, but it might prove wide as a church door—

A gasp escaped him. He took the pipe from his mouth; his jaw fell, for he saw the impossible. From seaward—from seaward, mind you!—a small boat was coming in to make the landing. From the open Pacific, not from any kind of craft, it came, four men lugging at the oars, men hidden by oilskins and sou'westers! It was within biscuit-toss of the beach before he realized its presence, so thick was the air. Cap'n Wingo sat stupefied, incredulous.

The small boat drove in at the shingle. The four plopped out and drew it up; they took out burdens and lifted them up toward the rocks, then sought shelter among those rocks. Cap'n Wingo got only glimpses of them. He looked at their boat. It was a peculiar sort of craft, unlike anything known to him; it looked like an inflatable boat, in fact. The thought steadied him and chilled his excitement.

A rubber boat—Japs, by Jupiter! Japs, set ashore from a sub!

The thrill was still coursing through his veins when off to the northward, rounding the far end of the island, he sighted a speck, distanced by the scud and rain. He dropped his pipe and chirruped to himself in delicious exultation. He forgot the *Arethusa,* which must have missed him by this time; he forgot everything else—Tony Sung's boat coming to the rendezvous! With shaking hands he fumbled at that newspaper-wrapped package. He tore off the wrappings as he crouched among the rocks, and brought to light an ancient double-barreled shotgun, already loaded.

He waited, tensed, squinting across the rain-squalls.

The fishboat came chugging down the island shore, and slowed. She came close, and sighted the collapsible boat on the shingle. Her siren tooted loudly; Tony Sung was at the wheel, pulling the cord. The four men came suddenly from shelter and stood clumped, waving. Tony Sung waved back. His dish-faced son appeared briefly, then returned to the engines.

She came in close, so close as almost to touch the shingle. Tony Sung came out into the bow and tossed a coiled line ashore; one of the four men caught it and ran back to a boulder and made fast. Tony Sung dropped from the bow and waded ashore. The boat backed out the length of the line; an occasional turn of the screw held her.

Tony Sung and the four men in oilskins exchanged warm greetings, it appeared; hard to see what went on for the sou'westers that hid faces and heads. But, after a moment or two, attention shifted. The dishfaced boy leaped to the gunnel of the fishboat, yelling, waving his arms, pointing down the shore.

Cap'n Wingo knew instantly what he was pointing at; the *Arethusa* was coming. And with that, Cap'n Wingo shot to his feet and sent his old quarter-deck voice roaring downwind.

"Hands up! You, there—hands up!"

The men did not obey; instead Tony Sung hauled out a pistol. Seeing this, Cap'n Wingo let go with both barrels, quite unintentionally; he had never before fired this borrowed weapon. But he let go straight, which was the main thing.

There was a scattering of oilskins, men and sou'westers; screams and shouts and oaths poured up from the grotesque, hopping, shot-stung figures. Cap'n Wingo roared another order, and it was obeyed; Tony Sung dropped his gun and put up his arms with the others. And then a ghastly dismay swamped Cap'n Wingo, as he saw the faces of the four men who had landed.

They were not Japs at all. They were white men.

"Oh, my gosh!" he said. "Now I've done it—"

He stood motionless, threatening, shotgun covering the group; in reality, he was as empty as the gun itself. An overwhelming horror of his mistake gripped him at sight of those peppered and bleeding fig-

ures—white men! He was incapable of any motion. The dish-faced boy appeared briefly, cast off, and the fishboat went careening wildly away downwind, but he cared not. A deep groan escaped him. Everything was in a whirl before his senses —a whirl of blood and white men's faces. White men! Not Japs at all.

One of the four slumped down to the shingle. Tony Sung and another stooped to aid him; blood was flowing fast. The other two kept their arms up, bleating frantically. Cap'n Wingo was deaf and blind. Even when the gray shape of the *Arethusa* came looming in, he remained gripped by that frightful paralysis.

THEN he was dimly aware that Dibble was ashore, shouting at him to keep them covered. Cap'n Ketch came scrambling ashore too, waving a gun. Cap'n Wingo paid no heed; he was immobile, breathing hard, wide-eyed with awful realization of the mistake he had made. He stayed where he was. When, later, Cap'n Ketch came stumping up to his perch amid the rocks, he shrank and awaited the scathing torrent of words. Instead Cap'n Ketch nodded at him.

"Two o' them fellers are right bad hurt, seems like."

Cap'n Wingo suppressed another groan. "Condemn it! I didn't go for to kill 'em!"

"No harm if you had, Eben. Durn'd if I ain't proud of you!" exclaimed Captain Ketch heartily. "Yes, sir; my hat's off to you. I'll eat every last word I said!"

Suspecting sarcasm, Cap'n Wingo held his breath.

"They ain't Japs at all," he said gloomily.

"No. A durned sight more dangerous, Dibble says. Germans, savvy? Heinies in Jap service; they got a lot of 'em in Tokio. Same as them aviators who machine-gunned Honolulu streets during the blitz, mind it? If they once got safe into the country—"

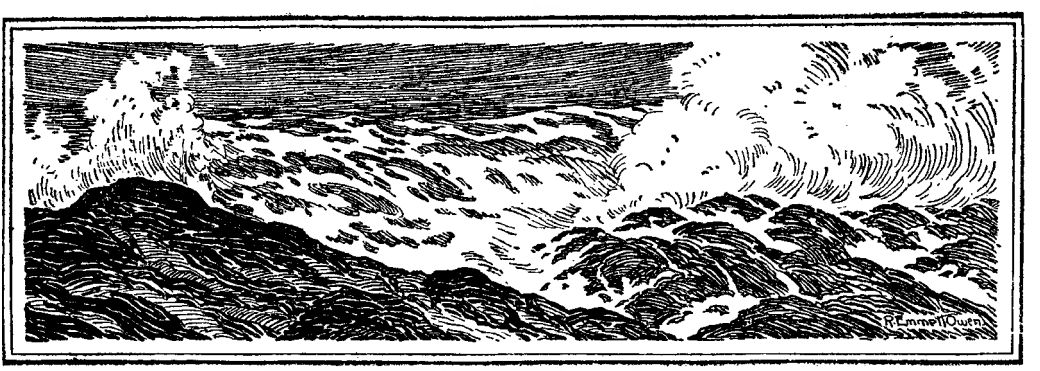
It was perhaps two minutes, a long two minutes, before Cap'n Wingo comprehended those words. Then the color came back into his frozen cheeks. He drew a long breath. His shoulders squared. The revulsion of feeling almost swept him off his feet with wild joy, and he fastened Cap'n Ketch with his old jaunty eye.

"Ha! So you admit Tony Sung ain't no Korean after all, huh?"

"If he is, he's a good Jap all right!"

"I knew it," boomed Cap'n Wingo. "That was my idear all the time. Oh, boy! Oh, *boy!* Nagasaki Scotch, huh? That's what comes of knowing your liquor. Well, come on! What you standing around waiting for? Let's go! Too old for any use, am I? If I know anything, them smart-alec Navy officers at San Ysidro are going to eat crow, and plenty of it!"

It is on record that they did, too. Very gladly.



The Road Makers

By VAN COURT HOBSON

Officially It Is Called the Alcan Highway; But to Some of Us It Is Sure to Be Known Simply as Pete's Road

I'M SITTING here in my tent alone tonight, most of the fellows are over at the big one, but I feel like writing down some of the stuff that has been happening to me lately; maybe it will help clear it up in my own mind.

We're all up here, building a road, building a road faster than I ever thought roads could be built. I can't tell you where it is because that is a military secret and I've got so used to keeping my mouth shut about it that I can't even write it down on paper.

I guess I'd better tell you who I am. Well, Powers is the name, Jim Powers, and if the government knew my real age I wouldn't have had a chance to work on this road. But I have the best reason in the world for being here, for my brother is up there where we're headed for and every day's work we do brings supplies a little nearer to him, gasoline for the big bomber he flies and food to keep himself and his swell crew going. He's always hungry, my brother is, though they say the flying men in our forces have the best grub in the world.

He's been up there in that place near the top of the world—another military secret—for quite some time. After Corregidor I made up my mind that no brother of mine was going to be cut off in some isolated part of the world with no grub and no ammunition, not as long as I could do something

about it. So when this road started, I signed up quick; I'm big and strong as the dickens, anyway.

It's a great thing, this road building business, hard work under the best of circumstances. But the conditions we're working out under are enough to wear anyone out. We men have stood up better than I expected but some of the machinery took an awful licking. It took a regiment of men to keep those machines going, but when they'd cut the whole side of a cliff with just a few bites or go through timber like a scythe through wheat, then you'd know they were worth all the attention they took.

Unless you've lived in awfully cold weather, you won't understand what it's like, working on that road. It's hard as the dickens to just face the wind some days, much less work in it. We looked like people out of Walt Disney's pictures, for frost can do funny things to one's clothes, and as to your eyebrows and nose, they don't ever look real. I got so used to seeing the fellows with white eyebrows and beards that I wouldn't half recognize them when they'd get thawed out.

Up there in that country, even the machines don't look like anything man ever invented. When it's snowing hard and the wind was blowing blue gales, those machines would suddenly lunge out of nowhere, like animals from an unknown world. I tell you, they gave me a turn, time and again.

History will tell all about the building of our road, but there's one thing they won't tell, because I'm the only person who knows anything about it, though I will tell Bill when I get to him. You can take it for what it is worth. Well, to begin at the beginning, I'm the only person but one who ever saw Pete, my Indian friend. It was a strange thing how the other fellows would look right at the spot where Pete was standing and never see him at all, but I did, though I never got close enough to talk to him. So I really don't know his name, I just called him Pete. I expect his real name is long and high sounding, like "Big Chief on a Bigger Rock" or something like that.

The first time I saw Pete was after a lot of little things had gone wrong with the road building. I guess I'd better not tell what they were, for they are a military secret, for sure. But there was enough to fray the soul of a man. Even the major in charge of us got testy, if that's what you want to call it. There's none better than our major, he's a whiz at cussing and equally swell at being a good boss. Everyone was pretty low, one night, after a tough day. Even the news over the radio was a little worse than usual that night. I kept thinking about my brother and wondering if he'd get cut off from supplies, way up there in that cold country and me only part way up to him. So I decided to go out of the sleeping tent and be alone for a spell. It was grand and warm in the tent and I hated to leave it, but the wind wasn't blowing outside, so I decided on a little stroll. Good thing I did, too, for that was the first time I saw Pete.

HE WAS too far away to even yell at, but he stood there, plain as anything, in the moonlight. A great big, upstanding Indian he was, with furs and all sorts of trappings hung around him just like regalia. He surely looked like my idea of Big Chief Something. By and by he slipped away into the shadows of the trees and I went back to the tent, feeling lots better, though I couldn't have told you why. I didn't say anything to the other fellows; I knew they would have kidded the life out of me, and told me I was seeing things. Maybe I was, but I saw Pete a lot of times after that.

Things kept on getting worse and worse with the machines, they kept on going haywire and we used so many parts that we knew we'd be held up if replacements didn't come from the States soon. So I decided to do a little detective work on my own. After eliminating every man, from

the major down, as a suspect, I finally settled on a fellow named Tieson as the only one who might be capable of doing any dirty work. I watched him like a hawk, never left his side all that day or the ones following, for I was just a helper then. I didn't catch him doing anything wrong, but strange—or maybe not so strange—there weren't any more busted machines or the like and the work went forward fast.

I know you're thinking that I should have reported Tieson to the major, but you see, I don't belong to the military, that is, not yet I don't. Besides Tieson was the second man on the road crew and everyone says he's a great road builder. So a guy like me doesn't walk in and say that one of the foremen is a dirty saboteur. If I had and couldn't prove it, I'd been fired right then and there. And then what chance would I have had to walk into Bill's camp and say "Hello, big boy" like I'd planned? I think an awful lot of my brother. So I just made myself real pally with Tieson and to ease the strain I told Pete all about it, with Pete standing on one side of a clearing and me on the other. He couldn't hear me, of course, I knew that, but I kept on going over the matter. It kind of comforted me to shoot the works, so to speak, in the general direction of the old codger, he looked so fine and stately and dependable, standing there against the rim of trees.

One evening, all of us were sitting around the fire in the main tent, we'd had a grand meal, one of the best and we all felt so comfortable and lazy. We'd had a good week, too, made a lot of road. Every last one of the crew was there, I'd made sure of that. I guess I must have dozed off, with the heat and the effects of the good meal after a day's work. When I awakened with a start I knew, even without looking, that Tieson was gone. I felt sick then, for I knew I should have told the major, even though I didn't get to see Bill. Before I could get into my boots and coat, the door of the tent opened with a bang and there was our Chinese water boy, as fine a kid as you could ever want to meet. He told us that Tieson was being killed, right down by the bridge that we had just finished.

By the time we got out of the tent every last soul in camp was there to join us and we did some tall hurrying to get down to the bridge. Tieson was dead, all right, only dead with the strangest wound along the back of his head, like he'd been hit with a sharpened rock. They carried him up to camp but I lingered around the scene of the crime, as they say in detective stories, hoping I'd find a clue. I did, all right, though no one else would have called it one. Just a bluish sort of bead, it was. I'd never seen one like it but I picked it up carefully and stowed it away for further references.

THE major made a pretty exhaustive inquiry into Tieson's death. Every last person could prove that he was in camp at the time, for Tieson had left the tent just a few minutes before the water boy burst in with his news. That water boy stuck to his story, said a great big man in white had come out of the forest, marched right up to Tieson, who was digging beside the new bridge. The big man had used just one blow, the water boy insisted, said the big fellow's arms went up just once and when they came down, Tieson crumpled up. Then the big man had gone back into the forests. Nothing the major could do changed the boy's story.

I sent a message of thanks to Pete when I saw him the next evening and I could have sworn that he waved his hand, with a noble sort of gesture, before he went away again.

The road building certainly did progress after that; we just hummed along. Pete followed right along with us, so I decided he was looking for something that only I could find for him. I promised him, right then, if I found it, that I'd get it to him some way. So when my big

tractor I'd been driving ever since Tieson died, hit a funny place in the path I was working, I got out of the machine before my helper had a chance to move. I found we'd run into some sort of burial ground, at least that's what I decided it was. I told my helper to go on back to camp; we were stuck for the evening, I said, and I'd soon follow. It was getting dusk, anyway, so I left my machine, standing right there like a great guardian. I went back to camp with an account of engine trouble that would have to be fixed the next morning. The major believed me—I'd been a dependable sort of fellow and he trusted me. Before I left the machine, though, I saw Pete far away and I told him to come and get what he wanted—if he did, he was to leave me some kind of token.

You can bet I was back at that machine at daybreak. I had breakfast with the cook. Sure enough, that burial ground or tomb was cleaned out, slick as a whistle. Now it looked like any other ordinary bump in the road. I didn't have to hunt very hard to find another bead, just like the one I found the night Tieson was killed. So I knew the old chief was happy and I made up all sorts of stories about him, making him a great king, like that fellow in India who built that white tomb for his lady love. Maybe this was Pete's, that the road machine had uncovered, built centuries ago when Pete's lady had wearied too much on the trip they were taking into an unknown world. Pete was too good an American—look what he had done to Tieson—to want to interfere with the road being built, even though it went right over his most sacred place.

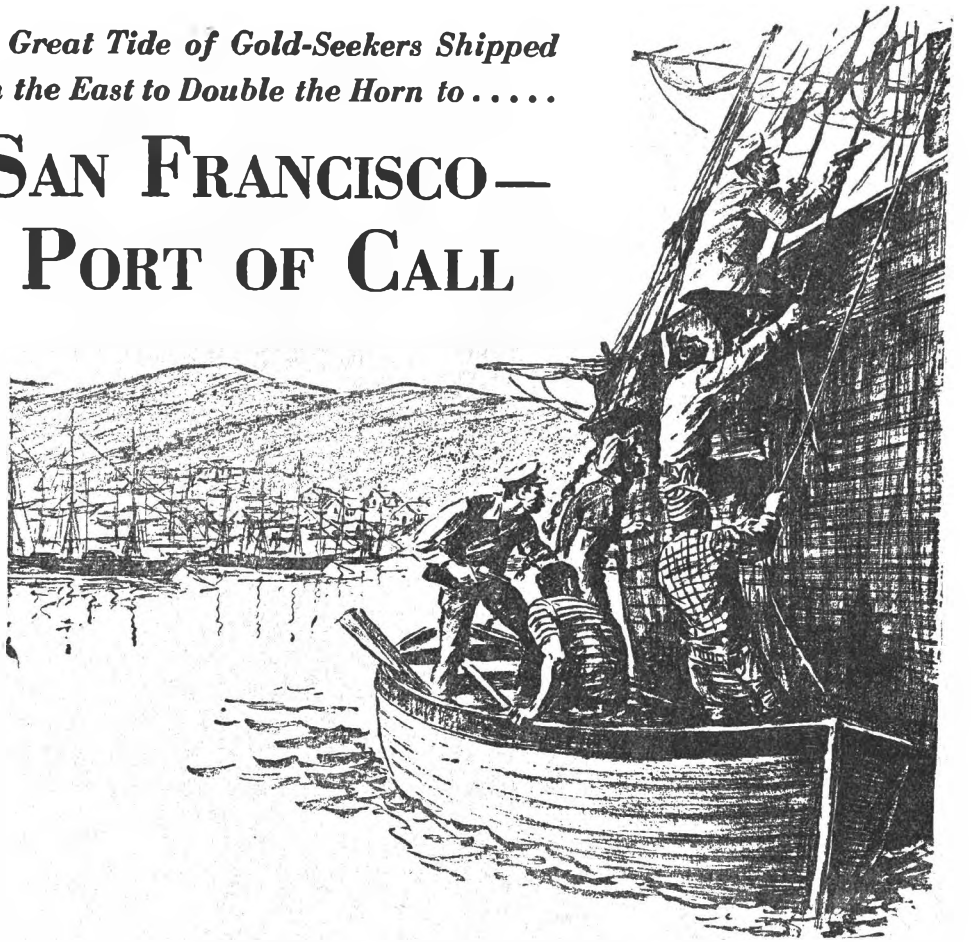
What he wanted was to move it himself, he didn't want a lot of strangers fussing around his temple.

I sent those beads out to a museum and just tonight I got an answer from them. They are in a state of dither, those fellows are, and they are trying to get up an expedition so they can come up here and explore. It seems those beads are rarer than anything, belong to the migratory people who came into this country over the land-bridge. I've been offered a ridiculously big sum for those beads, considering their size. I want one of them back, though, for when I see Bill it will make a swell lucky charm for him to carry. He'll believe my story about Pete, too, he's just that kind of an understanding fellow. That's one of the things I like about my brother.

If I have any luck I'll be with him myself some day, but now my job is to help build the road—some way I feel it's Pete's road, too.

A Great Tide of Gold-Seekers Shipped in the East to Double the Horn to . . . . .

SAN FRANCISCO— PORT OF CALL



By TOM W. BLACKBURN

CHAPTER I

'FRISCO WELCOME

"*FIVE April, 1849: Wind SW. Bottom 40 fathoms. Fourth day of fog. Bearing northerly to hold position against drift. Damn a port of call with no pilot-boat out! Signed, Flynn, Master.*"

The master's cabin of the *Witch* was quiet, broken only by the scratching of the pen and the creak of the great brass lantern hanging from its gimbals over the table. Captain Daniel Flynn shattered that quiet with deliberate violence as he spun an angry flourish after his signature. He flung the pen down on the table and slammed the *Witch's* heavy long book shut with a bang.

Across the room Natalie Longworth raised delicate brows above the fancy-work at which she eternally labored and which she never finished.

"I remind you again, Captain," she said severely, "that my father owns this ship and that he bought it and had it manned through his solicitors in Boston just to bring me around the Horn to join him in San Francisco. He is a very wealthy and a very powerful man. He will be impatient. And he will deal sharply with you for lying out here off the harbor for days

on end when we might have been together!"

Natalie Longworth was both pampered and beautiful. That she realized it made her a difficult person with whom to deal. Particularly for Dan Flynn, whose strength was in ships and not in caustic young women. The girl stared at him with eyes which were round and wide and mocking. Her throaty voice was richly flavored with the dislike she had made no point of hiding since the day they sailed from Boston six months before. Flynn stood up and scowled back at her.

"When I can set you ashore on the Embarcadero, Miss Longworth, I'll be a happy man. And not before. What you think of this fog and its delay is mild to what I think. Believe me!"

He wheeled, then, and strode out onto the deck. Roy Bender, his mate, met him just outside the door.

"I was coming after you. I think we've got the pilot boat in sight. The weather's lifting a little. But it looks a little funny to me. She's a battered old brig—and she mounts two guns!"

Flynn nodded. With the great tide of gold-seekers shipping in the east to double the Horn to San Francisco, it didn't seem too out of place that this port should feel obliged to use a larger pilot boat than ordinary, and an armed one, at that. If there was any echo of Bender's uneasiness in Flynn, it was drowned in his flood of relief at prospect of making the harbor and ridding himself of his owner's daughter. That was the important thing, the seat of all his bitterness.

"Get both watches on deck, Bender," he said absently. "Stand by to slack braces. We'll heave to and wait for the pilot to come up. But mark an eye on the fog and if an opening shows, remember it. I've seen pilots off of smaller boats than that one too drunk to take a newcomer in!"

Bender grinned and moved forward. Dan looked idly out over the water toward the other ship and let his thoughts turn again inward. When he was ten years old, he sailed his first berth. In the fifteen years since then, he had been making himself with his own hands. He had not done badly. When a firm of Boston solicitors, acting for a client, had asked for the ablest skipper in Boston, they had been directed to Dan's favorite tavern. The solicitors had, they said, orders from their client to buy the best ship available, put the best men aboard it, load certain mining machinery, and dispatch it to California.

That the ship purchased was the newest one from the ways of Donald McKay, Boston's clipper building magician, had clinched the offer for Dan Flynn. Like many another man who had grown up in the China trade, his great ambition was to skipper a McKay ship. He recruited his crew carefully from among men who had sailed often with him and he personally saw to the fitting of the *Sea Witch*.

The solicitors did not see fit to mention that their client, Cyrus Longworth had a daughter who also was sailing on the *Witch* until they brought her aboard an hour before the change of tide. They let Dan know, then, that the machinery in the hold of the *Witch* was of secondary importance. They let him know this ship had been bought, fitted, and manned primarily to get the girl safely out to her father in San Francisco.

That had been a bitter pill. The *Witch* —a queen who might make a name for herself in the China trade—consigned to the mollycoddling job of ferrying a woman around two continents! Flynn's nature was close-packed and had little room in it for love. What room there was surged with love of his ship. But the humiliation of the errand on which he sailed the *Witch* was only a mild beginning. For Natalie Longworth never forgot for an instant that she was the owner's daughter and that every man and spar aboard were slaves to her wishes.

The cabin-boy played sick for three days off Jamaica. He needed a quick cure

to set him right in his first berth and to make a seaman out of him. Dan gave it to him with impersonal thoroughness, only to be immediately dealt a scathing lecture on his inhumanity by the girl before a whole deck-watch. To his men, who had sailed often with him, it was a huge joke to be long enjoyed in the fo'c'stle—Dan Flynn dressed down by a girl. It did his discipline no harm; his men knew Flynn's hardness was in line of duty and not in his heart. But it rankled, and it rankled deeply.

At Maracaibo, Natalie Longworth had held the *Witch* at anchor five days in sweltering heat while she shopped for silks with the bosun along to carry her bundles. Those lost five days caused them to miss the last of the trades and they had to work southward for a thousand miles on vagrant winds which shifted so often the deck watch spent half of its time in the rigging and the *Witch* grew dingy for lack of attention to her paint and bright work.

These things could be endured. But one thing could not. This was the girl's attitude toward the ship. All sailing craft were of a kind—a collection of planks and oakum, cordage and canvas, which went from one place to another. If the *Witch* held together from Boston to the Golden Gate, the girl cared no further. Once Dan tried to tell her about McKay ships and how they were conquering the world for America. He told her about the *Flying Cloud,* on the ways when they left Boston; of the *Sovereign of the Seas,* the *Staghound,* and others of that sisterhood of fabulous clippers to which the *Witch* belonged. But it was wasted wind and he held his counsel thereafter, his bitterness growing.

THE pilot for the port of San Francisco was a strange man for his profession. He wore a master's cap and was drunk enough to be loose-jointed without being sloppy. He wore a heavy gun strapped low against one hip. And the six heavily-armed men who had rowed him across from his brig did not stay below in their boat, but followed him to the deck of the *Witch.* Moving forward, Dan Flynn saw he should have paid a little more attention to Bender's uneasiness when the other ship was first sighted. The pilot was waiting for him 'midships.

" 'Afternoon, Captain," he said affably. "Picked a nice day to come in. Fog's thickening. You'll be lucky to make it through the Gate before dark."

Flynn scowled. "We'll get under way, then. Give my helmsman your course."

The man raised his hands.

"Not so fast, Captain. There's the matter of the fee—eh?"

"Fee!" Flynn snorted. "You greasy-

palmed faker. Pilot's fee is payable when my hook's down, inside."

"Yes," the other agreed with a wide, annoying grin. "True Captain. If San Francisco was a regular port and I was a regular pilot. And that ain't a regular pilot-boat, because she's got two nine-pound brassies pointed right at your water-line and waitin' for a signal of trouble from me. Hand across five hundred dollars, gold or silver, and you can follow my brig in.

Balk and you'll sink, right where you are!"

The self-styled pilot was apparently used to dealing with ship-masters as anxious for land and a crack at the gold-fields of the Sacramento Valley as their crews. He was apparently used to a little bluster and a quick pay-off. It was a lightning, jolting fist which caught him at the base of one ear and flung him flat on the deck. He bunched his knees and clawed upright, his hand tugging at his big gun. But Dan's hand had streaked back under his own coat to pull his sheath-worn Navy Colt from its habitual resting place across the right side of the small of his back. Flynn stabbed his weapon forward into the flabby softness of the man's belly, circling so that the man was a shield between the crew of the pilot boat and himself. He raised his voice to his own crew.

"Put these scabby land dogs overside!" he raged. "Feet-first or head-first. If one of them touches steel or makes fight I'll put a hole through the middle of this walrus that the rest of them can crawl through!"

The pilot's face whitened. Bender and Limey Joe Dreen, the *Witch's* bosun, and two or three others moved toward the bunched pilot-boat crew, marlin spikes trailing menacingly from their hands. The pilot boat boys stood for a moment, then broke and started for the rail. A smile creased Flynn's face. But it froze suddenly. Natalie Longworth stood in the doorway of his cabin, her face white and her eyes flashing.

She crossed the deck with quick, sharp steps and shoved herself between Flynn and the pilot with no attention to Flynn's level, cocked gun.

"My captain has a notion he's a hard sea-dog, Pilot," she said hurriedly. "This ship belongs to Cyrus Longworth. I'm his daughter. We're landing at San Francisco to make our home. We don't want any trouble with authorities, naturally. I'd appreciate it very much if you'd report this as a misunderstanding and if you'd send word of our arrival to my father as soon as you dock. I have the fee here. Minted gold is all right?"

She held up a little pouch. The pallor slid from the pilot's face. He took the pouch, hefted it, and grinned over the girl's shoulder into Flynn's face.

"All right?" he said smoothly. "Anything is all right that the daughter of Cyrus Longworth does, lady. San Francisco is waiting for you! And you, too, Captain Bucko!" He made the last a malevolent snarl. "There's been more than one tough skipper lost his ship inside the Golden Gate!"

The man turned, then, and dropped down the ladder to his skiff and its waiting crew. Flynn stood immobile. In a moment the small boat came into view from under the overhang of the *Witch*. It wallowed with the clumsiness of its oarsmen. There wasn't a seaman on its thwarts—leader or crew alike. They were landsmen. And they'd be waiting ashore. For the girl as well as for the captain of the *Witch*. This knowledge was certain in Flynn. The name of Cyrus Longworth and the girl's relationship to him had made a big impression on the bogus pilot. It didn't look good.

When the skiff was a hundred yards away, Dan eased a little and thrust his gun back into its sheath. Natalie Longworth turned toward him.

"You and your stiff-necked, iron-handed, deck-discipline pride!" she said savagely. "Rather than bend, you'd have sacrificed my father's ship to the cannon on that other ship. What if the pilot's fee was unreasonable? What if it was robbery? My father's dollar investment in this ship is counted in thousands, not scrabbling hundreds! You are a fool, Captain Flynn!"

"I have company on this ship, Miss," Dan answered her quietly. "The cannon you were worrying about are little nine-pound brass bores. A full hit from both of them at once wouldn't even dent the oak planking of a McKay ship!"

He turned to the mate.

"Snug the braces and bring her around. Stand in astern of the pilot. We can't be more than a pair of miles off the bar. Once inside, anchor clear of everything and pass the word there'll be no liberty till we've unshipped our cargo—and our passenger!"

A quick grin of understanding sympathy touched Roy Bender's face as he started forward. The owner's daughter was as unpopular forward as she was aft.

Dan Flynn pushed open the door of his cabin, his mind set on putting his papers in order for the owner's survey. As he passed through the opening, a sound parted his lips.

"San Francisco!" The words had the ugly ring of an oath in his throat.

CHAPTER II

LAWLESS ANCHORAGE

IN THE brisk routine of bringing a train ship up on her hawsers after a long run, Dan Flynn forgot the cold and griping fury of helplessness to which he had been driven through the long six months of his cruise. He noticed Natalie's absence from the dinner-table. But his mind passed it without thought. He was alone in the big main cabin. He had given Roy Bender an address and put him overside in the cutter with six men before the hooks were down. It might take a little time for Bender to run old Longworth down in a place mushrooming as wildly as this raw town behind the Golden Gate. But the owner ought to be aboard by midnight, which meant unloading could commence early in the morning.

His meal complete, Flynn rose and went out onto the deck. His satisfaction that the voyage was done was so warm in him that he nodded a courteous greeting when he saw Natalie Longworth at the rail amidships. He got no acknowledgement from her and grinned a little at that. Dominant and unreasonable though she might be—shallow and spoiled as she certainly was—the girl had one virtue. There was a hot and stubborn fire in her. And Dan Flynn had a liking for a fighting spirit, wherever he found it.

He went on forward into the bow and sat down, hanging one leg over one of the stays to the dolphin-striker. Before him, in the murky gloom of early evening, sprawled the broad, curving sheet of water which was the best harbor on the American continent. Back of the bay, rolling back until darkness stopped a man's eyes, rose the beginnings of the hills from which a horde of men were frantically taking gold. Twelve months before, the presence of gold in the hills of California had been a myth, muttered by a few and scoffed at by many. Even so short a while ago as his own sailing from Boston, the Mother Lode, though generally talked of in the east, was still but half accepted. Yet already an army of the worst and the best of the country were here—men who needed only a rumor to abandon an old way of life and seek a new one in the hope it would be better.

Signs of their presence was plentiful in San Francisco Bay. A forest of sticks jutted skyward over a flotilla of abandoned ships. There were hulks among them, hulls unfit for the sea by the time they breached the Golden Gate. But there were good ships, too. Idly, Dan wondered how many tons of gold would have to come out of the dark hills before the value of these ships—deserted by men and masters alike in the hope of a strike of a few ounces—could be equalled or surpassed. Not that he doubted the Mother Lode would pay all of its accounts when the final reckoning came. Not that he didn't believe no more secure foundation could be found for a new city than the abandoned and rotting timbers of a thousand ships. Unlike most men bred to the sea, there was breadth in Flynn, so that he could understand an epic ashore without belittling its importance because its battles were not fought over deep water.

But he wondered how soon San Fran-

cisco would become a city—how soon it would grow out of its lawlessness and the livid ruthlessness of its birth pangs—how long it would be before order began to shape in the turmoil, and like all cities serving the sea, began to look out through the Golden Gate for the trade which would keep it alive long after its golden days had become an often exaggerated fragment of history.

Trade! Dan Flynn grinned to himself. A sailor's thoughts always turn back to the same beginning—ships and their place in the world. He felt an eagerness rising. Whatever Longworth wanted done with the *Witch,* there were plenty of ships in this harbor whose owners would pay well a master and crew who would sail them back to the east coast again. It would be a hard parting, leaving the *Witch.* But in Boston a man could sign on again for the China trade—and to hell with California!

Looking idly aft, Dan saw Natalie Longworth had stepped back from the rail. He thought for a moment she was going to come forward with something to say to him. But she spun on her heel after a moment, as though thinking better of it, and went down the companionway toward her own cabin. Flynn's attention drifted out over a quarter of a mile of water to where the dirty brig which had stood up to the *Witch* outside the bar was anchored. He could make out her name now—*Sonoma.* He was still looking at her, speculating on the hazardous, bold trade her master was working outside the Gate, when Limey Joe Dreen slid up to his elbow and tipped his head at the other ship.

"That harlot of a hull's been troublin' me ever since we sighted her this afternoon. I ought to have knowed her, but nail me to a cathead if I could add her up, then. I do now."

Dan's interest sharpened.

"That's the *Bittern,* Charleston registry, be damned to her new name and her scabby paint!"

"John Lewes' ship?" Dan nodded.

"Black Jack Lewes, blast his stinking hide!" Dreen agreed. "I did two hundred sixteen days with him once from New York to Calcutta. She had bigger sticks then. But that's her. And I'll lay a good tub of rum against the prettiest wench ashore that Lewes is aboard her, right now. He dropped from sight in the Atlantic after he was freed on that inquiry into the charges he was piratin' the Jamaica ferries. It must have cost him everything but his keelson to buy his way out'n that mess. Where'd be a better place to make a bad loss back quick and no Admiralty or Maritime Commission to trouble about than right here? Eh, Captain?"

Dan Flynn scowled sharply. Jack Lewes was renegade. Clever and fearless and alive with the lawless, conscienceless blood of privateering forebears. Joe Dreen's guess was a close one. He whistled slowly, a long exhalation of breath. Joe Dreen grinned. Dan started to say something, but an imperious, demanding voice stabbed at him. He turned. Natalie Longworth was facing him a pair of yards away across the deck.

"I don't intend to spend another night on this ship while you're her master, Captain Flynn!" she snapped.

"I'm expecting your father any time, Miss," Dan answered her carefully.

Her eyes hardened down and her lips drew back from even teeth.

"Since when does an owner come to the summons of a mere ship-captain? I have been given to understand for six months that you were a hard and fearless man. But I might have known it was all pretense. You're afraid to go ashore after what that pilot promised you this afternoon. You send your mate. Then you stand on deck and look at the stars. Meantime, I'm supposed to stay cooped on your ship, with shops and hotels and restaurants right under my eyes, until my father accidentally finds we have arrived and comes after me! I'll not do it, Captain. I'd sleep on a bench before I'd stay aboard your ship one extra

day. Order me a boat overside. I'm going ashore!"

A hardness came into the thin smile across Flynn's own face.

"It is my hope that by tomorrow, your actions will be of no more concern to me, Miss Longworth," he said savagely. "Until then, you are only a passenger on my ship. I will remind you that the only likely hotels in San Francisco are probably plain flop-houses, and that to get even a bed in one of them, you'd have to bid against miners fresh down from the hills with pockets full of raw gold and nothing on their minds but to buy the quickest and the strongest pleasures the dust can get them. If you can find a shop that doesn't bar its windows and lock up tight at sunset, I'll be surprised. And restaurants! What chef would cook meals for sale in San Francisco restaurants when he can make ten times the money—in soft, red gold, too—cooking in the camps in the hills! Your folly is your own business, but your safety is mine until I hand you over to your father!"

Natalie Longworth's face blanched.

"At sea there was little I could do with your high-handed manner, Captain Flynn," she raged. "You and your precious discipline! You and your sea-law that a master's word is final! I'm sick of it! And we're not at sea, now. I'll make such a fuss that half of San Francisco will come out here unless you put me ashore."

Wearily Dan turned to his bosun. Limey Joe looked up at him quizzically.

"I might find a place, Cap'n," he suggested softly.

Dan shrugged. "If you insist, it is against my advice," he said to the girl. "But I'll have no harbor police or a crowd of curious longshoremen cluttering my decks. Dreen will take you ashore in the longboat. He'll take four men with him. And he'll try to find you quarters. I hope you'll give his judgment more attention than you have mine!"

The girl wheeled and ran back across the deck toward her cabin. Dan spoke quietly to Limey Joe.

"Stick to her. Get her a good place or bring her back. Understand?"

Limey Joe grinned. He flexed his long arms and thick muscles stirred under his blouse.

"Sit easy, Cap'n," he laughed. "I'll pick my four, and there ain't anybody'll touch her with us to hand. But I ought to tell you that if I wasn't wantin' to get ashore powerfully bad, I wouldn't have stuck my neck out like this. I'd rather ferry a gored walrus than that gal!"

"I want to know where you've put her. And I'll need you sober in the morning."

Dreen chuckled. "I just want a look-see at the town. I'll get it afore we find a place that'll suit the miss. Look for me in about an hour."

Dan nodded. Dreen had a boat swung over, mustered his four-man crew, and dropped to the water. The girl came out of her cabin, carrying a portmanteau. A seaman tossed it to those below and steadied the girl at the top of the accommodation ladder. In ten minutes the *Witch* was free of the slim, acrid blight which had made the voyage a hell for her master.

Five minutes later, Roy Bender brought

the cutter alongside and scrambled hurriedly up to the deck. Dan met him at the top of the ladder.

"Longworth's disappeared!" Bender said nervously. "His quarters on Fort Street have been taken over by some other mining outfit—who, I couldn't find out. Nobody knows what's happened to the old man. Nobody seems to care. This is the damndest town I've ever seen. It's got a fever —yellow, spending gold fever. Nothing else counts. And there's something else. I saw Jack Lewes, talking to that barrel-bellied pilot that boarded us outside the bar. It looked like they might be splitting that pouch of minted eagles the girl handed out this afternoon!"

Dan roared up a man with a strong voice and put him on a trumpet to try and hail Dreen back, but the bosun had chosen a brisk set of boys on the oars and the ship's boat was out of earshot, nearly to shore. Jerking his head at Bender to follow him, Dan went aft to his cabin. He didn't want to sit in this roadstead, waiting for a vanished man to reappear. If his owner was lost, then he'd have to find him. And there were some pieces of scattered fact which involved Black Jack Lewes and might also involve Longworth.

Bender seemed pretty well shaken by the absolute lack of order ashore. But he was positive in his identity of the two men he had seen in the tavern and of the fact that they appeared to be dividing a pouch of gold. Dan went on deck and looked anxiously ashore, hoping that Dreen had either heard the signals from the *Witch* or that somebody else had heard them and called them to his attention. For a moment he was on the point of sending out the cutter again, ordering Dreen back. But he changed his mind. Doing so would only bring Natalie Longworth again on board in an even more caustic mood.

He went below again, broke out a bottle of rum, and pushed it across to his mate.

"We'll see what Dreen has to report when he comes aboard," he said slowly. "Then I think we'll make up a party and board the *Sonoma*. Jack Lewes lost his master's ticket after that Jamaica tangle. If he's skippering that tub over there, he's outside the law. And looking into that will give us an excuse to cross over to him."

Bender wrapped himself around a heavy slug of the thick, black rum, and nodded. He talked some more of the town ashore. Dan listened idly, letting his mind run free until such time as the bosun should have got quarters for his charge and returned to the *Witch*. His wait was far shorter than he had expected. Bender hadn't been aboard twenty minutes when a shout of alarm sounded from the deck-watch. Dan jerked up and sprinted out to the maindeck in time to see two hands haul a limp, bedraggled man over the rail. Limey Joe Dreen!

Dreen had a bad cut in the crown of his head and a bullet-torn flesh wound in the muscles of one shoulder. He had obviously swum out from the shore and he was exhausted. Dan bent urgently beside him. Dreen's eyes rolled.

"Got the boys—all four of 'em—" he gasped. "Took the girl. We wasn't ashore two minutes. Right in the open, a hundred yards back of the Embarcadero! Talk about open ports! They thought they got me, too, but I got to water and made a swim for it. Jack Lewes, blast his lights!"

CHAPTER III

MUTINY

FLYNN ordered ruddy-faced Pinky Johnson, ship's medico, hauled from his bunk. He had Dreen carried aft to his own cabin so that Pinky would have room to work on the injured man. These things he did automatically, without either heat of haste. He had learned in the bitter school of his apprenticeship the value of mechanical attention to detail, of clinging to the formality of ship-board routine in the face of any happenstance. It was this

quality in Dan Flynn, more than any other, which has set him cross grain to Natalie Longworth in the first hours she was on the decks of the *Witch*. But it stood him in good stead, now.

This was a time of peace. Sailings to San Francisco were classed as regular merchant voyages. Crewmen drew regular wages, without bonus for risk to life and limb beyond the calling of their trade. Yet here were four of the *Witch's* men dead ashore and her bosun in grave shape. Things like that unsettle the best companies afloat if they are given time to sink in. Flynn knew it. His orders complete to the medico as regarded Dreen's care, Dan wheeled on Roy Bender.

"Muster all hands, Mister Mate!" he snapped. "Call for volunteers. Keep half a watch to man our deck. Turn the rest to in the cutter. Serve out rifles to the deck watch and the small arms in the chest in my cabin as far as they'll go among the cutter crew. Keep all craft off the *Witch*, counter or rail, save our own boat. I'm taking the cutter across for a visit to Captain Jack Lewes!"

Roy Bender grinned widely. There was a heaviness at the corners of the grin which showed his disappointment at being left behind. But there was pleasure on the rest of his face and it spread quickly to the crew. Watching it, Dan Flynn felt a tight, good feeling of well being move through his own muscles. It wasn't for nothing that he always sailed with a strictly New England crew. Yankees were a strange breed. Hurt them and they begged for more. There was no end to it. There was no quitting. Hit and hit back was a creed bred deeply into their blood.

Three minutes after Joe Dreen had been hauled limply over the rail, Dan dropped into the stern sheets of the cutter.

"Shove off!" he barked. "Let fall. Give way together!"

Shamus Donegal, the carpenter, bent his huge shoulders and grunted out the tempo of the stroke for three beats. The cutter settled in the water with the drive of the crew. After Donegal's voice died there was no sound but the creak of leathers in the rowlocks and the hiss of feathered blades as they dipped into water again at the beginning of each new stroke. A white arrow of a wake appeared behind the cutter and Dan hooked his elbows on the gunwhale of the boat, his eyes reaching ahead to the dingy sides of the *Sonoma*.

Half the distance across to the *Sonoma*, Dan picked up the silhouette of a shallow, narrow-beamed little wherry skipping across the water from one of the lower landings of the peninsula of San Francisco toward Black Jack Lewes' floating tramp. The wherry was light and being driven hard. Approaching at a wide angle from the *Witch's* cutter, it would make the Sonoma minutes ahead of the cutter. Dan nodded to himself and grinned thinly. That would be Lewes, himself, coming aboard after his business ashore. Good! If there was talking to be done, a good Irishman wouldn't waste time on tramp crewmen and hired strongbacks. It was Lewes, Dan wanted to see. No one else.

Bearing up on the slowly rocking *Sonoma*, Dan nodded at the man on the tiller and the cutter made a swing to come in alongside the ragged ladder hanging over the old ship's neglected freeboard. Dan eyed the deck above as the remaining yards narrowed down. Lewes had always had a name of playing himself safe, of shipping twice the crew he needed to work his ship. There was a feathering of uneasiness in Flynn and he loosened the gun in its sheath at his back with a sort of unconscious precaution. But the decks of the *Sonoma* were quiet and her lookout didn't hail the cutter until it had nearly lost way and was within a yard of bumping against the blistered planking. Dan ignored the hail and caught at the ladder. He heard Donegal bark at a man in the bow to make the painter on the cutter fast. Then he was on Lewes' deck with his crew piling after him.

Two or three apparently startled hands were frozen where they had been lounging on the decks. From the main companionway a beam of light was streaming and the sound of voices drifted idly up through the passage. Dan ignored the men on deck and plunged into the companionway. It wasn't until he was at the bottom of the ladder and half through the 'tween-decks passage reaching before him—until his whole crew had piled down the companionway in his wake—that he thought of a precaution he had forgotten in his haste. He wheeled and started to order part of his men back onto the deck. But he was too late. The companionway door slammed shut. He heard the weather-dogs driven home to clamp it tight. And at the end of the passage ahead, a man laughed softly.

"Bucko Flynn and twelve men—armed, too! I'd call that 'boarding by force'! You didn't hail, did you, Captain? No, of course not. You've got blood in your eye. A bad thing when a man deals with Jack Lewes! It takes a cool head to board my ship. You've got a reason, of course, Captain Flynn. Make it a good one or you'll have a long time to think up a better one—in my chain locker with the door barred!"

Dan turned back slowly. Donegal, at his shoulder, growled and reached for the heavy pistol bulking at his waist band. Dan snapped his own hand downward, stopping the big carpenter's reach. Thin-bearded, slight, and dressed in a dirty, mismated garb of silk shirt and coat over wrinkled dungarees, Black Jack Lewes leaned insolently against the jamb leading into the main cabin of his ship. It was plain he was prepared and satisfied. Behind him were four or five men of the cut which had boarded the *Witch* outside the bar. They filled the doorway, ready guns in hand. Dan knew that behind other doors leading into the passage and which were now closed, other members of Lewes' crew were waiting.

The party from the *Witch* was boxed. Neatly and completely. Men who had followed him with an eager faith in his judgment. Men as peerless among seamen as the ships of Donald McKay were among the trade-carriers of the world. Dan swore at himself, unaware that he gave the words voice until he saw the satisfaction brighten on Jack Lewes' face. He caught himself short and snapped at the man in front of him.

"I'll have a talk with you, Mister!"

Lewes bowed in exaggerated courtesy. "As long as you want, Captain Flynn, so long as you keep it civil—eh, boys?" He flashed a wink over his shoulder at the men behind him. "About the Longworth people, no doubt, Captain?"

Dan spat out an oath and moved forward as Lewes stepped aside, clearing a way into the cabin.

The captain of the *Sonoma* gestured at one of the chairs pulled up to a scarred, rum-bleached table in the center of the room.

"Sit down, Flynn. I'm going to do the talking. You'll listen. You're sitting there with a God Almighty look in your eyes, thinking I'm a renegade master that stood Board Inquiry and come off second best. You're thinking that me and my ship and every man that's signed with me is a renegade. Go ahead and think it. You're fresh from the east coast and the word's general, there. But this isn't the Atlantic. This is the West. The fag end of the west and the rich end. And Jack Lewes is king on the water, here. Every ship that hits this port drops her hook and the crews go over—looking for gold. Looking for gold, ashore. In the saloons back of the Embarcadero are two hundred captains, drinking themselves to death and holding floozies on their knees. Not men like me. Men like you. Honorable men busted in their tracks.

"They're fools, Flynn. You'll see. You'll have your trouble when your boys hear just how easy it is to hit yellow sand on the creeks. I've had my pick of ships. And

I've had my pick of men. Lads that'd rather level a sight than tilt a rocker. Having Tobe Barrett take the *Sonoma* out whenever a ship's due off the Gate is just one angle. There's others. But I have troubles, too. My boys aren't on sea-legs. I can't make up a first-class deep-water crew. So I've got to hang close till I can grab a few more off new ships. That's where you come in. Know anything about this Longworth that's your owner?"

Tight-lipped, Dan shook his head. Lewes grinned.

"I'll tell you. He's the wealthiest trader in Boston. Made his money trading with the Spanish off Vera Cruz. He hot-footed it across from Vera Cruz to the west coast and come up in a Mexican coaster when he heard of the strike on the American River. He's got him a string of rich claims above Sutter's old place. He's going into mining in first-class style. Rather, he was. I aim to take it over for him. But I've got to have cash to work with. So I picked up his girl, too. He's got agents in Boston. They hired you. I've got a letter from Longworth and another from the girl. Take them to Boston for me and you'll get enough cash from those agents to keep my plans running here until the big pay starts. I can forget this half-penny pilot shakedown I've been working. I can pay the kind of hands I need ashore. Sail on the tide tonight with those letters and meet me back at Vera Cruz, with the cash, Christmas Day and I'll not touch you. That's the bargain."

Flynn stood up.

"Touch me, Lewes," he said quietly, "touch me just once! As for the rest of it, you can go to hell!"

Lewes' face held onto its thin grin. "You could go ashore. You might track down where I'm holding the old man and his clawing kitten. But it'd take your whole crew and more luck than a bucko has coming to take them away from me. You'd get no help from anybody ashore. It's hands off, there, and every man to his own business. And while you were ashore, what the hell you think would happen to your pretty ship? I've wanted the quarterdeck on a McKay tub as bad as any master afloat. Taking yours while you were gone is the easiest way I know of getting one! Be sensible, Flynn. You've got the name of a steady man. Sailing back to Boston with a letter from your owner leaves you in the clear. What's it to you if the old man loses his shirt?"

DAN FLYNN was caught hard. He could feel the strain. Looking about the shabby cabin, a vision of this renegade in command of the *Witch* was blasphemy. His mind began to tick over, catching at an angle here and a flaw there until a plan formed a vague shape in his head. He shrugged his shoulders heavily.

"My boys haven't been ashore," he said. "I doubt I could get them to sail on the tide after less than a watch in port. But I'll not let you have my ship!"

"Ships are wood. If one is lost, another can be built, Flynn," Lewes said. "A man that loves a ship or a woman is a fool. If you're still at anchor at turning tide, I'll take your ship or I'll ram her, or I'll burn her where she lies. Your choice, Bucko!"

Lewes came to his feet then, roared out a command. The companionway doors were loosed from the outside. Dan nodded at his boys. They started up the gangway. He followed, keeping his head bent to avoid the astonished disbelief on their faces. Silently, the men from the *Witch* dropped into their cutter and pulled away from the *Sonoma* without waiting for Dan's command. They rowed silently, putting their anger into their strokes, so that the cutter raced along. Dan bent forward and tapped Donegal on the shoulder.

"Can you hear me, Carpenter?"

"Aye, sir."

"Good! Listen. The boys are armed. When we get on deck, reach Mister Bender and the Doc. Tell them what I'm tell-

ing you. Pass the word along to the men that the *Witch* is to mutiny."

Swiftly, Dan sketched in the rest of his plan. Donegal grinned widely. Moments later he had passed the word over his shoulder to the next thwart. It traveled the length of the cutter. As they came alongside the *Witch,* Dan ran up the ladder and started slowly aft toward his quarters. He heard the crew from the cutter talking hurriedly with the watch on deck. He saw Donegal stop beside Bender, aft of the wheel. Suddenly a rifle banged. Men shouted. Keeping to his part, Dan drew his gun, wheeled, and fired three shots over the body of men rushing him. They had him, then, lifting him with surprising care in spite of the effort at an appearance at violence, and swung him over the rail.

He dropped through a long space, hit the surface of the bay solidly, and went deep. He came up sputtering and shouting and swam to the *Witch's* side to watch the rest of the *Witch's* boats come down, loaded with men, and pull out briskly for the shore. When the last of them were gone, he pulled himself up the ladder to the deck to face the accusing stare of Limey Joe Dreen, who had staggered from his bunk at the unheard of madness of shipmates who would mutiny aboard a Dan Flynn command!

Chapter IV

CHALLENGE ASHORE

DAN had trouble pacifying the crippled bosun. Dreen refused to be quiet until Dan had solemnly sworn the mutiny had been by his order and for the sole purpose of snaring Blackjack Lewes in a trap from which he could not escape. Limey Joe took it hard, even then, but he fell to. Pinky Johnson, looking more barrel-like than ever because of the two pistols he had thrust through his waistband under his coat, was cooler. He went forward into the carpenter's stowage and found the boxy little punt used for painting around the ship's waterline. Dan helped him get it overside. The medico took one thwart. Dan took the other. They sat Dreen on the stern-cap and rowed ashore.

Pinky and Limey Joe Dreen went into the biggest saloon, the Bunged Keg, and sat down to the task of using their eyes and ears while they appeared to be drinking themselves into helplessness. Dan stopped for two quick ones with them. Then he drew his face into a black scowl and started along the street, stopping at every bar to tilt a bottle. On his third stop, he recognized one of Lewes' men in the crowd, watching him alertly.

Good! He wanted the renegade to get the impression the mutiny of his picked crew had badly shaken Daniel Flynn. It was the only possible way to fool Lewes into allowing him the freedom of San Francisco's streets long enough to complete his other tasks. Keeping on, he stopped, also, in one or two mercantile houses which had the appearance of solid ownership. He had a few words with the men behind the counter in each. Turning south at the first corner, he continued, alternating between saloons and stores. And in between stops, he swept the streets and open lots for a place where men might gather unseen. In little over an hour, he came to such a place back of an already abandoned ferry landing on the mudflats east of town. The crew of the *Witch* were silent and well hidden under the hands of Roy Bender and Donegal.

"You have luck with the townsmen, Captain?" the mate asked eagerly as Dan crouched down among his men. Dan shook his head uncertainly.

"I don't know. Lewes' boys have really bossed the decks of this place since they landed. And they've got every roughneck along the bayfront with them, now. It looks like Blackjack wasn't boasting when he claimed he kinged it here. But there is good timber in this town. And

maybe it'll pull with us if we make a start!"

"You find old Longworth—or the girl?" Donegal's heavy voice was expectant. Dan shook his head again.

"No. Nobody seems to know or wants to say where Lewes might be holding them. But I've a hunch. Pinky and the bosun are checking it. There's an old sail loft up toward the Spanish fort. We'll move that way. Give me a ten-minute start. I'll pick up Pinky and Dreen. Then you boys start through the town—together in a knot. Make a lot of noise and come fast. Maybe Lewes'll drop his sails if we crowd him and he sees that mutiny was a fake. Maybe he won't. I tried to get us more guns. But I couldn't. We'll have to do with what we have."

Roy Bender stood up and stretched cramped muscles expectantly.

"We'll do, Captain!" he said.

SWINGING back toward the sprawling, mud-rutted town, Flynn moved at a brisk trot, shouldering his way through miners in jeans and homespun, broadcloth and cowhide. At a corner, he staggered a man in buckskin into the mire of the street. The man jerked out a blistering oath, then caught himself as he saw Dan's face. As Dan lunged on past him, he heard the man call out to his comrades:

"Ai, boys, I smell smoke!"

At the next corner, Dan looked back and saw that three trappers, led by the man he had jostled, were trotting expectantly along behind him, drawn by the promise of trouble in his own purposeful gait. He also saw that a sombre faced man in a shopkeeper's apron had come out of his store and was trotting along with them.

Turning back toward the Embarcadero, Dan dodged into the Bunged Keg. Pinky Johnson and the injured Dreen had given over their pretense at drinking themselves stupid. They each had a gun in hand and were busy lifting weapons from the belts of five men lined up against the bar. Dan judged Lewes had sent the five down to make sure that Pinky and the bosun of the *Witch* weren't playing 'possum and that the two men from the *Witch* hadn't liked so much attention. He pulled up for a moment at Pinky's elbow. The round-bellied doctor turned from his work with a quick grin of pleasure.

"On the nail-head, Captain," he chuckled. "These lads were loose-jawed. Your hunch was right! The old sail-loft for us—!"

Dan nodded. "Let's go!"

Dreen clutched an armload of guns and knives. Flynn shoved on through the Barrel and out the back door. In the open again, he could hear a turmoil further down in the town. He caught Pinky Johnson's arm as they moved.

"The boys!" he guessed. "Keep to shadow, Pinky. But get word to the mate when they get up here that our business is at the sail-loft. See they get there, and fast!"

Johnson nodded and faded into the gloom of darkened buildings. Dan held on down the alley for a hundred feet, then swept out onto the street. Lewes ordered his first shot fired then. It was from far up the street in the direction of the loft. And if it was fired at the captain of the *Witch*, it missed its mark by a wide margin. Across the street, a number of idlers were gathered, staring at the motley troop swinging onto the street at Flynn's heels. A man among them howled in echo to the shot. Dan judged the bullet had found its mark there.

That shot and the injury of an onlooker did something to the street—to all of San Francisco. More merchants, even customers on which they had been waiting, piled into the street. And most of them carried weapons in their hands. This had been the critical part of Dan's whole plan.

He had known that Jack Lewes would have a big force before he tackled big stakes. And regardless of how able the men from the *Witch* might be, they stood

no chance against an army recruited to rule a great harbor and the rich hinterland behind it. Dan had believed from the beginning that this was not his fight. He didn't believe that it was even the Longworth's fight—although their safety and their fortune hung in the balance. Masters raised to the China trade habitually see all things in terms of ships and cargoes and the sailing sea.

Dan believed that a new port in a new land had a pride it ought to fight to hold. This California, with its broad valleys and its gold—this western terminus of a western empire—had the wealth to make a deathless metropolis out of a port of call which could properly serve and shelter the trade ships come to connect it with the rest of the world. He had hoped the brow-beaten men who had thrown their lot with the city of San Francisco and not with the gold fields would back him against the pirates who were scourging the infant sea-trade by which, alone, the town could achieve peace and permanence, growth and glory. Watching the forming cue behind him, hearing the angry mutter of just violence surging up through muddy streets and over the tops of ugly, squatting buildings, his step lightened.

A block from the sail loft, Dan pulled up. From the mouth of another street, a second crowd of men fanned out onto the flats facing the building. In their vanguard were Roy Bender, Donegal and the doctor from the *Witch*. Behind them pressed a mixture of other crewmen and more townsmen. The two parties surged together, eighty or a hundred men.

Almost at the same time, even before Bender could reach the place where Dan stood and they could make plans of attack, Blackjack Lewes sprung a counter move in open admission that strong as he was, he still couldn't face the party drawn up in front of him. On signal and timed almost perfectly, rifles blazed in every opening in the walls of the loft building. That single volley was murderous in its effectiveness. Flynn saw men fall around him. He heard lead driving into flesh and bone with a sound like a parting stay. He stepped over the body of a man whose face was gone, and tried to catch his mate's attention across a dozen yards of space.

He did all this before he realized he had been hit, too. The realization came without hurt. He saw the inner half of the square white cuff of his shirt flood red. He was aware his left arm hung heavily from his shoulder. He could feel more blood loose on his chest. And an enervating languor was sliding through nerves which had been taut and electric since the moment he had faced Jack Lewes aboard the scabby *Sonoma* and listened to the man's fantastic proposal that the *Witch* sail for Boston with a ransom demand.

He took another step. Bender reached him just as he staggered and held him upright.

"Easy, sir!" Bender grunted. "Easy, now. That volley was a cover. They're breaking out of the loft. Four bunches of 'em. Two are headed for the beach. The other two are split up and going toward the hills up the peninsula. We'll cut 'em off from the beach and the water of the bay."

DAN fought stiffness back into his legs. "The girl—" he grunted. "You see the girl?"

Hazy as his vision was becoming, Flynn could see the astonishment cross his mate's face.

"Her—?" Bender choked out. "Why she's with one bunch heading toward the hills. I saw her face. But I think Jack Lewes himself is heading the party toward the beach. And there isn't a man aboard your ship out there on the bay!"

Dan didn't know why Natalie Longworth seemed so important, now. Possibly there was no reason. He wasn't worrying about her father. Arrogant, biting, and unreasonable though she had been, something made him flinch at the thought of

the girl being carried into the brush of the peninsula highlands by men like the dogs which ran to Jack Lewes' heels. He knew better than Bender what would happen if part of Lewes' crew got onto the waters of the bay. He was certain, where Bender was only guessing, that they'd take the *Witch*. They'd take her out through the gate and likely try to pick up what was left of the other parties at some cove down the coast. He wanted to order the whole company milling around him to throw up a cordon along the water. But the girl who had stood between him and full enjoyment of his first clipper command now prevented him from saving the one love of his life—his ship!

"Get the girl!" he grunted into Bender's face. "Take every man and get her quick before they can hide in the brush!" As an afterthought, he added, "Get the old man, too. I'll have to wait, here."

Bender turned away, stubborn protest on his face. But he swung ably into the mixed crowd, splitting it into parties and sending them racing out on tangents toward the renegades driving toward the hills. Pinky Johnson ran heavily up to Dan, pushed him down, and jerked his shirt open. Tilting his head down, Dan saw the bullet had not made a bad wound, but that it must have hit a nerve center from the way the flesh was knotted up around the hole. That, too, accounted for the slackness which had come over him. He said something about it to Pinky. The medico gave an extra pull to the wadding bandage he had fastened and snapped an answer.

"You've got a hole in you, Captain. No man walks around with a hole in him. You wait here till I've got a man to help me carry you back to town!"

Pinky waddled off in the track of the rest of the company, bellowing for someone to wait for him. Gun-flashes began to wink on the slopes of the rises back from the water. Once Dan heard Bender's great voice bellow an order, and after that, the flashes winked more often. Lying as he was on the ground within a quarter of a mile of the bayshore, Dan could see the hulks of the abandoned ships lying inshore. And out beyond them, riding between the gloom of the water and the sky, the trim, proud lines of the *Witch*. Dan stared at his ship as long as he could stand it, then drew himself shakily to his feet. He reeled drunkenly for half a dozen steps, then he began to steady.

A rod from the shore, a man rose out of the shadows to face him. Dan pulled up sharply. The man moved forward, grunted and blew out a breath of relief.

"Skipper!" I've been prowling for a stray pole-cat or two—me and a couple of the boys. I come near handin' you a ticket!"

Dan recognized the trapper he had accidentally jostled into the mud, back in town. A question formed on his lips, but the man answered it before it was spoken.

"Such a damned pack followin' them varmints a man ain't got a chance to track. Figgered huntin' would be better down here. Couple boats left ashore. Some of the others might come along and try to make it out to a ship or something!"

Dan grabbed the man's shoulder. "How many of you down here?"

"Six of us'n in leather," the mountain man answered. "Maybe six or eight more that got split off the main party."

"Get 'em, get them together, down at the boats! Hurry!"

DAN shoved on down through marshy ground to the fringe of the bar. Two dories lay drawn up on the mud. Dan found oars were inboard on them. He bent down to the level of the water and stared out toward the *Witch*. Lewes men were aboard her, now. Her stern was swinging free. They had apparently cut the aft lines. He could hear the capstan clanking as they walked her forward against her bow anchor. And he could see men climbing out along the yards. He went back to the boats and found a net and

a long float-line in the bottom of one. He dumped the net out and made the two ends of the line fast to the stem-pieces of the two craft. A moment later the trapper was back with his fellows. Dan counted them. With himself, fourteen men.

"How many went out to the ship?"

"How many dogs?" the trapper asked.

"Two boats, Skipper."

Dan nodded. "Six of you in this boat. Eight with me. Row like you're crazy. We've got to get this line stretched across ahead of that ship before she makes way!"

The men piled into the boats, pushing them off clumsily. A crabbed oar caught a gallon of water on the first stroke and kicked it into Dan's face where he sat in the stern-sheets. A wry grin crossed his face when he thought of the sharp, perfectly timed boat crew he had aboard the *Witch*—men who could *out oars, back, give way,* and *toss* without a flaw in teamwork. Then he turned his mind to the wild job ahead of him. A tough job for seasoned deckmen. A fantastic attempt with a crew of shopkeepers, miners, and leather men. He thought about the two boats which had gone out to the *Witch.*

Two boats might mean better than twenty men. It might mean considerably less than twenty. This was one time he hoped the *Witch* was making for the sea shorthanded.

CHAPTER V

THE "WITCH" AND THE WOMAN

TRAILING a wake as crooked as a dog's hind leg and rocking with the clumsiness of their crews, the two dories labored across the bay, angling toward a place where Dan hoped to meet the already moving *Witch* just short of her passage through the headlands of the Golden Gate. For a while he was about to order his men to give over. He didn't see any hope of making it. Then, as will sometimes happen in a boat with strange oar-mates, one boat and then the other fell into a cadence of stroke and both craft gained way.

Even then, it was a close race. A cream of foam was boiling under the *Witch's* forefoot when Dan stopped the second dory and took his own across the bows of the oncoming ship. He was just able to get the line linking the two small boats spread so that the *Witch* would hit its approximate center. As the cutwater of the ship hit the line and jerked the two little boats forward, Dan looked back toward the shore. Gun-flashes and the sound of shots had died out against the hills. The renegades had, he supposed, managed to get deep into the ravines under cover of dark. Bender would have slow business.

The *Witch* pushed on against the line binding Dan's boats to each other. And as she pushed, she swung them both back in an arc which would bring them alongside her—if Dan had figured the length of his line right. For a moment he was afraid they would fall astern of her. Then,

almost at the same instant that the careless lookout aboard the *Witch* sighted them and gave alarm, the dories bumped her sides abreast her shrouds. The need for secrecy gone, Dan stood up in his boat and roared a command he hoped would be audible in the other craft on the far side of the *Witch:*

"Grab those lines and up you go!"

Reaching behind him, he jerked his pistol clear and leaped up. He caught the dead-eye footing a shroud with his bad arm, bringing the strain of his weight onto his wounded shoulder. He hung for an instant in mortal sickness, afraid he would drop back into the dory. Then he swung

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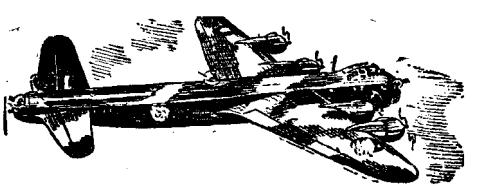
ON THE BEAM

Robert W. Nealey



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July 10th SHORT STORIES out June 25th

his other hand over, the pistol trailing on its trigger-loop from his thumb, regripped, and hauled himself up. A man's face popped over the rail as he rose even with it. He lashed upward with the dangling barrel of his gun and broke bone behind the face.

Then he was over the rail and onto the deck. Across the deck, he saw a leather man vault up onto the planking from the other dory. A seaman with a rifle raised behind the water-butt. He centered the man with a swinging shot, and wheeled toward the quarterdeck. Another seaman fired at him from the side of the main companionway. He ignored the man, only vaguely aware that a shot from behind him made the tally for him. His eyes were fastened on a man standing just free of the wheel on the quarterdeck. Jack Lewes!

Lewes was standing on wide planted legs, a leveled pistol in either hand and a wide, welcoming grin across his face. As Dan completed his turn and started forward, Lewes fired. First one gun, then the other, unhurriedly and with care. Sensing the coming shock, Dan slewed a little to one side. One of the two slugs ripped through the sleeve of his jacket and sang angrily against good planking, far down the deck. The second hit him somewhere in the center of his body. It brought a strong flash of pain and a great flare of red fire in front of his eyes. The bay, the ship, the night—all faded behind that red screen. But in its center, like a silhouette before an inferno, Dan could see Jack Lewes standing behind his guns.

It was an effort which brought sweat to his face and made his ears drum unsupportably, but Dan got his own weapon up and saw its sights sit down on the spraddle-legged silhouette before him. Lewes fired each of his pieces once more after the hammer of Dan's weapon fell. But the man was dead on his feet and he made no more lasting marks with these last efforts than a pair of scored planks in the decking a yard from his feet.

DAN didn't watch the man fall. Turning back amidships, he saw the nameless trapper exultantly stripping the last of Lewes' men of their weapons. The thought crossed him that the ship was still underway. Waving his gun drunkenly, he hoarsely shouted the necessary commands. Some of the disarmed renegade crew moved at the orders, slackening braces and spilling wind from the set sails. Dan started slowly aft toward his cabin. A great relief on him. But a sharp command from the near rail punctured it like the thrust of a knife.

"Stand easy, mates!"

With an effort, Dan turned. Head after head appeared along the rail beside the first. Dan recognized the challenging voice. Roy Bender! And he recognized the heads—the men who leaped on over onto the deck. His crew—all of them. But one puzzled him for an instant. A small, white-faced woman's head with a tangled, flying mass of hair and muddy, rigging-fouled hands. This woman and Bender saw Dan at the same time. Desperation eased from the woman's face and Roy Bender's voice rocked the deck.

"Captain Flynn!"

The woman came clumsily on over the side. Dan saw she was near exhaustion, that her skirts were plastered with mud, that a fury had been riding her. But he couldn't bring himself to believe this was Natalie Longworth until she seized his bad arm and shook him with all the force of her slight frame.

"You fool!" she sobbed—and he knew her then. "You stubborn, hide-bound, glorious fool! Sending your seamen after me and risking your ship—your love—to two little boats and a dozen men who've never seen a deck before! You nearly lost the *Witch!*"

Stupidly Dan stared at her, not even aware of the hurt in his shoulder. He was seeing a woman he had never known before. There was richness in her voice. A soft and powerful way of voicing the name

of his ship which struck home to him. Unaccountably, unbelievably, the *Witch* had another lover—in the acrid daughter of her owner. He shook his head dazedly. Roy Bender grinned.

"Give me a gale on the bows and ice on the quarter off the Horn, Captain," he said ruefully, "afore you put me where Miss Longworth gives orders again. She had near clawed herself away from those dogs in the hills by the time we reached her. And she drove us like I've never been drove till we had us boats and were on the water to keep Jack Lewes from making the Gate with our ship. If you hadn't beaten us, she'd have cleared these decks single-handed. There's salt in her blood—from 'way back!"

It was hard for Dan to understand. But he learned there was more than salt in Natalie's blood. There was a gentleness. And he came to know that the spoiled, arrogant haughtiness he had detested was no more than a wicked and tantalizing humor which spiced her whole nature. He came to see, as Pinky Johnson brought him around from his wounds in passing days, that the fault of the voyage out had been with him, in his stiffness and in the fact that he did not know a good woman needs the same understanding of her vagaries as a tall ship.

ON the twelfth of June, little more than sixty days after her arrival, the *Sea Witch* lay off the Embarcadero at the foot of Fort Street. Across her counter, where a proud ship wears the name of her home port, *Boston* had been chipped off. Over the chipping, laid in with good gilt, was lettered *San Francisco.* She rode deeply, her plimsoll line awash with a cargo of fur, grain, hides, and a little gold. Produce of the bawdy new port. Townsmen had been aboard, boasting of the organization of a volunteer government and the end of violence.

They brought the real thanks of honest and grateful men. Dan Flynn had

had enough of these things. The tide was turning and he was restless. He watched a cutter coming toward him. Cyrus Longworth with his last orders. Twenty minutes and he'd be standing toward the Golden Gate—and the China Sea.

But Longworth was not alone. Natalie was with him. And a small, roundish man from the Spanish lands back of the port. Longworth was expansive. Natalie's eyes were alive with some new deviltry. Her father handed an envelope to Dan. Dan broke the seal, staring at the papers within. They were a full and clear conveyance of title and possession to the *Sea Witch* from Cyrus Longworth to one Captain Daniel Flynn.

NATALIE laughed softly. "My dowry Dan," she said. "And we've brought Father Augustin aboard to bind the bargain tight before you can back out. Father likes San Francisco. I don't. Where the *Witch* goes, I go too!"

Dan turned to the smiling priest.

"Tell me, Father, in the ceremony you read, do you use the words 'love, cherish, and *obey*'?"

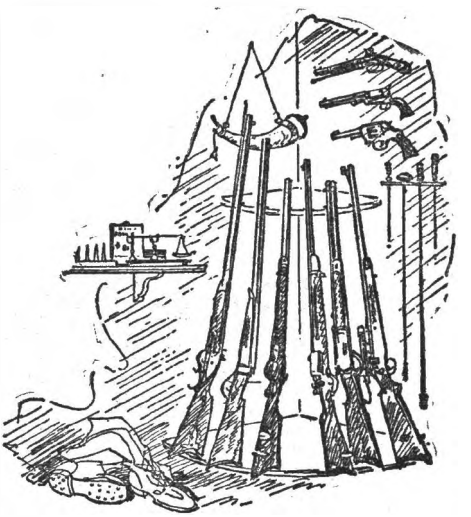
The padre nodded. "It is a fit pledge from a woman to a man."

Dan Flynn's grin widened. He reached his arms out for Natalie.

"You may begin, Father. The tide is turning, fast." He bent his head to Natalie's ear. "*Obey*. You'll have to swear to that. I think this time you'll make a shipmate a man can live with!"

A teasing, mock humility was in the girl's eyes.

"I can try, Cap'n. But I don't know. . . ."



THE SHOOTER'S CORNER

Conducted by
PETE KUHLHOFF

Gun Racket

WELL, folks, it looks very much like the used gun business in many cases had degenerated into an outright racket.

Remember the retail price of early 1942 was set for the highest price for which a new gun could be sold. Even at that time there were not many new guns on the market and inasmuch as it is pretty hard to set a price on used equipment many of the used gun dealers went haywire.

I have actually seen good used guns price tagged at twice the list price. You might say it's the old gag of "supply and demand." True, but there is such a thing as carrying it too far. For instance, Krags have been sold (as issued) for as high as 45 or 50 dollars. These guns were origi-

nally sold by the War Department for from $1.50 to $5.00—so it just "ain't" right!

Of course a Krag action on which a fine custom job has been done is worth a hundred or perhaps more bucks. But that's something else again.

For the life of me I can't see why a gun can be so important in a civilian's existence as to warrant the fattening of the purse of these vulture dealers. If you must go hunting or do a little pest shooting, why not borrow a gun from a friend, or hook up with your local shooting club and take advantage of the training program sponsored by the National Rifle Association, Washington, D. C. This program trains *qualified men* in the use of small arms.

Also write to O. F. Mossberg and Sons, Inc., New Haven, Conn., for a copy of "The Guidebook to Rifle Marksmanship," and the N.R.A. booklet on how to organize and conduct a shooting club.

BACK on the gun market are the foreign klucks mostly made of pot metal, but with the general appearance of models of our own good American hand-guns.

In the early 1920's the market was flooded with these, made to sell (not to shoot) so-called guns. Some of these pistols looked good but were found to be absolutely unsafe to use with modern ammunition.

About 1930, these "flooseys" started disappearing from the market due to pressure brought about by various agencies—but now with the severe shortage of guns, they are being dragged out of storage and sold to an unsuspecting public.

Some of these guns are marked "Smith and Wesson .38 Special" on the barrel, and with a small "for" in front, and a tiny "ctg." following. And somewhere on the gun you will find a small "made in Spain" or perhaps just "Spain." Brother, take my advice and have nothing to do with this junk.

After the Axis has been set back on its "axis" we will have plenty of good American sporting arms to shoot. So, let's buy more War Stamps and Bonds and help get this nasty business over with.

Plinker Tinker

IF YOU want to refinish (reblue) a gun with a minimum of equipment and effort, try this one.

Clean and polish the entire surface to

be reblued. Clean the bore of the gun and protect it with a thin coat of Rig or other good gun grease. Plug bore tightly with hard wood of sufficient length for use as handles.

You need a tray or tank large enough to submerge in water the part to be blued.

In most bluing processes, complete degreasing is essential. The easiest way to do this is to boil the part in water and washing soda. Next, boil part in clean water to remove adhering alkali. Immediate wetting of the parts by water indicates that degreasing is complete.

From this moment onward, the degreased parts must not be touched with the naked hands. Use clean cotton rags or cotton gloves.

Using clean wire hooks, submerge part in clean boiling water until heated completely. Raise from water and apply (using clean cotton swab on a clean stick) a 2 percent sal ammoniac solution. Paint on just enough sal ammoniac to cover the metal, which will dry immediately. Submerge and boil for about five minutes. Continue this process until the desired color is obtained, usually about five or six passes.

Now boil in a washing soda solution, and then in clean water.

After parts are dry, cover with vaseline and evaporate off at about 150 degrees C.

On my desk I have an old Civil War cap and ball revolver reblued by this method. It compares favorably with a factory job.

Recently I saw a small-bore barrel which was completely ruined by driving out a stuck cleaning patch. Apparently a patch much too large was forced into the barrel with a cleaning rod, which promptly stuck. Not being able to push or pull the rod out, this bright young fellow proceeded to drive it out with a hammer. The plug end of the cleaning rod came into contact with the bore and almost completely removed one land of the rifling.

So, if you ever get a patch stuck (which shouldn't happen) fill the bore with light oil and let stand for an hour or so. Pour the oil out, turn the gun upside down and pour the oil into the other end and let stand another hour. Pour oil out and nine times out of ten you can push the patch on through the bore.

If it refuses to budge, remove stock or fore-end and heat the barrel at the point where the patch is stuck over a gas or oil burner. Be sure and take it easy so the blueing will not be effected. It doesn't take much heat—two or three minutes will generally do the job. The heat slightly expands the barrel and chars the patch, and it can then be easily pushed out.

It's getting late, so I'll see you next issue.

25

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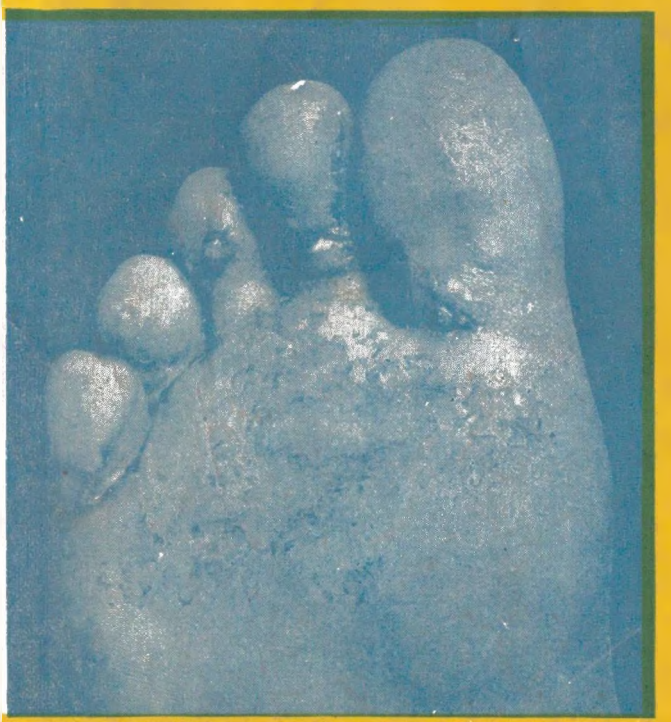
FOOT ITCH
ATHLETE'S FOOT



WHY TAKE CHANCES?

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 destroy the germ, whereas, upon contact, laboratory tests show that H. F. will kill the germ Tinea Trichophyton within 15 seconds.

H. F. was developed solely for the purpose of relieving Athlete's foot. It is a liquid that penetrates and dries quickly. You just paint the affected parts. H. F. gently peels the skin, which enables it to get to parasites which exist under the outer cuticle.

ITCHING OFTEN RELIEVED QUICKLY

As soon as you apply H. F. you may find that the itching is relieved. You should paint the infected part with H. F. every night and morning until your feet are better. Usually this takes from three to ten days.

H. F. should leave the skin soft and smooth. You may marvel at the quick way it brings you relief. It costs you nothing to try, so if you are troubled with Athlete's Foot why wait a day longer?

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.

PAY NOTHING TILL RELIEVED

Send Coupon

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 both contagious and infectious; it may go to your hands or even to the under arm or crotch of the legs.

GORE PRODUCTS, Inc. N. S. F.
801 Perdido St., New Orleans, La.

Please send me immediately a bottle of H. F. for foot trouble 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.....