"Hashknife Keeps a Faith"

A long novelette

W. C. TUTTLE

Short Stories

March 25th

Twice A Month

25c

They learned what danger smelled like

"All Blood Is Red"

by

JACKSON V. SCHOLZ

JAMES B. HENDRYX

—

EDWARD DALY

—

H. BEDFORD-JONES

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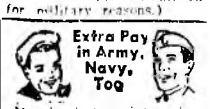

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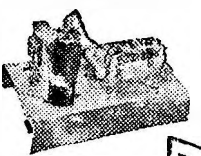

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Short

Every author's finest and

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SHORT STORIES issued semi-monthly by SHORT STORIES, Inc., 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York City 20, N. Y., and entered as second class matter November 24, 1937, at the post office at New York, N. Y., under the act of March 3, 1879. YEARLY SUBSCRIPTION PRICE in the United States, American Possessions, Mexico and South America, $5.00 per year; to Canada, $6.50; and to all other countries, $6.60. Price payable in advance. March 25, 1944. Vol. CLXXXVI, No. 6. Whole Number 918.

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BIGGEST AND BEST—TWICE A MONTH

Stories

latest stories—no reprints

MARCH 25th, 1944

COVER—OREN R. WAGGENER

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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Pin-up picture for the man who "can't afford" to buy an extra War Bond!

YOU'VE HEARD PEOPLE SAY: "I can't afford to buy an extra War Bond." Perhaps you've said it yourself . . . without realizing what a ridiculous thing it is to say to men who are dying.

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Sounds like more than you "can afford?" Well, young soldiers can't afford to die, either . . . yet they do it when called upon. So is it too much to ask of us that we invest more of our money in War Bonds . . . the best investment in the world today? Is that too much to ask?

Let's all BACK THE ATTACK

WE BOUGHT EXTRA WAR BONDS 4TH WAR LOAN

BY THE PUBLISHER OF THIS MAGAZINE

This is an official U. S. Treasury advertisement—prepared under auspices of Treasury Department and War Advertising Council

The Story Tellers' Circle

Beachcomber, Cum Laude

THE Commonwealth of Pennsylvania is a long way from the South Seas. But Jackson V. Scholz, who now calls the Quaker State home, has his own recollections of that exotic spot. Most of us owe any South Seas background we may have to the movies, but the author of "All Blood Is Red" has been there and confesses he has a strong interest in that area.

Here's the way it happened, Jack Scholz reveals:

I don't believe the South Seas would interest me so much if I hadn't come within an ace of graduating cum laude as a beachcomber. It isn't a hard thing to master for a person with the proper qualifications, and I got away to a head start with the firm conviction I possessed the gift. I went to Honolulu to confirm it. And how right I was!

I'd been there three times previously, but only for a month each time, not long enough to make the test. My fourth trip did the business. I developed early symptoms by engaging passages to come home, then canceling my reservations. This proved that I had passed the malihini stage, and was forging toward the coveted goal of kamaaina. I didn't make it, quite. Some remnant of will power must have intervened. I finally made a boat. If I'd missed that one, I'm sure I'd still be out there eating fish and poi from cocoanut shells.

The Hawaiian Islands, I understand, cannot be technically considered South Sea stuff, but I did get farther south than that—New Zealand. I spent a short time in the Fijis, which, unless someone's been kidding me, are reasonably typical of many of the islands in those parts. The men there, incidentally, have thick, bushy, kinky hair. They dye it red. Don't ask me why.

Jackson V. Scholtz.

Vast, Virgin and Varied

WE have had quite a few Edward Daly stories in SHORT STORIES, and in them we had been conscious of the feel of the East. As in "Before the Monsoon" in this issue for instance.

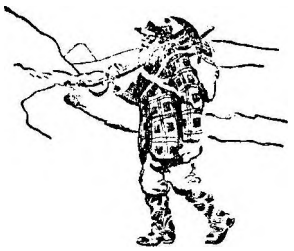
The following letter from Daly explains a lot of this; they get around, the English, and as Daly says, after the war a lot of young men from this country also will be ranging far afield:

When I was a kid my father was a British Army officer. With him, when I was three years old, I went to India for the first time. India is a wonderful place for kids. There is no great emphasis on rigid schooling because of the climate; there is color and pageantry and the native servants set no great store by unnecessary bathing. Mother didn't exactly concur but when she wasn't around, I washed when it was essential and not then if I could get away with it.

Years later I was back in India, serving with the R.A.F. I spent some years in Egypt and Irak and have a working familiarity with most of the Near East. I came to the United States six years ago and have been granted citizenship. My family is in England. Right now, they're fairly static in Birmingham, but for a while Hitler's bombers seemed to give them individual attention when they moved rapidly and often. My brother bombs Germany frequently. My grandmother is eighty years old. She has Hitler's, Togo's and Mussolini's pictures hanging in the sitting room. All face the wall. Opposite them are the big three of our side, right face forward. On last reports, she had President Roosevelt done in colors.

I liked the Orient, well enough to intend going back there when this war is over, there will be prodigal opportunity for those who venture for it. Practically every country in Asia needs everything, from railroads to handkerchiefs. The field for honest men is vast, virgin, varied as the earth. Young Americans, with enthusiasm, with a craft, with the ability to guide and teach will be needed by the thousand and for a hundred years.

Edward Daly.



Hendryxiana

THERE were some hectic moments around the office of SHORT STORIES before this issue went to press. The second instalment of the Hendryx serial hadn't showed up. Hendryx wrote that Mrs. Hendryx had flu and he couldn't get another typist, and he'd send it as soon as he could. Well, it didn't look as if that was going to be soon enough to keep the printer's deadline, and we did some hearty "supposing" around the shop. Suppose the manuscript just didn't come in time, could we write the instalment here? After all, we had a very complete outline of the story. Suppose we did write the story and then the real Hendryx came in, could we copy edit it in time? Hairs grew gray dispositions a bit ragged, and then the manuscript arrived. Well, you turn to page 78 and read it. See what you think any city-dwelling editor could have done with the part about Jack Gorman's three-hundred pound wife who was so good at trompin' furs, and the ninety-pound Siwash who "couldn't tromp a weasel pelt so it would stay flat." Would *we* have been able to bring in that bit about at least one chechako becoming sourdough even before he'd seen the ice go out of the Yukon? We might have been able to follow the outline of the plot, but imagine us tackling the description of the sourdoughs, for instance: Bettles who'd been in the North ever since the mountains were no bigger than igloos; Camillo Bill, which he's got more claims than any man ort to; Swiftwater Bill who owned the only genuyine bald-faced shirt in Dawson; Porcupine Jack whose nickname didn't come from any quills he happened to have but from his faith in the Porcupine River country, not to mention MacShane who once staked a claim at the North Pole and panned out nothin' but codfish.

Nope, we think it's a good thing the Hendryx original manuscript turned up—even if late.

Less Paper, But No Fewer Stories

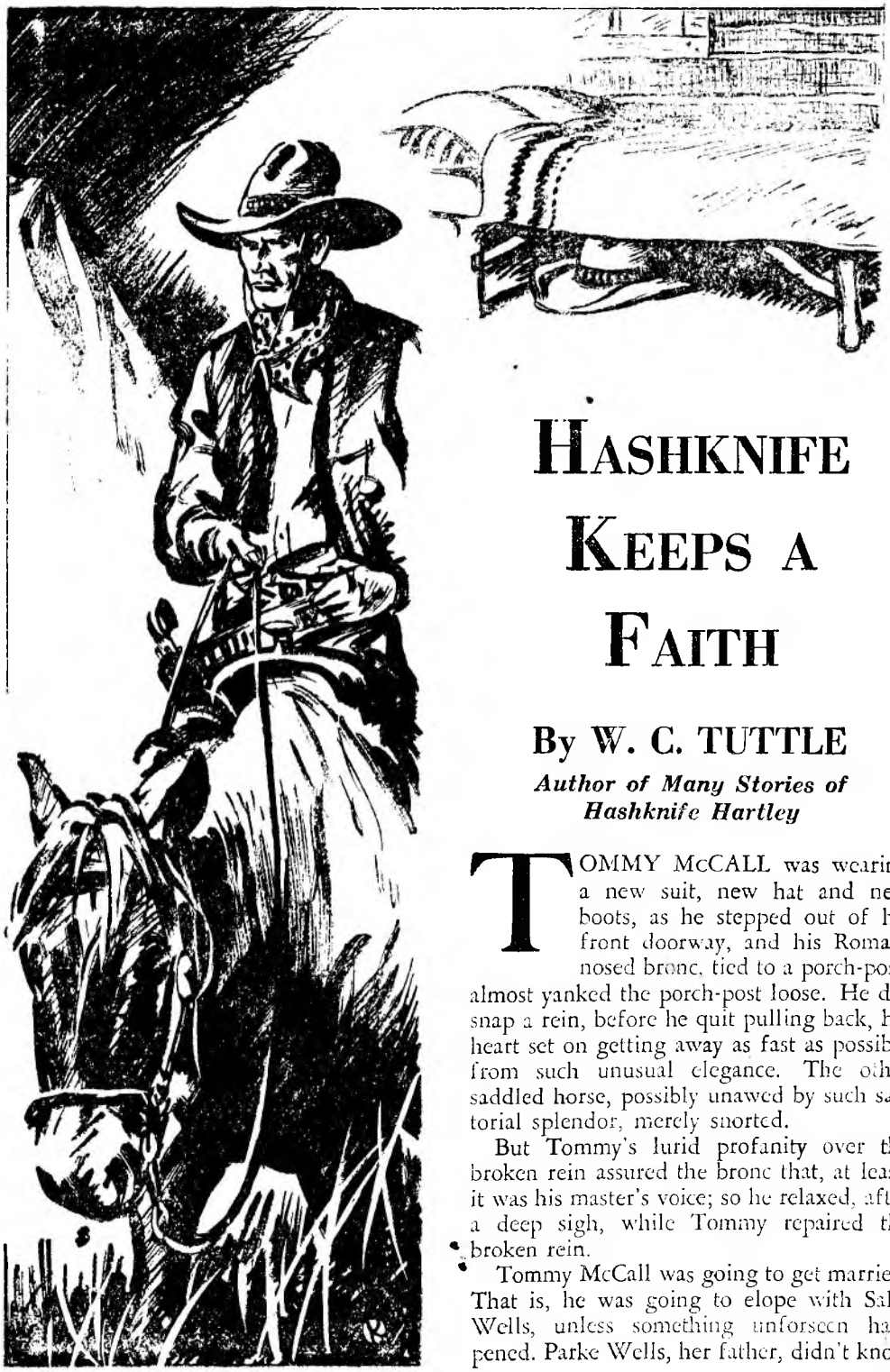
SHORT STORIES, in common with all other publications, is using less paper these days to conform to government order about paper conservation during the war, but we have adjusted our type size so that you are getting as much reading matter as ever—and it's of the best as always.

Ladies on Stamps

NOT long ago on our Curioddities page Irwin Weill let himself announce that only four women had had their portraits on United States postage stamps. That was a mistake, definitely. Never make a statement that a stamp collector can challenge. One of our correspondents wrote us that there were ten million stamp collectors in the United States; we thought it was more, judging from our mail. Anyway, even they can't all agree as to the actual number, but the nines seem to have it—Martha Washington, Pocahontas, Susan B. Anthony, Louisa M. Alcott, Whistler's mother, Frances Willard, Jane Adams, Queen Isabella, Virginia Dare. And even that doesn't mention the Statue of Liberty.

We very much appreciate the interest aroused by our miscalculation and shall try to be more accurate in the future.

Incidentally, it seems to us the stamp collectors must also be away ahead in information on the news these days. For very few people in this country, we imagine, knew as much about them as the collectors when names such as Gilbert and Ellice Islands, Solomon Islands, Andaman Islands, Madagascar, Malta, New Guinea, Borneo, North Borneo and so forth began to appear in military communiques.



HASHKNIFE KEEPS A FAITH

By W. C. TUTTLE

Author of Many Stories of Hashknife Hartley

TOMMY McCALL was wearing a new suit, new hat and new boots, as he stepped out of his front doorway, and his Roman-nosed bronc, tied to a porch-post, almost yanked the porch-post loose. He did snap a rein, before he quit pulling back, his heart set on getting away as fast as possible from such unusual elegance. The other saddled horse, possibly unawed by such sartorial splendor, merely snorted.

But Tommy's lurid profanity over the broken rein assured the bronc that, at least, it was his master's voice; so he relaxed, after a deep sigh, while Tommy repaired the broken rein.

Tommy McCall was going to get married. That is, he was going to elope with Sally Wells, unless something unforseen happened. Parke Wells, her father, didn't know

it. Few things ever happened in San Pablo Valley that Parke Wells didn't know ahead of time. And he was just the sort of a person to spoil a romance, and probably inoculate the bridegroom-to-be with a charge of buckshot.

Parke Wells didn't like Tommy McCall. At least, he didn't like him well enough to nod approval of their marriage. Tommy was all right. He was young, ambitious, owned his own little spread, and was doing all right, but Parke Wells, with all his money and influence, had more ambitious plans for Sally.

Sally also had a mind of her own. She loved Tommy, and their plans were all laid. It was Saturday night, and Parke Wells, together with all his men from the Roman Seven ranch, would be in Encinitas. Possibly Sing Low, the old Chinese cook, would be there, but Sing was *mucho amigo* to Tommy. Sally's room was off a balcony overlooking the big patio.

Tommy was to stake-out the two horses back of the wall, climb over, use a ladder, which was always in the patio, and climb to the balcony. He would help her down the ladder, over the patio wall, and then they would take a four-hour ride to Saguero Wells, where they would wake up a friendly justice of the peace—and that would be that.

Leading his extra horse, Tommy circled Encinitas and headed for the Roman Seven cutting across the hills to avoid meeting anyone on the road. Coming up to the ranch from the rear, he tied the two horses and made his way over the patio wall. All was serene.

Range Troubles Seemed a Magnet to Hashknife and Sleepy. Anything That Smacked of Trouble, Hashknife Regarded as a Challenge

He found the ladder quickly and made his way up to the balcony. Lack of light in Sally's room caused him to pause and consider. He had seen a light from a window on the main room. He tapped lightly on one of her windows, but received no response. There was no moon, and the starlight was not too bright. His watch indicated nearly nine o'clock, which was the time decided upon. There was not a sound. Tommy waited impatiently. Suddenly a door banged open and he heard Sing Low's voice yelling:

"He'p! He'p! Mu'dah! Mu'dah! Come quick! He'p! Mu'dah! O-o-o-oh!"

Tommy slid quickly over the railing. Sing's voice would wake up anybody within a mile, it seemed. He was halfway down the ladder, when Sing ran into the patio, still yelling. He saw Tommy, silhouetted against the sky, and yelled:

"Yo' kill him! O-o-o-o-oh, you killed him!"

Tommy's foot slipped and he came down into the patio with a crash, but leaped to his feet and raced for the patio wall, with Sing continuing to scream accusations and imprecations at him. Of course, Tommy had no idea what it was all about, but he did feel that the Roman Seven was no place for a cowboy Romeo just now. He untied his horses, leaped into his saddle and headed across the hills. When several miles away from the ranch he stopped to consider, and there, for the first time, he realized that he had no hat. And only a few hours ago he had proudly punched his initials into the sweat-band of that new sombrero.

"Well," he said ruefully to himself, "the worst they can know is that I was in their danged old patio—if that's any satisfaction."

He rode back close to town, where he left his extra horse, and then went into town. There was a big crowd on the streets, which was usual on Saturday night. He found his special friend, Harold Buckhalter Sneed, deputy sheriff, who drew him aside. Buck, as he was known, queried Tommy, knowing all about the proposed elopement; but Tommy wasn't saying much. He merely told Buck that something had caused a hitch in the plans, and asked Buck to have a drink.

Buck Sneed was about forty, would weigh not much over a hundred pounds, and was as bow-legged as a croquet-wicket. They found Mort Kane, foreman of the Roman Seven, drinking with Bill Rombeau, owner of the WHR spread. Kane eyed Tommy's raiment and said, "Where's the dance, Tommy?"

"I'm still a-lookin' for it," replied Tommy.

Some of the men at the bar were discussing a new strike at the Golden Streak mine, about ten miles from Encinitas, belonging to Parke Wells. A man came in and stopped at the bar for a drink. He was well dressed, rather young, but with a dissipated face and in need of a hair-cut.

"Looks like Dave Marsh was on a bender again," whispered Buck.

Tommy said, "Yeah," and turned back.

Dave Marsh was Parke Wells' son-in-law and worked in the courthouse as County Recorder. Sally disliked Dave so much that she rarely went to her sister's house. While they were drinking Michael "Doc" Lorimer, the sheriff came in, shoved his way to the bar, and said to Buck:

"A couple strangers just rode in, Buck—bringin' in the body of Tony Montez."

Buck's jaw dropped for a moment." Tony Montez? Why—yuh mean—"

"Dead as a door-knob—shot."

"What was that?" asked Mort Kane, who had heard some of it. Tony was one of his outfit.

"Somebody killed Tony Montez, Mort," the big sheriff said quietly. "Two strange punchers, ridin' in from Saguero Wells, found him in the road. The body is down at the office, waitin' for Doc Neal to look at it."

"Where on earth did this happen?" asked Kane.

"It must have happened near where the road forks to the Roman Seven, accordin' to their description. He's been shot twice in the head."

THEY hurried down to the sheriff's office, where the two strangers were waiting. The body of the dead rider was stretched out on a cot. One of the cowboys was several inches over six feet in height, lithe and muscular. His face was long, with high cheek-bones, a generous nose and a wide, thin-lipped mouth. A lock of his neutral-colored hair almost bisected his right eyebrow, and a pair of level gray eyes looked

over the men as they came in. The other cowboy was shorter, broad of shoulder and slightly bowed of leg. His face was blocky, lined with grin-wrinkles, and his blue eyes seemed to look with amazement at everybody.

The men crowded in, looking at the body. The sheriff said:

"These two men found him. The names are Hartley and Stevens, but I don't know which is which."

The tall one smiled lazily, "Mine is Hartley," he said quietly. "That makes my pardner's name Stevens."

"Yuh found him out near the forks, Hartley?" asked Kane.

"We're strangers and it was kinda dark," replied Hartley. "We described the spot to the sheriff, and he said it was at the forks."

The doctor came bustling in, shoved men aside and went over to the body, where he made a quick examination, while everyone remained silent. Finally he said:

"He hasn't been dead very long."

"Hartley, did you or Stevens hear the shot fired?" the sheriff asked.

"No, we didn't," replied Hashknife Hartley. "Our horses shied from the body. He was lyin' just on the left side, as yuh come this way."

"The wind was blowin' toward town," said a practical-minded cowboy. "Anyway, yuh can't hear a six-shooter shot very far."

Zeke Harris, a thin-faced, bow-legged cowhand, who worked for the same spread, came elbowing his way inside the office. Zeke was half drunk. He looked at the body, and turned on the crowd.

"Who killed him?" he demanded. "Who killed m' bunkie? Gawd," his face twisted with grief," he never hurt nobody. Tony never hurt nobody in his life. Why, he—he never even packed a gun—hardly ever. Now somebody's killed him. Well, ain'tcha goin' to tell me?"

"Nobody knows who killed him, Zeke," said Kane quietly. "He wasn't found until a short time ago. Calm down—yo're drunk."

"Calm down?" shrilled Zeke. "Somebody murders m' bunkie, and you tell me to calm down. What 'f I am drunk? I'm free, white and—who found him?"

"I found him," replied the tall cowboy quietly.

Zeke turned his head and looked into the gray eyes of Hashknife Hartley. For several moments the room was silent. Then Zeke said, "I—I just wondered. Much obliged to yuh, stranger." He turned and shoved his way outside.

"Somethin' shore cooled Zeke off in a hurry," remarked a cowboy.

"Zeke and Tony have bunked together a long time," said Buck Sneed, the deputy. "I reckon we'd all feel thataway, if we was Zeke."

Several of the men helped the doctor move the body from the office. Hashknife Hartley and Sleepy Stevens took their horses to a feed-corral and then went to the Encinitas House, the one hotel in the town, where Mort Kane, foreman for the Roman Seven, met them. He introduced himself.

"Yuh see," he explained quietly, "I just wondered if you boys were from the association."

"What association?" asked Sleepy blankly.

"The cattlemen's association, of course."

"I don't reckon we understand that question," said Hashknife soberly.

"If yuh don't—all right," said Kane. "I just wanted to be sure. Yuh see, Parke Wells, the man I work for, told me that he had asked for a little help, but hasn't had any reply yet. Well, you know how it is in a case like that—when strangers show up."

"I see," replied Hashknife. "It's all right, Mr. Kane—but we just don't happen to fit."

"Much obliged, anyway," smiled Kane. "I just wanted to be sure."

THE hotel proprietor took them up to a room, but had very little to say. He knew that they had found the body, and he assured them that Tony Montez was a fine boy who never had trouble with anybody.

After he was gone the two cowboys sat down and looked at each other. Finally Sleepy said:

"Do you solemnly swear that you ain't in no way informed Bob Marsh that we might come to Encinitas?"

"Yo're a suspicious soul, pardner," smiled the lanky Hashknife. "No, I haven't

told Bob Marsh anythin.' In fact, we didn't know we was comin' here."

Bob Marsh was secretary of the cattlemen's association, and one of Sleepy's obsessions. Because these two wandering cowboys refused to become regular operatives for the association, Bob Marsh had used all sorts of subterfuge to get them mixed up in cases, which he wanted them to handle for him.

"No," said Hashknife, "yuh can't blame Bob for us bein' here."

A commotion outside caused them to both go over to an open window, which faced out on the main street. A crowd of men had grouped almost directly below the window, and they could hear one voice, unmistakably that of a Chinaman, saying:

"I don' know who kill him. I flind him on flo'."

"Are yuh sure he's dead, Sing?" asked an anxious voice.

"Plitty dead, I t'ink. Yo' go fas', fin' docta'."

The crowd split up quickly.

"A fine community we got into—another dead man already," said Sleepy. "They don't need range detectives—they need undertakers."

"Looks like it," agreed Hashknife, picking up his hat. "We might as well go down and find out what it's all about."

The old hotel proprietor had all the news. In an awestruck voice he told them.

"Parke Wells was killed in his own ranchhouse. His Chinese cook found him. Everybody else was away; so the Chinaman had to walk all the way to town to spread the news. This is awful, don'tcha know it? Parke Wells was the biggest man in San Pablo Valley. What next, I wonder."

"How big was he?" asked Sleepy.

"Why, he owns the Roman Seven, and he owns the Golden Streak mine and he—well, I can't tell yuh what else—but plenty."

"Beloved by everybody, I suppose."

"Huh? Why do yuh say that?"

"You always say that about a dead man, don'tcha?"

"Dead men—yeah. That's right, yuh do. It's kinda hard to figure him dead. Maybe he ain't. Maybe the Chink made a mistake."

"We'll have to wait and see about that," said Hashknife.

Tommy McCall heard Sing Low's report. No one had questioned him about not wearing a hat, but he realized what damning evidence that hat would be, if he had lost it in the Roman Seven patio. So Tommy got on his horse and left town ahead of the sheriff and coroner, who were accompanied by Mort Kane and the rest of the working crew of the ranch.

There was no use Tommy searching for his hat in the hills. He went straight to the ranch then to the rear of the patio, over the wall, and made a search. But there was no hat, and the ladder had been replaced in the same spot where Tommy had found it. He heard the men from town ride up to the front of the ranchhouse just before he went over the wall, so he mounted his horse and headed back to town to pick up his extra mount.

HASHKNIFE and Sleepy were still up when the riders returned, bringing in the body of Parke Wells. They also brought in Sing Low, and put him in jail, charged with the murder. Parke Wells had been killed with a hatchet.

"If that ain't a Chinaman's work, I'll eat my hat," said the sheriff. "He admits that him and Parke Wells had a quarrel this evenin', and Sing was goin' to quit."

"Naturally," said Hashknife, soberly, "that would be grounds for the Chinaman to murder him."

"Yuh think so?" asked the sheriff quickly.

"They'll do it every time," declared Sleepy, seriously. "He's likely one of them highbinders, and him and Parke Wells belonged to different tongs."

"Yeah, that might be," agreed the sheriff. "I think I've got the right man."

Buck Sneed was trying to suppress a laugh. After they went to the office he said to the sheriff:

"Them two fellers was laughin' at yuh, Doc. Parke Wells couldn't belong to one of them tongs. Them things are Chinese secret societies."

"Yea-a-ah?" snorted Doc Lorimer. "Laughin' at me, eh? Well, I'm not payin' any attention to them two whippoorwills. The Chink is the guilty person, and you can bet on that."

"I hope he ain't," said Buck. "I like him."

Mort Kane came in and told them that he had been down to Dave Marsh's home

and told about the death of Parke Wells. Sally Wells was there, too, and the two women had gone out to the ranch.

"I'd hate to have a job like that—tellin' two women that their pa was dead," said Buck Sneed. "How'd they take it, Mort?"

"Right between the eyes," replied Mort soberly. "Somebody had to do it. Yuh know, Sally told me that Tony Montez came to her at the ranch after eight o'clock this evenin' and told her that Mrs. Marsh was very sick and for her to come at once. Sally got there and found Mrs. Marsh as well as ever. It looks like a scheme to get her away from the ranch."

"Yeah, it sure does," mused Doc Lorimer. "And then they killed Tony to shut his mouth."

Mort Kane nodded. "It sure looks thataway, Doc."

"Tony was killed near the forks of the road," said Buck Sneed. "Yuh might as well turn Sing Low loose, Doc—he never done it. That little Chink never rode a horse in his life, and I don't believe he ever fired a gun."

"Don't be too sure," replied the sheriff. "Maybe Sing had somebody helpin' him."

"Well," sighed Buck," he *could* have had, I reckon."

"Killers don't always work alone," said Kane. "But at that, I can't see any reason for Sing Low killin' him. They were usually quarreling, but Parke wouldn't fire the best cook in the valley."

"Him quarrelin' with the cook wouldn't be any novelty for Parke," said Buck, "because he quarreled with everybody."

"Yeah, that's true," admitted Mort Kane. "He didn't like to have anybody disagree with him."

"You and him got along all right," said the sheriff.

"That's true," admitted the foreman of the Roman Seven. "We argued, but it usually ended up by me doin' just what he wanted done. And," he added, "it was usually because he was right."

MORT KANE rode back to the ranch and stabled his horse. Sally met him at the front doorway.

"Something else has happened," she choked. "Before we got here, somebody else must have come when no one was around; someone who knew where Dad kept his valuables. Come in here."

He followed her to her father's room A receptacle had been built into the wall, guarded with a heavy padlock, and inside the space was where he kept a locked, metal box. Someone had pried the padlock loose, smashed open the locked box and strewed the contents, which consisted of hundreds of dollars in currency and many papers.

Mort Kane looked it over in amazement. Why would anyone break into that box, scatter the contents around the floor, and go away without all that money? It did not make sense.

"The man was leaving as we drove up," said Sally. "We saw him, as he climbed the fence."

"That beats anythin' I've heard about," declared Mort. "Sally, you pick up everythin' and take care of it. I don't want to touch it. In the mornin' I'll tell the sheriff. You and Ella try to get some sleep."

"They put Sing Low in jail?" queried Sally.

Kane nodded. "Yeah, they did. I dunno —it's all so sudden that we're all hay-wire. Maybe in the mornin' we'll straighten things out—I dunno."

He told her good night and went out to the bunk-house. Zeke Harris and Slim Hope were there, getting ready for bed. Kane told them what had happened, but they didn't seem interested.

"There's Tony's old hat and his boots, jist like he left 'em," said Zeke. "He ain't never comin' back to wear 'em. Poor ol' Tony—ol' son-of-a-gun."

"Yeah," said Slim, "and they got Parke Wells, too."

"He don't mean a thing to me," declared Zeke. "Tony was my bunkie. Yuh know, all I want is a pop at the dirty skunk that got Tony. I'd shore relish that. I'd want him to know why, too. Maybe I'll have luck, I dunno."

"Well," said Kane, "I think a good sleep will help all of us."

Zeke looked up at Kane and asked, "Who was that long-geared puncher down at the sheriff's office?"

"He said his name is Hartley," replied the foreman. "What about him?"

"Hartley, huh?" grunted Zeke. "Hartley."

"What about him?" asked Kane curiously.

"Nothin'," replied Zeke shortly.

After Kane left the bunk-house Slim Hope crawled into his bunk, but Zeke sat there, smoking moodily.

"Them two fellers was the ones that found Tony, wasn't they?" said Slim.

Zeke nodded, and Slim asked curiously, "What yuh got on yore mind, cowboy?"

"Somethin'," replied Zeke. "I've heard about a feller named Hartley. I'm jist a-tryin' to remember the first name."

"Somethin' wrong about him?" asked Slim.

Zeke looked up. "Nope," he said, "it was somethin' awful right, Slim. Mebbe it'll come to me. Right now I cain't help thinkin' about Tony. We been bunkies a long time. Mebbe he was a *Mejicano*—but he was the whitest man I ever knowed—inside. I'll be lookin' for the pole-cat that gunned him down."

ENCINITAS was not at all impressive. It was a typical cow-town, which had experienced a mild mining boom, when gold was discovered in the San Pablo range. Except for the Golden Streak, owned by Parke Wells, none of the other properties developed into paying propositions.

The Greenhorn Saloon was the center of activity, located across the street from the Encinitas House. The streets were narrow and unpaved, the building signs faded, the buildings themselves badly in need of paint. There was much conjecture as to what would be the future of the Golden Streak since Parke Wells had been killed. No one seemed to have a reason for the murder and the robbery of Parke Wells' personal strongbox. No one, with the possible exception of Zeke Harris, was interested in the demise of Tony Montez.

Sleepy Stevens wanted to ride on. "It ain't none of our business, Hashknife," he declared.

Hashknife stretched his long legs and relaxed comfortably on an old porch-chair in the shade of the hotel porch.

"That's right," he agreed. "We'll stay overnight and pull out in the mornin'."

"If we stay over one more night—we're stuck," sighed Sleepy. "You'll find out somethin', and—don't shake yore head. Ever since last night you've been sniffin' like a bloodhound. Bob Marsh don't know we're here, praise God from whom all blessin' flow; so let him send somebody—if they need him."

Hashknife puffed thoughtfully on his cigarette, looking out at the dusty street, where a freight outfit was passing.

"Yuh shouldn't worry," he said quietly. "Worry makes yuh old. I wasn't thinkin' much about what happened last night. Yuh know, killin' a man with a hatchet is awful messy. Parke Wells had a gun in his holster, when they found him, which indicates that he was killed by a man he trusted. Tony Montez was shot at awful close range, too."

"There yuh go," sighed Sleepy. "Maybe I'd better say *we*."

They were an odd pair, these two wandering cowboys. Hashknife Hartley, christened Henry, was the son of a range minister in Montana. Born into a large family, he had been obliged to shift for himself at an early age. With little educational advantages he started drifting down across the cattle ranges, learning things from contact with men that he could never have learned in school.

He had a keen mind and a desire to know things. At the old ranch that gave him a nickname he met Sleepy Stevens, who had forgotten that his name had ever been David, and together they went out to find what might be seen on the other side of a hill. For years they had drifted, with no real object in view; only working when it became necessary to replenish their scanty wardrobes, or get "eatin' money."

Range troubles seemed a magnet to them. Anything that smacked of mystery was a challenge to Hashknife. Not that they had any real love for the law, because they had seen it miscarry too often, but for their own satisfaction, and to help those in trouble. Their guns were not for hire, nor did they ask thanks or monetary reward for their work. It was their life.

Both of them were confirmed fatalists. Death had struck at them too many times for them to feel that they had anything to do with the things that happen. Their theory was, "When your number is up—you don't need to be careful."

They had ridden over the San Pablo range and found Encinitas. Fate had left a dead

man on the road for them to find in the dark. And Sleepy knew that they would not leave San Pablo Valley until Hashknife knew who killed Parke Wells and Tony Montez—and why.

Both men looked up as Buck Sneed, the deputy, came up on the porch.

"Any more dead men?" asked Sleepy.

BUCK shook his head. "I don't reckon so," he replied. "At least, there ain't been none brought in. How are you fellers this bright and shinin' mornin'?"

"If we was any better we'd have to be tied," replied Hashknife. "What's new?"

"Oh, nothin' much. Me and Doc Lorimer was out to the Roman Seven and talked with Sally Wells and her sister, Mrs. Marsh. They couldn't help us any. All they know is that Tony Montez came out and told Sally that Mrs. Marsh was awful sick and for her to come quick. I cain't quite figure it out, but Sally said Tommy McCall had been comin' out to see her last night. She said that she sent word by Tony to find Tommy and tell him what happened."

"You can't quite figure out what?" asked Hashknife curiously.

"Yuh see," explained Buck, "Parke Wells didn't like Tommy, and it's kinda funny he was goin' out there to see Sally."

"Is she a pretty girl?" asked Sleepy.

"I'll say she's pretty!" exclaimed Buck.

"There's nothin' funny about it then," said Sleepy. "Anybody could figure it out."

"Another thing," said Buck seriously, "was the fact that somebody got into the ranchhouse, busted open Parke Wells' little safe, poured money and papers all over the floor, and got out of there just as Sally and Mrs. Marsh drove up there last night."

"That's kinda interestin'," said Hashknife. "Did the ladies have any idea what the thief took?"

"Shucks, they wouldn't know what Parke Wells had in that safe. But whoever it was sure overlooked eight hundred dollars."

"Prob'ly wasn't after money," said Hashknife. "The question is—what did they want out of that safe? You knew Parke Wells pretty good, Buck?"

"Yeah—as good as anybody, I reckon."

"Honest, upright citizen, whose death will leave a void which we never can fill?" queried Sleepy soberly.

"Where'd yuh hear that?" asked Buck curiously.

"I've heard it so many times—I don't remember," replied Sleepy.

"Oh, yeah," grinned Buck. "Well, Parke was all right. He wanted to be top man all the time—and was. You know what I mean—the boss of everythin'. Made lots of money—kept most of it, I reckon."

"How long since yuh had a killin' in this valley?" asked Sleepy.

"Oh, gosh, couple years, I reckon. Last one was Jim Corey. Buzzards led us to him. Jim was a prospector. Shot through the head. Never had any idea who got him. That was the last one we had—until now."

"Ever had any trouble with rustlers in the valley?" asked Hashknife.

"Well, nothin' yuh could put a finger onto," replied Buck. "Oh, a couple months ago Parke Wells came to the office, faunchin' real hard. Said he was losin' cows and wanted us to bring him in a burnt offerin'. Me and Doc Lorimer investigated as much as we could, and told him we couldn't find anythin'. He gave us a cussin', and the matter was dropped. Why'd yuh ask that, Hartley?"

"Last night Mort Kane asked us if we was workin' for the Association. He said Parke Wells had asked them to send in some help. I took it for granted that somebody had been stealin' his cows."

"You fellers ain't from the Association, are yuh?" asked Buck.

"We certainly ain't!" snorted Sleepy.

"I didn't think yuh was. Me and Doc figured that Parke Wells was imaginin' things."

"I don't reckon we've met this Tommy McCall," said Sleepy.

"Tommy is a nice boy. He's got a little spread out a ways, and he's doin' all right, he says. Parke Wells just didn't like Tommy."

"And Sally does," added Sleepy.

"That's right, I reckon," sighed Buck. "She's shore pretty."

"Engaged to anybody?" asked Sleepy.

"Not less'n it's Tommy."

"Always somethin' in the way," said Sleepy.

Zeke Harris rode into town, tied his horse in front of the hotel and came up on the porch. He spoke to Buck and took

a seat on the far side of the porch. When Buck went away Zeke came over to them, sat in the chair Buck had vacated, and said quietly:

"Is yore name Hashknife Hartley?"

"Yeah, that's right," replied Hashknife.

"Uh-huh. Took me half the night to remember the first name. You don't know me. My name's Zeke Harris—but that don't mean anythin'. I had a brother in the Thunder River country—named Al Harris. Maybe yuh don't remember the name. Al was mixed up with a bad bunch, and he said you got him out of trouble. Wrote me all about it at the time. Said you was—well, jist right."

"Well, I'm glad to meet yuh, Harris," said Hashknife quietly. "This is Sleepy Stevens."

"Yeah, he wrote about Stevens, too," said Zeke. "Wish I'd kept that letter. Al's got a good job now. He's foreman for a big spread over in Wyomin', married and got one kid. Named him Hartley Stevens Harris."

"My Gawd!" breathed Sleepy. "Can yuh imagine that?"

HASHKNIFE grinned widely. "That's great, Harris."

"Uh-huh. Yuh see, Hashknife, Tony Montez was my bunkie. A finer feller never lived. Somebody gunned him down. I ain't very smart. I'd never be able to find out who done it. I've got a hundred and eighty dollars laid by for a rainy day, busted leg, or somethin'—and she's yours, if yuh can find out who killed Tony."

Hashknife studied the thin face, sad-eyed Zeke, who was in deadly earnest. Then he said, quietly, "Zeke, I'm no detective, but I'd like to help yuh."

"Would yuh?" asked Zeke eagerly. "Gosh, that's fine!"

"Did Tony have an enemy, Zeke?"

"I don't think he did. Tony never quarreled. He never played poker and he never took a drink. He was Mexican—from Hermisillo, but he was as white as any puncher I ever worked with. I'm sure goin' to miss Tony and his grin. Everybody liked him—except the snake that shot him."

"Zeke, do you think Sing Low killed Parke Wells?"

"No, I don't reckon he did. Yuh can never tell what a Chink might have on his mind, of course, but I don't think Sing is a killer. They say that Tony packed a message to Sally from somebody, sayin' that Mrs. Marsh was very sick, which she wasn't. Sing wouldn't do that. And Sing wouldn't kill Tony. If Tony carried a message to Sally, he must have thought the message was on the square. Tony liked Sally. She was allus nice to Tony. No, he wouldn't do anythin' to hurt her."

"Zeke," said Hashknife, "have you ever heard that somebody was stealin' Roman Seven cattle?"

"Yeah, I have," nodded Zeke. "Parke Wells thought so. We watched things pretty close, but wasn't able to find out anythin'."

"What sort of a feller is Mort Kane?"

"Fine. He's been runnin' the spread for three years, Hashknife. Yeah, Mort is a good cow-man, and a fine feller to work for."

"Zeke," said Hashknife," you were here when that prospector, Jim Corey was killed, wasn't yuh?"

"Corey? Oh, yeah, I was here. He discovered a mine some'ers back in the San Pablos. He tried to get Parke Wells to back him. Wanted to develop the mine himself. But I don't reckon Parke cared much for the idea."

"Was that before Parke Wells got the Golden Streak?"

"Yeah, it was."

"How did Parke Wells get the Golden Streak?"

"Well, I don't rightly know. I heard he bought it cheap from some busted prospector. Golly, he's sure made money out there! Talked about sellin' out his cow outfit and doin' nothin' but minin'. But I don't reckon he ever got around to it, and it's too late now."

"What about Tommy McCall?" queried Hashknife. "You say that Parke Wells didn't like him, and we heard that after Tony Montez brought word to Sally Wells that her sister was very sick, Sally Wells sent Tony to tell Tommy not to come out to the ranch."

"I didn't know that," said Zeke. "But Tommy wouldn't kill anybody with a hatchet. Naw, that ain't reasonable. Tommy ain't that kind."

"When a man wants to kill another man,

Zeke, he'll kill with what he's got in his hand."

"Yeah, that's true—but I don't think Tommy done it, Hashknife."

"And you don't think Sing Low did either, eh?"

Zeke shook his head. "Mebbe I don't want to believe it," he replied.

The talk drifted to general conditions in San Pablo Valley, but Zeke had nothing to offer that might throw some light on the two murders.

DAVE MARSH sprawled on the spacious porch at the Roman Seven, half-drunk, uninterested in anything. Dave was thirty-five, but looked older. People were talking that Dave was neglecting his work at the Recorder's office, but Dave didn't care. His wife and Sally Wells were in the house, mourning over the death of their father, but Dave wasn't doing any mourning.

Dave was wearing a shoulder-holstered gun. He needed a shave, haircut and a clean shirt.

Why worry about anything. His wife and Sally would inherit everything that Parke Wells owned, which was plenty. Dave's bleared eyes picked out a lone rider, entering the main gate of the big ranch. It was Tommy McCall. He rode up and dismounted at the porch.

"Hyah, Romeo," said Dave.

"Hello, Dave," replied Tommy, looking curiously at Marsh. His eyes noted Dave's condition and the holstered gun.

"Drunk and heeled," said Tommy.

Dave flared quickly. "Tha's my business," he rasped. "You ain't so much. You couldn't come here when Parke was alive."

"I guess yo're right," admitted Tommy quietly. "I—I wonder if I can see Sally."

"Why ask me—I ain't her keeper," replied Dave. "Go ahead—if yuh like red eyes and wet noses."

Sally came out on the porch and heard Dave's remark. By mutual consent she and Tommy walked around the house and sat down beside the patio gate.

"I'm awful sorry, Sally," he told her. "It's awful—things like that."

"It was a terrible shock," she said quietly. "I—I think I'm getting adjusted now. Ella is sick over it. You see, she and Dad—well, you know how he felt toward Dave. Can you blame him—after seeing him out there?"

"He ought to straighten up," said Tommy. "Why is he packin' a gun?"

Sally shook her head. "I don't know, Tommy. It worries Ella."

"She's had plenty worries with him, I reckon," remarked Tommy.

Sally nodded. They were both silent for a while, and then she said:

"Tommy, did you come out here last night?"

"Yeah, I came out here," he said quietly. "I brought the horses. Yuh see, I didn't know anythin' about you bein' down at the Marsh place."

"What happened—out here?" she asked.

"You didn't—" Tommy hesitated. "Sally, you don't think—"

"No, I don't," she said. "I—I just wanted to know, Tommy."

Tommy explained exactly what happened, but did not mention losing his hat, taking it for granted that he had lost it out in the brush, after reaching his horses.

"If Sing did it—why did he yell for help—and then accuse you?" Sally wondered.

"I don't believe Sing did it," said Tommy.

They saw Mort Kane hurrying from the stable, going toward the front of the house to meet Doc Lorimer, the sheriff, and Buck Sneed. They could not see the two officers, but they heard Mort Kane call their names.

Tommy sighed as he said, "I wish we had somebody with more brains than them two, Sally. We might find out who did it."

"I suppose they are doing their best," she said wearily. "Zeke Harris is terribly upset over Tony Montez. He came up to the house and wanted to talk with me. I don't know what he meant, but what he said was, 'Don't you worry, we'll get him. I know a man who will get him.'

"I asked him what he meant, but he just laughed and went away."

"That's funny," said Tommy. "Who do you suppose he meant, Sally?"

"Maybe he was just imagining things, Tommy. Too much whiskey last night."

Tommy squinted thoughtfully, digging one of his high heels into the hard ground.

"Two strange cowboys brought Tony's body to Encinitas last night," he said finally. "They were down at the sheriff's office, along with a bunch of men, waitin' for the

doctor to come. Zeke found out about Tony and came down there, half-crazy. Shoved his way in and started yellin', askin' questions. You know how he'd act. Well, the tall one of the two strange cowboys looked at him, and answered a question. Well, sir, Zeke cooled off, just like somebody's thrown a bucket of cold water on him. It was funny. All the tall cowboy said was, 'I found him.'"

"You don't know who they are?" asked Sally.

Tommy shook his head. "Just a couple driftin' cowboys, I reckon."

Doc Lorimer, Buck Sneed and Mort Kane came from the house and into the patio, and walked out through the gate, stopping in front of Sally and Tommy.

"You better go into the house, Sally," Mort said to the girl.

All three men looked very grave.

"Why should I go into the house," said Sally, and Tommy got to his feet.

"What's this all about?" he asked anxiously.

"You bought a new Stetson in Encinitas a couple days ago, McCall," said the sheriff, "and we'd like to know how it happened to be under Sing Low's bunk in his room."

Doc Lorimer took the hat from behind him and held it out in front of Tommy.

"It's got yore initials in the inside, McCall," he said. "You can't deny it's yore hat."

Tommy shut his lips tightly for several moments. Then he said, "It's my hat, Doc."

"Of course, it's yore hat. But that ain't the question, McCall. How does it happen to be in Sing Low's room—hid under the bed?"

"I don't know," replied Tommy hopelessly," unless--well, I just don't know, Doc."

"Uh-huh. Well, you better figure it out between here and Encinitas, or you stay in jail until yuh remember."

"In jail?" queried Tommy quietly. "You can't put me in jail just because—"

Doc Lorimer's right hand snapped down to his holstered gun, and the muzzle came up close to Tommy's midriff.

"The word 'can't' don't figure in this deal, McCall," he said. "I'll take yore gun—just in case."

Tommy handed him the gun, butt-first.

"Mr. Lorimer, you are making a big mistake," said Sally.

"Mebbe," replied the sheriff. "We'll find out later. Do you know where Tommy was last night, Sally?"

"He said—" Sally hesitated.

"I don't care what *he* said. McCall, I reckon we'll all ride back to town—and while we're ridin', you better tell what you know."

"All right," said Tommy. "I'll be back,

Sally. They can't put the deadwood on me, 'cause I never done it. Maybe they'll let me talk with Sing Low, and we can find out somethin'—I dunno."

Tommy rode back to Encinitas between Doc Lorimer and Buck Sneed.

"Yuh know," remarked the sheriff," it's kinda funny—findin' yore hat there, McCall. Mebbe it all fits. Somebody got Tony Montez to decoy Sally away from the ranch, and Sally says she sent Tony to tell you to not come out to the ranch."

"What fits?" asked Tommy.

"Mebbe," replied the sheriff, "you wanted her away from the ranch, so you could have it out with Parke Wells."

"Yeah," said Tommy. "I killed Parke Wells with a hatchet, threw my hat under Sing Low's bunk, met Tony at the forks of the road and killed him. You don't happen to have any other funny ideas, do yuh, Doc?"

"Murder ain't funny," said the sheriff grimly. "And you ain't told me how yore hat got out there."

"Maybe I will—after I talk with Sing Low."

"That would be fine," said the sheriff, "only you ain't goin' to have no talk with that Chinaman. Yo're both pretty slick, and I'm not goin' to let you two frame up a story to cheat the law."

"Maybe Sing will tell yuh how it got there," suggested Tommy.

"Sing Low," replied the sheriff, "ain't been able to speak or understand English since we put him in jail."

"He plenty no *sabe*," chuckled Buck.

"Listen, Doc," said Tommy, "that's a new hat and it cost me plenty. Do yuh think yo're showin' good sense in twistin' it up thataway and shovin' it inside yore chaps. After all, it's still *my* hat."

The sheriff straightened out the hat, cuffed it a few times and held it in his hand. Buck said thoughtfully, "Yuh know, Tommy, I seem to remember that yuh was all dressed up last night—and bareheaded."

"I always dress up to commit murder," said Tommy.

"McCall, did you see Tony Montez last night?" asked the sheriff.

"No," replied Tommy. "If Sally sent him to me with a message, he never delivered it."

"Uh-hu-u-uh!" gloated the sheriff. "So yuh was at the Roman Seven last night!"

"Yeah," admitted Tommy, "I went out there to leave my new hat under Sing Low's bunk."

"Now yo're tryin' to be funny," said the sheriff.

"Made me laugh," said Buck soberly.

"It don't take much to make you laugh," said the sheriff.

"That's 'cause I'm quick to catch onto things, Doc."

THEY took Tommy to the sheriff's office, where Hashknife and Sleepy were sitting on the high sidewalk in the shade. They noticed that Tommy's holster was empty, and that the sheriff had an extra gun shoved inside his belt.

"McCall, I don't reckon you've met Hartley and Stevens," said Buck. "Gents, this is Tommy McCall, our latest suspect."

"And yuh don't have to shake hands with anybody, Tommy," added the sheriff quickly. "Yo're under arrest."

Hashknife drawled, "Glad to meet yuh, McCall," and then he said to the sheriff, "Any chance to talk with the Chinaman, sheriff?"

"What for?" asked Doc Lorimer.

"Oh, I just thought he might have somethin' to say."

"Well, he won't, Hartley. Anyway, I'm not lettin' him talk to anybody."

"What evidence have yuh got against McCall?"

"That," replied the sheriff firmly, "is none of yore damn business."

Their eyes met for possibly ten seconds and the sheriff turned away.

"Yuh see," he explained, an apologetic note in his voice, "I've kinda got to—well, get things straight around here, before anybody talks too much."

After awhile Buck Sneed bow-legged his way up to the hotel porch, where Hashknife and Sleepy were relaxing in the shade. Buck mopped his face, sat down and sighed deeply.

"Why did the sheriff put Tommy McCall in jail?" asked Sleepy.

"Because," replied Buck, "we found Tommy's hat under Sing Low's bunk at the Roman Seven. Yuh see, Doc Lorimer got to thinkin' that he might find some evidence in the Chink's room out there; so we went out. We found Tommy's hat. Tommy wouldn't tell how-come his new hat got there; so Doc slammed him in jail."

"What has Sing Low said?" asked Hashknife.

"He can't talk English," grinned Buck.

Two men came across the street and onto the shaded porch. Buck introduced them as Bill Rombeau, owner of the WHK spread, and Andy Hope, one of his punchers, and a brother of Slim Hope of the Roman Seven. Rombeau was a big, swarthy, wide-grinning person, badly in need of a haircut. Andy Hope was short and fat, colorless, with pale-blue eyes, button-like nose and a small mouth.

"What's this I hear about Tommy McCall bein' arrested, Buck?" asked Rombeau. The deputy sheriff nodded.

"Yeah, we got him in the coop, Bill. Killed Parke Wells, and forgot to put on his hat. Must have been awful upset, 'cause it's a almost new Stetson, and set him back thirty dollars."

"Admitted the murder, eh?" said Rombeau.

"Didn't have to. Any San Pablo jury would hang him on that evidence. Hell, as far as that's concerned, any San Pablo jury would hang anybody on any evidence—if yuh keep 'em sober and awake long enough to vote."

"Yeah, I reckon that's right," agreed Rombeau. "I feel sorry for McCall. What about the Chink? Will they hang him, too, Buck?"

"Oh, sure," replied Buck soberly.

"Why?" asked Andy Hope.

"Andy," replied Buck, "you don't know a San Pablo jury."

Rombeau and Hope left a few minutes later. Buck chuckled. "They'll tell everybody that McCall and Sing Low have confessed the two murders. They ain't got brains enough to know I was jokin'."

"Has Rombeau got much of a place?" asked Sleepy.

"Yeah, it's a pretty good spread. He started a couple years ago. Took over a small outfit and registered his own brand. Yeah, he's doin' all right. Connected his three initials and made it the WHR. Hires two punchers—Andy Hope and Dell Bush. French-Canadian, I think."

Doc Lorimer came up the street and walked in on the porch. He seemed satisfied over something, and Buck said, "Did Tommy tell yuh how his hat got out there, Doc?"

"No, he didn't," replied the sheriff. "But I had a little talk with Sing Low. I told him that Tommy was a prisoner, and I explained that in the mornin' we're holdin' an inquest. I said, 'If yuh don't tell us what yuh know at that inquest, we'll prob'ly hang yuh for murder.'

"Well, he kinda grinned, and he said, 'Mebbyso I tell.' And there yuh are. That Chink knows somethin', and I think I've scared it out of him."

"Did he act scared?" asked Hashknife.

"Well, yuh never can tell about a Chinaman, Hartley."

"You can tell enough about one to know danged well he ain't scared of anythin'," remarked Hashknife. "They don't scare—and they don't lie. If they can't tell yuh the truth—they don't talk."

"Anyway," said the sheriff, "he'll talk at that inquest."

ZEKE HARRIS brought Sally Wells and Mrs. Marsh to town in a buggy that afternoon. Sally wanted to talk with Tommy McCall, but the sheriff refused, explaining that he didn't want anybody to talk with either Tommy or Sing Low, until after the inquest. Zeke brought Sally up to the hotel porch and introduced her to Hashknife and Sleepy.

"I done told her to quit worryin'," said Zeke.

Sally smiled wearily. "Advice is easy," she said.

Hashknife shifted a chair into the shade and asked her to sit down, and Zeke said, "The sheriff wouldn't let her talk to Tommy."

"The sheriff," smiled Hashknife, "is a cautious soul."

"Zeke, do you play pool?" asked Sleepy.

"Me? Huh!" Zeke was indignant. "I've played the best in the country."

"Didja ever beat any of 'em?"

"That's gittin' personal. Do yuh feel like a game?"

"I hate to set in the shade and grow old," replied Sleepy. "Let's go."

It was Sleepy's way of giving Hashknife a chance to talk with Sally, and of course, it also gave Sleepy a chance to play his favorite game.

"It—it seems rather funny for me to be sitting here, talking with a stranger—under the circumstances," said Sally. "Especially," she added, "when there are so many things that have to be done, Mr. Hartley."

"Why do it, Miss Wells?" asked Hashknife gravely.

"That's just it," she said. "Maybe it was to please Zeke."

"Tony Montez was Zeke's bunkie," said Hashknife quietly. "Zeke has told me about it."

"You knew Zeke's brother," said Sally. "He wrote to Zeke about you."

"So Zeke said. Miss Wells, do you know how Tommy McCall's hat got under Sing Low's bunk?"

"No, I don't. I suppose Sing Low found it and put it there."

"Found it out at yore ranch?" queried Hashknife.

Sally nodded, and proceeded to tell Hashknife all about herself and Tommy McCall. She told him that her father didn't like Tommy, and had refused to give his consent to their marriage, and how they had planned to elope to Saguero Wells. She told him that Tony Montez had brought her word that her sister was very ill and wanted her at once. She had told Tony to find Tommy and tell him not to come out to the ranch that night.

"But somebody killed Tony," she said sadly, "and Tommy went out to the ranch. He got up on the balcony, when he heard Sing Low yelling for help. Tommy got down that ladder as fast as he could go, and Sing Low saw him. Of course Sing likely couldn't identify him in the dark, but it seems that Tommy lost his new hat, Sing found it, and hid it under his bunk."

"Why didn't Tommy tell all this to the sheriff?" asked Hashknife.

"I don't know. Maybe he didn't want me mixed up in it, Mr. Hartley."

HASHKNIFE smiled. "I can imagine he went away from there in a hurry. Miss Wells, did you see yore father that evenin'?"

"No, I didn't. The crew all go to town on Saturday night, and Dad went with them —usually. He wasn't home for supper, and Mort Kane said he had an idea that he was already in town. If he was, he came back, for some reason or other."

"What about yore father's safe bein' robbed?" asked Hashknife.

"When my sister and I went out to the ranch we saw a man running in the dark, and I am sure he came from the house. We found the little strong-box opened and the contents scattered on the floor. There was

nearly eight hundred dollars in currency on the floor, along with a lot of papers."

"There must have been somethin' in that box that was worth a lot more to some man than money."

Sally nodded. "There must have been," she said quietly. "I am coming to the inquest tomorrow, and if Tommy won't tell—I will. I'm not ashamed of it. And Sing Low never killed my father. Sing wouldn't kill anything. He has been with us for years. He and my father quarreled—often—and Sing would threaten to quit—but it was just their way."

"Did your father and Dave Marsh get along?" asked Hashknife.

Sally shut her lips tightly for a moment, but shook her head. "They hated each other, Mr. Hartley. Dave isn't—well, he isn't very nice. He drinks and mistreats Ella, but she sticks to him. He's all right, when he isn't drinking. I heard him tell Dad one day he hoped he'd live to dance on Dad's grave. Dad said, 'You won't, because you're living on borrowed time right now.' I don't know what he meant, but Dave's face got white and he never said anything more."

"Borrowed time, eh?" remarked Hashknife thoughtfully.

"That's what he said. But Dave never did it, Mr. Hartley. He was at home, when I got there, half-drunk—and I came straight from the ranch."

"Have any others had trouble with yore father?" he asked.

"None of the men at the ranch," she replied. "They all got along fine. Dad spent most of his time at the mine, and let Mort Kane run the ranch. Mort is a good man with cattle, and he knows how to handle the men."

"Miss Wells," said Hashknife, "did yore father have any enemy in this valley, who might have done it? Anyone he has had trouble with?"

"I suppose he had enemies," she said quietly. "Dad wasn't without fault. But I don't know of anyone who hated him that much."

Hashknife stared thoughtfully out at the dusty street.

"It's funny—me sitting here and telling you things," Sally said finally, "but it seems as though I had known you a long time. Zeek said I ought to meet you."

"I'm glad you did," Hashknife said simply.

Sally had to do some shopping with her sister, and Sleepy came back in a little while. He sprawled on a bench and rolled a cigarette.

"Can Zeke play pool?" asked Hashknife.

"I'd rather not talk about it," sighed Sleepy. "I broke 'em—and missed. He ran fifteen. Then he broke 'em and ran fifteen. What did yuh find out from the beautiful lady?"

Hashknife told him how Tommy McCall lost his hat.

"I suppose she still loves him," commented Sleepy.

"Of course, she loves him."

"I was afraid of that. Still, it fits in with my usual luck. I think I'll go find Buck Sneed and see if he can play pool. I've got to have revenge on somebody."

Mr. and Mrs. Polk Adams Scott came to town in their Circle S buckboard. They were otherwise known as Pokey and Aunt Minnie. Pokey was little, bow-legged, almost bald, mustached as a pirate, and smoked a pipe with a short stem. Aunt Minnie was huge, slow-moving, deeply religious and inclined to be tearful over the misfortunes of others.

Aunt Minnie went straight to the Marsh home, while Pokey headed for the sheriff's office, where he found Hashknife and the sheriff. It was nearly dark, and the sheriff was lighting the lamp, as he came in.

"Heard all about it," announced Pokey. "Saw Bill Rombeau, and he said yuh was buildin' a gallus to hang Tommy McCall and the Chinaman. Which one do yuh hang first?"

"Hyah, Pokey," grinned the sheriff. "Meet Mr. Hartley. Hartley, this is Pokey Scott, owner of the Circle S."

They shook hands gravely, and Pokey said:

"Length must run in yore family. Mine are all short and bow-legged."

"Aunt Minnie come in with yuh, Pokey?" asked the sheriff.

"Oh, shore. She's down, minglin' tears with Mrs. Marsh. Minnie is a great tear-mingler. Goes t' church and cries over what happened to the children of Israel. Fact. Cries at weddin's, funerals, socials, and when there ain't nothin' special goin' on—she jist cries."

"Can't stand sufferin'," remarked the sheriff.

"Can't, eh?" snorted Pokey. "Kept me away from liquor for thirty days. Can't stand sufferin'!"

"Pokey, who hated Parke Wells bad enough to kill him?" asked the sheriff.

"I did. Bigoted, cross-grained, big-headed reptile."

"Yuh hadn't ought to speak ill of the dead, Pokey."

"I've still got my opinions, Doc. I hated him from the belt both ways, and him bein' dead don't change my opinion. I'll go to his funeral and bow m' head in prayer, because I'm a damned hypocrite, just like a lot more of you fellers."

Hashknife smiled. Pokey Scott was just an honest old rawhider, ready for fight or fun. Pokey turned to the sheriff.

"Why keep Tommy McCall in jail? Hell, all he wanted was to marry Sally. Yuh can't hang a man for that. Parke Wells was a fool. Tommy is a damn sight better'n Dave Marsh—and Parke once gave them his blessin'. They tell me Dave is hittin' the bottle again. Too bad. Nice wife, good job—and no brains. Where did you come from, Hartley?"

Hashknife smiled slowly, as he replied, "Mr. Scott, that is a hard question to answer. My pardner and I keep on the move most of the time. We came here over the top of the San Pablos."

"Saddle tramps, eh?"

"Yeah, reckon that's about what we are."

"Don't pay," declared Pokey. "Never amount to anything', never have anythin'—die driftin' and the county will have to bury yuh. Look at me. I'm a solid, respectable

citizen, hard-workin', God-fearin'. Got money in the bank, and cows on the hoof. Die in m' own bed and with money to pay for my own funeral. That's me."

"And if yuh had it to do all over again?" suggested Hashknife.

"Do it all over again? Why, I—damn it, I'd do jist what yo're doin'."

They all laughed, but Pokey was serious.

"I mean it," he declared. "There's a lot of things to see—they tell me. I had an itchin' foot—but I met Minnie, and she made up my mind to settle down and raise cows. And here I am, sixty year old, bow-legged and mean—and what have I seen? Nothin'."

"Never traveled?" asked Hashknife.

"Oh, yeah, I've traveled. Been to Phoenix, Tucson and once I got up to Flagstaff."

"How's the cow business down here?" asked Hashknife.

"Oh, it's all right."

"Rustlers ever bother yuh any?"

"Rustlers?" Pokey looked curiously at Hashknife.

"Parke Wells thought they were liftin' some of his cows."

"Oh, yeah. Well, he was one of them human critters that thought all his cows should have twins. Couldn't anybody steal his cows. Nossir, rustlers never bothered me none."

Mort Kane came in and joined the group.

"We were discussin' rustlers, Mort," said the sheriff.

The foreman of the Roman Seven laughed. "Rustlers, eh?"

"Hartley was askin' Pokey if they bothered him any."

Mort Kane looked at Hashknife, who said, "You told me that Parke Wells had asked the association for help."

"That's right," admitted Kane. "But I think Parke was imaginin' things."

"He could—easy," said Pokey. "If I didn't have anythin' more than rustlers to bother me, I'd—"

From somewhere came the unmistakable report of a gun-shot. Pokey stopped talking and the four men looked at each other. Sleepy and Buck were crossing the street toward the office, and they heard Sleepy say:

"It was in the alley, Buck—I saw the flash!"

The four men crowded outside. The alley led to one side of the jail. Buck and Sleepy were already down there. The sheriff turned back, and they all went through the office, down a narrow corridor to the cells. Tommy McCall yelled to them:

"Somebody shootin' in the alley!"

The sheriff opened Sing Low's cell and lighted a match. The Chinaman was flat on his back beside a barred window, which opened out on the alley, and there was a rapidly increasing pool of blood under his head. Doc quickly lighted a lamp, sent Buck for the doctor, while Hashknife made a quick examination.

"The doctor won't help him none," said Hashknife. "That bullet went in under his chin, and straight up through his brain. Somebody called him over to the window, and as he looked out—they got him cold."

"But why?" asked the sheriff testily.

"So he couldn't tell what he knew at that inquest tomorrow."

"The best damn cook in San Pablo Valley," said Mort Kane.

Old Doctor Reber showed up in a few minutes. He was both the coroner, and undertaker.

"Never knew what hit him," he said quietly.

"What did he know that he could tell at the inquest?" asked Kane.

"We'll never know the answer to that question, Mort," replied the sheriff. "Somebody was afraid he'd say somethin', I reckon. What a mess!"

"And what a mess we're in," added Buck Sneed. "Three murders. My Gawd, a man ain't even safe in jail! Better tell Tommy to sleep on the floor and not even answer anybody."

THE doctor got some men to help take the body away, and Hashknife and Sleepy went to their room at the hotel. Someone had been there ahead of them, and had emptied their war-sacks on the floor, yanked open the empty drawers of the bureau and commode, and even tossed the bedding aside.

Hashknife and Sleepy surveyed the scattered articles, and, without any comment, separated their own stuff and put it back in their sacks.

"It's kinda good to have that happen once in a while," commented Sleepy. "It gives yuh a chance to see just how much stuff yuh

have accumulated. I thought I'd lost that red tie—and there she was."

"Sort of a house-cleanin'," nodded Hashknife. "Somebody tryin' to find out who we are and why we're here, I reckon. I hope they're satisfied."

Sleepy sat down, his boot-heels on the window-sill, and looked out at the moonlight across the distant San Pablos, while Hashknife sprawled on the bed, smoking a cigarette, as he scowled at the ceiling.

"I wonder what the Chinaman knew," said Sleepy quietly. "And what's behind all this killin', pardner? Do yuh reckon the Chinaman knew who killed Parke Wells?"

"I don't believe he did, Sleepy. I reckon he thought Tommy McCall did it, and that's why he hid Tommy's hat. But somebody else had a hunch that Sing Low knew somethin' else; so they shut his mouth."

"Yeah, it kinda looks thataway," agreed Sleepy. "You was kinda askin' about Parke Wells' mine. Sa-a-ay! What about Dave Marsh? Everythin' that Parke Wells left will go to the two daughters, and Marsh will get his share."

"Dave Marsh was home when Parke Wells was killed," replied Hashknife. "Sally Wells told me that. But there's a queer angle to things. Maybe the killer went back and busted into Wells' private money-box, but my hunch is that somebody else, hearin' that Wells was killed, went out and tried to find somethin' in that box—somethin' worth more than money to him.

"Yuh see, Parke Wells didn't have supper at the ranch that night. Nobody knows where he was. I talked with Slim Hope, who says Parke Wells wasn't there for supper, and that him and Mort Kane left after supper and came to town. They thought Wells had stayed in town to eat, but nobody seems to have seen him here."

"Why in the devil would a killer use a hatchet?" wondered Sleepy.

"I looked at the body," said Hashknife. "There's a deep bruise over the left eye, made by the hammer end of the hatchet, I reckon. Yuh know, Sleepy, the sign kinda reads that Parke Wells had the drop on the man who killed him. Maybe the hatchet was on the table, behind the man. He flung it at Wells and downed him. Then he grabbed the hatchet and finished the job. Maybe I'm plumb off the track, but it kinda reads thataway. The sheriff says that Wells' gun was on the floor—cocked."

"By golly, I'll betcha that's what happened!" exclaimed Sleepy.

"Except for one fact," said Hashknife slowly. "The killer got Tony Montez to bring a fake message to Sally Wells, in order for her to be away from the ranch. The killin' was premeditated. This man knew that Parke Wells would be at the ranch. Maybe Wells got the drop on him, and the killin' was done as I told yuh—but I don't believe it. The man could have cocked Wells' gun and left it on the floor."

"Did the man kill Tony Montez before he killed Wells?" asked Sleepy.

"I think he did. He'd have to, in order to be sure Tony wouldn't talk."

"Hashknife, do you think Tommy McCall had anythin' to do with it?"

"No. I believe he got scared away, when the Chinaman started yellin', and lost his hat. The Chinaman found the hat and hid it, thinkin' that Tommy did it. Anyway, we'll see what the inquest brings out. How did you and Buck come out in yore pool games?"

"The way that feller plays pool," replied Sleepy, "indicates to me that he wasted his youth around a pool table."

DOC LORIMER, the sheriff of San Pablo Valley, had never had many opportunities to bask in the spotlight, and he was enjoying himself at the inquest. Sally Wells sat in the witness chair, her hands clenched, facing the six-man jury. Tommy McCall was sitting in the front row, beside Buck Sneed. Tommy was just a bit mad, because it seemed to him that Doc Lorimer was trying to convict him at the inquest.

"Miss Wells," said the sheriff, "could yore father have known that Tommy McCall was comin' out there that evenin' to elope with you?"

"I don't know how he could," she replied firmly.

"You don't know that he didn't?"

"How could I swear to that?" she retorted.

"Uh-huh. You have admitted that yore father didn't like Tommy McCall. Maybe he knew you was agoin' to elope with McCall, and *he* faked that message that Tony Montez brought to you. Maybe he wanted to

get you away; so he could deal with McCall. Ain't that right?"

"And then went out and murdered Tony Montez," she added coldly. "You must have had a very good opinion of my—my father."

"I don't know who murdered Tony," replied the sheriff. "Right now, we are tryin' to find out who killed yore father. You say that Sing Low found McCall's hat and hid it. He also must have put the ladder away. It kinda looks as though Sing Low was tryin' to protect McCall. If McCall had nothin' to do with it, why didn't he stop and investigate, when he heard Sing Low yelling for help?"

Tommy jumped to his feet, with Buck hanging to his sleeve.

"Why ask her that question?" demanded Tommy hotly. "She wasn't there. I told yuh my story, Doc, and it's true."

"All right," replied the sheriff, coldly, "I'll ask *you* that question. Why didn't you stop and investigate when Sing Low was yellin' for help?"

"Because I was too damn scared," replied Tommy soberly.

The crowd enjoyed their first laugh of the inquest, with Doc Reber hammering on his desk for order. Sally was excused. Mrs. Marsh, her sister, was put on the stand, merely to testify that she had not been sick, and did not send for Sally. Mort Kane took the stand, but had nothing to offer as real evidence. He did not see Parke Wells during the afternoon, and did not see him in Encinitas that evening. He thought it was possible that Wells had gone out to the Golden Streak.

The jury was out about thirty minutes, while the crowd waited impatiently for their verdict. Bill Rombeau had been appointed foreman, and the others were Alex McLaren, Ed Hill, Dan Black, Jim Bell and Al Fisher. When they came back, Bill Rombeau said:

"We have decided that there is enough evidence to hold Tommy McCall for the next session of Superior Court."

The coroner polled the jury, and each member nodded in agreement. Buck Sneed took Tommy back to jail, and the inquest went on. Hashknife and Sleepy were not interested in the other inquests, knowing that there would be no evidence to connect anyone with the slayings. Over at the Greenhorn Saloon they found Dave Marsh at the bar, red-eyed, badly in need of a shave.

"So they're going to hang Tommy McCall, eh?" he sneered. "They would. No brains. Have a drink?"

Hashknife and Sleepy accepted. It might possibly give them a chance to find out a few things from Dave Marsh, who was just drunk enough to talk.

"Yeah, I suppose they'll hang him," Hashknife remarked.

"Think so, eh?" queried Marsh. "Lis'n t' me. I know things. Tha's right. I know plenty. If I want to tell what I know—but I don't. Fill 'm up, barten'er. I know plenty. I could make everybody sit up, y'betcha."

"Whiskey talk," said Hashknife quietly.

"Whiskey talk, eh?" Dave Marsh sagged back from the bar. "Think sho, eh? Nossir, I know plenty."

"But," said Hashknife, "yo're afraid to talk, because it might implicate you."

Dave Marsh frowned over his drink, as he digested Hashknife's remark. It may have struck home, because he straightened his necktie. Then he said, "What evidence did they have against Tommy McCall?"

"None that will stand in court," replied Hashknife.

Dave Marsh took a deep breath, shoved his drink aside and turned half-around to face the tall cowboy.

"Who the devil are you, anyway?" he asked. "You act like you—well, I don't know—it seems like—"

Dave Marsh turned his head away and fingered his drink. The bartender said, "You've been drinkin' too much, Dave. Why don'tcha taper off."

"Yeah," muttered Marsh. "Might be good thing."

Then he turned away from the bar and went unsteadily out of the saloon.

"Forgot to pay for that last round," said the bartender. "Somethin' upset him. What did yuh mean about him implicatin' himself?"

Hashknife smiled slowly. "A man who knows too much usually is afraid to tell it, because it might cause him trouble."

"I reckon that's right," agreed the bartender. "I hear a lot of what you called whiskey-talk, but I don't pay much attention. You're a friend of Zeke Harris, ain't yuh?"

"I hope so," replied Hashknife gravely. "A man can't have too many."

"That's what my friend, Jim Corey, used to say."

"Was Jim Corey yore friend?" asked Hashknife.

"Sure was. Didja know him?"

"No, but I've heard about him. He was a prospector, wasn't he?"

"Yeah, and he was a good one, too. Jim knowed ore. Somebody killed him."

"Did he find any good prospects around here?" asked Sleepy.

The bartender filled the glasses, before he replied.

"Jim came to me and told me he'd hit a good one. He said that this was one mine he didn't want to sell. He says, 'I'm goin' to try and get somebody to back me, and work it myself.' He said I'd be in on it. He told me to keep quiet about it, 'cause he hadn't recorded it yet. He didn't want anybody snoopin' around. I don't even know where it was, and they killed Jim before he recorded it."

"Just another 'lost mine,' eh?" said Sleepy.

"Yeah, but this one never produced. I never even seen a sample of the ore."

"I heard," said Hashknife," that he tried to get Parke Wells to back him."

"I heard that, too. I never asked Parke Wells. After all, there wasn't any use askin'—after Jim was killed."

THE crowd came over from the inquest, and Mort Kane told Hashknife that there had been no evidence in the case of Tony Montez and Sing Low.

"Do you think they can convict Tommy McCall on that evidence?" he asked.

"What evidence?" asked Hashknife.

"That's what I think, too," grinned Kane.

The crowd in the saloon seemed divided. Some seemed to think that it was wise to hold Tommy McCall. Bill Rombeau, foreman of the jury, said it was.

"If he didn't kill Parke Wells, who did?" he inquired.

No one seemed to have any ideas. One man said, "Who killed Sing Low? Find the killer of that Chinaman, and you'll have the killer of Parke Wells."

"How do yuh figure that?" asked Rombeau.

"The killer was afraid the Chinaman might have seen him."

"Aw, shucks!" snorted the owner of the WHR spread. "Some friend of Tommy McCall killed the Chinaman, before the Chinaman had a chance to tell what he knew about the shootin'. We've got the right man."

Hashknife and Sleepy went down to the sheriff's office, and the sheriff let them talk to Tommy McCall, who was properly indignant over the action of that jury.

"It was Bill Rombeau who did it," insisted Tommy. "Why did they make that big saddle-bum foreman of the jury?"

"Did you ever have any trouble with Bill Rombeau, Tommy?" asked Hashknife.

"It wasn't trouble," replied Tommy. "Bill wanted to take Sally to a dance in Encinitas, but she told him she wasn't goin'. She didn't want to go with him. Then she went with me. That was before Parke Wells told me to keep away. Rombeau got tough about it and I hit him on the nose. He couldn't smell onions for a week. Refused to fight with his hands. Said he'd get me for that. But, shucks, that happened over a year ago."

"What else do yuh know about Rombeau, Tommy?"

"Well, nothin' that everybody else don't know. He's—wait a minute!" Tommy scowled thoughtfully for several moments. Then he said, "There was a cow-poke down here about a year ago from the Huachucas, and he stayed with me a couple days. Bill came out to my place while this feller was there, and after Bill went away this feller says to me:

"'Rombeau, eh? Bill Rombeau. Saa-y! I know that whippoorwill, Tommy, but his name was Timmons.'

"But I didn't pay much attention," said Tommy. "Names don't mean so much, after all. Fellers change their names once in a while—out here."

"Especially when there's a good reason," said Hashknife quietly. "Thank yuh, Tommy."

"Did that information help any?" asked Sleepy, after they left the jail.

"Well," smiled Hashknife, "it adds to the general information. All we've got to do now is to find out who killed Parke Wells, Tony Montez and Sing Low. After that, it'll be easy."

THREE funerals in one day was an unusual event for a town the size of Encinitas, and it seemed that everybody in San Pablo Valley was there. Zeke Harris was principal mourner for Tony Montez, dressed in his wrinkled, Sunday best. He wanted Hashknife and Sleepy to sit with him, which they did. Zeke was very sincere in his friendship to Tony Montez, whose funeral was conducted after the procession had left for the cemetery with the body of Parke Wells. Sing Low was last.

Zeke thanked Hashknife and Sleepy, who did not go out to the cemetery, but sat in the shade of the hotel porch. Buck Sneed came and sat with them, thankful that he didn't have to go to the cemetery.

"But for the grace of God, we could be those three," said Sleepy.

Buck shuddered. "Yeah, I reckon so," he admitted. "I'd prob'ly be the Chinaman—I never did have any luck. Dang it, I feel sorry for Tommy—a-settin' down there in that hot jail, wonderin' what'll happen next. I hired an old jigger to take care of things out at Tommy's ranch, until he's loose—or hung."

"That won't happen," said Sleepy. "Hell, they can't hang a man on the evidence they've got against Tommy McCall."

"That's right," agreed Buck, "but they might. I heard a man sayin', 'If the law don't hang him—we will.' Can yuh imagine that?"

"Who was the man?" asked Hashknife curiously.

"Andy Hope. Brother of Slim Hope. Works for the Rombeau outfit."

"Whiskey-talk," said Sleepy.

"Yeah. Anyway, a certain amount. But a damn fool like Andy might start somethin' that'd be hard to stop."

"A man," said Hashknife, "is supposed to be the most intelligent of all animals. Put two together, and the intelligence drops; and when yuh put fifty in a bunch, let someone yell for a rope, and they haven't got as much sense as fifty wolves. They don't have to be drunk. In fact, if they were drunk, the mob instinct won't work, because a drunken man wants to argue. Buck's right. A suggestion of that kind, at the wrong time, might make things tough for Tommy McCall, who is just as innocent as either of us."

"I wish yuh could prove that," sighed Buck. "This big bunch of hairy wolves will come back from that funeral, have a few drinks, talk things over and decide to rid the country of all criminals. Oh, I know 'em."

"I didn't see Dave Marsh at the funeral," said Hashknife.

"He wasn't there," said Buck. "He's home, a settin' on the front porch, with a bottle. Somethin' is wrong with a *pelicano,* Hashknife. He ain't shaved for three days. That ain't like him, a-tall. And," Buck's voice lowered, "he's packin' a gun in a shoulder holster. I'm jist afraid that somebody is goin' to have to kill that feller."

"Who do yuh reckon that *somebody* will be, Buck?"

"Jist so it ain't me—I don't care. The commissioners are askin' Dave to resign tomorrow. Doc told me. I dunno if Dave knows it or not. Sally told me she was goin' to try and have Mrs. Marsh stay at the ranch with her. She's a-scared of Dave—and I don't blame her a darned bit. I seen him today, and his eyes look like pieces of green beer-bottle glass. Looked right past me, and told me to go to hell. Nice feller, that Dave Marsh."

They came drifting back from the cemetery in singles and groups. Pokey Scott, bowlegged his way onto the hotel porch, uncomfortable in a ill-fitting, rusty-black suit, stiff collar, and a pair of yellow shoes.

"M' feet are killin' me," he declared. "Standin' around in the heat."

"Pretty hot out there on the hill," said Sleepy.

"Good place to start a sinner out," sighed Pokey. "After a touch of that, he won't mind where he goes. Me a-standin' there, first on one foot and then on the other, with Minnie bawlin' sad-like. I tell yuh it was awful. She liked it. Now she's with Sally and Mrs. Marsh, helpin' them bawl. Minnie's good for couple hours yet. I dunno how anybody, in heat like this, can muster up that much moisture."

"Some women," said Sleepy, "are natural weepin'-willers, I hear."

"It don't seem to hurt 'em none," said Pokey. "Minnie's been doin' it ever since the day I married her. Weddin's, funerals, good-news, bad-news, it's all the same to her. Yuh ain't seen Dave Marsh, have yuh?"

"Not today," replied Hashknife. "He wasn't at the funerals?"

"Nope."

More people drifted in, most of them going to the Greenhorn Saloon to drink hard liquor and talk over the situation. Mort Kane came over to the hotel and sat down with them, mopping perspiration from his brow.

Pokey asked Mort if he had seen Dave Marsh.

"I reckon he's home, too drunk to move," replied Mort.

"Packin' a gun," added Pokey.

Mort nodded. "That's a bad combination," he said.

"Maybe he's got somethin' on his mind," suggested Hashknife. "Tryin' to get up enough nerve to kill somebody."

Mort looked at Hashknife keenly. "Do yuh think so?" he asked.

"Yeah," said Hashknife. "He's prob'ly got a killin' in mind."

"I'm glad me and him have always been friends," said Buck Sneed. "I'd hate to have to kill a drunk."

"A feller," said Mort Kane, "has to protect himself, I reckon. I know I would. Yuh can't take a chance with a drunk and a gun."

Some loud conversation started over in the Greenhorn Saloon, and Buck Sneed went over there to see what it was all about.

"Arguin' over Tommy McCall, I reckon," said Mort Kane. "Well, I reckon I'll go out to the ranch. Why don't yuh run out and visit us?"

"Mebbe we will," yawned Hashknife. "I'd like to have a talk with Miss Wells. I wonder if she'll be home this evenin'."

"I don't know—she prob'ly will. Well, I'll see yuh, later," and Mort went over to the Greenhorn Saloon.

Hashknife said, "How about somethin' to eat, pardner? And after supper we'll take a ride. I'm gettin' tired of settin' on a chair."

IT WAS sundown when Hashknife and Sleepy rode in at the Roman Seven. It was their first visit to the place, but there was no one to welcome them. Evidently Sally and her sister were still in Encinitas, and none of the men had come back yet. They left their horses behind the patio and looked the place over. Several head of cattle were at the watering-trough near the stable; so the two cowboys wandered down there.

All except two of the steers were branded with the Roman Seven. One was a Circle S, belonging to Pokey Scott, while the other was branded with the WHR, the Bill Rombeau brand. Hashknife studied the three brands closely for several minutes, while Sleepy rolled and lighted a cigarette.

"This is a nice layout," remarked Sleepy.

"Purty good—seems to me," Hashknife drawled.

HE rolled a cigarette, and as he shaped it he sang softly, the song of the Jingle Bob spread:

"When I'm too old for work
And my legs raveled out,
I want a good chuck wagon job.
I want to stay out where the wild cattle roam,
I want the ol' cow-trail to still be my home,
And to work for the Ol' Jingle Bob."

Sleepy tensed a little, as Hashknife's rather unmusical voice mourned over the old Jingle Bob. It was a rare thing for the tall cowboy to sing. In fact, he never sang until a mystery was not exactly a mystery any longer—in his mind. That song, to Sleepy, meant that Hashknife had at last found something that might lead to powder smoke. But Sleepy said nothing. Hashknife lighted his cigarette, and they walked slowly back to the patio.

Darkness comes swiftly after sundown in the Arizona hills. They were about to circle the patio, when they heard sounds of galloping hoofs. They stepped inside the patio, and in the half-light they saw a man dismount near the corral fence, leave his horse and hurry to the house. They were unable to see who he was. They heard him close the door behind him.

"I think it was Dave Marsh," whispered Hashknife. "He didn't wear a big hat, and he wasn't wearin' spurs."

There was a big window opening onto the patio, but it was closed. Hashknife moved out through the patio gate, where he could see some of the windows in the main room, but there was no light in the house, as far as he could see; so he went back into the patio, where Sleepy was

crouched against the window, listening closely.

It was possibly ten minutes later when two riders came up to the ranchhouse, apparently not in any hurry. One went into the house, while the other took both horses down to the stable.

"Mort Kane and Slim Hope," whispered Hashknife. "I heard Kane speak Slim's name."

Sleepy had managed to open the patio window a trifle, and they could hear voices. Suddenly Dave Marsh's voice, pitched in a high key, declared:

"I'm damned if yuh do, Kane! I knew you got that paper. 'Cause it wasn't there when I came here, and you was the only one who knew about it. You wanted to blackmail me just like Parke Wells did. I done crooked work for Parke Wells, because I didn't want to hang for a murder that I don't believe I committed. But you can't scare me, Kane. I'm through bein' scared, and I am not afraid of any damn snake like you. I believe you murdered Parke Wells, Kane, and I—keep your damn hands off me! Kane, I'll—"

A shot thudded inside the house. There was silence for several moments and then they heard Slim Hope running from the stable. Kane's voice called, "C'mere, Slim."

Then they heard the door close behind Slim Hope. Sleepy whispered, "What the hell happened in there, do yuh suppose?"

"Somebody got a one-way ticket, I reckon," said Hashknife calmly.

"Hadn't we better take a look?"

"Not yet."

A few moments later another shot sounded in the house, and Hashknife was certain that he heard the bullet strike one of the outbuildings. Then the two men came out, talking nervously, and headed for the stable. They heard one of them say:

"We can circle and come in behind 'em—like we was comin' from town."

Not over two minutes later the two men galloped swiftly away from the ranch, heading back toward Encinitas. Hashknife and Sleepy found the door unlocked and went into the house. The air was full of powder fumes. With the aid of a match they located the lamp, the chimney of which was still hot.

On the floor beside a table was Dave Marsh, a six-shooter only a few inches from his clenched right hand. It had been fired once. Marsh had been shot through the heart and at such close range that his coat was scorched. On the table was a single sheet of paper. Hashknife picked it up and quickly read aloud:

"I am making this confession of my own free will. I shot and killed Jim Corey on April 15th, and hid his body in the hills. I swear that no one helped me in this deal, and I alone am guilty of his murder. I had good and sufficient reasons for the deed."

"Lovely dove!" breathed Sleepy.

"And it's signed by David Marsh," said Hashknife. He looked down at the dead man, a grim expression in his gray eyes.

"Suicide and confession," he said. "They fired Marsh's gun through that open window, so there'd be an empty shell under the hammer."

Then he leaned down, pulled Marsh's coat aside, disclosing the corner of a white envelope in an inside pocket. The bullet had torn one corner partly off, and there was blood on it. On the envelope had been penciled the name of Doc Lorimer, the sheriff.

Hashknife ripped the envelope open and took out the single sheet of paper it contained. He stepped over to the light and quickly scanned the writing. It was shaky and ink-spotted, but legible. Then he put both papers in his pocket, blew out the light, and said:

"C'mon, pardner—we're finished here."

They went out quickly, closed the door, and hurried back to their horses.

"Gettin' about time to play a hand or two, pardner?" asked Sleepy.

"Yea-a-ah," drawled Hashknife, as he swung into his saddle, "they've been dealin' off the bottom of the deck long enough."

ZEKE HARRIS had searched Encinitas for Dave Marsh. He wanted to tell Dave that his wife was going out to the Roman Seven, and, if possible, to get Dave to go along. But Zeke had no success in his search. There was a drunken gang in the Greenhorn Saloon, and all they lacked was a leader to take Tommy McCall out of jail and try him for murder. Zeke went back and told Sally that he couldn't find Dave.

So Sally, Mrs. Marsh and Zeke got into the buggy and started for home. It was

quite dark, and they were driving slowly as they approached the forks of the road, where they were to turn to the right on the Roman Seven Road. Suddenly Zeke jerked the team to a stop. A short distance ahead of them he had seen the flash of gun shots, and they heard the reports.

"What do yuh reckon that was?" said Zeke nervously. "Must have been four, five shots!"

Then there were three riders, racing at top speed, who went past them in a shower of dust; traveling so fast that there was no chance of identification. The three in the buggy were covered with suffocating dust, and with no chance to get out of it, until they could drive past where the horsemen had started.

But they did not get past that spot. The horses swerved wildly, almost upsetting the buggy. But Zeke was a good driver, and managed to get the vehicle straightened out. Calming the horses for a moment, he gave the lines to Sally, and climbed out.

Zeke almost stumbled over the body in the road. Zeke lighted a match and looked down into the bloody and dust-smeared face of Slim Hope. Ten feet further on, a pair of boots showed over the edge of the road, barely visible in the bad light. The owner of those boots was Mort Kane, foreman of the Roman Seven, and as far as Zeke was able to determine in a quick examination, just as dead as Slim Hope. A saddled horse was tangled up in the brush a few yards away.

Zeke ran back, climbed into the buggy and turned the team around.

"Mort Kane and Slim Hope!" exclaimed Zeke. "Both dead, I think. Well, get the sheriff and a doctor."

Zeke whipped the team into a run, and they went back to Encinitas in a shower of dust.

"Who could have done it?" asked Sally. "Who would kill Mort and Slim? What is this country coming to, anyway?"

"She's shore gettin' perilous," said Zeke. "If this keeps up, I'm goin' t' rent me a church to sleep in.

HASHKNIFE and Sleepy didn't come back on the road. On the way out Hashknife had looked over the country and decided just how to cut across the hills. He was not sure just how many people knew they had gone out to the Roman Seven. They were cutting through the brush on a mesa, when they heard the shots, but were unable to tell whether they had been fired on the road or at Encinitas.

"Somebody celebratin' the funerals," remarked Sleepy.

There seemed to be considerable excitement on the street, as they stabled their own horses in town. Evidently the stable men had joined the crowd in front of the Greenhorn Saloon. Sally and Mrs. Marsh were in the buggy in front of the hotel, as Hashknife and Sleepy came up there. Pokey Scott was there, together with several other men, all talking excitedly. Pokey saw Hashknife and grabbed him by the arm.

"Didja hear it?" he asked anxiously. "Somebody bushed Mort Kane and Slim Hope out at the forks of the road a while ago. The sheriff and coroner have gone out to git 'em."

"Killed 'em both?" asked Hashknife.

"Zeke Harris said he thought they was dead. Who'd do that, Hartley?"

"I don't reckon I've got the answer to that one, replied Hashknife.

Zeke came up on the porch, spoke to Hashknife and said, "It's a good thing somethin' happened. They tell me that that drunken bunch in the Greenhorn was jist about to make a trip to the jail. This kinda cooled 'em off. I think Tommy is all right now."

Someone yelled that they were coming back with the bodies. Hashknife drew Zeke aside and whispered to him for several moments.

"Yo're damn right! I'm with yuh, plumb up to m' chin," said Zeke.

The wagon turned on a side street and took the bodies down to the doctor's place, but the riders came on and tied up at the Greenhorn rack. Hashknife, Sleepy and Zeke sat on the hotel porch. Buck Sneed came from the doctor's place and stopped at the porch.

"We was a-wonderin' where you two were," he said. "Didn't see yuh around."

"We went for a ride, Buck," replied Hashknife.

"Uh-huh. Mighty nigh had work for a couple good hands around here a while ago. Some of the boys kinda hankered for a necktie party, seems t' me."

Doc Lorimer came along.

"I was a-tellin Hartley and Stevens about the boys hankerin' for a rope-stretchin' a while ago," Buck told him.

"Yea-a-ah," drawled the sheriff. "You boys been out of town?"

"Went for a little ride," replied Hashknife. "Any idea who bushed the two fellers, Doc?"

"Ain't had time to talk about it. C'mon, Buck, we'll drop over to the Greenhorn."

"Three men, Doc," said Zeke. "Three men came past us."

"Thank yuh, Zeke."

"As if it made any difference," sighed Zeke, after the sheriff and deputy had gone. "One or fifteen—he won't find 'em. Yuh know, yuh can't hardly imagine Mort and Slim bein' dead. Nice fellers, both of 'em."

"Went to Sunday school and said their prayers every night," said Sleepy.

"I dunno about that," said Zeke.

"Let's see what's goin' on across the street," suggested Hashknife, and added quietly, "Keep both eyes open—there's three of 'em."

THE Greenhorn Saloon was crowded, the lamps dimmed in tobacco smoke, which swirled around them as the crowd moved. The sheriff had cleared a space in the middle of the room, and was standing with his back against the bar as he questioned them.

"Zeke Harris saw three men come from that killin', and they was headin' for Encinitas," he said.

"Mebbe turned off some'ers sheriff," suggested a cowboy.

Hashknife craned his neck and saw that it was Dell Bush, one of Bill Rombeau's outfit.

"Mebbe. Where was you, Bush," remarked the sheriff dryly.

"Me? Hell, I was here, Doc. Ain't been away. You ask Bill Rombeau."

"How about it, Rombeau?" asked the sheriff.

Bill Rombeau, standing near the sheriff, laughed and nodded.

"Dell's right, Doc; we've been here all the time."

Hashknife shoved his way to the front near the sheriff, while Sleepy and Zeke eased their way to other favorable positions. Rombeau saw Hashknife, and turned quickly to the sheriff.

"Yuh might ask Hartley where *he* was," he suggested. All eyes turned on Hashknife, who smiled slowly, except with his eyes, which were directly on Bill Rombeau.

"Ain't nobody seen *him* around here this evenin," added Rombeau.

The sheriff said quietly, "Well, Hartley, where were you?"

"Snake huntin'," replied Hashknife, "and I think I found their nest."

All conversation ceased. They were watching this tall, hard-faced cowboy, who never took his eyes off Bill Rombeau.

"Snake nest, Hartley?" the sheriff repeated.

Hashknife's reply was an almost imperceptible nod. Then he said, "That's right—snakes, sheriff."

Rombeau laughed harshly. "Better ask 'em more, Doc. They went out to the Roman Seven late this afternoon, and they ain't been seen since, until jist now. I'll bet they know somethin' about the deal."

"We do," said Hashknife quietly. "I'm glad to hear yuh say that *you* knew we went out to the Roman Seven. I want all you men to remember that he knew we went out there tonight."

Bill Rombeau's eyes went a little blank. He didn't know exactly what Hashknife meant. Then Hashknife went on. "It's important that Bill Rombeau knew we were out there tonight, because two men were shot off their horses—on their way back from the Roman Seven."

"What's that got to do with me?" asked Rombeau harshly.

"Quite a little," replied Hashknife. "Bill, why did you change yore name from Timmons to Rombeau? Up in the Huachucas they know you as Bill Timmons—down here, yo're Rombeau. Why the change?"

"I don't know what yo're talkin' about," rasped Rombeau. "I ain't never been in the Huachucas. Anybody that says I have is a damn liar!"

"Yo're name was Timmons," declared Hashknife evenly. "You came down here and bought out a little brand. You *had* to change yore name, so yuh could use yore initials on a brand that yuh could work right over the top of Roman Seven. The T in Timmons wouldn't work. Parke Wells

discovered it—and you murdered him, you snake!"

"That's a lie!" shouted Rombeau. "I—Mort Kane killed—why, you damned—"

The crowd ducked instantly. Some of them went flat on the floor. Rombeau whirled, flung both arms around the sheriff, and tripped him as he tried to plunge him into Hashknife. A six-shooter blasted, as Rombeau bumped against the bar, trying to regain his balance, and he went down, clawing at the bar. Sleepy's voice rasped:

"Hold it, you fool! Well, if yuh must have it!"

Whap! Andy Hope went staggering almost to the center of the circle, his gun falling from his hand, and went down on his face.

"I had to pet him kinda hard, said Sleepy. "He thought he jist *had* to do some killin'."

"Mister Dell Bush," declared Zeke dryly, "plumb forgot which hand t' use. Step out, Dell and let the folks admire yuh."

Dell Bush stepped out, hands above his shoulders, looking very much as though he was going to pass out, while Zeke prodded him with a gun barrel.

"Much obliged, Zeke," said Hashknife.

"Tha's all right," replied Zeke. "I had an open shot at the big *pelicano*. And, Doc, if yuh don't mind doin' it, put some bracelets on this canary, before I shove all his ribs to the front."

The crowd had gathered again, looking dumbly around, trying to get their mental bearings. The sheriff put handcuffs on Dell Bush, as Doctor Reber came running in, bareheaded, carrying his little black bag. Rombeau, or Timmons, was not dead, nor was he unconscious. But when the doctor made his examination, the big owner of the WHR seemed to sense that things were not so good.

"Pretty bad, Doc?" he whispered. Doctor Reber nodded his head. "Finished, Doc?"

"I'm afraid so, Bill."

"Well, what the hell," whispered the big outlaw, "I played out the string. Where's Hartley? Oh, there yuh are. You got off lucky. We thought it was you and yore pardner. Kane said we'd have to git rid of you two. We never knowed that Kane and Hope went out to the ranch."

He choked and they had to wait a few moments.

"You killed Parke Wells?" the sheriff asked.

"No," whispered Rombeau painfully. "Parke Wells found out what we done. He told Mort he was goin' to send for me to come over that night. Mort—" He drew a deep breath, and they thought he had passed out, but he rallied. "Mort got Sally away. Then he killed Tony on his way back to the ranch. Parke Wells accused me—and had a gun on me—but Mort hit him with the hatchet. He—he had to kill him. Then he got scared of what the Chinaman might know. Slim Hope killed Sing Low."

"How many steers did yuh steal from the Roman Seven?" asked the sheriff.

But the man didn't answer, he just stared into space. Doctor Reber said quietly, "I don't believe he will ever answer that one, Doc."

"It don't matter," said the sheriff, "He won't steal any more."

"You can turn Tommy McCall loose," said Hashknife.

"Yeah, that's right—I can. Well, well! what next?"

They started for the jail with Dell Bush and Andy Hope, who was able to travel under his own power. Someone had told Sally and Mrs. Marsh, and they were going down there, too. Zeke Harris was running across the street, talking excitedly.

"I told yuh, didn't I?" he said. "My brother wasn't wrong, was he? He said that Hashknife Hartley was a dinger, didn't he? I knowed it! Whoo-ee-ee!"

Hashknife and Sleepy paid their hotel bill and went up to their room to get their war-sacks.

"There wasn't nothin' said about Dave Marsh," remarked Sleepy.

"Listen to this," said Hashknife. By the lamplight he read the letter he had taken off Dave Marsh's body.

"Sheriff Doctor Lorimer, Encinitis.

"Tonight I am going to kill a man—or get killed—and I don't care much which way it goes. I have been under the thumb of a man I hate ever since Jim Corey was killed. I believe I was tricked into confessing the murder. I was too drunk to know what I did, nor what hap-

pened. All I know is that I was forced to confess—on paper, and that confession has been held over my head, until I can't stand it any longer.

"I was forced to alter records so that Parke Wells, and not Jim Corey would show as the owner of the Golden Streak. When Parke Wells was killed, I went to the ranch to break open his safe and get that paper. But somebody else had broken it ahead of me, and I feel that I know who it was. I can't go on, with this in his hands, so this is the showdown.

"If you ever read this, Doc, you'll know what it means. If I can get the man who stole it, you'll never read this —if I don't I won't care.

"Hasta luego. Doc,
"David Marsh."

Hashknife took both letters, held them over the lighted lamp until they burst into flames. Then he tossed them into the big wash-bowl and watched them fade into a black ash, which he dumped into a cuspidor.

"No use goin' any further with this," he told Sleepy. "They'll see that Marsh committed suicide—prob'ly from whiskey. Parke Wells was a bad-boy, but there's no use visitin' his sins on the heads of two innocent women. I reckon that ends it in San Pablo Valley, pardner."

"And there's some awful good lookin' hills north of here," said Sleepy, as he picked up his war-sack and pulled the drawstrings tightly.

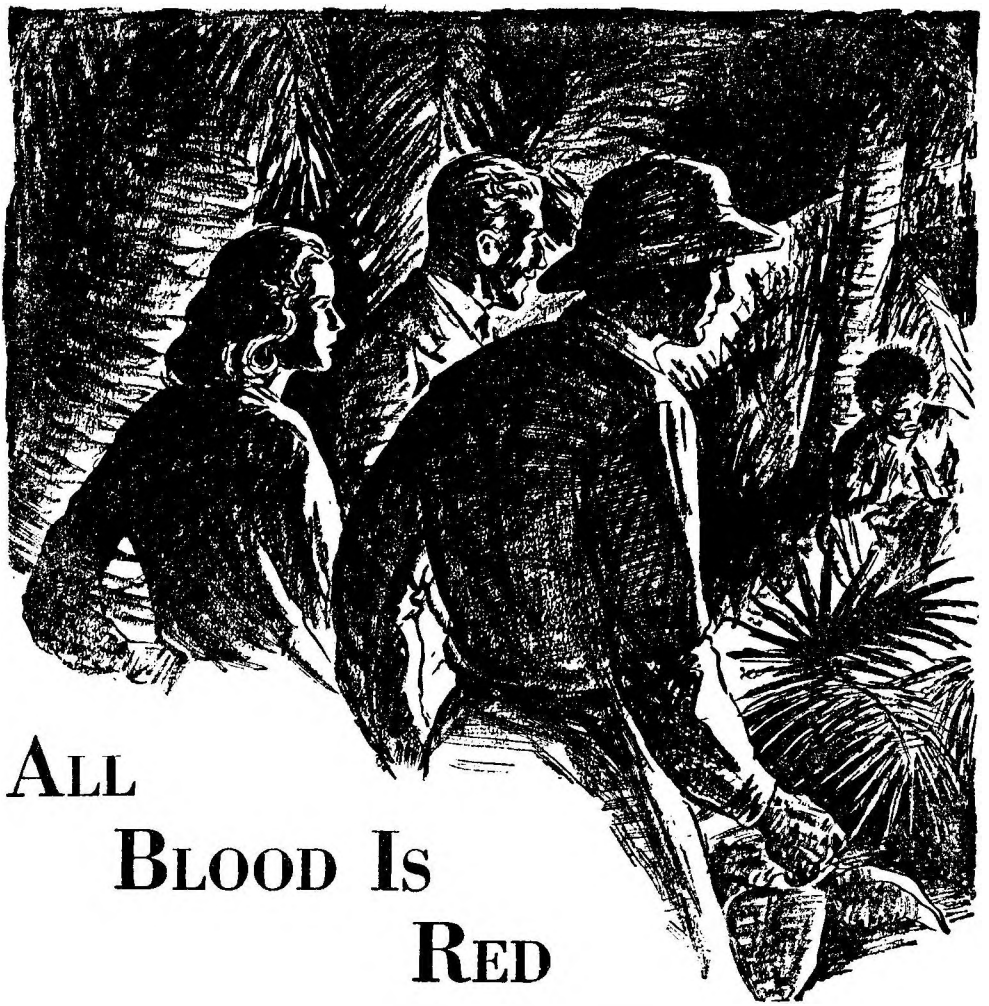
They saddled their horses at the stable and rode away, while Encinitas was still celebrating the release of Tommy McCall, and the end of rustling in San Pablo Valley. It was like them to go quietly away, never even saying good-by to anyone. Their job was done, and they were heading for another hill.

They rode past the forks, where three men had died violently during their short stay in Encinitas. The stars were like diamonds, dancing on the broken outline of the San Pablos, as they rode slowly along the rough highway, heading north. Sleepy said:

"I'm glad we stopped a while, even if I didn't find a danged pool player I could beat. It squared things for Sally and Tommy, stopped the rustlers, and didn't hurt anybody, except them that had it comin'. Why, it even vindicated Zeke Harris, Hashknife."

"I'm glad about that," said Hashknife quietly. "When a person has faith in yuh—it's shore great to make good, especially since his brother named his kid Hartley Stevens Harris."

They both chuckled and rode silently along, with only the soft *plop, plop plop* of hoofs in the dust, and the jingle of bit-chains to show that they were heading for another hill.



ALL BLOOD IS RED

By JACKSON V. SCHOLZ

Author of "Splash Bomb Champ," etc.

THE coral beach sent off reflected, brilliant rays of light which jabbed into the brain like gimlets. The glare's intensity was something you could almost lean against, and so, involuntarily, Marty Britt inclined his body as he strode along.

He walked with the flexible, loose gait of a man who coordinates instinctively. He was angular, big-boned, assembled with a minimum of lumpiness. His battered topee showed the pith through worn spots. It was tilted to protect his eyes.

They were squinted now against the light, but normally they were wide enough to suggest he didn't believe in anything, God, man or devil—not disillusioned, merely seasoned in the South Sea crucible. He was twenty-eight years old, and looked it.

His lips, at first, seemed thin, but were fuller than they looked. It was the way he held them. His nose at one time had been well-formed, sensitive. There was a small kink in it at present, a football keepsake. It had been aggravated and made permanent by a wallop from a square gin bottle.

He didn't look like the sort of man to be caught off guard. Maybe the glare, today, was worse than usual. Maybe he was pondering too deeply on the tangled skein

of things surrounding him. Maybe he was thinking too intently about Enid Gregory.

He turned from the beach into a crude dirt road which led through the coconut grove to the experimental rubber grove beyond. He grunted with relief as the dense shade from the high trees hit him with a relaxing force which seemed to untie knots at the back of his neck. He tilted his topee back and saw a small group of native workers coming toward him along the road, moving silently on broad bare feet.

A smaller figure, head bent forward, was slightly in the lead, stocky, muscular, bandy-legged. Britt thought, at the time, that this was strange, because the build of the man ahead did not conform to the tall erectness of the other natives. However, Britt hadn't been on the island long enough to know all of Gregory's men by sight. His eyes, too, were still adjusting themselves to the sudden dimness. He kept on going."

The stocky man was one stride past him when something clicked in Britt's brain like the cocking of a trigger. His normal reflexes flashed into action — but his sixth sense came to life too late.

His cat-like whirl had barely started when something blasted against the back of his neck like a short length of pipe. An incredible numbness slammed through every nerve. He made a violent effort to retain his consciousness, but a black fog rolled in upon him, dimming his sight, crumpling his tendons. He felt himself going down, but he never knew when the ground came up and hit him.

HE CAME to slowly, fighting savagely as soon as the first glimmer of awareness gave him a small toe hold. He found himself face down upon the ground, his face pressed hard against the dank, cool earth, pungent, with the smell of rotted vegetation. He felt an involuntary twitching of his muscles as if they were trying by themselves

to reestablish contact with his brain. He let them work awhile, and when he felt the contact had been made, he tried to push himself up with his hands.

The first effort was a failure. He got half up, his elbows folded and his nose plowed in the dirt again. He cursed feebly, then tried again. This time he made it—part way. He rolled to a sitting posture, but couldn't get beyond that point.

His brain cleared fast, despite the lump of agony behind his ears. He moved his head, fearing the worst, then decided that his spine was still intact. Anger moved in after that, chill and wicked. The natives were still there, standing patiently, watching him with stolid faces. They were all there except the bandy-legged man.

"Where is he?" Britt demanded hoarsely. "Where's the ape that slugged me?"

Most of the men remained impassive. They may not have understood each word, but their smattering of English was good enough to let them know his meaning. Tagu was the one who answered. His English was more fluent than the English of the others,

"No more man here," he declared flatly.

Tagu had authority. He bossed a group of twenty men. He was big, even for the natives of that district. His legs were long and firm beneath the trade print loin cloth, and the muscles crawled like snakes beneath the dark skin of his torso.

The features of his face were proud and fierce. He was a native of the Gilbert Islands.

His hair, black and thick, with scarcely a trace of kinkiness, showed the strength of his Polynesian strain.

Something else showed, too—in his expression—something new which blew the final cobwebs from Britt's brain like the sweep of a frosty breeze. The light in Tagu's eyes was almost insolent. The spread of his legs and the set of his head bordered dangerously upon amused contempt.

Britt tried to gain his feet, but only made a nasty situation worse by flopping back again. This time, Tagu grinned with frank amusement.

"Help me up," Britt ordered quietly.

A couple of the boys moved toward him. Tagu blocked them with a brawny arm. He muttered something in soft dialect, the boys hesitated briefly, but obeyed Tagu. The breeze blew colder in Britt's brain.

Tagu gave another throaty order, then walked past Britt as if the American were an ant hill. Britt sat for some time longer, massaging his legs slowly. His face was bleak, his eyes hard. The muscles at the angles of his jaw worked fitfully. They always danced like that when he was thinking hard, or worried.

He stood up finally, stamped more life into his legs, then started back the way he'd come. The effect of the vicious rabbit punch was wearing off. His stride was slow but steady as he moved along the beach. Now and then he'd raise his hand to rub the muscles of his neck until he winced. His head ached like the wrath of God, and the glare from the sand was no great help.

He reached his house—small bungalow, or shack—whichever name applied. It was off the ground on four-foot posts, one-roomed, but clean and cool inside. The uprights, rafters and the ridge pole were supplied by the pandanus palm. The thatch on the roof came from the same tree. The floor was made from the mid-ribs of the coconut palm leaves. It was springy, but secure.

HE WENT to a suspended canvas water bag in the corner of the room. The evaporation from the outside left the water inside fairly cool. He lifted the mosquito netting at the top, dipped in with half a coconut shell and took a drink. He poured the remainder in his hand and splashed it on his face. It made him feel some better—not enough. He took a square bottle from a shelf, uncorked it, and started to raise it to his lips. He changed his mind because he hated gin. Instead, he rubbed his neck with it.

He stretched out on the canvas cot to try to get his mind in gear again. The muscles on his jaw began to wiggle, but an interruption came before he had a chance to tie a half a dozen thoughts together. He heard feet padding up the steps outside, and then Ah Ling, the Gregory's Chinese house boy, came into the room.

Britt raised his head, grimaced with the pain, and said, "Hi, Ling."

Ling said, "Boss, him wanchee see you, chop-chop."

"Oh, cut it out," groaned Britt. "Your pidgin stinks."

"Okay," Ling grinned, unoffended. "But I've got to practice, haven't I?"

"What for?"

"I think I get your point. You mean that Gregory's too busy with his domination of inferior races to be critical of dialect."

"Something like that," Britt admitted. "Just stay inferior, he'll be satisfied."

"Can do," Ling grinned. "But I haven't told you all of it. Gregory's coming down here as soon as he gets his bath. He heard you were hurt."

"Who told him?"

"Tagu. And something's happened to Tagu. I don't believe Gregory caught it, but I did. I smell trouble."

"You've gotta good nose."

"Pretty good," admitted Ling. "Well, cheerio, Gregory'll be here soon. May I drop in later?"

"Yeah, glad to have you."

Britt meant it. Ling was a handy man to have around when there was any brain work to be done. Ling, as an anomaly, was in a class all by himself. Going to the United States at the age of fifteen, he had spent the next ten years collecting college degrees and majoring in anthropology.

Lack of funds did not disturb him in his further research. At the moment, he was working his way through the South Seas at various jobs, trying for the low-down on the polyglot of the Island races. A brilliant linguist, the only thing he couldn't hammerlock was a convincing line of bêche-de-mer. That's how Marty Britt had tripped him up, had forced a confession, and had developed a swift liking for the young Chinese.

Britt arose, grunting, from the cot. He stood for a moment till the dizziness wore off, then went to the packing box which served him as a dresser. He ran a comb through his thick, dun-colored hair. There was just a chance that Enid Gregory might accompany her brother.

She didn't, though, and Britt was seated on the cot when he heard the heavy weight of Gregory's feet upon the steps. The deliberate planting of the footsteps suggested a big man, but Ralph Gregory, when he came in, wasn't big. He was slender, in a rigid sort of way, an impression which the stiffness of his back intensified to a degree which made the man seem stiff in thoughts as well as bearing.

He was dressed in whites, impeccable as usual. His movements were controlled with the manner of a man who follows a strict code of behavior, a code stemming from a mental discipline, which, in turn, is based upon the utter belief that everything he does is governed by some higher force which no one dares to question.

His features confirmed all first impressions. They were set in a firm mould. His lips were thin, topped by a mustache, sandy, neatly trimmed. His nose was long, too long to suit him, probably, but it gave him something to sight along with his impersonal, blank stare. There were tiny red veins in the nose, because Gregory did not stint himself on Scotch. His eyes were gray, well spaced, heavy-lidded. They were seldom opened wide.

He stood before Britt now, legs spread, hands clasped behind his back, staring at Britt without expression. Britt raised his head, not an easy job, and stared back at him. Britt's eyes were blue, light blue with flecks of green. There was a veiled amusement in them now. They were always like that when he looked at Gregory. It was not the way to gain his boss' favor, but Britt couldn't help it.

"You're hurt, I understand," said Gregory. The words came from the front of his mouth, and he bit them off as he let them out.

"Not very bad."

"What happened?"

"One of your boys clipped me from behind."

The Englishman's snort was involuntary and contemptuous.

"Preposterous, man!" he snapped.

"I thought you'd take it that way."

Gregory's nose twitched as the fumes of cheap gin reached it.

"You're drunk, Britt!" It was the flat statement of a man who made his decisions and stuck to them. Britt recognized the tone, and shrugged.

"What happened, then?" he inquired blandly.

"A coconut fell on you. Tagu was there and saw it happen."

"So that's the angle, huh? Had you rather take Tagu's word than mine?"

Gregory sniffed again, nodded toward the gin bottle, and said, "Under the circumstances, yes."

"You're making a mistake, Gregory."

GREGORY'S back went stiffer. He sighted coldly down his nose. "I prefer to have you call me *Mister* Gregory."

The veil scarcely covered the amusement in Britt's eyes now.

"I must have forgotten, Mr. Gregory. Excuse me, please."

Gregory's eyelids dropped a little lower. "I believed, Britt, that I had made our positions clear. Probably I was too tactful. I own this island. My word is law. You didn't desert from that Dutch steamer, risking sharks to swim ashore, just because you wanted to see the world. The trouble you left behind you must have been considerable."

Gregory let the words sink in. Britt rubbed his neck, but continued to meet the other's eyes. Gregory went on:

"I needed a new overseer. You seemed to know copra and bananas. I told you you could have a chance here. If your offense aboard the boat was not too bad, which I shall know when it makes its next stop in three months, I may neglect to turn you over to the captain. It will depend upon your efficiency and your behavior. It's entirely up to you, my man."

"Thank you, Mr. Gregory," Britt acknowledged with forced meekness. "Now, about that other thing. The guy who slugged me—"

"Rubbish!" exploded Gregory. "Sober up."

Starting to leave, he met Enid Gregory coming up the steps.

"Enid!" he said sharply. "What are you doing here?"

"I heard that Marty was hurt."

She pushed unceremoniously past her brother and came into the room. She brought a freshness with her, a quick, live beauty which always effected Britt like a sneak punch to the solar plexus. A lot had happened to him, and to Enid, too, he chose to believe, during his brief ten days upon the island. He came to his feet too fast, swayed an instant, and was forced abruptly sit down. His hand was still upon his neck. Seeing this, the girl said:

"I'll massage it for you."

"Enid! Please!" snapped Gregory.

She whirled upon him with a challenge, "Please, *what?*"

Her brother congealed into a slender icicle. To forestall trouble Britt said:

"Thanks, but I'm okay now."

He came to his feet, more slowly this time, by way of proof. She watched him a moment from wide gray eyes, then seemed convinced.

"If we can help, you'll let us know?" she asked.

"Sure, I'll let you know," said Britt.

She left with her brother after that, and Britt stretched out upon the cot again. He took up his thinking where he'd left off when Ling had interrupted him. He tried to make the facts dovetail into a pattern he could understand. He made headway by degrees, and it brought the acrid smell of trouble sharper to his nostrils.

II

WHEN Ling came back Britt asked him bluntly. "Does Gregory have a short, bandy-legged native working for him?"

Ling thought a moment, then said, "Not that I know of. The man you describe doesn't conform to the local type of native."

Britt told him what had happened in the palm grove. Ling listened without change of expression. He didn't seem surprised.

"Did you notice the fellow's feet?" he asked.

The corners of Britt's eyes crinkled with approval. "We seem to be thinking along the same lines," he admitted. "You mean, did I notice whether or not his big toes were spread away from the others by a sandal strap? No, I didn't."

"Nevertheless, he *could* have been a Jap?"

"Easily. His head was down so that I couldn't see his features. The rest of his body might have been darkened with some sort of dye. That rabbit punch was a Judo trick. They hit with the edge of their hands."

"But why should he have hit you? Does it make sense?"

"I believe so," said Britt slowly. "But I'd like to have you check my reasoning."

"Go ahead."

"The Marshalls are to the north of us, the Gilberts to the south. These small intermediate islands might come in handy to the Japs later on, but they're not quite ready yet to take them by force. If they could make friends with the natives, and get the natives to do the dirty work, they could move in quietly without any premature publicity. Right?"

"So far, so good," said Ling.

"Gregory has made a little tin god of himself. He's tried to make these natives believe that all a white man has to do is spit, and the black, brown, and yellow races will run for cover. He's got his boys to believing it. Therefore, if some Nippo should come down here, claim a blood relationship with the black boys, then show them that a white man can be knocked cold by a tap on the neck, he might make a big impression.

Ling nodded. "Particularly with a man like Tagu. He's not the type who can swallow the lord-and-master stuff that Gregory hands out. Tagu's dangerous. He has too much influence with the other boys."

"So there we are," said Britt. "And I can't get Gregory to believe it."

"No," agreed Ling. "He wouldn't believe it. What happens now?"

"I'm going to try to grab the ape who slugged me, and dangle him under Gregory's nose."

"Big job," warned Ling.

"Maybe not. I've got a hunch he came ashore from a sub. That means a rubber boat, and there are only a few strips of beach where he could have landed. If I'm right, the boat'll be hidden somewhere."

"Sounds logical. Good luck."

Britt was feeling almost normal once again when he started on his hunt. As he had told Ling, the landing places for a small boat were limited, and a certain strip of sand on the island's northern end seemed the most practical of all. The surf, at other points, broke over shallow reefs in a way to make things treacherous for a flimsy rubber boat. What surf there was at the northern end broke about two hundred yards from shore, where a man could swim in easily from a capsized boat, and tow it with him.

Britt found the boat concealed in a bed of heavy vines just off the sand. He grunted with satisfaction, tipped his helmet back and considered his next move.

Show the rubber raft to Gregory? Let him see it with his own eyes? A stubborn glint came in Britt's eyes as he shook his head. Producing the owner of the boat would be the thing to do. Gregory couldn't pass off *that* sort of evidence with a fishy stare.

Nabbing the Jap would be another matter. There was no telling when he'd try to leave the island. At night, certainly. But *what* night. Probably as soon as possible. now that he'd accomplished the important part of his mission. The chances were that he'd been here some time doing the missionary work which had been climaxed by his attack on Britt. Tonight might be the night.

Britt went back to his job. He was watchful, critical of the men, and he saw the difference in them, a sullenness, a new deliberate insolence in obeying orders. Britt's face settled into hardness. The crows'-feet deepened at the corners of his eyes. The show the Jap had staged was working on these boys like a slow and creeping poison. One hundred and fifty blacks—three whites.

Gregory saddled Britt with paper work that evening after dinner. It was something Britt hadn't counted on. It was a delay he didn't want to risk, but, after all, it was his job, and he wasn't ready yet for an open break with Gregory. He teetered on the verge of telling Gregory about the rubber boat, but instead, his jaw locked stubbornly. He'd take a chance on the delay. He'd bring the Britisher whole proof or none. The nervous sweat rolled off of Britt as he concentrated on the figures.

He finished finally. He left the office casually enough, but broke into a jog when he was out of sight. He wished he had a gun of some sort, but Gregory kept close watch of the few firearms on the island. Britt's only weapon was a pocket knife with a long, sharp ugly blade. He hoped he wouldn't have to use it, because he wanted to deliver the Nippo in one piece.

He lost time finding his way along the narrow path which slanted toward the north end of the island through the heavy bush. The jungle foliage shut out all light from the stars. It was dark as the inside of a coconut.

Britt blundered on, making more noise than he cared to think about. As he approached the north beach, however, he slowed down and proceeded with more caution. Soon he could see the white glimmer of the sand, and then it was beneath his feet.

It was lighter, now. The mat of stars in the black bowl above his head gave off surprising lumination. He half turned toward the spot where the rubber raft was hidden, then froze suddenly in his tracks, his eyes straining toward a point in the water off the beach.

He closed his eyes deliberately for several seconds, then opened them again. It was still there, a small, black, bobbing object outlined at brief intervals against the white of the breaking surf beyond. The Jap was on his way.

Britt wasted no time cursing his bad luck. He shed his clothes with smooth, deliberate motions. He touched the spring of his pocket knife, and the wicked blade whipped out. He wrapped a handkerchief around it, then clamped it in his teeth while he was running toward the water.

He plowed in with long high strides. When the water came above his knees he drove forward in a shallow dive. His finger tips touched sand as he went into the first strokes of a powerful crawl. Then the depth increased, and he was surging toward the rubber raft like a sleek white fish.

The boat was about one hundred and fifty yards ahead. An occasional quick glimpse showed the Jap to be pulling steadily at the small, inadequate oars. He had seen Britt, certainly. No chance to miss him, the phosphorous was too thick. It sparkled like a million jewels, leaving a glimmering sharp path in the swimmer's wake.

It was Britt's hope that the Jap *would* see him. If he didn't, Britt was going to waste breath in a yell, because it seemed a safe bet that the Jap would do the obvious thing —stick around a little longer to polish off the white man who had learned of his presence on the island.

Britt guessed right. His next glance showed that the Jap had knocked off rowing. His arm was extended in Britt's direction. Britt saw a slim bright stab of flame. He heard the chuff of a bullet in the water near his head. Light caliber, Britt guessed again—probably a .25.

The Jap threw another slug, but Britt didn't bother dodging. He knew what little chance the other had to draw a fine bead from that jigging raft. Right again. This time, the vicious splash was ten feet off its mark.

Britt kept on going. The knife in his mouth made breathing hard, but he managed to get enough breath in around the edges. He waited for another shot. It didn't come. He wondered why, until a quick glance showed him. A slender line of surf had slithered out to slew the boat around. Britt believed, for an instant, it would overturn, but the Jap, hanging on with both hands, got it back in balance somehow. The wave carried the boat back toward the beach—and Britt.

Britt was too close, now, for comfort. He decided to try to time the next shot so he could sink beneath the surface when it came. He kept his head up, watching carefully. Suddenly he grunted with amazement.

The Jap was back at the oars again, trying frantically to get things under control, trying to buck the surf for a quick get-away. Britt doped things out and expelled another grunt—of satisfaction, this time. The story of what had happened was apparent. The Jap, in his panicky grab to keep the boat afloat, had dropped his pistol overboard. He was unarmed now, and his one idea was to reach his little yellow pals as soon as possible.

He tried to nose into the next breaker with enough force to carry the raft across the top, but its blunt bow offered too much resistance to the weight of water thrown against it. The boat bucked like a mustang, teetered for an instant on the crest, then started to slide back, despite the frantic efforts of the oarsman.

It was the moment Britt had waited for—had counted on, in fact. He churned his way into the boat's backward path, took the handle of the knife in his right hand, hauled in a deep breath, and sank beneath the surface.

When he saw the shadow of the raft above his head he slashed upward with the long keen blade. He felt it slice into the rubber bubble, felt the resistance of the fabric as the knife swept through in as wide

an arc as he could make, then felt the knife wrenched from his hand as the boat spun unexpectedly in the white froth of the wave.

Britt drove for the surface then, breached water and sucked air deep into his lungs. He saw the boat—empty. There was no sign of its occupant. Britt started to turn when a pair of powerful arms slid around his neck like the tentacles of an octopus.

Britt did two things almost simultaneously. His right hand flashed across to grab one of the Jap's hands before it had a chance to clench. Britt got a grip on one of the Jap's fingers, yanked it back, and felt it break. At the same time, he drove his head backward savagely. It crashed into the Jap's face with enough force to mash the Nippo's nose. Britt felt the involuntary jerking of the other's body, then the arms about his neck went slack from the violence of the pain.

Twisting swiftly, Britt got his hands on the Jap's muscular, thick neck. He put the pressure on, but the Jap, recovering from the first shock, was still as full of fight as a wounded shark. He broke Britt's throttle hold by some trick Britt hadn't learned. His knee drove wickedly for Britt's groin, but Britt had anticipated that one. He twisted fast to take the blow upon his hip. He slashed backward with his elbow, and scored again on the Jap's battered face.

The Jap, however, kept in close, and the battle raged in a welter of white froth. Tumbling waves swept over them, but Britt was fighting, as he always did, with a cool ferocity which invariably sharpened his senses instead of dulling them. As a result, he usually went under with a supply of air. There were, of course, exceptions, choking, fire-flecked interludes when a gasp of air meant the difference between life and death. Somehow he always managed to get that gasp in time. He had a water instinct—and he needed it.

Because the Jap, with his deep lungs and his powerful torso, had it too. He was fighting for his life—at least he thought he was, a belief which added desperation to his struggles.

The Jap was strong, comparatively fresh. Britt had the fast swim from the shore behind him. It had taken something out of him, taxed him dangerously. Normally, he could have handled this husky little monkey. Now sharp doubts began to drill their way into his brain. He could feel no slackening of the other's force. Small worms of dull fatigue were creeping, meanwhile, through Britt's muscles. He couldn't maintain this pace much longer.

On occasions of this sort, he was wont to use his head. That's what he did now. He deliberately eased up, made choking sounds and several futile gestures. It seemed, just then, that he could see the triumphant glitter in the other's beady eyes.

He heard the Jap suck in his breath, a full deep lead. It was all the warning Britt required. He filled his own lungs to their capacity, as the Jap, falling for Britt's act, sank like a rock and welded his arms about the American's knees.

Britt let himself be hauled beneath the surface, all the way down while the Jap squatted on the bottom. Britt let himself relax, let the gentle motion of the water massage new life into his weary muscles. They were the things that needed rest, not his lungs.

The Jap intended this to be the showdown. He was going to drown Britt now, keep him under till his lungs exploded. This suited Britt. In fact, it's what he'd wanted—not to drown, of course, but to hang suspended like a buoy, gathering new strength while the Jap did all the work. Plenty of time, still, to worry about getting drowned.

But the time began to flow away like fine sand through an hour glass. Britt began to wonder if he'd guessed wrong. Hot needles found their way into his chest, and worked their way upward to his eyes.

HE forced himself to calmness. It wasn't easy now. He released a little breath. That helped. He saw bubbles rising from below. That helped even more, as it brought the knowledge that the Jap was also wearing out. Britt dipped into his reserve, stayed limp, and waited.

It took the Jap that long to realize what was going on. His mind finally got off its single track, when it dawned on him that Britt was merely resting, that the picture was all wrong, that Britt should be wasting strength in a futile effort to break clear.

Seeking a belated remedy for this, the Jap slid one hand down to grab Britt's foot.

The idea, probably, was to twist some toes, and get a little action from the man above.

BRITT also figured it that way. When the clamp about his legs eased up, he cleared one leg with a savage upward thrust. He felt it crash against the Nippo's jaw. The other's arms went slack entirely now.

Britt licked his first wild urge to fight back toward the air above. He waited an instant longer, and when he saw the Jap clawing for the surface, Britt grabbed him, thrust him down again, got his feet in the Jap's belly, and pushed hard.

The push carried Britt away and up. He broke surface, and the breath exploded from his lungs. He was dizzy, weak and sick. His only thought was air for his scorched lungs, but when he pulled it in, it choked him. He kept himself afloat instinctively, but not until his breath stayed down, not until the stars stopped whirling in a solid mass, did his thoughts come back to his opponent.

They came back with a jolt, scattered thoughts which he had to nail in place. The events of the past few minutes seemed like something which had happened in the past —unreal, disjointed. He'd been fighting with a Jap—a stinking little Jap. A Jap!

Britt's thoughts snapped suddenly back into their groove. He remembered, now, what he was here for. His first touch of panic showed in the jerky, uncoordinated way he looked about him. He had to have that Jap—had to take him back as proof.

The catch was, that Marty Britt was now alone. There was no head above the water but his own. He made a few frantic, aimless thrusts with his arms, then pulled himself together. There was only one way to reason. If the Jap wasn't on the surface, he was down below it.

With what strength he had left, Britt began his dogged hunt. Time and again he dived, explored the bottom, and came up empty handed. He passed his limit of endurance before he realized what he'd done. When he finally started back for shore, he didn't think he'd make it.

He didn't make it—quite. He bogged down fifty yards from shore. He swallowed water—too much water. His head went under. When he brought it out again he saw another sleek head surging toward him. Britt gathered his remaining strength to fight it out, when a voice said, "Take it easy, Marty."

Half strangled, Britt gasped, "What the hell!"

Ah Ling said, "Grab my shoulder!" Britt gratefully obeyed.

III

ONCE ashore, Britt stretched for some time upon the sand before he felt like talking. Then he said:

"Thanks, Ling. What're you doing here?"

"Oriental curiosity, I suppose. I followed you here. I went out to watch the fight, but I lost you when the boat capsized. I've been looking for you ever since."

"Lucky you found me when you did," Britt said. Then, "I've made a lousy mess of things. I haven't got a Jap to dangle under Gregory's nose. The Nip stayed down."

"They do that sometimes," Ling consoled. "Maybe he'll wash ashore. A dead Jap's better than no Jap. Maybe he'll show up."

"Not much chance. The island's too narrow at this point."

"Will you try to convince Gregory anyway?"

"I couldn't make it stick. Gregory's too fond of me."

Ling thought that over, then grinned slowly. "Yes, I guess he is, like a lion tamer who acquires a particularly tough animal. He'll love the beast so long as he believes himself capable of taming it."

"Yeah," said Britt. "Gregory's finally got himself a Yank to work on. He's probably wanted one all his life. Common fellows, these Americans—cheeky lot—must make 'em realize, doncha know, that we British represent the dominant race—yes, quite." Britt chuckled. "I'm afraid our boss is letting himself get in a rut."

"He won't be in it long, will he?"

Britt sobered. "I'm afraid not. Things are beginning to look bad, Ling. That little Jap monkey stirred the boys up—plenty. I can only guess what he promised 'em. The point is, he seems to have sold them the bill of goods. They're simmering now, and

if they ever pop their safety valves it won't be pretty—it won't be cricket by a long shot. Tagu's ready. If he can swing the rest—watch out."

"Better have another try at Gregory," suggested Ling.

"I think you're right," said Britt.

Britt made his try next morning. He headed for the Gregory bungalow, his feet crunching on the winding, crushed shell walk with its border of crinum lilies. The grounds about the bungalow were compact, but colorful and lovely with frangipani, hibiscus and flame trees.

The house itself was set upon a small rise. Its walls were built of coral blocks, thick, porous and heat resistant. The wide roof was thatched, for further coolness, with the broad leaf of the pandanus palm. A wide veranda, screened tightly against insects, stretched around three sides of the dwelling.

Enid Gregory answered Britt's knock upon the door. There were dusky, worried shadows beneath her eyes, the sight of which aroused Britt's quick resentment against the person who had caused them. They were usually there when Gregory settled down to one of his periodic bouts with Scotch and soda.

"Is he soused?" asked Britt.

"Not yet, but he's on his way."

"Sorry," Britt said. "But I've got to see him."

"He's in his office."

GREGORY held his liquor well, you had to hand that to him. Seated at his desk, he appeared as cold, well-groomed as ever. It showed in his eyes and nose, however. His eyes were red rimmed, and the veins in his long nose looked like tiny crimson worms. With his elbows on the desk, he regarded Britt unblinkingly. He didn't offer Britt a chair, so Britt remained upon his feet.

He told Gregory, as concisely as he could, of his battle with the Jap the night before. Gregory's thin lips beneath the mustache twisted at the corners with amusement.

"Do you think I'm lying?" Britt demanded bluntly.

Gregory raised his eyebrows slightly, still amused. "I wouldn't know," he said. "And wouldn't care. I can't see that your veracity is a matter of importance."

Britt held his temper. "What *is* important then."

Gregory took his time. He took a small sip from the glass upon his desk. "I'm quite willing to concede," he said, "that you were a hero last night—in your own eyes. The other man may even have been Japanese, sent here, as you suggest, to arouse my men. The important thing is that *I* am the master of this island. My natives understand that. I control them. They understand that too. They wouldn't dare to lift a hand against me."

Britt stared at him. "Are you serious?" he demanded.

An icy glitter came in Gregory's red-rimmed eyes. Slowly it gave way to amusement. "I begin to understand. My overseer is getting his wind up. Quite to be expected in emergencies. Last time you deserted ship. This time you come to me. Quite proper, my man. Quite proper. Well—" he pushed himself to his feet. "—duty I suppose. You say the men are getting cheeky. I'll show you how it's handled."

Britt conceded this with an impatient nod. "But I'm afraid you've missed the point," he said. "Where there's one Jap there'll be more, like lice."

Gregory sobered. "Jolly nuisance," he admitted. Then, "I'll get a wireless off to Singapore. They'll have a gunboat here in jig time."

"Jig time may not be soon enough," Britt argued. "The Japs are here to feed the natives raw meat, to make 'em understand that our blood is just as red as theirs and will flow as freely—that white men aren't gods. The natives are getting the idea. They're the ones to worry about right now."

"Oh, the natives," said Gregory brightening. "Don't get the wind up about them, old man. It's possible they're getting a bit cheeky, but I'll handle 'em. Give 'em the old fishy stare. They can't stand it. I'll even wear my monocle. That always gets 'em."

"Better get started then," said Britt.

"Eh? Right away? Oh, come now," Gregory reproved. He pulled open a lower drawer of his desk to display two full fifths of Scotch. "I'm only on my first, you see. Never stop on occasions of this sort with less than three. My quota, you

might say. Vulgar, what? Can't help it, old chap. Must see it through, and all of that. Tomorrow—back to business—fresh as a daisy."

Britt felt an icy rivulet trickle down his spine as he grasped the complete futility of denting Gregory's calm assurance. There was even an instant when Britt himself almost fell under the spell of such bland confidence, but the moment was crushed beneath the impact of the ugly facts. Britt drained his glass with two long gulps.

"Another spot?" invited Gregory cheerfully.

"No thanks. I'd rather take a look around."

"Not necessary, I assure you. Handle it tomorrow by myself."

"Hope you get the chance," Britt answered grimly. "Well, so long."

"Cheer-o," said Gregory, and went back to his drink.

Britt tried to hide the tension in his face as he went back to the porch, but Enid Gregory, still there, noticed it.

"What's wrong, Marty?" she inquired.

"Just routine stuff — according to your brother."

"It's worse than that,' said Enid quietly. "I can feel it. It's in the air. I can't explain it. It's something wicked, rather frightful, Marty. Do you feel it too?"

"It's all in your imagination," Britt said shortly.

THE girl made a swift impatient gesture with her hand.

"Please, Marty," she said evenly. "I'm not a child. This island has been my home for seven years. I'm tuned to it, and I've never felt like this before. Something horrible is happening. I know it. Is it fair to let me feel like this without telling me the facts?"

Britt let his breath out audibly. "No," he said. "It isn't fair, because I feel the same way about it as you do."

He told her everything he knew and feared. Enid listened, the shadows growing in her eyes. Her voice, however, when she spoke, was steady.

"And Ralph," she asked, "won't believe that we're in danger?"

"No," Britt answered shortly.

"He wouldn't," Enid said with no accusation in her tone. Then, "It seems unfair to burden you with the responsibility."

"Huh?" jerked Britt, surprised. "After all, my hide's at stake as well as yours—and Gregory's," he added as an afterthought.

"What will you do now?"

"Make the rounds, and try to smell out trouble."

"I'll go with you."

"Better not," said Britt.

"I'm not afraid."

"It—it isn't that, entirely," Britt said awkwardly. "It's mostly because Gregory—well, he doesn't quite approve of me as a companion for you. Can't say that I blame him, but that's how it is, and in his—uh—present condition it might be wiser not to stir him up."

She thought this over, then said, "You're probably right. I'll stay here. But—be careful, Marty."

"Careful as a cat," said Britt. "So long."

He decided to visit the rubber grove first. He didn't relish the short walk through the gloomy tunnel of the jungle, but that's just why he choose it—because he didn't relish it.

He did not make the mistake, this time, of stalking blindly from the glare of the beach into the shade of the trees. Once in the shade he stood awhile to let the pupils of his eyes distend. When he started forward he walked casually, but could not control the prickling of the hair upon his neck.

It annoyed him, because he wasn't given to the jitters. It was the uncertainty of the thing, he decided, the uncertainty of a dangling menace which might decide, at any time, to drop. He honestly did not believe that the time was ripe, a conviction which did not decrease his watchfulness.

Britt's sixth sense was as well developed as that of any man who knows what danger smells like, but it didn't help him now. He heard no sound behind him. His first warning was a soft hiss, then something streaked past him like a shaft of light.

His first instinctive jump carried him to the protection of the brush. He twisted as he jumped, for a look behind, but there was nothing there. He searched the path ahead and saw a short spear sticking point first into the ground. He'd seen the type before, the

kind the natives used for spearing fish, an ugly thing with a shark tooth point.

He stood motionless for several moments longer, knowing the uselessness of trying to catch the man who had thrown the spear. Finally the tension left his muscles. He was glad, in a way that this had happened. It indicated that some native had managed to get himself steamed up too soon, had tried a pot-shot on his own responsibility. It meant that the big blow-off, which would undoubtedly be an organized affair, was still smoldering.

Nevertheless, the significance of that thrown spear was solid and unshakable. It meant that the natives were rising to the pitch, that the ground work had been done, that the time was almost here.

It had a quieting effect on Britt's nerves. He stepped back into the path, walked to the spear and pulled it from the ground. He held it for a moment thoughtfully in his hands, then broke it carefully, and tossed the pieces into the bush. It wasn't the sort of evidence which would impress a drunken man, particularly one like Gregory.

He thought about Gregory now impersonally, almost with pity. Britt felt sorry for a man who would deliberately get drunk when all hell was about to explode about his ears. His jaw went tighter as he headed for the rubber grove.

He spent the remainder of the day on the move. He covered the working area thoroughly, watching tautly. There was lots to see, but nothing he could get his teeth in. The threat was there, quivering in suspension. He could feel it as plainly as he could feel a coming monsoon blow. The sullenness was watchful, organized, and Britt had the crawling certainty that the time for the explosion had definitely been set.

He sat upon his own porch after dinner, thinking. His big body stretched relaxed in a wicker chair, but the occasional bright flare of his cigarette showed tension in his face. The slight crook in his nose seemed emphasized, giving him a look of hard implacability.

HE HEARD the scuffling of lizards in the thatch above his head, a familiar sound which scarcely registered. Another sound crept in, however, a sound which raised his head to sharp attention. It was brittle, rhythmic, like the clapping of many hands in unison. The tension crept into his body, because he knew that the sound was just what it appeared to be. It came from the native village about a mile away. A dance was starting. The natives were beating the cadence with their palms.

This too was a familiar sound, but he strained his ears to it tonight as he had never done before. He tried not to let his imagination trick him into believing that the tone was different, that it carried something in it he had never heard before.

Then came the undertone of chanting. It grew in volume, swelled and ebbed in the heavy air with an accumulative rolling violence which left no room for further doubt. Britt had never heard *that* sound before upon this island. He came smoothly to his feet, stretched himself like a big cat and headed for the Gregory bungalow.

He didn't know what he'd do when he arrived. His only lucid thought, just now, was to get Enid Gregory out of danger. Maybe he could persuade her brother to leave the island temporarily in the power boat. If Gregory couldn't be persuaded peacefully, there were other ways which ought to be effective. The point was, Enid must be moved to safety.

She was on the veranda when Britt entered the screen door. She came toward him with a nervous haste. Her voice was not entirely steady when she said:

"Oh, Marty! I'm so glad you came!"

"Worried, kid?" Britt asked her quietly.

"I—I'm afraid so, Marty. That—that chanting. I never heard them chant like that before. And Ralph just sits and—drinks."

She was standing close to him. Britt saw her tremble. Then, not knowing how it happened, he had her in his arms, and felt her cling to him. Gradually her trembling ceased.

"How soon will it happen, Marty?" she asked quietly.

Britt dared not trust himself to speak. The shock of her closeness was too great. He tightened his arms a bit, when Gregory's voice called from the house:

"Enid! Do I hear Britt out there?"

"Yes, Ralph. He just came."

"Send the blighter in!"

Enid's lips brushed Britt's in a swift impulsive gesture. She pushed against him then, and said:

"Go in, Marty—and good luck."

Britt went back to the office. Gregory was still at his desk, soundly drunk by now. He flapped a glad greeting with his hand and said:

"Sit down, old man. Sit down Have a spot. Here's your glass, still waiting for you. How goes the insurrection, good and faithful servant?"

He slopped whiskey in the glass, forgot the soda, and handed it to Britt straight. That suited Britt. He downed it at a gulp. He needed it.

"We're in a jam, Gregory," he said. "There's trouble at the village, plenty of it. Listen to that noise."

Gregory cocked his head obediently, but the sounds, apparently, failed to register. He nodded his head sagely.

"Fine, fine. Let 'em dance. Keeps 'em happy. Good for the morale."

"That's a blood dance!" said Britt sharply, trying to force his words through Gregory's alcoholic fog. "They mean business, Gregory! They're working themselves to a killing pitch!"

"Now take it easy old man," Gregory soothed. "Don't work yourself into a funk. Everything's all right, I assure you. *But* even if it wasn't—look—" He opened a desk drawer and took out a long barreled .38 caliber revolver. "I'm deadly with this, man, positively deadly."

Britt knew that much. Shooting was one of Gregory's hobbies. He could plug a quarter with that gun at fifty feet. Yet Gregory's marksmanship was not the vital issue. The native dance was hitting its stride now. The chant was a savage, deadly monotone. Britt said as carefully as he could:

"Sure, Gregory, I know you're good. But that pop gun won't help you now."

"Positively deadly," Gregory repeated. "Can't miss, old chap, even when I'm drunk. See that moth outside the screen. Now watch."

He leveled the revolver at the window, lined it on the moth, and pulled the trigger. The hammer clicked. Gregory snorted with disbelief, and tried again. Another click, but no explosion. He flipped the cylinder back, and stared stupidly at the empty chambers. His bewilderment was comical as he fumbled through his whiskey haze, and tried to solve the problem.

"I—I always keep it loaded," he explained to Britt.

Britt felt a chilly sweat upon his forehead. "Better check your other guns," he suggested thinly. "And your ammunition too."

Gregory stared for a blank moment, then some of the blankness left his eyes. "Yes, quite," he said. "I believe you're right." He arose, steadied himself with some difficulty then staggered to the gun rack.

"All here," he muttered. "Never keep 'em loaded anyway."

"Ammunition," Britt reminded him.

"Yes, quite."

He opened a drawer at the base of the cabinet. It was empty, but it seemed to take Gregory some time to comprehend this fact.

"Were *all* your shells in there?" demanded Britt.

Gregory nodded, still trying hard to coordinate his thoughts. He moved back to his desk, reached for the Scotch bottle, and found it empty. He opened a desk drawer where he evidently kept a reserve supply. There were no bottles in the drawer. He clapped his hands. Ling appeared.

"More Scotch!" ordered Gregory.

Ling bobbed his head, left, and returned shortly. Ling's face was still impassive on the surface, but Britt was quick to note an unaccustomed tightness underneath. Ling said:

"Whiskey gone—*all* gone."

"You lie," charged Gregory hoarsely.

"Me no lie," said Ling with a quiet dignity that got across.

A strange thing happened then, something which Britt found hard to comprehend. It was harder, owing to the fact that he had never credited Ralph Gregory with an underlying strength, the sort of strength a man could count on when the chips were down.

Britt knew that drunkenness, to some extent, could be counteracted by a violent mental shock, yet he had never seen the force in action, as he saw it now.

Standing in the center of the room upon braced legs, Gregory began to sober up.

Some of the glaze began to leave his eyes. He hauled in deep long breaths, giving the oxygen a chance to cleanse his blood. The sweat of concentrated effort glistened on his face.

He turned his head to listen to the growing bedlam coming from the native village. He seemed, for the first time, to understand its meaning.

When he spoke to Ling, his voice was even and controlled.

"Sober me up, Ling. I don't care how you do it. But get to work—and hurry."

"Can do," said Ling with a note of pleased anticipation. "You get in cold shower bath. I bling ice, fix coffee. But first you go outside, stick fingers down your throat."

"Blasted nuisance," muttered Gregory. "I'll do it, though."

At the doorway Gregory stopped, turned, then handed Marty Britt a shock which set him back upon his heels.

"My apologies, Britt," said Gregory. "I *was* a fool."

Britt stared at the stiff, retreating back, then breathed, "Well, I'll be damned."

IV

HE WAITED with Enid upon the porch, while Ling applied his drastic first-aid measures.

"Ralph's really not a bad sort," Enid said. "He does well in emergencies—real ones, that is to say."

"I hope so," said Britt fervently.

"How bad is this one? Please don't pamper me."

"All right," said Britt, "I won't. It's bad." He told her about the stolen liquor, and the ammunition for the guns. About the latter, he inquired, "Could one of the natives have taken it?"

"Easily," said Enid. "We have—or had —several as servants about the house. I gave them permission to attend the dance. Why didn't they take the guns?"

"Why should they, so long as they have the shells. Besides, they were probably smart enough to know that Gregory would miss the guns a lot sooner than the ammunition. They wanted the liquor, of course, to get drunk on. It'll make 'em a lot braver."

"What are we going to do?"

"Hop in your boat and get away," said Britt. "It's the only thing to do."

"We can't. The motor is torn down. Ralph is overhauling it."

Britt let his breath out slowly. "That makes a difference," he admitted.

"I don't believe so," Enid disagreed "Ralph wouldn't have used it anyway, and I wouldn't have left Ralph."

"I might have known that," Britt admitted. Then, "I wonder how Ling is making out."

He learned, a little later. Gregory appeared on steady legs. He looked haggard in the dim light, but this was not surprising. His voice and gestures seemed quite normal, a small miracle of dogged will-power. Dressed in freshly laundered whites, he carried a light cane as a swagger stick. Britt was forced, despite himself, to admire the man as he said calmly:

"Shall we go?"

"Sure, why not?" said Britt. He'd been thinking along those lines himself. It was the only strategy remaining.

"I'll be ready in a moment," Enid said.

There was no protest from either man. Their thoughts still coincided. Enid came back shortly wearing riding breeches. The three of them started for the native village, and Ling fell in behind them. Britt dropped back and said:

"Don't mix in it, Ling, unless it's absolutely necessary."

"I understand," said Ling.

Britt rejoined Enid and her brother. They walked awhile in silence. Gregory broke it.

"How do you figure our chances, Britt?" he asked.

"Skinny," Britt said shortly.

"Jolly skinny," Gregory admitted. Then. "Are you willing to concede me a final go at it in my own way?"

"You mean face 'em down?"

"Exactly. A bit of rubbish, maybe, but I've simply got to try it as a farewell gesture to my thories of omnipotence."

The words were bitter. They came hard, but Gregory got them out. The guy had guts—a big supply. Britt said:

"Try anything you like, but you'd better keep your right cocked."

The sound of the chanting rolled about them now like mellow thunder. The rhythm of the hand beats, sharp, staccato, sliced

through the voices with a primitive, blood-chilling cadence. It sounded like the measured breaking of live bones. Britt felt the hair upon his neck go stiff.

They approached the village through the coconut palm grove. The footing was not difficult, and Gregory used his flashlight sparingly. He slipped it in his pocket soon, as the light from the natives' fire came filtering through the tall stems of the palms, to throw crawling shadows on the ground. The small group moved forward silently, until it stood, unnoticed, upon the edge of the village clearing.

The thatched huts of the natives faced one another across a broad, flat space which formed a sort of courtyard. The lower end was closed with a structure larger than the rest, the meeting house.

The dance was being held out in the open. The fire was leaping high in the space between the houses. The dark figures of the dancers shuttled back and forth between the watchers and the fire, whose rays reflected eerily from the sweat-shined bodies of the dancers.

Only the men, stripped down to breech-clouts, were performing. To Britt this was significant. His big hands closed and opened as the pounding rhythm of the dance was carried to the dancers' stamping feet. They moved like stiff automatons. Their bare feet raised a dust which hid them to the knees. It gave them a weird dismembered look, as if dancing with leg-stumps upon fog.

The women had discarded their all-concealing mother hubbards, in favor of their ceremonial grass skirts. That's all they wore, a costume adding to the wild barbarity. Their eyeballs rolled in their dark faces, as they clapped their hands unceasingly, and worked themselves into hysteria.

The natives had been drinking Gregory's liquor, there was little doubt of that. And those who were not drunk on whiskey were intoxicated by a far more dangerous drug—their own emotions.

Britt said, "Better think twice, Gregory."

"Sorry," Gregory admitted. "But I happen to be a one-thought chap. Here goes."

HE STARTED toward the fire, walking with the calm deliberation of a man out for a morning stroll. Britt, unnoticed, moved quietly behind Gregory's shoulder. A native saw them, flashed a warning.

The chanting stopped. Hands, half-raised to clap, remained suspended. The dancers froze—glistening statues of black ebony. All eyes were turned toward Gregory, in unreal pantomime, with the slender thread of peril stretching ever finer.

Gregory kept on, unhurriedly. It was a brilliant show of self-control, which Britt, padding silently in the dust behind, tried hard to match.

And then Britt believed incredibly that it would work. The complete confidence and sheer effrontery of Gregory's bearing held his natives rooted to the spot. He didn't speak, just stared at them—a touch of genius. The natives' eyes began to shift uncomfortably away from Gregory's chilly stare. A little more, thought Britt, and they'll be crawling to their holes.

It might have happened that way, if it hadn't been for Tagu. Tagu was the danger spot, the leader. He proved it now in a blur of violent action. He came in a mighty leap, directly through the flames. That, too, was showmanship, the kind his men could understand.

He carried a native knife, an ugly thing—shark's teeth, lashed between two slender bamboo strips. It could disembowl a man, and that was Tagu's aim just now. His eyes were wild with drunken hate as he came head-on at Gregory.

The latter braced himself, but Marty Britt reached Tagu first. He went in low and fast, with as neat a football block as he had ever thrown. He blasted into Tagu's legs, and Tagu went down hard.

Britt went down, too, but he knew what he was doing. He came to his feet with the speed of a big cat. Tagu bounced up also, as if his rear were made of rubber. Crazy with rage, he lost his head. With the bellow of a bull gorilla, he came lunging in at Britt.

He aimed a back-hand slash at the American's throat with the knife. Britt judged it coolly, let it swish by with an inch to spare, then brought his big fist up in a savage arc. It exploded with terrific impact flush on Tagu's unprotected jaw. It lifted Tagu from the ground, spun him half about, and sent him crashing head first in the dirt.

An incredulous sound, almost a wail,

came from the watching natives. They stared at Tagu's unconscious, twitching body, and saw the distortion of his face from a badly shattered jaw. They couldn't understand it. Their feeble gestures of disbelief showed their bewilderment, because Tagu had, apparently, talked big. He had probably assured them that he, the mighty Tagu, could polish off the whites all by himself—with one hand tied behind him.

And now, he'd had his chance. With all things in his favor, the element of surprise, the knife, he hadn't lasted long enough to work up a good sweat. He was out cold, like a punchy stumble-bum. Britt had slapped him down as casually as he might have squashed a big mosquito. Small wonder that the natives' faith in Tagu, their one and only big shot, hit the skids.

"Well played, old man," said Gregory. "I believe that fixes everything."

"Hope so," grunted Britt. He made a sweeping gesture of dispersal with his arm. "Party's over, boys," he said. "Get going."

THEY understood the gesture, but did not obey it to the letter. Instead of moving toward their huts, they started edging toward the meeting house as if they had unfinished business there.

"I don't like that," Britt admitted quietly.

Enid and Ling had joined them by this time.

"You've studied their language, Ling," said Britt. "Could you catch anything they said?"

Ling nodded, "Something about consulting their new friends," he said.

Gregory stared hard at Ling, but made no issue of the Oriental's careless lapse into proper English.

"I don't like it," Britt repeated. "It's beginning to add up."

It added up at once. Five stocky figures left the meeting house and joined the natives.

"Japs—" said Britt. "I might have guessed it."

"By Jove," breathed Gregory incredulously. "What are those blighters doing here?"

"They probably came ashore from the sub to look for their pal when he didn't show up last night," Britt explained. "They've been steaming the natives up to get rid of us. It didn't work, so the Nips'll make their try."

"Shoot us, naturally," said Gregory calmly.

"You still don't get the point," said Britt impatiently. "They've undoubtedly got orders not to kill us. Their job is to convince the natives that we can be pushed around. Then they'll let the natives finish it. They wouldn't have had to stick their dirty little noses in it if Tagu had turned out to be the man he thought he was. Well, here they come. It'll be a brawl." He turned around to Ling and Enid. "Stay out of it," he snapped. "The pair of you."

The Japs came forward slowly. The whole thing seemed unreal to Britt, so utterly fantastic that he had the urge to laugh. Only the need to save his breath prevented him—that, and his common sense.

The Japanese, still in a group, stopped ten feet away at a gesture from their leader, a pock-marked, slant-eyed evil-looking little ape. He stood upon spread legs, arms folded, arrogant and certain of himself. He spoke in stilted English.

"You will all go to the ground upon your knees. You will touch your heads upon the ground. At once! I order it!"

Ten feet was too short a distance across which to issue an order of that nature. It was a distance which Britt's long legs could cover faster than the Jap supposed.

Britt shot across the space like a big panther, swinging as he came. The Jap never knew what hit him. Britt's fist splattered his nose into a pulpy mess. The Jap landed on his neck, kicked once, then relaxed—out cold.

Britt didn't know this at the time. He was much too busy. He aimed another swing at another Jap, too fast, and missed. The next instant two of them had swarmed upon him like a pair of orangoutangs. One was on his back, clawing for a disabling hold about his neck. The other, locking his arms about Britt's middle, probed for Britt's kidney with his thumbs.

Judging the man upon his back to be the worst immediate threat, Britt threw enough power into his legs to hurl himself backward, carrying the double weight of the two Japanese. They hit the ground with stunning force, but the one on the bottom got the worst of it. Britt heard his breath come

out in a shrill squeak, and the grip about Britt's neck relaxed. He smashed backward with his elbow, felt it connect solidly, then felt the body underneath go limp.

The Jap on top had meanwhile found his hold. Agony, like liquid fire, was boiling low along Britt's spine. The man had his head clamped against Britt's chest, but Britt's long fingers slid in for a strangle hold.

When they began to close, the Jap, with a violent twist, jerked clear. He slashed at Britt's neck with the edge of his palm, but Britt got his shoulder up in time.

The Jap made the blunder then of sitting erect across Britt's middle. Britt's legs flashed up from behind like two big whips. They hooked around the Jap's neck, then straightened like a pair of giant springs.

The result was immediate and disastrous —for the Jap. His head crashed against the ground. It sounded like a watermelon dropped on concrete. When Britt came swiftly to his feet, that Jap lay still, his neck twisted at a grotesque angle—broken.

Britt whirled toward Gregory, then checked in swift amazement. One of Gregory's Japs was already out of the picture, sprawled unconscious, bloody-faced upon the ground. The other was being handled with dispatch, for Gregory was staging one of the wickedest exhibitions of dirty barroom fighting Britt had ever seen.

THE dust lifted long enough for Britt to see the coup de grace, a savage knee-thrust to the Jap's groin. It did the trick. The man flopped, writhing on the ground. Gregory arose, then kicked him in the head to ease his pain.

He spun fiercely, looking for more antagonists. When he saw that it was over, his composure came back quickly.

"Jolly little tussle, what?" he panted.

"Yes, jolly," Britt admitted.

Gregory turned to the natives then, and repeated Britt's former gesture of dispersal. The natives, wide-eyed and muttering, didn't wait. They went meekly to their huts.

"What'll we do with the remains?" asked Gregory, eyeing the fallen foe.

"Leave 'em here," said Britt. "Their buddies'll be after 'em tomorrow."

"Right-o. Let's go home. I could use a spot of rest."

"And a little iodine," Britt added.

The meeting at the bungalow was a frank council of war.

Britt opened it. He said, "It's time you knew the facts. To start with, I'm a fake, an impostor, naval intelligence, U. S. Navy. It was a frame-up with the Dutch captain of the boat. He let you think that I'd deserted."

"My word!" gasped Gregory, shocked from his aplomb.

"Yeah, I know, corny as hell and all of that," admitted Britt. "But those things do happen. We're expecting trouble down here, lots of it, and we're trying to get a line of some sort on these islands. That's where I fit in. Sorry, Gregory."

"Quite all right, old man," said Gregory, getting back into his stride. "Quite all right. What happens next?"

"I can only advise you from here on," said Britt. "And my advice is, to get your boat fixed, and to clear out fast. You can come back when the trouble's over. Right now, this is no place for Enid."

The stubborn look came back in Gregory's face, then slowly left. "Yes, quite," he said. "I can have it fixed by morning if you'll help me. Shall we start?"

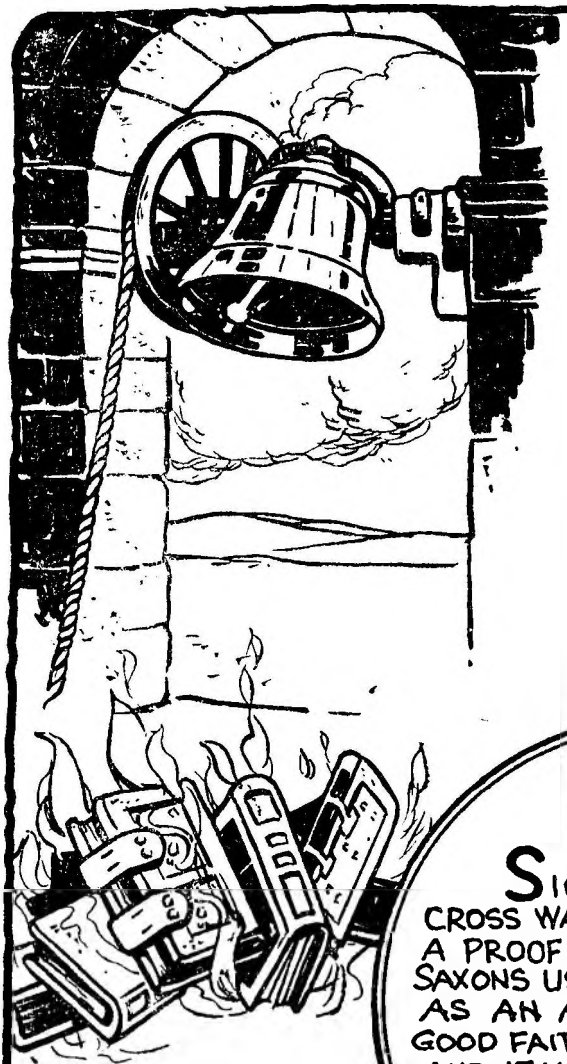
"Yeah, sure," said Britt. "But—but there is one more thing." He fumbled awkwardly for words. "Enid and I—that is, I *believe* that Enid—"

He bogged down. Enid stepped into the opening.

"Enid *does*," she admitted firmly.

"Too bad we haven't got a spot of Scotch," said Gregory. "We'd drink a toast."

Curioddities By Weill



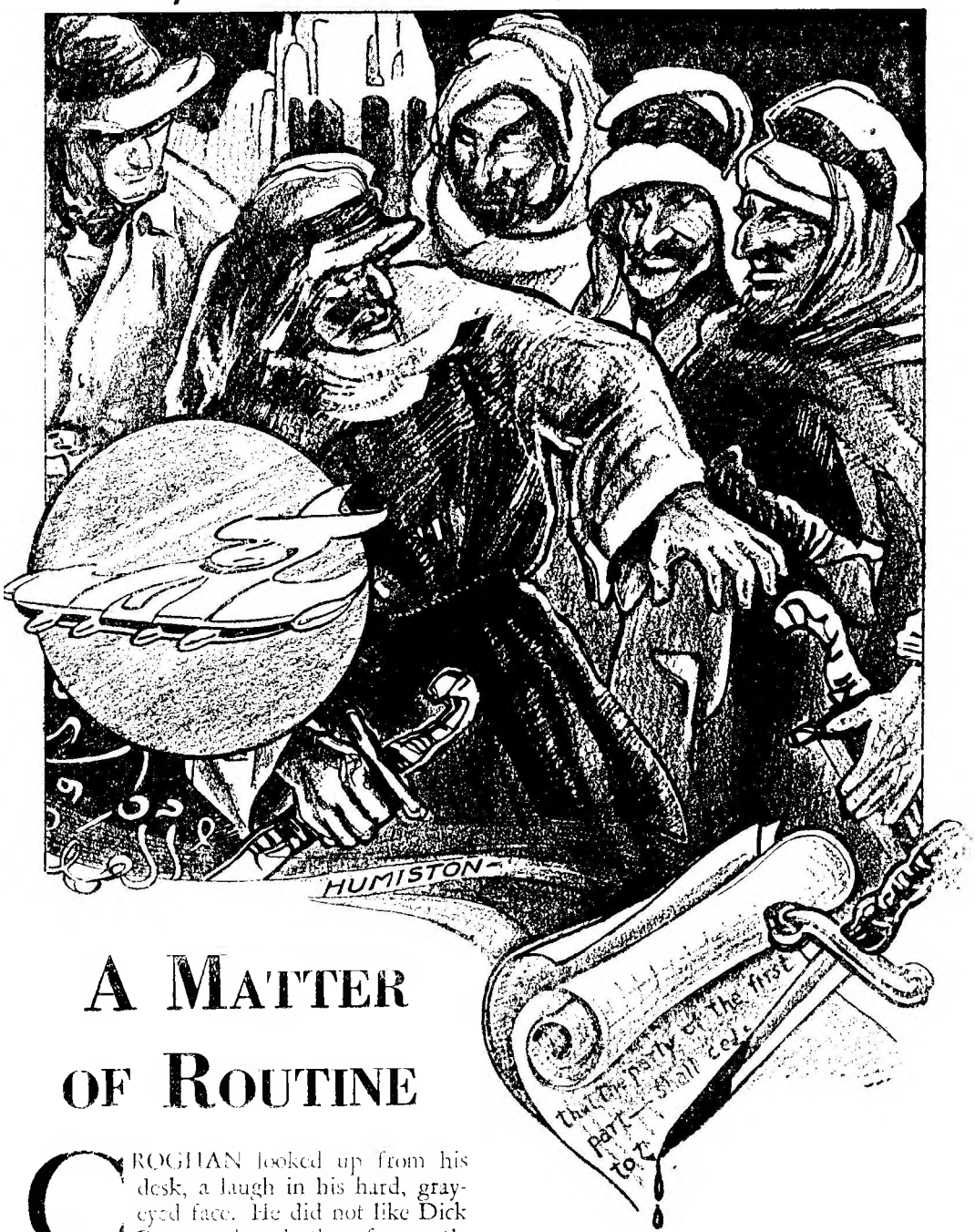
BELLS WERE FIRST INVENTED ABOUT THE YEAR 400 AND WERE ORIGINALLY INTRODUCED INTO CHURCHES AS *A DEFENCE AGAINST THUNDER AND LIGHTNING!* THEY WERE FIRST HUNG UP IN ENGLAND AT CROYLAND ABBEY, LINCOLNSHIRE IN 945, AND IN THE ELEVENTH CENTURY AND LATER, *IT WAS THE CUSTOM TO* **BAPTIZE** *THEM BEFORE THEY WERE USED!*

SIGNATURE OF THE CROSS WAS NOT INVARIABLY A PROOF OF IGNORANCE! THE SAXONS USED THIS MARK AS AN ATTESTATION OF THE GOOD FAITH OF THOSE SIGNING AND IT WAS ATTACHED TO THE SIGNATURE OF THOSE WHO *COULD* WRITE, *AS WELL AS TO STAND IN PLACE OF THE NAME OF THOSE WHO* **COULDN'T!**

BOOKS OF ASTRONOMY AND GEOMETRY WERE DESTROYED IN ENGLAND UNDER THE REIGN OF EDWARD VI IN 1552. IT WAS BELIEVED THEY WERE *INFECTED WITH* **MAGIC!**

WHEN WERE NINE-PINS AND CARDS BANNED ON WORKING DAYS? *See Curioddities next time.*

Tales of the Strato-Shooters By H. BEDFORD-JONES



A MATTER OF ROUTINE

CROGHAN looked up from his desk, a laugh in his hard, gray-eyed face. He did not like Dick Burton, though they frequently worked together. Privately, he thought Burton a snob and an utterly selfish individual.

"Yes, I'm catching the North African express in an hour," he answered the query. "A routine job in Algiers, arranging a clearance for the new airport we're building near the city. Weren't you there during the war?"

"Yes." A flush climbed into Burton's blond features. "If I give you a letter, will

you drop it into a mailbox there? It'll save a deuce of a lot of time."

"Sure thing. If you'd like the trip, I can get the job transferred to you—"

"God forbid!" exclaimed Burton with needless vehemence. "I never want to see that damned hole again!"

This was queer, thought Croghan. Only one thing would explain such vehemence: fear. But Burton was no man to fear anything, or he would not have been a strato-shooter. Croghan knew from experience how intrepid Burton was. However, there are various kinds of fear. He thought nothing more of the conversation, for the moment.

To Croghan the trip had no appeal. An interview with the governor-general, a little exertion of diplomacy or perhaps graft, and nothing more; a routine job entirely. He knew Algiers well, had lived there and rather liked it in his cynical way. Croghan was a hard man, bitter hard. He believed in efficiency and he got results. That was why he stood at the head of the corps of trouble-shooters serving Stratolines, Incorporated.

Stratolines had developed, after the war, into one of the biggest things on earth. The terriffic world-wide competition of airlines that took place even before the peace treaties were signed, did not involve Stratolines; it was one jump ahead of them all. It wanted no passenger or local business. It was out for freight alone—freight carried on non-stop distance runs, the longer the better, at stratosphere levels.

Its giant six-engined Planetoids, with the Brem auxiliary helicopter on which it held a world monopoly, laughed at competition, even in this booming air age. Its network of bases extended everywhere. Its influence was tremendous. Yet with Stratolines—as with the solar system—things might still go wrong, difficulties crop up, well-laid plans go agley. Hence the corps of picked men known as strato-shooters; men equal to any emergency. Some of the problems they encountered were queer ones. Some were insuperable. Some were merely human equations gone wrong. But, in all cases, they were overcome.

Bert Croghan lived for efficiency. He was devoid of sympathy; he had, they said, no soft spot, no human feeling. He was hard as nails and looked it. Though he could laugh readily enough, his gray eyes were points of flint in a bony, jutting face. He was disliked and feared and admired. After the time he had been so nearly "framed" for accepting a million-dollar bribe from the Persian oil people, he was always on guard and suspected everyone.

Burton handed over the promised letter; Croghan noted that it was superscribed in Arabic and tucked it away without a second glance. Burton knew Arabic well. Croghan knew it less well, but enough to get along with at a pinch. Anyone can speak it, but writing it is another matter. To ask why Burton wrote in Arabic to someone in Algiers, never occurred to Croghan. Already he was in that loftily detached frame of mind with which he approached the problems of Stratolines, Incorporated. He was not a man but a machine.

A helicopter bus flew him from the Stratolines building to the airport. Everything was arranged; his reservation at the Oasis in the Boulevard Carnot, his passport and customs formalities, even his interview with the governor-general next afternoon. He went aboard the express and settled down with his evening edition, oblivious to all around. He gave not a thought to the thrilling spectacle which the great New York airport and the heavens above it presented, in this period of the air age. That was all mere routine, like his errand itself.

Later, he turned into his berth and read himself to sleep, having first fixed firmly in mind his job at Algiers. Stratolines was constructing there, on the uplands behind the city, a huge terminal field with shops; for here the freight-lines crossed from north to south and from west to east; the advent of

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Stratolines' Trouble-Shooter Caught the North African Express Fast Freight Plane—for More Trouble

air transport had proved a colossal boom to all Africa, whose development was going ahead on a stupefying scale.

Stratolines, however, had run up against a snag. In the precise center of their terrain lay a deep gully or wash. Its sides constituted an Arab cemetery on the one hand, a prosperous vineyard on the other; cemetery and vineyard and farm down below, and farmhouse above, were owned by an Arab named Mustapha, who refused to sell at any price.

Naturally, Stratolines had done everything, even invoking diplomatic procedure, but to no avail. Mustapha had refused to discuss the matter with their agents, the French could effect nothing. Croghan's job was to break the jam, no matter how or at what cost. Stratolines was desperate to get that airport at work. There was no other terrain for miles around that would provide the runways necessary for the giant transports.

Refusing to worry about it till he faced it, Croghan slept and did not waken till the sun was up and the map-indicator above his berth showed they were over Portugal.

He dressed, breakfasted, and watched the televis news on the cabin screen until the African coast was sighted.

Algiers, developed to fantastic proportions by air traffic, rose like a gigantic white blotch against the green hills; the ship settled to rest at the new passenger airport behind the botanical gardens. Croghan stepped out, and was met by the Stratolines agent, who drove him uptown and plied him with questions and offers of service.

"All I want is to know why the governor-general has refused to take any action."

"We could get only evasion," said the agent. "The president of the line cabled him and General Perrault was still polite but evasive. He will be so with you."

"I have an appointment with him for four o'clock. The Residency is still on the hill over the town? Then leave it to me," said Croghan. "Isn't he the same General Perrault who marched his brigade from Toulon to Paris during the war?"

"The same, yes; but he is older now," was the reply. Croghan grinned and said no more.

ALGIERS was unchanged; the same undusted French city, the same squalid, narrow Arab streets, the same golden glory over everything, the same persistent bootblacks, the same Arabs clad in old burlap or in magnificently tailored splendor. Croghan sniffed it all in, good and bad, and felt his heart warm to it. Here, more than any other place, he could relax.

That afternoon a taxi took him up the hill, in past the guards, and along the curving road to the Residence. A secretary received him and led him to the governor-general, a gray, erect, precise man. Everything was most polite and careful and restrained; it was evident to Croghan that only vague evasion awaited him. He grinned.

"Do you remember, General," he said abruptly, "when you were a mere colonel during the war—it was in the Tunisian campaign—and your men were caught by a battery of Nazi guns on the way to Bizerta? An American attack plane strafed hell out of the Nazis at roof level and was shot down. When you had occupied the Nazi positions you found the pilot of the plane, slightly wounded—"

General Perrault woke up. "Ah, name of a name of a name!" he exclaimed. "Do I recall that day, that man? It was magnificent! But how do you know about it? Let me look at you again, mon ami. There is something about you—"

"Sure. I was that pilot," said Croghan. "Remember me now, do you?"

The general came to life with a glad cry. He embraced Croghan, he ordered wine, he sat down with him and talked like mad; he presented the visitor to his aides, and in short loosened up altogether.

"Now, let's talk business," said Croghan. "I gather you're not going to help Stratolines in this pinch. Well, I shan't urge you. All I ask is to know why."

The general sighed, but he had been broken down and all evasion was past.

"My friend, I am helpless, quite helpless," he said frankly. "Your firm needs a piece of ground. First, it contains an Arab cemetery. Second, it is owned by Sidi Mustapha ben Yusuf. He is a descendant of the Prophet, like a million others; but in Arab eyes he is a holy man. If he refuses to sell or even to discuss the matter with you, I cannot force him. It is a matter of religion,

and in matters of religion we dare not interfere. There, in a nutshell, is the whole difficulty."

"Okay, general," said Croghan cheerfully. "But you can do one thing for an old friend, and I'll ask no more. Persuade this guy to talk things over with me."

"He hates Christians, I warn you! He speaks no French.

"Well, I'll talk Arabic with him. Tell him I'm not a Christian but an Arizona Muhammedan, a Jersey Dervish, anything you like! Surely he doesn't hate Americans?"

"Worse than any others, I regret to say. But I shall do what I can. I'll see him this afternoon and telephone you. Will you not come here as my guest? I am desolated. At least, I shall lend you one of my official cars, with a driver; it will give you prestige locally. And to reach Si' Mustapha you must have a car."

"Doesn't he live on the property back of town?"

"No; on his ancestral farm among the hills, twenty miles away. He's a lordly rascal, and has vast influence among the natives."

THERE the matter rested. When Croghan departed, he refused a car; he wanted to walk, and did, down the hill and through the French city. As he came to the square fronted by the handsome but garish post-office, he remembered Burton's letter. He dropped in at the Bureau, bought some stamps, and mailed the letter. He caught a glimpse of the inscription and smiled; it was addressed to Ya Lella somebody—a woman. He was sorry now he had not taken a look at her address. Burton must have had some affair of the heart here in wartimes.

Late in the afternoon General Perrault phoned that Sidi Mustapha had agreed to see the visitor next morning, and the official car would call for Croghan at ten o'clock.

Croghan sat until sunset on sidewalk terraces, sipping Nosi Be coffee, watching the Arabs and soldiers and civilians, listening to wild music from Sudanese troop bands, and being thoroughly bored. He was to dine next evening at the Residence; tonight he was free.

So, presently, he sauntered over to Rue Michelet and along beneath the arched colonnades that overlooked the wide harbor below, and turned in at the old restaurant he had used to frequent. It was a little dingier, but otherwise unchanged. He settled down at a table, ordered his meal and a bottle of wine, and reflected how much better off he was than if dining at some luxurious tourist hotel.

And right there his lazy routine ended with a bang, and he quit being a machine.

She came walking in from the entrance with a slow swinging stride. She was not at all overdressed; her grace, her perfectly appointed ensemble, her air of calm assurance, caught his attention. Such a woman, here unescorted, could have but one meaning, yet he doubted. She knew how to do her hair; and more important, what not to do with her hands. And she was not wandering. She was making straight to some goal. And it was Croghan's table.

He rose as she paused, showing only surface politeness in his manner.

"Surely you'll welcome company, Mr. Croghan?" she said in English, smiling a little.

"This is something new," he observed. "One should appreciate the artistic touch, by all means! I am enchanted."

He drew out a chair for her. She was quite at ease.

"They were right when they warned me you had a bitter tongue," she said cheerfully.

"They?" at the word, his brows lifted slightly, but he refused to be baited into asking questions. For the first time, it struck him that this meeting might not be accidental. "Oh, that's the risk you ran, madame, in choosing such an approach. I might know that you're not what you seem, but—"

"No, I'm not a street-walker," she said with disconcerting bluntness. "But if you pretend to think me one, it might save us both considerable trouble. You see, it's no secret that I've been pretty hard up lately; your arrival was unexpected, they had to work fast, and I was the best available person, so they picked me to attract you."

"Well, they couldn't have made a better choice," said Croghan. He realized that she was deliberately putting him on guard. He beckoned the waiter. "Madame is dining with me. Take away that Chateau du Roc

and bring a bottle of good Beaune instead."

His swift appraisal had rewarded him. She wore no wedding-ring but bore the mark of one. Her golden-brown hair was natural; her features were daintily feminine, piquante, alluring; her eyes carried an impish sparkle in their brown depths. She studied him, smilingly.

"You're resolved not to ask questions, eh? Wise man. Then let's check on your conclusions regarding the brazen hussy. Go ahead; I'll tell you if you're right or wrong. Or aren't you sufficiently interested?"

"Oh, definitely!" rejoined Croghan. "I'd say you're either American, or partly so; age, twenty-three; married at eighteen and separated soon after. The rest is mystery."

"You do very well." She nodded approvingly. "My mother was a Russian refugee —they flooded North Africa after the first World War, you know. My father was an American a vice-consular agent here. He died here, my mother stayed. Married at eighteen? No, nineteen; in the last year of the war, and separated the next year when my husband went home. He had a very important family who would have been disgraced by an Arab woman, as they called me. So I let him get a divorce."

"Good riddance, if he was that sort," said Croghan heartily. "Alimony?"

She shook her head. "I am not—was not —a professional, my friend. I inherited my mother's house here, a farm that produced well, and was content with small means. It was enough for me and my son, until the bad times came last year."

"A son, eh? Does this husband of yours know there is a child?"

"Oh, yes! This is not a movie story." She laughed softly, deliciously. "And you? No, you are not married. You have worked for Stratolines ever since the war. You were here in the Tunisian campaign, an air pilot; you have many medals."

"Where'd you get all that?" snapped Croghan. She regarded him archly, enjoying his astonishment.

"This is not a night club; we cannot dance here," she said. "You see, only when we are dancing can you hope to get questions answered. My house is a nice one up high, a villa on the road to the Observatory. We can dance there to the radio. Yes?"

Croghan met the impish eyes, and a smile curved his lips. A cynical smile.

"Your child is there. You'd take me there—and you'd expect me to believe, or even pretend to believe, that you're anything but the finest sort of a girl? Sure, I'll go along. Or we can go somewhere else and dance, if you like."

A quick smiling warmth lit her eyes. She reached out across the table and patted his hand quickly. She was quite serious, now, and remained so.

"I like you; honestly, I do. My name's Angelique—" She broke off, then continued very hastily. "Now you must pretend. You must, you must! Be fascinated. Be a fool like me. This is a microphone—they will listen—"

THE waiter appeared, bringing a handsome floral piece lit by electric bulbs; when attached to a wall socket, it brightened their table nobly. He was full of compliments. One gathered that from his devotion to so charming a couple he had been moved to thus decorate the table fittingly. Croghan's lip curved cynically; he played the game; he understood. For the moment he must accept everything—later, he would learn the reason.

She became a different person, full of blandishments and honeyed words. As for Croghan, he proceeded to lose his head about her quite openly. He enjoyed himself, pressed more wine upon her, vowed his eternal devotion.

"But you must tell me more about yourself, your work, what you do here!" she exclaimed.

"Anything. I've no secrets from so charming a woman!" he cried. "But not here, my dear. We must go somewhere and dance; I must see more of you."

It was well played on both sides. The meal was excellent. Anyone listening to what came from that hidden mike would have sworn that she had him hooked—bait, line and sinker. All the while, he was wondering who "they" could be and what was in the wind."

He was wondering about Angelique, too, in a practical sort of way. He believed her story about fifty percent. She was no chance pickup "they" had located. There was something more behind her activity, some

definite reason for it. Croghan was far too cynical to credit superficial indications about anyone.

"When it comes to that," he reflected at the back of his mind, "General Perrault no doubt lied like hell, also. He was just a bit too smooth for any use, to my notion. There's no religious problem in Algiers like there is in Morocco, not a bit of it! They even show tourists around the mosques here. Nope, I'm up against a tight corporation of some kind, and the quicker we bust it loose and see inside, the better."

But if Perrault had lied to him—why? Politics, perhaps; these Frenchmen were ever entangled in a maze of devious political affairs.

She had a car parked on the square, a little old rattling pre-war car hanging together by a thread. They piled into it and she drove up the winding hill roads through El Biar and Bouzarea to the road that came to abrupt end at the Observatory. A needless roundabout way, as Croghan noted; they might have come more directly. Why? He asked her, and she uttered a low, delightful laugh.

"Why? Because I'm enjoying myself, and the cool night, and you! It is nice that you do not make love to me. Really, I mean; that pretense back there was very well done and will fool them."

Croghan was not falling in love with anyone, and said so; but he was interested in her. Evidently she was in a pretty bad jam of some kind. He could divine in her a quiet courage, a deft efficiency that stirred his admiration. Probably she had told the truth about herself and her situation here.

"Any microphones at your villa?" he asked.

She laughed again. "No, I promise you! The little Richard will be asleep. My Arab woman, Fatima, goes home at night. It will be safe; the only safe place we could find. There's the place ahead, just off the road."

The old car wheezed to a halt, before one of those charming little villas that dot the hills behind Algiers. A tiny place overhung with flowers. Croghan followed her in, as she switched on the lights, and looked about happily.

It was an exquisite little interior, with arches and gay tiles, a few good pictures, a glorious old ikon in a silver frame. She went to look at the child, and returned. He sprawled comfortably on a divan and lit a cigarette. She settled herself in a deep chair, sighed, and looked at him.

"The radio?" he said. She smiled.

"That was just talk for the microphone."

"You spoke of a farm. This can't be it, on a sharp hillside?"

"Oh, no! Si' Mustapha owns it now."

"Eh? The same chap I'm to see tomorrow, Sidi Mustapha ben Yusuf?"

"The same. It is not a coincidence."

HER eyes warned him. Clear eyes, filled with an odd certainty of knowledge, touching upon him lightly, almost sadly. Why, dammit, she seemed sorry for him! He stirred.

"Well, let's have it. What am I up against"

"A spider-web." She leaned forward, took a cigarette from the table, and spoke softly and quietly. "There is a group of men in the background of politics and finance here, very powerful men, mostly French. They are accustomed to having their own way, my friend. Even the governor-general must do as they say."

"So that's it!" he observed. "Poor Perrault had to lie. Just how much do you know about my job here?"

She waved her cigarette. "Oh, all of it! You visit Si' Mustapha tomorrow. He will be polite, evasive; he will give you a fine dinner and many compliments, with several of his sons looking on. You will get promises, and nothing will come of them. You are caught in a spider-web, my friend."

"I am, like hell!" said Croghan, but he knew her words were true. "A web can be torn away."

She shook her head, letting smoke trickle from her nostrils.

"Not this one. You must have a certain piece of land. Well, I owned it; that was my farm. I promised a Stratolines agent to sell to him and gave an option. Stratolines went ahead, buying and building. Then, suddenly, Mustapha claimed the land; the old deeds were declared illegal. I was helpless and made it over to him; oh, they paid me full value! But your great company had gone too far to back out."

"So that's it! I thought it was funny that Stratolines had been hooked."

"Not funny, but clever," she said. "Your coming was expected. They mean to milk your company for an enormous amount of money, and they can do it. My task tonight is to find out from you what your authority is, how badly Stratolines must have this property, how far they are committed by contracts here, and so forth. I am to be well-paid for finding out. You can tell me whatever will best suit your purpose and I shall repeat it."

"When?"

"In the morning. Before you see Mustapha. He is acting for them, you see."

"He actually owns the land in question, eh?"

She nodded. "Yes. He is one of them. He hates Americans."

So there it was. Having learned the worst, Croghan looked at it calmly and could reach just one conclusion; this spider-web must be ripped apart. How? He had no idea. So, characteristically, he abandoned that train of procedure and slanted off on another.

"I owe you a great deal, Angelique. By the way, what's your name?"

"I use my own, Madame Sainton. My story is well known—and my divorce." A slight bitterness lay in her words.

"You've helped me when it was not to your interest; why?"

She studied him for a slow moment. "In order to get a reward. I could, perhaps, help you even more, if you dared the risk; provided I were properly compensated."

"Oh!" said Croghan. He was vaguely disappointed; he might have known she had some axe to grind. "What reward do you want?"

"Two things. First, plain speech from you, the truth. Connected with your firm is a man named Burton. Has he been here in Algiers?"

Croghan was puzzled. "Dick Burton? No, he hasn't."

"Then how did I receive this evening a letter from him posted today, posted here?"

"The devil! Was that letter to you?" Croghan laughed, but she did not. "He asked me to mail a letter for him when I got here. It was addressed in Arabic."

"Yes, to me. Well, that's cleared up!" Her sombre air vanished; she even smiled. "Now for the second part of my reward—" She checked herself as, from another room, came a faint wail in a child's voice. She rose. "Would you like to see him? Come along."

Croghan rose and followed her into a bedroom where a dim light burned. A child lay on his bed; a pretty boy with golden hair. His mother sank beside him, hushing him, and glanced up at Croghan. The child was asleep again almost at once. For a moment Croghan watched them, then he nodded, smiled, and went back to the front room. He took another cigarette and went to the table, seeking matches. A framed photograph lay there, face down, as though it had fallen. He picked it up—and saw Burton's face, younger, in uniform.

"The devil! Little Richard—Dick Burton—well, something else is cleared up," he reflected. "What a damned fool Burton was, and is!"

She came back into the room, glanced at the portrait, and spoke.

"I see there's no longer any secret. You know him?"

"Yes, of course. A fine fellow; a terrible fool."

"Oh, we're all fools at times, she said lightly. "He's getting married again, he said in that letter. He sent money for little Richard. Money!" Her voice hardened on the word. Scorn and contempt leaped into her face.

"The second part of your reward?" said Croghan. "What is it?"

"To get to America, with him." She nodded back at the room they had left. "Not for me; nothing matters, for me. But his future. He belongs there, and I'm helpless. Can you do it? Remember—there is still a way in which I may help you!"

"What is it?"

"No. Stick to the subject. Answer me, first.

Her implorant eyes, her tense air, told him that this meant everything to her.

Regretfully, Croghan went into the immigration laws of the United States with her, for they offered no hope. Following the war, they had been tightened rigidly.

"If you were not divorced, it would be simple," he went on. "Owing to the great number of our soldiers who married in Europe and elsewhere, the old rule of the first World War was restored, giving a woman the nationality of her husband. But

you are French by nationality, having been born here; the same with your son. You'd have to marry an American and have him adopt the boy, if you want to enter."

"For his sake, I would do that," she said crisply. "Can you find the man?"

Croghan broke into laughter, and this angered her, but he could not help it, till he wakened to the tragedy in her heart. Then he lost all mirth.

"I'm sorry; we don't look at things the French way," he said. "To do it, a man would have to love you—not a hard job, either. He'd hardly do it just to serve your purpose."

"What about yours?" she demanded. "I can show you how, with risk, you may gain what you desire."

"Do that," said Croghan promptly, "and I'll guarantee you the man will be found!"

"Agreed. On your honor?"

"On my honor, it'll be done—somehow."

She jumped up, obtained and unfolded a map of Algeria, and brought it over beside him, pointing with her finger.

"You're going to see Mustapha in the morning. Here's his farm, just off Highway No. 1, near Beni-Mered. Now look; going on toward Blida, there's a fork in the highway outside Beni-Mered. Taking the left fork, after only five kilometres one comes to Oued Djer."

"I see. What about it?"

"At Oued Djer lives Ali el Attaf. He's a mortal enemy of Mustapha; a feud has existed between their families for generations. During the war, when your army was here and things were in confusion, Ali killed two of Mustapha's sons and was himself wounded by Mustapha. It is a deadly fued. Well! Put Mustapha in the hands of Ali, or threaten it, and Mustapha will do as you say."

Croghan laughed at her ideas of a business deal as practised in Algeria.

"I wouldn't know how to do that, Angelique. Besides, it wouldn't work. Any sale extorted under duress would not be legal."

"Oh!" Her face fell. "And it is true, he has sworn on the Koran not to sell that land to your firm. He could not break such an oath; he is a good Moslem."

"Well, let it wait," he said. "Your idea may strike some spark in my brain; we'll see. I must be getting back to town—"

"But you can't! They'll have someone watching this place." She stared at him wide-eyed. "Don't you see? They think I'm a bad woman; they must go on thinking so! They must be certain you have stayed here. You can stay; take this couch and I'll sleep with Richard. It will convince them. Otherwise they will not believe me at all!"

He saw her point. "The devil! Are you in their power? Have you no freedom?"

"Life is not easy here for people who are poor," she said quietly.

Croghan repressed a hot oath; then, since in Rome one must do as the Romans do, he acquiesced to what she desired. He sat down and carefully instructed her in what she was to report; it was certain that the fantastic figures involved would not please the Algerian rascals who expected to blackmail Stratolines.

Angelique produced wine and cakes, and they chatted. Again she urged upon him her hairbrained scheme, and he shook his head.

"Don't you see, the things would have to be done legally, not in some far village?"

"No," she pouted. "Ali el Attaf rules that village of Oued Djer. He has native and French lawyers there; he deals much in land and cattle. Ali is blind in one eye and crafty; he is very greedy and would do anything for money. He likes Americans; he would help you."

"No; forget it," said Croghan. "It's impossible. By the way, I'm going in General Perrault's car—how would you like a ride to Mustapha's place in the official bus?"

"I'd love it!" she cried, starry-eyed.

"Good. I leave the city at ten. We'll stop here and pick you up."

LATER, the lights out, he made himself comfortable on the divan, only to lie awake staring into the darkness, his brain busy. Gad, what a live woman she was—what a blithering idiot Dick Burton was! This wild-cat scheme of hers was totally impossible, for a dozen reasons.

Now, Croghan was one of those who held that nothing, in the service of Stratolines, was impossible. Further, he operated on a well-founded belief which had often served him well; namely, that when a man was up against a hopeless situation, he only made it more hopeless by doing the expected

thing, and the only way to win was to do the unexpected.

"She's right; this is a spider-web," he thought as he lay there. "Therefore, it must be torn apart! And it must be done fast, damned fast, and hard."

He fell asleep at last, upon a smile.

IN THE early hours before dawn, Angelique waked him and drove him back to the city in her old rattletrap. She was enthusiastic at the prospect of riding about the country in the governor-general's car, as well she might be. She dropped him at his hotel, promising to be ready when he showed up.

Croghan slept till a decent hour, breakfasted, sought the hotel manager and obtained twenty-five thousand francs in cash. A Stratolines agent never had money troubles. At ten o'clock to the minute arrived the governor-general's car, with a merry, efficient Arab Spahi at the wheel; it was a mammoth car of golden plastic and flew the flag of France.

That Spahi kissed the thousand-franc note Croghan handed him, showed white teeth in a gay laugh, and headed where he was told; apparently he was under no strict orders, except to put himself at Croghan's service. So, with the promise of another banknote of equal size at parting, Croghan gave him very explicit instructions. The Arab assented without demur, and tooled the big car up the winding slopes to the Observatory road.

Angelique was waiting, and they were off without delay.

"Did you make your report?" asked Croghan.

She nodded, smiling. "It was well received, and my reputation is lost forever!"

"Cheer up; it may soon be regained. You look charming this morning! And morning is the test," said he, glancing at her unadorned gown of simple white, such as few women would dare to wear. "What? Not even a jewel to give a touch of color?"

She laughed at him. "Would you gild perfection?"

"Truth lies, as ever, in a jest," he said. But she scarcely heard the compliment, for she was watching the driver and the flying countryside.

"Why are we going so fast?"

"Business, Angelique! You'll see."

The kilometres, indeed, flew past like magic. The staring road-signs told of Birkadem and Birtouta behind them; suddenly she turned to Croghan, startled.

"We've left the road to Mustapha's place behind—where are we going?"

"To Oued Djer," he said. She caught her breath, staring at him. He smiled. "Trust me. All will go well."

The village ruled by Ali el Attaf was a miserable little place of mud hovels; Ali himself was a scrawny ruffian with an empty eye-socket and a well-merited air of villainy, but he could laugh, and he did laugh, while the naked progeny and burlap-clad elders of the village clustered to stare at the governor-general's car.

Croghan talked with him alone, in mingled Arabic and French.

"Allah, and Allah!" said Ali. "For twenty thousand francs I would kill him gladly!"

"No; you'd do that for nothing," said Croghan. "The twenty thousand is to insure your honesty and self-denial in not killing him."

Ali laughed even more heartily. "Very well; of lawyers and notaries there is no lack, so give me the money."

"When you have earned it," said Croghan, and hopped back into the car.

LIKE the magic carpet of old, the glittering car whisked them back to Beni-Mered and on to the farm headquarters of Mustapha, a far more prosperous place at the edge of the vast fertile agricultural plain. It was a collection of building rather than a farm, guarded by a mud wall. A number of cars stood about the main building, and a large assemblage of Arabs had gathered for the occasion.

"Hop in front with the driver," said Croghan to Angelique, as he alighted.

Through the crowd of staring Arabs advanced Mustapha to greet his guest. He was clad in robes of snowy white; a black-bearded, stalwart figure of undeniable force. Croghan summoned up his scanty Arabic and made the plunge. It was lose or win all at one cast.

"His Excellency, the governor-general, desires to be present at our talk, Sidi Mustapha, but was forced to stop in Beni-

Mered," he said, after giving his name. "However, he sent his car to bring you, and will himself return here with you. If you'll get in, we'll go to him at once."

The car and flag and chauffeur spelled authority of the highest, Mustapha had not the least reason to doubt; in fact, it was a distinct honor to be tooled about in such a bus, and Mustapha's flattered vanity jumped at the chance. He flung a few words at the crowd, then went to the car. The Spahi held open the rear door and saluted. Mustapha gathered up his snowy robes and climbed in. Croghan followed. The door was slammed, the Spahi darted around to his own seat, and next instant the big car was in motion.

A violent oath escaped Mustapha. Angelique, who had kept out of sight, rose up and turned, smiling. The Arab knew her, of course, but expressed himself in no uncertain terms at being tricked into riding with a woman, an unveiled woman, a woman of the Franks; it was an affront and he resented it. Angelique chattered gaily in Arabic, and his anger subsided. Meantime, the car was streaking for Beni-Mered, scattering busses and anything else on the road with its powerful siren.

They went into the little town with siren blasting, and straight on through the town, and then swung out of the highway at the fork. Sidi Mustapha turned to Croghan in perplexity and new anger—and found Croghan fondling a pistol and smiling at him.

"By Allah, are you mad?" cried Mustapha. "Where is General Perrault?"

"In Algiers," said Croghan. "He has changed his mind about the arrangement with you and your friends, Mustapha, about that land; he is an old friend of Americans, and consequently you are the one to suffer. Ali el Attaf is also a friend of Americans, and is going to take you on a nice long journey into the mountains. You may not be very comfortable, but that can't be helped.

At the name of his deadly enemy, to whose village they were obviously speeding, Sidi Mustapha changed countenance. He sat staring in vivid alarm from Croghan and the pistol to the laughing countenance of Angelique; he became rigid, tense.

"Keep your hands outside those robes and in sight," said Croghan, jerking up the pistol. "I don't want to shoot you; Ali el Attaf wants to do that. After you are dead, your eldest son will be willing to talk business with Stratolines about that land."

Mustapha's thoughts were almost written in his bearded countenance; a deep breath, and he resigned himself to the inevitable. He was quite helpless. That Croghan spoke the truth, that the governor-general had double-crossed him and his associates, was only too evident by the use of this official car to bait the trap. His eyes flashed up. They were approaching the mud huts of Ali el Attaf.

"By Allah!" he murmured, fingering his heard. "What is man, to avert his destiny? Mektub! It is written."

A goodly crowd was gathered in front of the huts. The lean one-eyed Ali came forth when the car stopped, and with malicious mockery greeted his distinguished guest Mustapha. Mustapha was loath to leave the protection of the car, but finally did so, accepting his fate with a certain dignity. Croghan, at his side, accompanied them to the huts, calling on Angelique to follow. She obeyed.

"It is given man to alter his own destiny at times," said he, when they were in the hut to which Ali led them. Outside, the crowd gathered with shrill yells of jubilation. "You have sworn not to sell that land, Sidi Mustapha; but you can lease it for ninety years without breaking your oath. I'm sure, in such case, that I can prevail upon Ali to let you depart home in peace."

Sidi Mustapha grunted, listened to the vengeful yells outside, and sweat dripped on his beard.

Fast is a fast car, but the telephone is faster, and Algeria is a network of telephones. When the official car of the governor-general after depositing Angelique, brought Croghan to his Algiers hotel at three-thirty that afternoon, it was met by two officers who brusquely prevented Croghan from alighting.

"Monsieur Croghan? You are under arrest," said one, and they climbed in. "To the Palais du Gouvernement, at speed!"

TEN minutes later Croghan walked into the presence of the governor-general. Far from embracing him, General Perrault

was in a towering rage and made the fact clear. He dressed Croghan down handsomely for his abuse of confidence and friendship, for kidnapping an influential native, for blackmail and extortion. He poured forth a torrent of furious invective and prospective punishment which would have made any French subject shiver in his boots.

Croghan listened respectfully, and when the general paused for breath, spoke calmly.

"My dear general, you've been imposed upon."

"Yes, by you, whom I trusted!" stormed the governor-general.

"No; by somebody who has lied to you," said Croghan. He produced a number of papers written in French and Arabic. "Look at these, if you please. Here is a lease of the disputed property, from Sidi Mustapha to Ali el Attaf; here is another, from Ali to me, in behalf of Stratolines, Incorporated —a ninety-year lease. These are copies; the originals have been deposited at the Consulate of the United States, and the Consul will very shortly take up with you the question of my unwarranted arrest."

General Perrault swore a blue streak. "Illegal! The whole thing is illegal!"

"Indeed? Here is a statement signed by Sidi Mustapha, showing that the deal was voluntary on his part and uninfluenced by anyone."

"It was extorted from him!"

"You can't prove it, and I can prove the contrary by these signatures—witnesses, as you'll perceive."

"Monsieur, this is a farce," exploded the governor-general. "You shall suffer. So shall the woman who aided you in this imposition, this criminal conspiracy! She is a subject of France—"

"No, no; my dear general, calm yourself!" Croghan spread out the other papers. "Look at these. She is my wife; her son has been adopted by me—all both by French and Arab law, as is plainly set forth. Besides, she is now at the American Consulate with the boy, and you'd better not try any arresting of American citizens there!"

General Perrault was dumbfounded. Before he could find words, Croghan went on.

"My dear Perrault, it would pain me inexpressibly if you took any action which you might regret—you, my old comrade in arms! You know how the newspapers would play it up; you know how charges would fly, how it would be said that you were allied with a ring of scoundrels here in Algiers, whom my wife could probably name —why, it would be terrible scandal! You see, the whole thing is a trumped-up piece of nonsense. There cannot possibly be any charges made against me, or against her."

General Perrault swallowed hard. He twisted his gray mustache. His eyes dwelt upon the papers before him, then lifted to the face of Croghan. What he read in that hard, gray-eyed face brought a sigh to his lips. He leaned back, and slowly nodded.

"My friend, my comrade—you are right," he said. "Yes. I was sadly mistaken. The whole affair, as you say, is utter nonsense. I cannot possible permit any charges to arise out of such absurdity." He swallowed hard again. "You will honor me by joining me in a glass of wine?"

"With pleasure," said Croghan.

"And your visit here—you have accomplished your business?"

"Mere routine," said Croghan. "Just a matter of routine, I assure you."

That was a bald, unvarnished lie, and Croghan was well aware of it. For he knew, even then, that life would no longer be mere routine for him—so long, at least, as he was married to Angelique. And, since they are still married and fabulously happy, the lie still holds good.

To Pop Hanley the "Atlantic Star" Was Home. So He Took a Home Owner's Interest in Her Doings

THIS IS MY HOME

By LEE TILBURNE

Author of "The Fix for Loud-Mouth," etc.

POP HANLEY'S pale blue eyes were swimming as the head of the Atlantic Steamship Line handed him the check. His voice was too full to say anything and the words that the big man spoke were lost on Pop's weather-beaten ears. Pop was a hero.

Captain Bell looked up and scowled, but there was no malice in it. The scowl was a friendly one.

"Here again, eh Pop?" He grinned and his little eyes vanished in folds of flesh. "You're as sure as death and taxes, Pop."

Hanley grinned back as he took the pen in his stubby, powerful hand and put his signature on the ship's papers. Pop Hanley it read. No one knew the old man's first name and it was doubtful if Pop knew it himself, for Pop was not an educated man, nor was he very literate. He was a seaman — nothing else.

Some twelve years ago when the *Atlantic Star* had been rolled out of the construction yards and berthed at Pier 63, North River, Pop Hanley had been the first to sign on. And since then he had never missed a trip on her.

He had lasted through three captains—Captain Bell was the fourth. He had been with her when she rammed a sand bar off Sandy Hook and he was the last man, along with the captain, to leave her to burn

two days out of St. Thomas, but she hadn't burned completely and the *Atlantic Star* was still running—running with the onus on her name of—jinx ship. Her frequent change of personnel was a sure sign of that. Pop Hanley had stayed on. Every trip he would be in the main cabin with his papers in order ready to sign on.

Most of the men who had come in contact with Pop knew how stubborn he was and put his constant reappearance down to that trait in his nature. For Pop was a persistent fellow and that, too, was well known. Pop only smiled that idea off. Sure, he was bull headed about some things, but he had other reasons for signing on. The *Atlantic Star* had been his home for twelve years. Before that it had been first one ship and then another, but none of them seemed to suit him as this one did. If it could be said, Pop felt a kindred spirit in the short stubby lines, smelly holds and worn gear of the ship. He knew where everything was, where she went on each trip and exactly what she was capable of doing.

So together the *Atlantic Star* and Pop Hanley grew along together, and with them also grew the ship's name as a jinx ship and Pop's one and only bad habit — having hunches. Pop swore little, drank nothing stronger than beer and smoked his pipe — and had hunches, which were never right.

Whenever Pop said, "I gotta hunch," there was a general silence in the near vicinity, for the men of the sea are a superstitious lot, even in the matter of hunches from an old man whose hunches were always wrong.

It might have seemed odd that all of them were wrong and it was said that Pop was kidding half the time, but after a person knew Pop for several trips he began to realize that Pop wasn't kidding and was really in earnest although mistaken in his mental calculations. Perhaps he was really endowed with an inner feeling that told him what was to happen, but like a camera, the picture was upside down on the plate, and Pop would bring out the reverse side instead of correcting it to show the true picture.

POP walked aft with his duffle and slung it onto a corner bunk. It was his bunk, if the law of possession could be taken into account, for he had had the same one now for twelve years. His name was painted on the locker at its foot and his initials were scratched on the steel bed rails in various places.

There was almost a soft light in the old man's eyes as he looked at the bunk. The light which means a person is looking at something he loves or holds dear for the sake of fond memories held for a long time.

He slowly pulled out his worn gear and stowed it into the locker which was about big enough for a golf bag and nothing else. Everything fitted into place as if it had been a tailor-made job.

Pop straightened as he finished his simple task.

A harsh voice spoke to him.

"Hey, bum, what in hell are ya doin' with my bunk?"

The old man turned and looked at the bulky man in front of him, who topped him by a full head. Pop's eyes were mild and his manner milder, yet there was something about his squat, bowlegged figure that made shipmates leave him alone.

"Young fella," said Pop smoothly. "I've had that bunk now for twelve years. Think you can take it away from me?" He grinned. "That's my name on the locker and that's my name on the bed. Get it?" There was no threat in his voice—just positiveness.

The dark face scowled and the man's voice snarled. "Ta hell with that stuff. This is a southern trip an' it'll be hotter than Hades down here. The bunk by the porthole is the one fer me."

Big man measured little man and Pop took in the dark face and mean little eyes. Neither budged. Three older men, who had sailed with Pop before, edged forward and were about to say something, when the big man put his duffle on the deck and advanced.

"I wouldn't," said Pop simply. His right hand clamped on the other's forearm and as the big one swung, Pop tightened and jerked down. The other lost his balance and a stiff left hook caught him fair on the side of the jaw.

"Very pretty," someone said.

"Yeah," said Hanley slowly. He rubbed his left hand and pushed his way past the fallen man. "I've got a hunch him and me will be really friendly like before the voyage is over."

Those who knew Pop smiled.

"Even if you have to lick him every day," laughed Miller, an old shipmate.

Pop didn't reply, but went up on deck. As far as he was concerned the argument was over. The big man would forget and if he didn't he would have to be knocked down again. That was all there was to it.

An hour later the crew was busy casting off. Pop's eyes wandered over the twenty odd seamen. His blue eyes wrinkled at the corners. He addressed his remarks to Miller, who was helping him with the aft line.

"I've gotta hunch we is goin' to have a right smooth trip."

Miller didn't stop working, but he shook his head and watched the four inch manila go into place in a neat coil. He had never known it to fail. Pop's hunch meant that they would have a rough passage.

TWO days out of New York and the *Atlantic Star* was plowing through a heavy sea. Miller had expected it and had passed the old man's hunch along to the crew. The older men, who knew Pop took it in their stride.

The younger men had grinned, but they weren't grinning now.

One of the young ordinaries, who was spooning beans into his mouth in a half-hearted attempt to eat, nudged Miller.

"You mean to tell me that Pop is always wrong and dead sure and earnest in what he says?"

Miller looked at Hanley, who was unconscious of the roll of the ship and was enjoying his meal. "Yeah, always. And his hunches are always wrong, as far as I can remember."

"Then if that's the case," the other said, "why don't he just say the opposite from what he thinks and then he'll always be right?"

"I dunno," Miller sighed. "Better ask Pop. He can give you an answer to that question, I'm sure."

The newcomer finished his meal and waited until Pop finished his and then he followed him to the fo'c'sle.

"Say, Pop—"

"Yeah."

"I was speakin' to Miller and he was tellin' me about your hunches. Do you really believe in 'em?"

The older man chuckled and sat down. He had been asked that many times before by young fellows. He slowly filled his pipe and lighted it before he spoke. "Sure."

"Then why is it that you're always wrong?"

Pop scratched his iron gray head.

"Ever know anyone that played the horses day after day and very seldom won, bud?"

The other nodded.

"Well, that's me. I'm always playing hunches and I'm a dead sure loser. I don't base my hunches on anything I see or hear. I just feel somethin' and then I say what I think. Mebbe some day I'll bring in a long shot and then everybody will be surprised."

The young one smiled.

"Sure, Pop, a guy can't be wrong all the time."

The seaman's curiosity satisfied, he left and Pop let his eyes travel around the room. Severn, the big fellow he had fought with, wasn't present. He had the twelve to four and was on duty now. Pop was just as glad, for he had a funny feeling in his stomach whenever the man was near. It wasn't a feeling of fear, for Pop had no fear—except perhaps of the loss of his home, and that was a natural one. It was a feeling of distrust and dislike, not that Pop really disliked anyone.

Yet, though the two had quarreled, the man never came near Pop. Never spoke to him. Perhaps Severn had found out that Pop was dynamite. Perhaps—Pop gave it up.

THE ports were closed and the room was hot and stuffy when seven bells automatically brought Pop back to consciousness. He knew it was half past seven. Time to trot down to the galley for a cup of coffee before going on deck. The *Atlantic Star* was still trying to stand on her head. As Hanley passed the rows of bunks he saw several green faces. Some of the boys weren't taking kindly to the weather. He saw Severn in his bunk, asleep. Or at least he looked that way.

Pop went to the galley, got some coffee and then started back for the fo'c'sle to get his boots and slicker. It was going to be wet even up in the crow's nest.

He took the starboard passage on his trip aft. The dimly lit corridor with its multitude of smells lent to the hot stickiness and

gave a ghostly air to the surroundings. Pop was used to it.

He passed number three hold and was abreast of number four when he stopped. There was an unfamiliar bumping noise. Just as unfamiliar to Pop on board the *Atlantic Star,* as would be an odd noise in the home of a man on shore. With each roll of the ship the noise sounded. Pop went back to the light switch and flooded the hold with a white glare. His blue eyes wrinkled at the corners and he grumbled softly. Someone had been careless. And Pop took it as a personal affront that anyone should be careless on his ship.

One of the oil drums was rolling back and forth with each motion of the ship. The noise was caused by the contact the drum made when it hit the bulkhead or another drum, and from the top of the drum a tiny trickle of liquid was dripping on the deck. It, too, ran back and forth with the ship's motion and with each passing second is grew bigger.

"That's sure funny looking oil," Pop surmised. "Sort o' flows quick like. "Pop sniffed the air and smelled oil, but with all the barrels down there, that was natural. He waited for a few minutes, with only the thrumming of the engines below and the whipping of the wind in the rigging overhead. He waited until the puddle slopped in his direction and then he stuck a finger through the wire mesh and into the liquid.

"Oil, me gran'mother, that's water," his voice rumbled down the passage.

Pop was so engrossed with his find that he failed to notice a deeper shadow standing in the rear of one of the supports not ten feet away. He only muttered to himself and started forward. Captain Bell might be interested in this. He still had a few minutes before going on duty. He'd see him now.

But Captain Bell only chuckled when Pop told him about the oil.

"Must be mistaken, old-timer," he said. "Haven't been hitting the bottle, I hope?"

Pop's eyes smoked a bit, but he spoke evenly.

"Never touch it, sir. I'm tellin' you the truth."

"Yes, yes, well there's no use overlooking anything, is there? Mr. McCough, the first, is in charge of cargo. Better see him and ask him to step down and see about it. Tell him I said so."

"Yes, sir."

Pop left. He had an idea that the first wouldn't be very keen on looking over the cargo in a hot hold during this weather, but Pop with the stubbornness born into him went up to the first mate's room and entered.

"Well?" the mate wanted to know.

Pop explained.

"Oh, nuts, Hanley. What's all this dribble anyway? We shipped oil, not water. Who would want to ship water?"

"I dunno, sir."

"Well, I've got work to do, but as long as the skipper says to investigate, I guess I'd better do it and get it over with."

"Yes, sir," Pop agreed. The mate scowled.

Pop led the way below and switched on the light. He frowned to himself. He didn't remember shutting off the light when he had left.

"Well?" snapped McCough.

POP started to speak, but didn't. The drum was still there. At least it looked like the same drum, but then drums don't differ much. The trickle of water was gone and the drum rolled back and forth as sound as a dollar.

The mate growled, opened the wire door and went in. He looked around and then turned to Pop.

"Satisfied?" demanded the mate. "There is no leak here."

Pop mumbled something under his breath, sniffed near the drum and shrugged. "I dunno, sir."

"Ah nuts, Pop. If you weren't such an old geezer I'd throw you into the brig for being drunk. Now get aboard and prop that drum tight and then lock up."

The mate turned and stomped out of the hold.

Pop fixed the drum and then locked the door, but he wasn't satisfied. He went to the fo'c's'le, got his gear and went on duty.

What had happened to that trickle of water? Who had turned off the lights in the hold? Pop wasn't noted for his powers of detection, nor his ability to plan, but those two questions got under his skin and itched. And when Pop had an itch he scratched it,

and when a man scratches he sometimes gets something.

Pop Hanley might have let matters stand as they were, for he was no trouble maker and besides, he had been wrong so many times. There was a good possibility that he might be making something out of nothing. Yet with that thing nagging at him, he went to bed, ate, went on watch and tried to forget the trickle of water coming out of an oil drum. Pop might have been heard to mutter that he had hunches, but whatever his present hunch was, no one was near enough to hear it. Perhaps Pop, in the judgment of his own mind, decided to keep his mouth shut and keep the hunch that was giving him the itch, to himself. Yet the other way Pop looked at it was this. Would a man investigate a burglary in his own home? Pop thought he would.

The sea calmed down within the next few days, the oil drum didn't break loose again and Pop made it a point to go down that starboard passage at least once a day whenever he went for his coffee.

Perhaps this very action on his part might have had something to do with what happened the night before they sailed into Havana harbor.

POP climbed down the ladder from the crow's nest at a little after twelve, the night before they raised Morro Castle. He was feeling a bit under the weather, although not over-tired.

He dropped back to the galley, had a cup of coffee and then started aft to the fo'c's'le. By sheer force of habit he took the starboard passage. Pop glanced neither to right nor left as he plodded along the alley. He was thinking more about his upset stomach than his oil drum. He had almost forgotten about it. But not entirely. So, with the same curiosity that makes a person look at the scene of a crime after the crime has been cold for months, Pop stopped and looked into the dark hold to see how his oil drum was coming along.

Something flashed through the air, hit the wire mesh with a snap and bounced to the deck with a clang. Pop whirled like a cat, his eyes searching the darkness. A pair of legs were vanishing up the ladder.

"Well—" was as far as he got. He picked up the missile, a hammer, and raced for the ladder. At the top he looked both ways and saw no one.

Pop tucked the hammer into his pocket and walked into the bunk room. He looked for Severn, but he wasn't there.

Miller was just rolling into his bunk.

Pop tapped him on the shoulder "Seen that big lug I popped the other day?"

Miller frowned. "Severn?"

"Yeah."

"He went out as I came in. About ten minutes ago." Miller relaxed on the hard bunk. "He has the twelve to four, you know."

"Yeah," growled Pop, "I know."

He left Miller, went to his own bunk and turned in.

POP HANLEY was somewhat of a privileged character, as the crew of officers felt that there was no harm in the old boy, and they rather liked to hear him talk about the past history of the *Atlantic Star*. So when Pop dropped up to the bridge for reasons other than strictly business ones, he was always welcome.

Pop finished his morning watch. That itch, which had died down to a mere faint scar in his mind had been freshly opened last night when someone heaved a hammer at his head. What would have happened if the weapon had connected Pop guessed at, but he only thought the wrong thoughts, such as a dark night and a splash over the stern. Then the log would read—lost at sea. Some would say he had been drinking or perhaps he had gone crazy and had jumped overboard after the story he told the captain about water in oil drums. It was possible. That was why Pop, after lunch, took a stroll up to the bridge and saw the second mate.

"Hello, Pop," the second greeted. "We'll see Cuba in an hour."

Pop had seen Havana too many times, but he nodded.

"No more water leaks out of oil drums, eh Pop?" The news had got around among the officers, but not the crew.

"No, sir," Pop said with a grin.

Hanley lit his pipe and leaned against the rail. The *Atlantic Star* was slapping along at an even twelve knots. He sighed. He sure did like this ship. Too bad the wrong kind of people were on it.

Pop, with his mind on one point asked a question.

"Mister second, we carry mail, don't we?"

"Sure, everyone knows that."

"Aye, sure, but are there any other lines makin' this run that carried the mail?"

The second rubbed his chin. "Couple of others, why?"

Pop ignored the question.

"Pays pretty good, too, don't it?"

"Keeps a lot of ships running," the second admitted frankly. "Lots of companies just get under the line with the money from the mail contract."

"Yeah, I can see," grunted the old man. "Then the lines that ain't got the contracts is just out of luck?"

"That's right. Now for instance, the Southern Steamship Company, which also makes this run, doesn't carry mail. They would like nothing better than to get the contract. They would, too, if this line we're working for should lose it."

"How?" Pop asked with an uninterested air.

The second rubbed his chin again.

"Well, it's something like this. The government has the right to take away the contract from a line if something is wrong with that line. Lack of discipline, unsound and well—half a dozen other reasons. The Atlantic Line is near the edge. Especially this tub." He shrugged. "Course I don't know much about it. Been so long ago since I read up on that stuff."

Pop nodded. Some of it was clear to him, but he didn't need to understand all of it, for he had formed an idea.

"Ever work for the Southern Steamship Company?" Pop asked changing the subject.

"Hell no!" exploded the second. "No one with any respect would work for that gang of robbers. They and this line have been bitter enemies for years."

"Yeah," Pop muttered softly, as he built up his idea.

POP HANLEY left the bridge a few minutes later and calmly walked into the first mate's room. The first was putting on his whites in preparation to going ashore. He nodded.

"What do you want, old-timer?"

"Nothin' much, sir."

"Then let's have it, for I'm shy on time."

"You stowed the oil drums didn't you, sir?"

McCough scowled.

"For Pete's sake, Pop, you still at it? I thought you'd forgotten those darn drums by now."

"I have, I have," lied Pop. "I know the first mate is in charge of cargo, but I was interested in somethin' else."

"For instance?"

"For instance, that oil cargo is insured for about the amount it is actually worth."

"Of course. For the market price of oil to be exact."

"And if there was water in them there drums and they were lost—accidentally—of course—then the people who shipped the oil would be making a nice profit."

The first put his hands on his hips and glared at Pop.

"I know you haven't been drinking, but I'll bet you've been reading story books."

"Never read," said Pop frankly.

"Then you've been seeing movies ashore."

"Don't like movies," was the answer.

"Then you're crazy," snapped McCough. "Get out of here."

Pop shrugged.

"Ain't there a lot of rivalry between this line and the Southern Steamship Company?"

"Sure," growled the first. "Every line has a rivalry between it and every damned ship afloat."

"Yeah," Pop acknowledged the answer and left.

Pop wasn't exactly sure of what he would get out of all this questioning, but when he thought of tough guy Severn, the hammer aimed at his head and the possibility that something might happen to his ship, well——. Pop didn't finish the thought. Was there anything he could actually go on? Nothing. Nothing to make him go on except that stubborn streak in him that prodded him on.

POP and Miller stood by the aft steam winch and fed out line to the men on the pier head. The winch protested, sputtered and hauled back as the lines were made fast. Pop stretched and walked over to Miller.

He nudged him and pointed to the third mate.

"Does he look familiar to you?"

"Kind of. Why?"

"Dunno. Use to be a first and got busted. Or so I heard tell."

Miller was as old as Pop and had been to sea probably as long. He folded his arms across his chest and cocked his head to one side.

"Come to think of it, I do recall him, now that you mention about him being a first."

Pop's eyes lit up. "Where?"

"Lemme see. When I worked for the Southern Steamship Line there was a first on by the name of—yeah, it was Korjas. This guy is a little older lookin'."

Pop scowled. "You worked for that lousy line—and him too?"

Miller shrugged. "Only one trip. A guy has to eat, Pop." He turned away. "Yeah, it was three years ago. I remember him now. Sort of a quiet guy, who never mixed with anyone, including the officers."

"Yeah," murmured Pop, but his thoughts were miles away.

The two lines were rivals—natural enough. There was a mail contract that might be had and that was also natural. Oil not in oil drums and a third mate who used to be a first and worked for the rival line. So what? Pop wasn't particularly interested in the rivalry between the two lines nor about the third mate, but he was interested in his own home—the *Atlantic Star*.

Pop went below and got out a moth-eaten chart he had picked up somewhere and then started to point off distances with his dirty fingers. Pop knew the route as well as the captain did. The ship had plowed along it so many times it opened a groove in the water.

"Yeah," Pop said to himself, as he folded the chart. "Yeah, maybe I'm wrong, but then again maybe I ain't. What can they do to an old coot like me? Perhaps if I could—"

Pop didn't go ashore with his friends. He waited until they were well on their way and then he cleaned up and went ashore.

Pop headed for a different part of town, away from the bars and cafés. He was heading for the shipping firms offices.

IT WAS during supper, the following day, that Pop took it upon himself to pronounce one of his hunches. Up to this point he had only made his usual predictions as to the weather, sailing and various small matters that a seaman might be interested in.

Pop hadn't seen much of Severn since the night of the hammer throwing and he was just as glad for he felt that he might be tempted to do something that might land him in the brig, and that was no place to be in when there was work to be done. But Pop had seen the man ashore and the circumstances closed the case as far as Pop was concerned.

The ship was due to sail at eight and Pop, after much deliberation and thought, set out with his plan. Pop had thought it out very carefully. He was an old man and the sea was his life. It was funny, too, how a ship, a jinx ship like the *Atlantic Star* could grow on him after twelve years on her dirty decks. Most men would have been glad to get off after twelve weeks, but not Pop. The *Atlantic Star* was his home and he was going to keep it that way. Perhaps that, too, had a lot to do with the decision he had in mind, for Pop knew no home except this one and he was going to hold it.

Pop sat down at the mess table, hungry from his day ashore and anxious to shove off from the heat of Havana. Most of his mess mates had eaten ashore, but there were still quite a few who had saved their money and were eating aboard ship.

Pop ate slowly, watched the men and then nudged Miller. Miller didn't stop eating, but grunted an acknowledgment of Pop's motion. Pop spoke rather loud, which was not necessary, for the work of cargo stowing had stopped and the noise from the winches was quieted.

"Miller, me boy," he shouted, "I've got an awful feelin' coming over me right now."

"What?" muttered Miller through a mouthful of spuds.

"So help me, lad, I've had hunches all me life, but never one like the one I got now. It gives me a headache."

"I should think it would," growled his shipmate. Yet there was a curious silence in the room and the gleam in the men's eyes was enough to make Pop go ahead.

"Miller, what would you say if I told you that the *Atlantic Star* will never reach San Juan?"

"I'd say you were nuts," Miller retorted.

"Yeah, but I've gotta hunch this ship will go down somewheres near the windward channel. Perhaps even before we hit Cape Maisi Light."

Someone grinned and winked at his fellow eaters. A mutter ran through the room. It was bad to talk of such things, yet they all knew Pop and his reputation for having his hunches go wrong at all times. Why worry about the old coot? He was probably half crazy anyhow.

Miller said. "You ain't serious this time, are you, Pop?"

Pop got up, stretched and made for the port.

"So sure of this hunch that if I wasn't broke I'd jump ship right here in this hot hole—Havana."

Pop took a good look at Miller and his eyes saw the expression on the faces of his friends. He felt a little triumphant as he went out onto the deck.

It was a cinch that he couldn't go to the captain with such a tale, as he had circulated on the boat and in Havana, but perhaps the word might reach the captain and he might send for him. He had planted the seeds in the minds of the first and second with his idle questions—maybe the captain would catch on.

Sure, Pop knew that his hunches were the common joke of the ship and had been for twelve years, but then there were times when the past was forgotten when a serious hunch like this was advertised. He figured the way any captain of any ship might figure—why take a chance.

The next full day passed quickly enough, but it dragged for Pop Hanley. He went about his duties with a frightened air. Miller watched the old man and seemed to see a change in him. Every time he asked about the hunch, Pop would elaborate on it and add more to the tale.

Pop would even suggest ways in which it would happen.

The word got around. At first the officers were prone to laugh at this hunch. Sure, they all knew Pop. Hadn't he predicted wrong ever since they knew him? Even the third mate kidded him about it, which was out of the ordinary, for the third had never spoken to the old man before.

THAT night Pop eased himself down from the crow's nest at a few minutes before twelve. There was a seaman at the bottom waiting for him.

"Captain Bill wants to see you," he said.

"Yeah," answered Pop and there was a slight lift in his voice.

Pop went to the captain's cabin and knocked before entering.

Captain Bell was seated in his underwear, smoking a black Havana cigar. He looked serious.

"Look, Pop," he began. His voice was kindly, but there was a slight rasp to it. "We all sort of take you for granted on this ship, like we take the rudder or engines. You're a permanent fixture around here. Now we know you have hunches, and we know they're always wrong, but when you start to whisper around that the ship is going to sink, then you're laying it on a bit thick. Look, old-timer," he said softly, "you've probably been to sea longer than I have. Out with it—what's on your mind?"

Pop grinned.

"I was wonderin', Captain, just how long it would take for you to send for me. You know what happened the first couple of days out?"

"You mean the oil drum?" smiled Bell.

"Yes, sir, the oil drum."

"Well, what about it?"

"Lots of things, sir. First of all, I wasn't satisfied about the way it was, and then when I found that I was wrong, when the first went down with me, I still wasn't satisfied.

"I wouldn't have done nothing about it, sir, but a few nights ago someone tried to get me with a hammer down near number four hold."

Captain Bell straightened, a frown creased his forehead.

"So I started to ask about and I found out certain things about oil, and mail contracts, and third mates and perhaps the sinking of a certain ship."

Captain Bell held up a pudgy hand.

"One thing at a time, Pop. You mean to tell me that you think there's a plot to sink the *Atlantic Star?*"

Pop nodded.

"I don't know direct, mind you, but I can figure. Now let me ask a question." There was a sharp look in Hanley's eyes.

"We dump all our oil at San Juan, don't we?"

"We do every trip, Hanley."

"Then we'll be sunk before we get there."

Captain Bell got to his feet quickly for one so fat.

"You're either crazy or dead right. Which ever it is, I'm taking no chances. What did you have in mind?"

"Let's you and me go down to number four hold and see."

A half an hour later, Pop, with a grin on his homely face was seated in the captain's cabin, and the captain, with his hands dirty and face red from the heat sat opposite him.

"You aren't crazy, Pop. Oil in only the few top drums. The rest is water, about ninety percent all told."

"Yeah," cried Pop. "Want to hear the rest of it?"

"After that evidence, you bet I do."

"Well, first of all it was that oil drum incident you've heard about and then it was that fellow trying to get me. I finally got to thinkin'. 'Pop,' say I to myself, 'something's darned crooked on this here ship of yours. This is your home and you should do somethin' to guard it.' So, I saw the second mate and he told me about the mail contracts and the rivalry between the two lines and then I went to the first and he told me about the cargo and, then me shipmate, Miller, he told me about Mister Korjas, the third officer."

"What about him, Pop?"

"He used to work for the Southern Steamship Company."

"No crime in that."

"No, sir, but it set me to thinkin' about the oil again. I set out for the offices of the Southern Steamship Company when we got into Havana. I found out that the people that shipped the oil with us used to ship with them."

"Yes, I know that too, but I believe they had a change of policy or something of that sort."

"Yeah," retorted Pop. "Mebbe."

"Well, what convinced you?"

"I seen the third mate come out of a bar with Severn, the guy I think tried to get me with a hammer. Course, I ain't sure, but then I watched them while we were in town and they were together a lot. Finally they went to the Southern Line offices last night."

"Oh," said Bell softly. "Then?"

Pop continued. "Then my hunch really started. If I'd come straight to you with that idea, you'd have said I was nuts. I figured it would be better to wait until you got up your interest and sent for me."

Captain Bell nodded with understanding.

"Of course it hasn't happened yet, and it won't for I'm going to keep an eye on Korjas myself and you can watch Severn."

The captain rubbed his chin. "Suppose I hadn't sent for you, Pop? Suppose I just passed it off as one of your usual reverse hunches?"

Pop Hanley smiled broadly.

"I was waiting for that, sir. If you did, well, I'd a just waited and watched and then when things started to happen I'd have sounded the general alarm and then things would have popped right."

"Good," laughed Bell. "And when do you think he will strike?"

"On the third mate's watch, somewhere's between eight and twelve."

The following night as the *Atlantic Star* neared the windward passage, she shifted her course. It was six bells, eleven o'clock. Great Inagua Light, weak and faint on the port, Cape Maisi Light fair and clear on the starboard. Two men watched from the shadows of the bridge superstructure.

"See, sir," said a husky voice, "he makes believe Maisi Light is Inagua and heads for the shore of Cuba. When we hit the sea cocks will be opened and then—then the Southern Line will get the benefit, you'll get the blame and the third—well."

"Aye," said the other. "I get it now. Get set for the alarm and take care of Severn below."

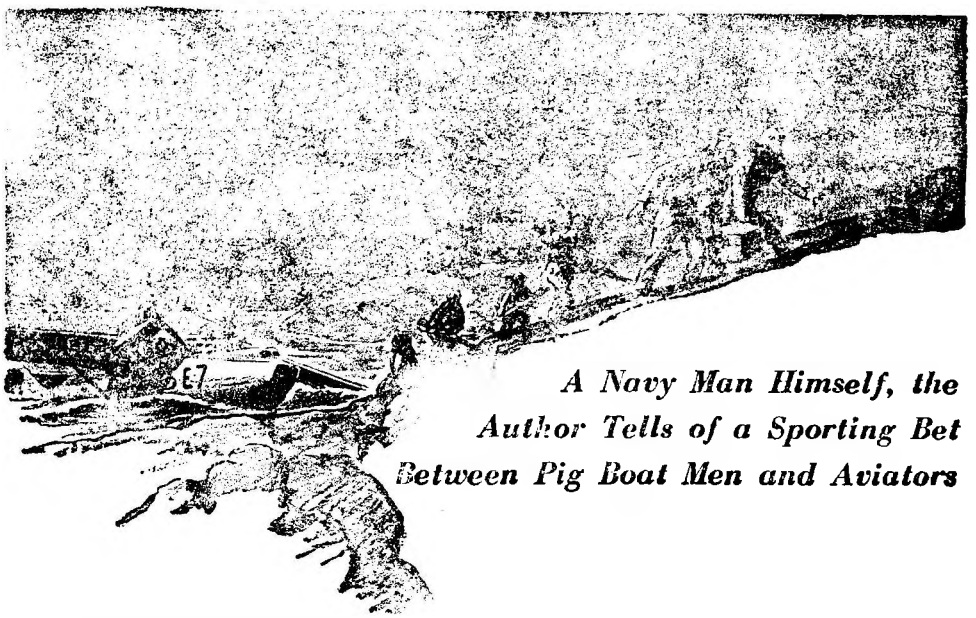
"Yeah," Pop said.

POP HANLEY looked at the check, smiled and left. The *Atlantic Star* was signing on men within the hour and he would have to hurry or he would be late for his berth.

"Yeah," Pop said, "I gotta get home."

SIX-MAN INVASION

By PRESTON TREMAYNE



A Navy Man Himself, the Author Tells of a Sporting Bet Between Pig Boat Men and Aviators

THE Commander's face looked tired and worn, but his eyes sparkled as he re-lived those tense moments. The circle of naval officers grouped around him sat on the edges of their chairs. He was concluding his incredible tale:

". . . and so we lay on the bottom of the harbor for ten days. We came up only at night to charge our batteries. Then, one foggy morning, we saw what we were looking for—the Jap transport with its destroyer escort. I manned the periscope myself. I waited. Then—'fire one!' A few seconds later, I gave the second command—'fire two!' We hit the transport with both fish—right amidships. She sank like a stone. Never knew what hit 'er."

The Commander's audience settled back in their chairs. A deep silence followed the story of the daring exploits of the pigboat. The silence was understandable. It was more of a compliment to the daring of the Commander and his crew than all the medals he could possibly hang on his tunic.

George Wilkinson, one of the Catalina pilots, looked outside as the last rays of the pale Aleutian sun sank behind the rugged mountain crest. Looking around, he noted that the Officers' Club was emptying out fast. In Dutch Harbor you either flew or slept—so you could fly some more. That's why he always enjoyed those few precious minutes when he could sit around and beat his guns with everyone else. He turned to the commander.

"I don't want to discount your story, Commander," he said, "but I think one of our boys can top you."

Bob Litrell blushed deeply. "Let's not go into that, George," he laughed. "I've told that story at least five times already."

"Let's hear it," the Commander suggested.

George had an idea. "I'll tell you what, gentlemen" he said, addressing the group at large, "Since there are four pigboat men here and three aviators, we'll make a sporting bet. As you know, we've often argued about who's doing the most work up here. Let's settle it now. You've heard the Commander's story. Now listen to Bob's. When he finishes, we'll take a vote. The losing outfit buys the next round. How about it?"

"Agreed," the Commander said, without hesitation. "If you can do anything with those flying bathtubs of yours, it's worth a drink.

"Okay," George said. "It's a deal. Go ahead, Bob."

Bob blushed again. "Well—if you insist."

He settled back in his chair, taking a drink from the highball glass beside him. "All this happened before the Japs beat it out of Kiska," he explained.

THE army was sending six Liberators over Kiska to give it another working over. They were supposed to reach there at five in the afternoon, drop their loads and come back. I was assigned to follow up with the Cat on a reconnaissance hop. The idea was that I could drop down through the overcast, grab a picture of the damage and get out.

They figured I could get out before the Japs got any planes in the air. That's what they thought!

I took off about six and was right outside Kiska Harbor at seven-thirty. I sailed in immediately—fat, dumb, and happy. It was just like poking my head into a hornet's nest. The Army had evidently been delayed and the raid had been pulled off just a few seconds before I arrived.

Every ack-ack on the island opened up at once. Flak was flying on every side. I hadn't been in the clear more than a minute before I heard something crash into the metal hull. I picked up the mike.

"Let's get that picture and get the hell out," I barked. "This is no place for a white man."

About that time, I felt the whole hull quiver as a stream of lead poured into it. I looked up just in time to see three float-type Zeros practically clip a wing off. They had probably been hiding in the fog bank. I knew I was hit badly. The wings were torn to ribbons. The tanks were leaking like sieves. The Zeros banked for another pass. It looked like a frontal attack.

Charlie Reuter, the second mechanic, was on the bow gun. He was a pretty cool operator—and one of the best gunners in the squadron. He took careful aim and squeezed. A stream of lead reached right at the leading Zero. The Jap kept coming. About two hundred yards away, there was a blinding flash. The explosion tossed us around like a ball of cotton in a high wind. The Zero became a few fragments of debris, floating toward the water below.

The other Japs, seeing the fate of their companion, stayed a respectable distance. We managed to get a hurried picture and got away in the overcast.

As soon as we could get squared away again, I took a quick appraisal of the damage. The hull and wing sections had taken so many hits I marvelled that the plane still hung together. Miraculously enough, the engines still beat out their steady roar. The mechanic called me from the tower.

"We're leaking gas bad, sir," he said. "Both tanks are almost empty."

"Think we'll be able to make it to Dutch?" I asked.

As in answer to my question, the port engine suddenly sputtered and then completely quit. It began to windmill, so I hit the feathering knob. I still had the starboard—for the time being, at lea— There was a dreaded swishing sound. The starboard quit too! I looked down at the frothy surface of the open sea, just a thousand feet below. My eyes snapped around like those of a trapped animal. A dead-stick landing in the open sea wasn't going to be any Sunday-school picnic.

"All hands stand by for open-sea landing," I shouted into the mike.

I eased the big Catalina down closer to the water. Then I hauled back on the yoke. It was a pretty fair full-stall but an open-sea landing in a damaged P-boat is pretty rough stuff. The hull quivered as we hit the top of a large swell. There was a teeth-rattling jar and the plane leaped fifty feet into the air. By that time, I had the yoke all the way back. When we hit again, I could feel the keel tremble and then buckle under the impact—but we stayed on! I began to give rapid instructions.

"Let's get those holes plugged up," I said. "Break out the life raft. We may need it. How's the damage in the after stations?"

"Everything under control, sir."

The radioman made his report. "Number two compartment is taking in water fast, sir. I can't seem to stop it."

I climbed down from the pilot's compartment and went aft. Sure enough, the

water was already to my knees in the radio compartment.

Everyone back to the number three compartment," I ordered. "Close off the watertight doors on number two."

The entire crew crowded back into the blister section. Luckily, none of us had been hit during the attack. Our situation was pretty bleak, however. We could stay afloat for several hours with one compartment closed off. After that—! To add to our plight, the radio equipment had been completely smashed. Not a soul at the base knew where we were. I almost wished I didn't know.

I could think of any number of places I'd rather have been than in the open sea, fifty miles from Kiska.

Red Jense, the navigator, was leaning out of the port blister, studying the whitecaps on the surface of the ocean. The sun had gone down. The slate-gray sky glowed with the uncertain light of the short Aleutian twilight. In a few minutes, the four-hour period of darkness would close down on us. Red had completed his observations and was drawing lines on a chart.

"Well, men," he announced, "according to my figures, we're about forty-five miles from Kiska, on a bearing of about zero-three-five true. The wind is northeast—about twenty-eight knots. That would give us a drift of about fourteen knots an hour. In other words, in about three hours we should be right back where we started from—right in the middle of the Japs on Kiska!"

"Hell's bells," I muttered, "let me check those figures." I grabbed the plotting board and worked it out myself. He was right! We had no choice in the matter. The wind was drifting us right back to the Jap base. All we could do was sit—and wait.

The next few hours were the most miserable I've ever spent. Despite our improvised patches and constant bailing, the water had risen slowly until it stood about level with the narrow catwalk. The night was the darkest I'd ever seen. A heavy fog completely shut off the stars and moon. It closed like a huge, moist hand over us.

WE WERE all sitting gloomily around, wondering how long we could stay afloat. Suddenly, there was a rasping noise and we were all thrown heavily against the after bulkhead. We had drifted in to land. We didn't know whether to rejoice or not.

I opened the blister and looked out into the blackness. I could barely make out the vague outline of a narrow beach. Beyond, the land seemed to slope upward toward the center of the island. I decided to have a look around. Perhaps we had made a mistake—perhaps we weren't on Kiska after all.

I picked my way cautiously down the beach, staying near the fringe of rocks along the shoreline. If there were Japs on the island, there would certainly be sentries. Still, I didn't—

A voice barked out of the darkness—in Japanese! The slender thread of hope I had melted at once. I stood perfectly still, waiting for the sentry's next move. There was a tense silence for a minute—two—three. Still I didn't move. I stood motionless for ten minutes or more. Then I heard the steady, cautious tread of the Jap's feet on the sandy beach. My hand slid to the forty-five in my holster. I waited.

The Jap was slowly advancing. I could see his vague outline in the blackness. I crouched near a large boulder and waited until he was just a few feet away. My arm swung in a wide arc and the butt of the revolver crashed against the Jap's skull. He dropped like a sack of damp oatmeal.

I crawled back to the plane and we took stock of the situation.

"It's this way," I explained. "We have two choices. We can push off in our rubber boat into the open sea—or we can dig in here and make them come and get us. Either way, we have about one chance in a hundred of getting out alive."

Red spoke up first. "I never did like the idea of starving to death," he said. "I'd just as soon take a few Japs with me before I go."

"Me, too," Mike agreed.

Charlie grinned. "Just let me dismount one of those fifties and I'll hold off those yellow bellies for two weeks."

I didn't even bother to take a vote. All six of us decided to stay. It was a grim choice, but someone watching our preparations would have thought we were embarking on a big game expedition.

Charlie dismounted both fifties in the blisters and we lugged them up to the summit of the hill. Mike unhinged the thirty

calibre in the bow and brought that along, too. Red, Shorty, and the rest of the crew brought ammunition, emergency rations and the little fresh water we had left in the breakers. After we had stripped the plane, I opened the watertight doors and the big Catalina began to settle to the bottom. In a few seconds, it had completely disappeared.

We found three small boulders near the summit of the hill so we pushed them together to form a small fortress. We scooped some of the loose dirt from an old bomb crater, mounted the guns, and waited. We had a pretty fair foxhole—a foxhole with a sting!

IN ABOUT an hour, some of the mists began to lift and the sun made a valiant effort to pierce the fog. We all watched that sunrise. Every one of us was sure it would be our last. It would be only a matter of time before the Japs spotted us. Then —the fireworks.

From our foxhole we had an excellent view of the entire Jap base. I could see the burned, rusted hulls of the ships in the harbor—victims of former bombing raids. To the left, I could make out what appeared to be a seaplane hangar. Six float-type Zeros were moored in the water near the shoreline. Hundreds of tents, foxholes, and dugouts were scattered over the hillside just below us. The whole landscape was pitted and scarred by the craters of hundreds of bombs. Then I made an interesting discovery.

From our position, I could see that much of the landscape had been camouflaged. Right below us, there was a fake storehouse and barracks. The entire area around the camouflaged buildngs was blasted with dozens of craters. Any real building would have been destroyed at least ten times. On the far side of the island—the side that was very seldom bombed—I could make out the real thing. There was a radio station, a munitions dump, storehouse and other small buildings. They were all carefully concealed from the air by cleverly-placed netting.

"Well," I remarked, pointing out the objects to Red, "that explains where they keep getting their supplies. Pretty clever, eh?"

He whistled. "Well, I'll be damned!"

Mike tugged excitedly at my sleeve. "Here comes one of the boys," he whispered. "Shall I let him have it?"

I peered over the top of the boulder. A lone Japanese sentry was climbing the hill. He was obviously heading for the spot we had landed the night before—probably the relief watch for the Jap I had slugged. He passed just about fifty feet to the left of us. Something—probably his animal-like intuition—caused him to look around. His narrow eyes popped open as he saw us. He threw his rifle to his shoulder.

"Okay, Mike," I said, "Now."

Mike squeezed the trigger of the thirty calibre. He put a short burst right into the Jap's mid-section. The yellow devil screamed, spun around and pitched over on his face. His body rolled all the way down the hill.

The whole camp came to life at once. The Japs ran to their fallen comrade, glanced toward our position and began to jabber excitedly. I waited until about a dozen of them had collected around the body. Then I turned to Charlie.

"How's the old eye, this morning?" I asked.

"First rate, sir," he grinned, lovingly caressing one of the fifties.

"Okay," I said. "There's the target. Take it easy on the ammunition though."

Charlie sighted over the long, polished barrel. His grin turned to a snarl. The gun bucked and chattered and the air was suddenly full of flying lead. The little knot of Japs went down like duckpins in a bowling alley. I'll swear he didn't use more than fifteen rounds, yet everyone of the twelve Japs was stacked neatly into a gory pile.

"Good hunting!" I exclaimed. "Now for the big rush."

I fully expected to see the whole Jap camp come tearing up the hill en masse. We braced ourselves and waited. Curiously enough, however, we didn't see a single Jap for over two hours.

"What's all this stuff about fanatic heroism?" I asked. "Aren't they supposed to be itching to throw their lives away?"

"That was my idea, too," Red remarked. "They must be plotting a campaign."

RED'S prophecy was correct. About noon, the Japs massed about five hundred men near the base of the hill. They spread

out and sniped at us from the cover of bomb craters and boulders. Every now and then, one of the bolder of the outfit would heave a grenade in our direction. The grenades all fell short, bursting harmlessly on the hillside. We stayed under cover and held our fire. Then as I figured, the Japs began to get bolder. They kept edging up the hill. Still we held our fire. They probably interpreted our silence to lack of ammunition. They had reached the end of their rope, however. They were about fifty yards away, but they couldn't get any closer without coming out into the open. There was no cover in that last fifty yards of our No Man's Land.

"Get ready," I said grimly. "This looks like it."

The words were hardly out of my mouth before things started to happen. With a sudden shout, the Japs burst from cover and charged right up the hill. We held our fire until they were practically on top of us. Then we let loose with everything at once.

I'll never forget that bloody scene. The fifties and the thirty cut them down like weeds before a scythe.

The remnants of the force scrambled down the hill in terrified confusion. I've always considered myself rather cold-blooded —especially where Japs were concerned— but the scene below almost made me sick. I counted at least a hundred and twenty bodies. They were piled up in the most grotesque shapes imaginable. I could already imagine I could smell the sickening odor of their warm blood.

The Japs tried no more frontal attacks but managed to keep up a continuous siege all day. Late in the afternoon, they swung one of their three-inch harbor defense batteries around and began to lob shells at us. I had always heard the Japs were lousy gunners. Their fire convinced me of it. I don't think a single shell of the dozens they fired came within two hundred feet of us.

For the most part, we dug down deep in our foxhole and held our fire. We would let them have a short burst every now and then, however, in order to keep them at a safe distance.

After that first encounter, they seemed to have developed a healthy respect for our marksmanship.

The long afternoon finally blended into twilight. The cold yellow sun was sinking beyond the western horizon. Just before it became completely dark, I could see the Japs massing again at the foot of the hill. Obviously, they were counting on driving us out under cover of darkness.

"How's the ammunition holding out, Red?" I asked, half-afraid to hear the answer.

"Not too well," he replied. "We have about a hundred rounds of thirty; two hundred of fifty and two clips for your forty-five."

"Well," I laughed, "we can take on a few more before we run out. Then—"

Red nodded. I didn't have to tell him what would happen when we used up our ammunition.

The cloak of darkness fell swiftly over the Aleutian outpost. Luckily, however, it was a fairly clear night. The stars and the faint light of a half-moon gave us a limited amount of visibility of the hillside below. We waited tensely, our eyes riveted to that bloody hillside. An hour passed—two.

THE attack came about an hour before daybreak. It came suddenly and without warning. The Japs opened up with everything at once. Lead slugs rattled against our protecting boulders like hail. We could see the vague forms of masses of men creeping up the hill.

We waited until they were close and opened up again. Cries and groans came out of the darkness. I could see them pitching over onto the hard earth. They started to break.

During the lull in the gunfire, I heard a stealthy tread off to the right. I whirled around just in time. About eight of them had managed to work their way in behind us. They were just a few yards away when I saw them. I put a whole clip of forty-fives into their midst.

"Shorty," I shouted. "Watch."

Shorty, kneeling beside the smoking thirty, whirled just about the same time the Jap leaped—only Shorty had a knife. I could see the glint of the blade as he plunged it into the Jap's mid-section. The Jap's yell turned to a gurgle as he doubled up. Shorty pulled the knife out and wiped the blade on a corner of his shirt.

Nice going," I commented, marveling at his composure.

The hillside grew strangely quiet again. We had evidently taken a terrific toll. I could see the dim outlines of heaps of bodies scattered over that bleak ground. We were silent for awhile. Red was bending over the ammunition.

"Guess what?" he said finally.

"Don't tell me," I replied.

"It's pretty bad," he said. Not more than twenty rounds."

The cold, gray fingers of dawn began to reach out over the leaden sky. The sun was obscured by a heavy fog bank, rolling in from the north. We waited grimly for the chance to use our few remaining rounds. Our position had become just about hopeless. Hopeless—? That fog bank! A plan began to take shape in my numbed brain.

The day before, I had noticed a strange-looking craft, tied up near the seaplane area. It was a cross between a Chinese sampan and a motor whaleboat. It was probably used to carry supplies and ammunition to the planes out in the bay. If we could just get down there—

The Japanese harbor battery began to shell us again. This time their fire was more accurate. Their fourth salvo burst a few feet away. Mike clutched at his arm.

"It's not so bad," he grinned. "Just a fragment."

We watched the fog bank until it swept over the island in a dense, swirling mass. In a few seconds, it was impossible to see more than two feet. These Aleutian fogs are the damnedest I've ever seen—and I'm from San Francisco!

"Okay, men," I said. "It's now or never."

We fired our few remaining bursts into the gray wall in front of us just to let them know we were still doing business. Then we threaded our way down the hillside. We clasped hands to keep from losing each other. I couldn't help thinking of a Conga line.

I'll never forget that little jaunt. Several times we were near enough to the Jap positions to hear them talking. Once, I almost fell into a foxhole. We finally hit the shoreline and groped around in the fog for the boat. Luck was with us. We found the boat about a hundred feet from our first position. Our navigation had been right on.

We lost no time getting in the boat and shoving off. We heard surprised exclamations from shore but the Japs didn't fully realize what was going on until we were well out in the bay. Then they turned everything they had on us, adjusting the range by the sound of our motor.

Shells sent up geysers all around us. We were all pretty well drenched but somehow our small craft escaped a direct hit. We plowed on through the choppy water of the bay. After a few minutes the waves grew larger and we began to hit the ground swells. I knew we were in the open sea.

"Turn left about sixty degrees," Red said. "That should take us somewhere near Otter Cove."

I began to hear a new sound. It started as a steady hum and rapidly grew to a roar —Jap planes. They circled overhead, looking for a rift in the fog to show our position. We prayed that the fog would hold —probably the first time aviators have ever prayed for fog!

The planes circled for almost two hours and then gave up. We breathed freely for the first time in three days. It was wonderful, feeling we were going to live after all.

We made it to Otter Cove without mishap. The Army doctor there patched Mike's arm and a transport carried us back to Dutch. I made my report to intelligence.

AS THE aviator finished his story, he grinned at the incredulous looks on the faces of his listeners.

"It's the truth, s'help me," he concluded.

"A regular six-man commando raid," mused one of the pigboat officers.

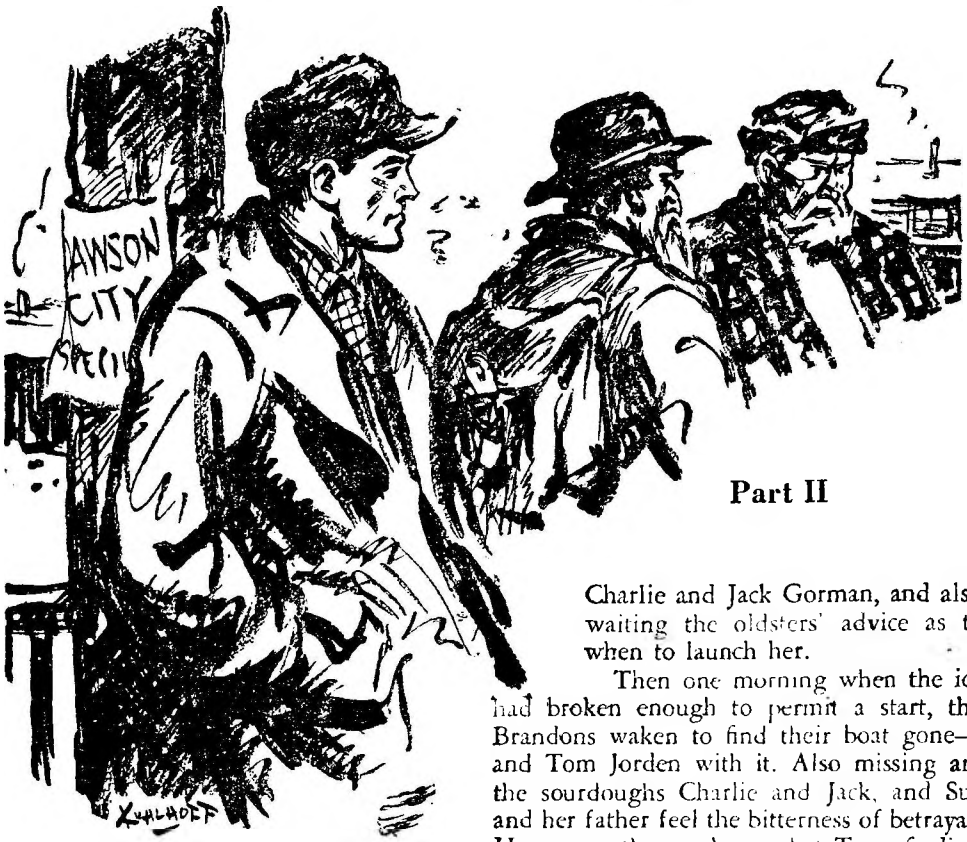
George Wilkinson added a sequel. "You know the rest, gentlemen. With Bob's information, the Army was able to blast the radio station and storehouse to bits on the next trip. The Japs were entirely cut off. Intelligence thinks that's the main reason for their getting out of Kiska."

The Commander had been listening quietly without comment; he raised his hand, beckoning a colored mess attendant. "Bring us another round," he said. "Charge them to my account—my personal account."

WAY OF THE NORTH

By JAMES B. HENDRYX

Author of "New Rivers Calling," etc.



Part II

THE STORY SO FAR

"BE SURE you're right, then be as tough as the toughest of 'em—and a little tougher." That was the advice that Tom Jorden took with him when he struck north—north to the Klondike gold rush.

He found it valuable on Dyea Beach—that wild gateway to the promised land of gold; it helped him make his way when many another failed, and finally won him a partnership with Sam Brandon. Sam and his daughter Sue were also among the gold seekers, and with them Tom built a boat to take them and their duffel along the string of lakes toward the Klondike. They put their all into the boat, following the plans of two old Sourdoughs (we've met them before in Hendryx yarns), Moosehide Charlie and Jack Gorman, and also waiting the oldsters' advice as to when to launch her.

Then one morning when the ice had broken enough to permit a start, the Brandons waken to find their boat gone—and Tom Jorden with it. Also missing are the sourdoughs Charlie and Jack, and Sue and her father feel the bitterness of betrayal. How were they to know that Tom, finding their boat stolen, had induced the sourdoughs to take after the thieves, and that all three were now in hot pursuit and having overtaken the fugitives (two men from the first camp) were shooting it out with them. But rapidly gathering darkness precluded accurate sighting and storm overtook them.

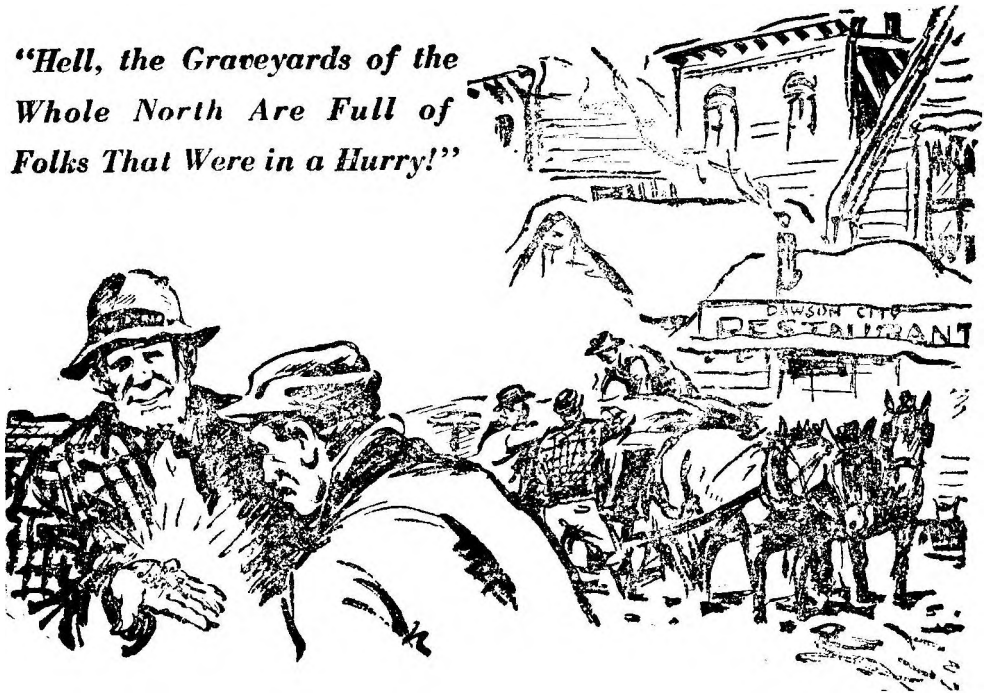
"We got to make a lee!" Gorman cried. "Which way's Caribou Point?"

"How the hell do I know," Moosehide shouted. "I ain't no owl!"

As Moosehide braced himself and hauled in on the sail, there was a terrific crash. Moosehide picked himself up from the foot of the mast. "Tom," he cried. "Hey, Tom!"

But there was no answering shout, only the roaring and hissing of the elements.

"Hell, the Graveyards of the Whole North Are Full of Folks That Were in a Hurry!"



CHAPTER IX

CAPTURE

STANDING in the bow of the pitching, tossing boat, Tom Jorden had strained his eyes for sight of the craft they were rapidly overhauling. In vain he sought to pierce the all-enveloping blackness. Out of the void came sounds—the soft hiss of curling whitecaps, the splash and gurgle of the waves that broke against the boat, the rush of wind about the straining sail, and the voice of Jack Gorman from the stern.

There was a sudden thud—a crashing jar and Tom pitched forward. And in that split second he steeled his nerves against the plunge into the icy water of the lake. The next instant he landed squarely atop of the man at the tiller of the leading boat, sweeping him from his seat and into the six inches of bilge water that sloshed about the bits of hastily loaded duffel pilfered from the supplies abandoned on the beach at the Lindemann camp. Half stunned, he realized that with the release of the tiller the boat had swung into the wind, and that from somewhere forward a man was bellowing orders intermingled with curses—realized, also, that the man beneath him lay limp and inert. The boom swung inboard and with the sail flapping and slatting above him he heard the man forward roaring to throw the rudder over.

Instantly Tom's brain cleared. Familiar with every inch of the boat, he arose to his knees, slipped out the wooden key that locked the tiller to the rudder post, pocketed it, and lifted the tiller from the post. Sounds and muttered curses told him that the man forward was scrambling aft along the windward rail. Leaving the inert form awash on the bottom, Tom slipped forward along the lee rail, the stout spruce tiller firmly gripped in his hand. With the sail slatting loudly between them, he passed the man unnoticed and reached the bow where he tossed out the heavy stone anchor, which found bottom when a third of the hundred-foot line had run out. He slowly paid out the remaining line, and as it went taut he heard the other cursing the inert form in the bottom of the boat. The curses redoubled and rose in shrill fury as the man groped about in the darkness for the tiller, with the boom swinging, and the sail slatting loudly as, head to the wind, the boat pitched and tugged at her anchor line.

Stealthily working his way to the mast on hands and knees, Tom located the rifle with

which the man had exchanged shots with Moosehide Charlie, then, a grim smile on his lips, he groped about for the cleat and cast off the halyard. The next instant the sail came flapping down, and he crept forward to again take his place in the bow where he sat humped up with the rifle across his knees and listened to the raving of the man in the stern. "Damn the damn luck! Steerin' handle gone, an' now the rope busts an' the sail comes down! An' hell only knows when this damn boat'll be pilin' up on the rocks! Can't do nothin' in the dark, an' mebbe nothin' in daylight with no way to steer. An' it's all your fault, you fool!" he raved, evidently addressing the man who lay on the bottom. "If I've got to drown, by God, you'll drown too! If you ain't drownded yet, layin' there in that water, you damn soon will be! No one knows you was along. No one knows either one of us grabbed off this boat."

Sounds issued from the dark as the man's voice ceased—straining, grunting sounds, followed by a splash—and again the sound of the voice: "There, you clumsy coot—you lost that rudder handle, go find it!" And in the bow Tom realized with a shudder of horror that the man had heaved his unconscious partner overboard. He had already identified the voice as belonging to the man who had attempted to attack Sue Brandon on the outskirts of Sheep Camp. His lips set grimly and he fingered the hammer of the rifle, as the words of Old Doctor Leroy came to him: "Be sure you're right, then be as tough as the toughest of 'em—and a little tougher." "He sure knew what he was talking about," the boy breathed, "when he said I'd run into the worst as well as the best. But I don't believe even he knew a man could be that bad."

ALL through the night Tom sat in the bow, the cocked rifle across his knees, as the boat rocked and pitched and tugged at her anchor line. She shipped some water, but not much, for being lightly loaded she floated high. From time to time the man in the stern muttered and grumbled. Toward morning he evidently became seasick for Tom could hear him retching and cursing.

The first hint of dawn grayed the east, and as the light slowly increased Tom, whose eyes were fixed on the stern, made out the figure of the other humped on the steering seat, his face buried in his arms, which rested on his knees. Presently the man raised his head, and his eyes widened in horror as they fixed on Tom who eyed him in silence, a grim smile on his lips. The eyes blinked again and again, and as the man raised a hand and brushed across them as though to rid them of the vision, thick ropy spittle drooled from his loose-hung lips. Tom spoke no word—just sat grinning into the terror-wide eyes, the cocked rifle across his knees—the length of the boat between.

The man found his voice, a voice that sounded shrill and trembling. "What—who—the hell be you?" Tom remained silent, waiting for daylight to strengthen. The man again brushed a hand across his eyes. "Where'd you come from? Er—ain't there no one there?" Tom's eyes held the other's with a fixed stare. The man's lips writhed and his voice rose in shrill falsetto: "Say—talk, can't you! Er—er—am I nuts? Mebbe I've went cuckoo, an' they ain't no one there! It's the damn sickness has went to my head!" He lurched from his seat, and at the movement Tom swung the rifle on him.

"Sit down!" he ordered. "You know who I am. You've seen me before—there at Sheep Camp, when you tried to attack that girl."

The man slumped back onto the seat. "But—wher'd you come from? How'd you git here?"

"This is my boat. I belong here."

"But—how'd you git here? An'—there in the woods, by Sheep Camp! How'd you git there, too? I follered that girl out there. An' I know'd she was alone!"

"You mean you thought she was alone. But you were wrong. And here in the boat, after you'd dumped your partner overboard, you thought you were alone again—but you're not alone, by a damn sight!"

"By God, I know how you got here! You jumped in off'n that other boat when they bumped. You jumped on my pardner an' killed him. It's murder. That's what it is—murder!"

"That's right. It's murder. And you're the murderer. The man was alive when I came forward, last night. You murdered him when you dumped him overboard."

"It's a lie! He was dead, I tell you. Deader'n hell."

"You can tell that to Constable Burns. In the meantime you can get busy and we'll sail this boat back where you got her. My partners are anxious to get started."

"Sail—hell! You ain't goin' to sail her nowheres without no steerin' handle! An' with a busted sail rope to boot!"

"I've got the tiller. I slipped it off and carried it forward with me last night when I heard you clawing your way aft. And the rope's not busted. I lowered the sail. Knew we wouldn't be needing it till morning." Reaching down, Tom picked up a tin pail and tossed it to the other. "Take that and bail her out, and we'll be getting started."

The man made no move to comply. "You go to hell! If you figger I'm goin' to help you, you've got another guess comin'. You can't make a man work if he don't want to."

Tom's eyes narrowed, and in them the man noted the steely glint that he had seen there as he faced him on the outskirts of Sheep Camp. Cold fear struck into his heart as the younger man spoke. "No. I can't make you work. But I can damn well shoot you and toss you overboard, as you tossed your partner. You've got it coming." He swung the muzzle of the cocked rifle into line. "And you've got just ten seconds to start either praying or bailing—and I don't give a damn which."

For long moments the man stared into the narrowed eyes.

"By God, you would shoot!" he mumbled. "Yer tough. You damn near killed me when you kicked me in the jaw that time." Picking up the pail he began to bail out the boat.

When he had finished Tom issued another order. "Now come up here and haul up the anchor while I ship that tiller. Keep to the right and don't crowd. One crooked move out of you and the wolves'll be gnawing two corpses on the shore instead of one."

As the man made his way forward Tom slipped aft, keeping the boom between them. The wind had shifted into the northwest and subsided to a stiff breeze. Grasping the anchor rope the man strained and hauled until the slack was taken up.

"I can't lift the damn anchor," he growled. "It'll take the two of us."

"Oh, no it won't. Just keep on trying. That rock only weighs about a hundred pounds."

"I can't lift it. My hands is sore, an' I'm sick to my stummick."

"The sooner you get it aboard the sooner you can quit hauling on it." Retching and growling the man complied, and after much pulling and hauling the anchor was hoisted and stowed in the bow. "Get busy now and haul up the sail. The way the wind is, we ought to make the camp by night."

The sail bellied out, and as the boat gathered headway, Tom settled himself comfortably and watched the shore slip past. A sense of well-being came over him. He had done what he set out to do. He had got the boat back. Vaguely he wondered whether he would really have shot the man had he not started to bail. The scoundrel richly deserved shooting, but—— He again remembered words of old Doctor Leroy: "Toughness is a virtue, Tommy—if it's rightly used." His lips set in a grim smile. "Anyway, I must have looked tough. He thought I'd shoot. But the devil of it is—I'll never know myself whether I was bluffing or not."

UP FORWARD the man growled. "That there's my rifle you've got. An' all this stuff in the boat is mine, too."

"That's right," Tom agreed. "Ease off on that sheet. We're running too close to the wind."

"What you goin' to do when you git back there?" the man asked after several moments of silence. "Turn me in fer murder?"

"That'll be up to Constable Burns. I'll turn you over to him, and tell him the whole story. He can use his own judgment. If he thinks it's worth while to search the shore for the corpse of your partner, he'll probably hold you for murder. If not, there'll be the boat-stealing charge, and attempted murder, or shooting with intent to kill—or whatever he wants to call it."

"I never figgered to kill no one," the man growled. "All I wanted was to cut the rope so yer sail would come down."

Tom laughed. "Tell that to Moosehide Charlie," he said. "One of your bullets knocked the cap off his head. But there's no half a ton of supplies in here. Burns'll

probably just take you back to Summit and kick you out of the country."

The wind held and all day the two sailed southward, passing outfits heading north in the boats that had been patched up after their encounter with the ice, their occupants toiling at the heavy oars to force the clumsy craft slowly against the headwind. Seated in the stern, Tom wondered how it had fared with Gorman and Moosehide Charlie. Had their boat been stove in or capsized there in the blackness of the night? Or had they sailed on, giving him up for dead? And the Brandons—what of them? What would Sue think when she awoke to find him and the boat gone?

Dusk blurred the shore as the craft approached the head of the lake. Tom strained his eyes for sight of their tent among the scattered spruce trees. It was then he caught sight of the solitary figure poised on a high rock that jutted out into the lake—the figure of a girl with her skirts whipping about her knees in the wind. Then the figure was gone.

Before the tent Sam Brandon looked up from his task of tending the supper fire to see his daughter running toward him from the direction of the lake.

"Oh, Daddy! Daddy." Her voice reached his ears, high pitched with excitement. "The boat's coming back. Our boat! And Tom's in her. Tom, and another man. And the other one looks like that horrible creature who followed me out from Sheep Camp. You go to the lake. I'm going to find Constable Burns.

CHAPTER X

THE SOURDOUGHS HEAD BACK

WHEN Moosehide Charlie picked himself up from the bottom of the boat after the crash and received no answer to his call, he shouted to Gorman. "Tom's a goner! He got knocked overboard when the boats hit."

"Yeah, an' you better haul in on that sheet, er we'll be a goner, too. Hold her close in. We got to run fer a lee."

Hours later, drenched to the skin, Moosehide dropped the anchor into the comparatively placid water of a lee shore. From somewhere ahead came the roar of the waves breaking over the saw-toothed rocks of the Caribou Shoal.

"This stuff got all mixed to hell when we hit," Moosehide said. "But I'm goin' to hunt up my duffel bag an' git into some dry clothes before I freeze stiff."

"Me, too. Cripes, I wisht we could land an' git a fire goin'."

"Can't land till mornin'. It's all rocks along here. The boat might get stove up."

After much groping and fumbling about among the jumbled cargo, the bags were located and the two men succeeded in changing into dry clothing.

"This here's goin' to be mighty tough on Sis," Moosehide opined.

"Yeah. She shore set a heap of store by that boat."

"Boat—hell! I was thinkin' of Tom Jorden."

"He was the pick of this year's run of chechakos, all right—fer's I can see," Gorman replied. "But you got to remember, Moosehide, there's a lot of good men in the Yukon—but damn few good boats."

"But cripes, Jack—them two young folks was in love! Ain't you got no sentiments?"

"Shore I have. But what I mean—take a boat like that there one—double bottom in her, an' all corked up like she was. By God, she ain't goin' to get another boat like that very soon!"

"I feel like hell, myself, about Tom," Moosehide said. "He was willin' an' eager to learn. He didn't claim to know it all, like most of the damn chechakos. An' he had guts. He'd of made a sourdough, an' a damn good one."

"Shore he would. But what I mean—Sis can find a lot of sourdoughs in Dawson, ready made. Hell, there's Bettles, an' Camillo Bill an' Jimmie the Rough an' Swiftwater Bill an' Porcupine Jack an' Black John—not countin' me an' you, an' quite a few more to boot."

Moosehide laughed. "Yeah, an' believe me, from what I know of them old-timers, I wouldn't want no daughter of mine marryin' no one of 'em—me an' you inclooded."

"Oh, I don't know. Fella's daughter married me, one time. An' we didn't hit it off so bad till she broke a leg climbin' into the fur baler. Damn good fur tromper, she was, too—except she was kinda arkward an' clumsy like. She's go better'n three hundred pound, anyways you'd look at her. An' by God, when she tromped a bale of

fur, it was tromped! The hell of it was it happened right on the start of the balin'. I was runnin' a post that year, way to hell an' gone up the Stewart, an' I done a good business with them Moosehead Siwashes up in there. I didn't have no fur press—jest rigged up a baler so the woman could tromp the fur down. An' what with her heft an' all, it worked good. But when she broke her leg there I was left without no help except a damn skinny little Siwash that wouldn't go no more'n ninety pound on a full stummick. Hell, he couldn't tromp a weasel pelt so it would stay flat!"

"Did yer wife get well?"

"No. She had so damn much meat on her leg seems like I never got it set right, somethin' must of went wrong in there. She hung on about a month an' then she up an' died on me."

"That was tough luck."

"You tellin' me! Did you ever try to get a three-hundred-pound corpse out through a door without no help except a ninety-pound Siwash which he was lazy as hell, to boot?"

"I mean, you must of missed her after she died."

"Oh, I don't know. Chances is she wouldn't never be'n worth a damn trompin' fur no more. Prob'ly couldn't never got her into the baler agin. Had a dog onct that stepped in a wolf trap an' got crippled up, an' I couldn't never get him onto that crick agin. Wimmin an' dogs gets funny notions that way."

MOOSEHIDE grinned broadly in the darkness.

"I didn't know you was so sentimental, Jack," he said. "But bein' as you are, you won't kick on headin' back up the lake, come daylight."

"Up the lake!"

"Yeah. We're goin' back there to tell Sis what happened."

"But hell, Moosehide! What good would it do to tell her? She knows by now that the boat's gone. Why would she give a damn if two fellas stole it, er a dozen? If we could of fetched the boat back, it would be different."

"I mean—tell her about Tom. She'll be wonderin' what become of him."

"Well, hell—so are we."

"Yeah. But bein' in love with him, that way, it might be kind of comfortin' fer her to know what happened."

"If a girl was in love with someone, why would it be comfortin' fer her to hear he got drowned in a lake in the dark?"

"Jest the same, we're goin' back," Moosehide insisted. "It's the only decent thing to do."

"Okay," Gorman said, a note of resignation in his voice. "But we're losin' two hull days."

"We ain't got to be nowheres at no particular time," Moosehide replied. "Hell, the graveyards is full of folks that was in a hurry."

AT DAYLIGHT they landed, cooked breakfast, and set sail back up the lake. Toward the middle of the afternoon, they came upon a boat drifting helplessly in the trough of the waves, as its three occupants sat dejectedly amid their belongings. Steering close, Moosehide hailed them: "What's the matter?"

"We lost an oar," one of them explained. "About half an' hour ago, it was, when we was changin' off rowin'. It slipped overboard an' floated away. We tried to paddle after it with the other oar, but we couldn't git the boat headed around."

"Okay, it can't be far off, we'll head down wind an' pick it up." The oar was retrieved a few minutes later, and Moosehide returned it with a bit of advice. "Better be more careful next time you change—an' the next time you camp, you better make you a couple of spare oars. Hell, if we hadn't come along, you might of drifted clean acrost the lake."

The men thanked him, and one of them asked, "What you fellas all headin' back fer?"

"What d'you mean—all?" Gorman asked.

"Well, you two, an' that other boat. The one that's built jest like that one."

"You mean," Gorman yelled, "that the other boat was headin' back up the lake?"

"Sure she was—she was makin' good time, too. Passed us about noon. Two fellas in her—same as you."

"Haul in that sheet, Moosehide, an' let's git goin'!" Gorman cried, shoving the tiller.

When the boat was once again under way, Moosehide's brow drew into a frown. "I

can't figger what the hell them fellas is headin' back fer," he said.

"Chances is they don't know they're headin' back," Gorman opined. "I'll bet what happened—they got turned around in the dark last night, an' think they're still headin' for Dawson."

"Cripes—even a chechako would know more'n that!"

"Like hell they would! By God, if there's a wrong way to do a thing, chechako will do it that way every time—an' headin' south here on the lake is shore as hell the wrong way to git to Dawson—so that's the way they'd go. You wait an' see." By God, the way things look now, we'll help Sis git her boat back!"

CHAPTER XI

SUPPER

WITH the boat thief safely in the custody of Constable Burns who was waiting on the beach with the Brandons as the bow of the boat nosed onto the gravel, the three made the craft fast for the night and made their way to the tent.

"Oh, Tom!" the girl cried, her eyes alight. "Tell us what happened. Tell us all about it. I'm just dying to hear. Oh, when I woke up yesterday morning and found you gone, and the boat gone, and the sourdoughs gone, too, I nearly *died!*"

Tom grinned. "Thought I'd pulled a fast one and hit out for Dawson without you, eh?"

"No, of course not! I—I didn't know what to think. I knew someone had stolen the boat, and I knew you'd gone after 'em. Oh, tell us all about it! I can hardly wait."

"There isn't much to tell," Tom said, as they reached the little fire that flickered before the tent, "except that I'm hungry as a wolf. I haven't eaten a thing in two days except what I could dig out of a can with my belt knife and swallow cold."

"You won't have to eat anything cold tonight," the girl said, stooping to tilt the cover of a pot that simmered over the blaze. "Just get a whiff of that!"

"Best grub I ever smelled," Tom said, as the savory odor reached his nostrils. "What is it?"

"Duck soup. Three ducks and two rabbits, and rice and potatoes. I spent all day yesterday walking along the shore looking out over the lake for sight of the boat. I just knew you'd bring her back! And I took the twenty-two along and shot the ducks and rabbits, and today I made the stew. And it's all ready. Daddy and I were just about to have supper, but I ran down for one last look out over the lake when I saw you coming in. And oh, Tom—it was the grandest sight I ever saw—our boat, with her sail set coming nearer every minute. It was too dark to see your faces, but I just knew it was you at the tiller. And that other—I'd know him anywhere by his squat thick body—I'll remember him to the last day I live—how he stood there leering at me in the dusk. I was never so scared in my life. And then—you were there." The girl paused, and the shadows of the flickering firelight hid the flush that had mounted to her cheeks. "And again, just now—when I felt so alone and forsaken there on that big rock—again you came to me out of the twilight."

"It seems that Tom has a happy faculty of showing up at the crucial moment," Brandon said. "But come, Sis, dish out some of that stew. Tom must be about famished—and I wouldn't mind a bowl of it, myself."

A half hour later the three settled back comfortably, and Brandon tossed more wood on the fire. "And now," the girl said, "tell us all that happened. I'm bursting with curiosity. I want to hear it all—every bit of it!"

"There isn't much to tell. I woke up yesterday morning at daylight and heard the wind blowing, so I went to the lake and found the boat gone. I found Mooseshide Charlie and Gorman just getting under way in their boat, so I went along with 'em. We overtook our boat late in the evening and somehow, in maneuvering around in the dark, the boats collided and I was pitched into our boat. I lit squarely on the man at the tiller and knocked him out. We hove to till daylight, and then the other chap and I sailed her back."

"But—where's the other man? The one you knocked out?"

"Oh, your friend, the squat guy pitched him overboard sometime during the night. He says he thought he was dead. I'll tell Burns about it in the morning and let him use his own judgment. The only thing I'm worried about is what became of Mooseshide

and Gorman. Their boat may have been seriously damaged in the collision."

"Never got a scratch!" said a voice from behind them, and the three turned to see the grinning faces of the two sourdoughs at the edge of the firelight.

"Mooseh'de!" Tom cried. "By gosh, I'm glad to see you! But what in the devil are you doing back here?"

"It was Mooseh'de's idee," Gorman cut in, with a glance at the girl who was eagerly awaiting his words. "You see, Sis, the waves was runnin' half as high as a meetin' house, an' it was so black out there a man couldn't see his nose behind his back, an' them boats was rarin' an' buckin' like a couple of bronchos, when all to once they hit, an' when me and Mooseh'de picked ourselves up off'n the bottom, Tom was gone. We hollered, but didn't get no answer, so we run fer a lee. We set there in the dark waitin' fer daylight to come, an' Mooseh'de allowed we'd ort to go back an' tell you how Tom got knocked off'n the boat an' drownded. I figgered it worn't no use goin' back here, less'n we could fetch yer boat back fer you. But Mooseh'de claimed it would be comfortin' fer you to know that Tom had be'n drownded. What I claim, he's got a hell of an idee of comfort—but he claimed it was our dooty, so we come."

The girl cast an accusing glance at Tom. "You never said anything about what a terrible night it was, out there—with the high waves, and all!"

Mooseh'de chuckled. "Yeah. Me an' Jack's be'n standin' here a couple of minutes, an' couldn't help overhearin' Tom's account of the doin's. Sounded right commonplace an' easy, the way he told it. He never mentioned nothin' about the naval battle, where I got the cap shot plumb off'n my head."

Gorman laughed. "The 'Battle of Lake Lindemann,' the hist'ry books'll prob'ly call it. It's too bad they can't set down Mooseh'de's famous sayin' when that bullet knocked his cap off—but it ain't fit to print—not where schoolmarm's an' kids could read it. At that, I'll bet if they set down what them old admirals and generals really said, it wouldn't be fit to print, neither. Anyways, it was quite a night, take it first an' last. We were shore glad to find Tom here! When we'd got about halfways back some fellas told us they seen the other boat headed this way, an' I figgered them damn chechakos had got turned around in the dark, an' was headed the wrong way."

Mooseh'de shook his head. "I didn't think that even chechakos would be that big fools. When them fellas told us about the boat, I figured Tom must of managed to git into her, somehow. But gittin' into her was one thing, an' takin' her away from them two damn thieves there in the dark was somethin' else ag'in—an' them with a rifle, to boot."

Tom laughed. "It was simple enough, really. I knocked the tiller man out when I lit on him, and when I heard the other one crawling aft, I unshipped the tiller, so they couldn't handle the boat and crawled forward, keeping the boom between us. Then I heaved out the anchor, and lowered the sail. I'd found the man's rifle where he dropped it. The one who crawled aft was so sore at the other for, as he thought, losing the tiller, that he picked him up and heaved him overboard. He didn't know I was in the boat till daylight. But I had the rifle, and there was nothing he could do about it. So—here we are."

"Damn if we ain't," grinned Mooseh'de. "An' by God, there's one chechako that's a sourdough before he ever seen the ice go out of the Yukon—you bet!"

CHAPTER XII

TOM GETS A JOB

THE trip down through the lakes, and on down the Yukon was uneventful enough. The two boats held together, and each night the two tents were pitched side by side. They passed dozens of the oar-propelled craft that had been launched at Lindemann, and thanks to the experience of the two sourdoughs, the long journey was made without mishap, and the two outfits arrived at Dawson well in the forefront of the spring stampede.

On the morning of the last day on the river, the sourdoughs shoved off while the others were still at breakfast. Mooseh'de Charlie waved a hand. "So long! See you in Dawson! We'd ort to make it by noon. Good water from here on. You won't have no trouble."

Sue Brandon watched the boat till it disappeared around a bend, then she glanced at the others. "So—this is the last day of our trip," she said, the words coming slowly, a note of genuine regret in her voice. "I've loved every minute of it. But I knew it had to end. I wonder what Dawson will be like?"

"It's been a wonderful experience," Brandon agreed. "Drifting day after day farther and farther from civilization. I never realized there was this much wilderness in the world. Back there at Lindemann, with all the people coming in, I was afraid the country would be overcrowded. But I guess there's no danger for some time to come."

"Plenty of room, all right," Tom said, his eyes on the succession of peaks and ridges that extended back from the river as far as the eye could reach. "I've enjoyed every minute of it, too. But, of course, we couldn't go on just drifting down a river forever. I—I hate to think of it—but when we hit the beach at Dawson, our partnership ends."

Brandon cleared his throat. "Well—yes. I—I suppose that's so. What are your plans, my boy?"

"I haven't any plans. I came here to find gold. I don't know the first thing in the world about how to go at it. I guess the smart thing would be to stick around for a while and sort of watch the others—the ones who have been successful, and find out how they do it."

Brandon nodded approval. "A fine idea. But in the meantime, Tom—how are you—er, fixed for money? Prices will be mighty high, I'm afraid."

"Oh, I've got enough to last for a while—about four thousand dollars. Mooschide Charlie advised me to salt the money away for a grub stake, and get a job with some outfit till I learn something about the game, then either hit out on a prospecting trip of my own, or throw in on some stampede. He says they're always stampeding to new creeks. Someone makes a strike and when the news gets out there's a grand rush to that locality, and the creek is staked from one end to the other. Of course, only a few claims on each creek are any good. But the chance of locating one of those good claims send men swarming into a locality by the hundreds."

Brandon nodded. "Just so. You spoke of getting a job with some outfit till you learned the game. You mean, I suppose, going to work for some outfit that is carrying on a successful operation?"

"That's it."

"The only drawback I can see is that no matter what outfit you worked for, your experience would be limited to that particular locality, and to the particular method used by your employer. Whereas it seems to me that in a country as big as this, with conditions varying as they must on the different creeks and rivers, a method that would be highly successful in one locality might well be entirely inadequate in another."

Tom nodded. "Yes, I suppose that's true. But a man can't work on all the creeks."

"He can. That's the point I'm making. He can do just that. I didn't come into this country to dig gold. That is, I do not intend to go dashing about on stampedes, and slosh around in muck, and work with shovels and pans and picks and sluices, or whatever the tools of the trade are. I'm too old for that sort of thing.

"My purpose in coming here is to invest in mining properties. Buy—sell—operate, as the case may be. This, of course, will entail the investigation of properties, many of which will undoubtedly lie at considerable distances from Dawson. It will also demand the ability to apply the technical method that will produce the best results under given conditions. I am too old to cover considerable distances rapidly by dog-sled or canoe. And I know nothing of mining. What I need is a young man—a smart young man—a man capable of looking after my interests in the field."

Tom nodded. "What you want is a mining engineer, or at least someone with practical experience in mining. With all the people there are pouring into the country you probably won't have much trouble finding someone who can fill the bill."

Brandon shook his head. "According to Mooschide Charlie, mining, as carried on in this country—surface mining, and shallow shafts—does not demand the services of a mining engineer. About the only engineering jobs necessary are the construction of dams and the building of flumes when occasion demands, and any surveyor can do the engineering work. And as for practical

experience—those who have it are either operating on their own account, or are otherwise unavailable.

"Another thing, I've got to have a man I can trust with considerable sums of money. Mooschide summed it up very aptly the other evening. 'All a man needs in the Yukon' he said, 'is a little savvy, luck, and a lot of guts.' I've had my eye on you, my boy. And I think you'll fill the bill."

"Me! Why, I don't know a thing in the world about mining!"

The older man smiled. "But you've got guts. And you've certainly got plenty of luck—or you wouldn't be alive, after that night on Lake Lindemann. You have two of Mooschide's requisites — and I'll take a chance on the third. My proposition is this —you go to work for me on a salary. Your job, for the first several months, will simply be to visit operations on different creeks, see how they operate. Ask questions, learn how to appraise new properties—in other words, soak up all the information about mining that you can hold. In the meantime I'll set up headquarters in Dawson, and dabble about in small investments, and sort of get the lay of the land from that angle. In that way, when the time comes for operating on a large scale, we'll be all set to tackle it. You can get wider experience in three months working for me, than you could in three years, tied down to one locality. What do you say?"

TOM was silent for what seemed a long time. Finally he spoke. "Ever since I graduated from high school, I've worked on a salary—and it wasn't much of a salary, either. It was to get away from just that that I decided to hit for the Yukon. It was because I saw the opportunity to do something.

"To make good on my own account. It isn't so much that I want to get rich. I want to make good. You're offering me a wonderful chance to get experience—much better than I could get anywhere else. But I don't want to be tied down. I mean, if there'd be a stampede, I might want to join it. Or, if I ran across some location that looked good, I might want to work it. If I took you up, I might want to quit at a moment's notice, and hit out. That wouldn't be fair to you, because you'd be financing the experience that I might turn to my own profit."

"I see your point," the older man said. "And it seems reasonable enough. I'm willing to gamble on you. Tell you what I'll do. You go to work for me—just as I said. We'll agree that you're at liberty to quit at any time on a moment's notice, and go on your own. I'm making just two stipulations —you are not to quit to go to work for anyone else. And if the venture you undertake on your own account doesn't pan out, you'll come back and work for me. For my part, I'll agree to take you back whenever you want to come. That's fair enough, isn't it?"

"It's more than fair," Tom said. "I'll take you up. But I'll make one stipulation, too —if my personal venture is successful, I'll repay every cent you've laid out on my education."

Brandon smiled. "Okay—if your venture should be successful, you could afford to repay me. It's a bargain. And, now, the matter of salary—"

"I'll leave that to you," Tom interrupted. "You'll know what I'm worth when I get going."

"All right—we'll leave it that way. I'll pay you what I think you're worth, plus all expenses."

"And where do I fit into the scheme of things?" Sue asked, smiling at the two across the little fire.

"Oh, you'll fit in," her father said. "You'll be one of the main cogs in the wheel. You'll be my office manager. Come on—let's pull down the tent and get going. I'm anxious to see what this Dawson looks like!"

CHAPTER XIII

DAWSON

LATE that afternoon the boat was beached at Dawson, and the three moved, bag and baggage, into the Dominion Hotel. After supper Tom strolled out onto the street and, attracted by the loud jangle of a piano, stepped into the Klondike Palace. The place seemed to be doing a capacity business. The long bar was lined with customers in all stages of inebriation, each striving to outshout his neighbor to make himself heard above the din of the tinny piano.

Along one side of the room men sat at round tables playing poker or stud. And toward the rear other men were grouped two and three deep about various faro and roulette layouts.

Threading the crowd, Tom spent a half hour watching with interest, as the men with tense, set faces, placed their bets, risking huge sums on a spin of the wheel, or the turn of a card. Tiring of this, he made his way toward the door, pausing for a few moments at the broad entrance to the dance hall, to watch men whirling girls scantily clad in tawdry finery, about the floor to the accompaniment of the piano placed on a raised dais, and lustily pounded by the pasty-faced "professor" clad in an ill-fitting dress suit and imitation shirt front.

Again on the street, as Tom strolled past the warehouses and stores with false wooden fronts, he pondered the fact that the sights he had seen in the Palace had depressed, rather than enlivened him. Somehow a note of sordid insincerity pervaded the place. The men at the bar were drinking too much, talking and laughing too loudly. At the gambling devices the tense, strained faces showed that the bets were too high—that the men were playing for more than they could afford to lose. And in the dance hall the gaiety seemed forced—the tempo was too fast—the men whirled the girls too high.

"It's almost as if—as if they were afraid this is the last night they'll ever be there," he muttered. Then his eyes lighted as they encountered a sign TIVOLI SALOON. "That's the place Moosehide mentioned. He was telling Jack Gorman about a poker game they had in there."

Stepping inside he was instantly struck with the sharp contrast to the Palace. Men were drinking at the bar and in the rear other men were grouped about a faro layout. But there was no dance hall — no jangling piano. And the men were drinking quietly. Toward the rear end of the bar a small group of older men were laughing in evident appreciation of a story told by one of their number—but the laughter came in low, belly chuckles—not in raucous guffaws. The atmosphere of the Tivoli breathed sincerity—where the atmosphere of the Palace had, in its every aspect, flaunted insincerity.

AS HE crossed to the bar a man motioned him toward the group. "Well, by God—if here ain't Tom Jorden, now! He's the lad I was tellin' you about—him that's got guts an' luck enough fer two men! An' I'm predictin' that when he gits the savvy he's goin' to be hard to beat. Come on over here, Tom. I want you should meet the boys."

Tom grinned and flushed slightly as he encountered the appraising glances of these shrewd-eyed men. Then Moosehide was introducing them. "This here is Bettles, who's be'n in the country ever since the mountain's wasn't no bigger'n igloos, an' kin drink more licker, an' show it less, than any two men in the house. This here is Camillo Bill, which he's got more good claims than any one man ort to have. Beside him stands Swiftwater Bill, who owns the only genuyne bald-faced shirt in Dawson. The next one is Porcupine Jack, whose name comes, not from any quills he's got, but from the Porcupine River, 'cause his faith in the lower country has got even God guessin'. An' the other one is Burr MacShane, who once staked out a claim on the north pole, an' never panned out nothin' but codfish."

Tom smiled. "I'm mighty glad to meet you men," he said. "I've heard Moosehide mention some of you."

"Don't never believe nothin' that old walrus tells you," Bettles chuckled. "Hell—he learnt to lie even before he could talk! An' now mebbe you'll give us the straight of that there battle of Lake Lindemann, as he calls it. Accordin' to him, this here naval battle raged until night come down so black a man couldn't see a match when he lit one, an' right in the middle of the lake them two boats run together and you got knocked off on the peak of a forty-foot wave, an' come down right plumb on top of one of the damn pirates that stole yer boat, squshin' him flat, an' you wind up by capturin' the other pirate with his own rifle an' sailin' the boat back to camp."

Tom chuckled. "Well, allowing for Moosehide stretching that wave a bit, the facts are about as you've stated 'em. I sure had a lot of luck. What will you have? I'm buying a drink."

"A lot of luck an' a lot of guts," Swiftwater said.

"I've heard whiskey recommended as a beverage," Bettles grinned, reaching for the bottle. "Guess I'll try a little of that."

When the drinks were poured Burr MacShane raised his glass. "Here's to Tom Jorden, boys—may his luck hold."

"Bein' a chechako, that-a-way," Bettles said, as the glasses were returned to the bar. "Howcome you'd hit fer the Tivoli instead of the Klondike Palace?"

Tom smiled. "Oh, I stopped in at the Palace first. Heard the piano going, and it sounded kind of lively, so I went in. But I didn't stay long. I didn't like the place. It seemed somehow—well, sort of—of tawdry, and insincere."

"If Black John was here he'd prob'ly know what them words means," Moosehide grinned. "But I guess it b'iles down to you meanin'—it stinks. An' it goes to prove what I was tellin' the boys before you come in—yer one chechako that don't have to wait to see the ice go out of the Yukon before becomin' a sourdough."

"Guess that's right," Swiftwater Bill agreed. "But that damn dive is doin' a real service fer them chechakos, at that, 'cause when Cuter Malone gits through with 'em down to the Palace, they're shore goin' to appreciate hell when they git there."

Camillo Bill cleared his throat. "Now yer here, what do you aim to do?" he asked, shooting Tom a glance. "I don't make a practice of grubstakin' chechakos. But I wouldn't mind takin' a chanct on you."

"Not by a damn sight!" Moosehide interjected. "I found him first—an' by God, if anyone grubstakes him, I do. Cripes, with the luck he's got, I couldn't lose!"

Porcupine Jack, who had scarcely taken his eyes off the younger man, spoke up. "If you brought in enough money to grubstake the two of us for a trip to the lower country, I've got a real good proposition on the Porcupine River that's got 'em all skinned."

Bettles grinned. "Hell, Porcupine, I'll grubstake you fere a trip down there any time you want to go."

Porcupine Jack shook his head. "Nope. This ain't a grubstake proposition. She's a two-man trip. Equal partners."

Bettles shook his head. "I'm doin' all right here. The lower country'll get along if I never see it again."

Tom smiled. "I thank you men—all of you. I sure appreciate your willingness to deal with a greenhorn—a chechako. But the fact is, I've agreed to work for Sam Brandon until I'm ready to strike out on my own.

He's the man I threw in with at Lindemann. Moosehide, here, knows him. He's an older man, and he brought in some money to invest. He needs someone to sort of look after his interests — do the outside work. I don't know a thing about mining. I've got to learn as I go along. Brandon's idea is for me to go around to the different creeks, ask questions—watch the work—in fact to learn all that I can. You men are all sourdoughs—men of experience. I'd be mighty obliged, if you allow me to visit your workings, and learn what I can—probably pester you with a lot of questions. If I get to be too much of a bother—just kick me off the works."

Camillo Bill grinned. "I've got goin' propositions on a dozen different cricks—an' no two of 'em jest alike. Yer welcome to hang around anyone of 'em, er all of 'em—an' ask all the questions you want to. It won't bother me none—nor no one that works fer me. There's quite a bit to learn—what with flumes, an' sluices, an' testpannin', an' all—but nothin' that you couldn't pick up in a summer. You've hit here jest at the right time, too—we're right now startin' to sluice out our dumps."

THE others nodded. And Bettles included the others in a wave of the hand. "Right here at the bar stands a bunch of men who's combined savvy includes every damn situation that a man could be up against, both in the upper country, an' in the lower country, too. An' there ain't a damn one of us that ain't glad to help an up-an'-comin' young fella get along. Cripes—we all had to learn! Why the hell wouldn't we help?"

Moosehide Charlie grinned and jabbed a thumb into Tom's ribs. "Shore we'll help. An' when the rest of the boys see what I've saw, they won't be blamin' you none fer throwin' in with Brandon, instead of us old badgers. You see, boys—Sam Brandon's got a daughter. She's jest as much sourdough as Tom, here. An' believe me—she ain't hard to look at, neither!"

CHAPTER XIV

PORCUPINE JACK

DURING the next four weeks Tom Jorden spent every few nights in Dawson. Every moment of the ever-lengthening days found him on some creek absorbing the details incident to the operation of sluices, riffles, grizzlys, sumps, flumes, shafts and dumps. He learned the art of collecting "flour gold" from the riffles with quicksilver, of test panning, of burning in for winter mining, of sniping bars in summer. He memorized the laws applicable to the business of placer mining, the size and location of claims—discovery, inland, creek, and river, and their legal staking and recording. He visited Quartz Creek with Swiftwater Bill, Bonanza with Bettles, Ophir and Hunker with Camillo Bill, Squaw Creek with Moosehide Charlie, and Shorty Creek with Burr MacShane.

To a man the sourdoughs liked him—went out of their way to explain or to offer advice, generally in an off-hand, round-about manner. As on the occasion he and Swiftwater were camped on the Klondike and a canoe rounded a bend, its two occupants paddling furiously to force the craft against the current. Another followed it, and another, and another. Then a line of pack-laden men streamed past on the foot-trail. Swiftwater grinned. "Stampede," he grunted.

"A stampede!" Tom cried, his eyes lighting. "Gosh, I wonder if I oughtn't to get in on it? My agreement with Brandon leaves me free to hit out on my own any time I want to. I'd sure like to make a strike!"

Swiftwater nodded. "Yeah? Well, who the hell wouldn't? Look 'em over, son. You don't see no sourdoughs amongst 'em, do you? I ain't seen a damn one of 'em that looks like he know'd which end of an owl the hoot comes out of. Some damn fool chechako prob'ly panned out some colors on some sandbar, way to hell an' gone up some crick, an' then busted a gut gittin' back to Dawson to file him a claim. Then he most likely went to the Klondike Palace an' throw'd a few ounces of dust around an' done a lot of loud-mouthed braggin'—an' now half the chechakos in Dawson is follerin' him to his location. They'll come dribblin' back in a few days, cussin' their luck, an' they'll hang around the Palace waitin' fer someone to fool 'em again. An' when they git broke they'll go to work choppin' cordwood fer wages—an' that's about their speed, at that. Don't never pay no heed to no stampede that ain't got anyways a sprinklin' of sourdoughs in it."

Tom grinned. "You old-timers sure hate the chechakos, don't you?"

Swiftwater shook his head. "No, we don't hate 'em. It ain't nothin' ag'in a man that he's new to a country—if he wasn't a damn fool along with it. We jest sort of despise 'em, that's all. Look at 'em—the ones that's goin' past. They're like a lot of damn sheep. One hits out, an' all the others foller—they don't know where they're goin'—nor why—but they go jest the same. They come pourin' into the country to find gold—an' not one in a thousan' of 'em takes the trouble to learn how to find it when they git here. But by God, a chechako'll eat as much an' drink as much as a good man—an' the result is grub an' licker's gittin' so scarce we've got to pay ten times what it's worth to git it."

TOWARD evening a week or so later, Tom stopped at a claim on Hunker Creek, where three men were engaged in sluicing the tail end of a dump. One of the men he recognized as Porcupine Jack. "Hello," he said, "I didn't know you had a claim around here. I thought you pinned your faith on the lower country."

The older man eyed him from beneath the brim of a dilapidated felt hat. "This ain't my claim," he replied. "I'm workin' it fer Camillo Bill. I wouldn't fool around with this upper country."

"The claim's not much good, eh?"

The older man shrugged. "Good enough, I guess. Good as any on the crick. Camillo picked it up for forty thousand, an' he'll take out maybe a hundred an' fifty thousand before he's through with it. Good investment—for the upper country."

"Most of the sourdoughs have more faith in the upper country than they have in the lower," Tom said.

"Yeah—an' most of 'em call Forty Mile the lower country. Hell, everyone knows that Forty Mile and Birch Creek are worked

out. Bettles and Burr MacShane an' I are the only ones that have really been in the lower country. I mean the real lower country—north of the Circle. Bettles did all right on the Koyukuk. Made enough there to buy in on Bonanza. And Burr MacShane went way to hell an' gone beyond the Endicott, an' he did all right, too. You can't blame those fellows for sticking around here—they've both picked up good propositions here—and this is an easy country to live in. Down there on the Koyukuk and the Chandalar, and the Porcupine, it's tough. I've got a proposition on the Porcupine—if I can ever find it, that's got this upper country backed off the map." The man paused, walked over to the sluice and gave an order to the two others. He returned, and glanced at his watch. "About quittin' time. You'll stop over for the night. We've got an extra bunk in the shack. Throw your pack in there, and we'll be with you in a few minutes."

Tom strolled over to the shack a short distance away and kindled a fire in the cook stove. In a few minutes he was joined by the others. The older man introduced him. "Boys, this is Tommy Jorden—came into the country this spring along with a fellow named Brandon. And, Tommy — that's Mike Casey and the other's Pete Moss."

As the introductions were acknowledged, Moss picked up the empty water pail and stepped to the door. "Jorden," he repeated. "Know'd a fella named Jorden onct. Run a hardware store in Big Falls, Minnesoty. I worked around there one harvest shockin' wheat."

"He's my uncle," Tom replied shortly, and turned to Porcupine Jack. "You say you've got a good proposition on the Porcupine, if you could only find it," he said. "You're a sourdough. I should think any of the old-timers would grubstake you for a trip in there."

Porcupine Jack nodded. "Yeah, they would—if I'd ask 'em. In fact, most of 'em has offered to do it without my askin'. But I refused to take 'em up."

"Don't want to let 'em in for a half interest, eh?" Tom smiled.

"Hell, no, it ain't that! I'd give any one of 'em the shirt off my back. It's—I think maybe you can understand. None of 'em have any faith in the Porcupine. There's never been a big strike there—never even a midddin' big one. A few men have taken out a little better'n wages on some of the cricks. But after you pass Rampart House, there's no tradin' posts, an' it costs too much to haul in your supplies. Once a strike was made, things would be different. There'd be a stampede, an' it wouldn't be long till there'd be another Dawson way up the Porcupine. Hell—there wasn't a shack where Dawson is now—till Carmack made his strike on Bonanza. And down around Forty Mile the sourdoughs laughed when anyone mentioned the upper country.

"I've put in a good many years in the lower country, an' because I've never found what I'm after, the sourdoughs think I'm kind of cracked. They don't think I know what I'm talking about when I tell 'em there's coarse gold on a crick that runs into the Porcupine, way up. But because I'm one of 'em—because I'm a sourdough, any-one of 'em would grubstake me. An' if I failed on that trip, another one would—an' they'd keep on doin' that. But don't you see—it would be charity—not business—from their angle. And I don't want charity! That's why I'm here on Hunker workin' for Camillo Bill. He pays me good wages to run this outfit for him. And I accept those wages because I know I earn 'em. This job'll be finished in three, four days, an' I'll hunt another one. In about two years I'll have enough to outfit myself for another go at the Porcupine. I'll hit it yet. The gold's there—just as sure as God made little apples. An' when I find it I'll have earnt it—no one will have handed it to me. I think you'll understand."

Tom nodded. "Yes, Porcupine," he said, "I think I understand."

CHAPTER XV

BRANDON BUYS SOME CLAIMS

SAM BRANDON entered the Tivoli Saloon one day and stepped to the bar where Moosehide Charlie stood drinking with old Bettles, dean of the sourdoughs. "Just the man I wanted to see, Moosehide," he said, after acknowledging his introduction to Bettles. "I need some advice. I've bought two locations from a man named Jack Fisher, one on Hunker, and the other

on Ophir Creek. Mr. Rumsey, at the bank, and others, including Corporal Downey of the Mounted Police speak highly of Fisher as a man of integrity."

Bettles nodded. "Yeah, you can go on what Jack Fisher tells you. I've know'd him for years. He's prob'ly lettin' go some of his scattered locations so he can put in all his time on a big proposition he's bought into on Bonanza."

"That's exactly what he said. So, after making inquiries, I took these locations over. Now, I've got to find a man who can operate them. I thought maybe you could recommend someone."

"What's the matter with Tom Jorden?" Mooschide asked in surprise.

"Why, nothing—except that I need a man of experience. I'm paying Tom a salary to go out on the creeks and learn all he can about the country and about mining. And I've scarcely seen him in the past four weeks. The fact is, I'm contemplating a rather extended prospecting trip myself, and I'd like to leave a man in charge who could attend to the cleaning up of the dumps on these Fisher properties. I can't expect Tom to have acquired the necessary knowledge in so short a time."

"Can't, eh?" replied Mooschide dryly. "Well, tellin' you about me—if I was looking fer someone to run an outfit, an' I found out I could get holt of Tom Jorden, I wouldn't hunt no further."

"What! Do you mean to say you believe him capable of—"

"Listen, Brandon," Bettles cut in. "I know this here Tom Jorden. Know'd him ever since the first night he hit Dawson, an' passed up the Klondike Palace to have a couple of drinks in the Tivoli. An' I know what Mooschide told us about what come off there on Lake Lindemann. An' I watched him the four, five days he spent on my workin's up on Bonanza, an' I've heard what the other boys has said about him when he was visitin' their outfits. He ain't be'n in the country long. But by God, the way he goes at things—eighteen hours out of every twenty-four, he don't have to be. There ain't nothin' goes on that he don't see it—an' if he don't know the why of it, he ain't ashamed to ask. An' he don't ask no damn fool questions, like most chechakos, neither. Everything he asks is right to the p'int. He's learnt more in four weeks than half the old-timers has learnt in four years. I'm like Mooschide. If I could get holt of Tom Jorden to run a proposition fer me, I wouldn't hunt no further. By cripes, he can handle anything that's likely to come up, right now! An' if he run up agin somethin' he didn't savvy, he'd find out the how of it before he had to tackle it—an' don't you fergit it!"

"Surprising! Astounding!" Brandon exclaimed. "Of course, I knew Tom was smart, and willing, and seems capable enough as far as he knows. That's why I hired him. But I had no idea he could absorb the requisite knowledge in so short a time. But if you men recommend him it certainly takes a load off my mind."

Bettles grinned. "Whenever you get through with him, jest turn him over to me. I've got some scattered propositions, here an' there, that I'd like to have him lookin' after. He's the best damn chechako I ever seen—bar none."

ONE evening, several days later, Tom Jorden stepped into the dining room of the hotel to find Sue Brandon seated alone. As he crossed to her table, the girl's eyes lighted.

"Oh, Tom! It's about time you showed up. Where in the world have you been?"

Tom smiled and dropped into the vacant chair opposite her. "Here, there and pretty much everywhere. I've been out soaking up savvy."

The girl returned the smile. "I hope you soaked up a lot of it, because you're sure going to need it."

"What do you mean? Where's your dad?"

"He's gone."

"Gone! Gone where?"

"Off on a prospecting trip. Said he was tired sticking around town. I could see that he was getting restless, so I encouraged him to go. And he hit out, and left you and me to run the outfit."

"The outfit! What outfit?"

"Oh, we're a going concern. We've got two locations to work. One on Hunker, and the other on Ophir. I'm the office man, and you're superintendent in charge of operations."

"You mean, he bought these locations?

Bought 'em without having them investigated?"

"Yes. He investigated the man, instead of the locations. Everyone, including the banker and Corporal Downey and Moosehide and Bettles speak very highly of him, so Daddy bought the locations on his representations. So now you've got two dumps to clean up."

Tom's brow wrinkled. "It's a wonder your Dad would trust the job to me. You'd think he'd pick up some man with experience."

Sue smiled. "He thought so, too. So he hunted up Moosehide and Bettles and asked them to recommend someone who could fill the bill."

"And they couldn't?"

"They could."

Tom flushed slightly. "You mean they—they recommended me!"

"They did—both of 'em. What's the matter? You look scared. You can do it, can't you?"

"Sure I can do it! And I'm not scared. Just surprised." A waiter brought the girl's supper and took Tom's order. "Go ahead and eat," he said. "Don't wait for me. I'll be through by the time you are. You've got the descriptions of those locations, I suppose?"

"Yes. We'll go over them tomorrow. And—"

"Tomorrow! Tomorrow I'll be on Hunker. I know just the man to run that outfit—an old fellow they call Porcupine Jack. He's been cleaning up a dump for Camillo Bill, and he ought to be through right now. I want to grab him before someone else does. I'll run the Ophir job, myself. We'll go over those papers just as soon as I can throw this grub into me."

"But, Tom," the girl said, with just a hint of reproach in her tone, "surely tomorrow will be time enough. You're tired. You've just come in off the creeks. There's a show in town, tonight. Local talent, and they say it's a scream—those who've seen the rehearsals. That young Doctor Southerland is in it, and they say he's a wonderful female impersonator. Why the other night, in one of the dance halls, he ran onto old Doctor Lemoine who has the reputation of being quite a lady's man. The old doctor was a bit tight, and Doctor Southerland was in costume for rehearsals, and he enticed the old doctor into a booth and teased him up till he spent all his dust—and the next day he returned the old doctor seventy-five dollars in percentage checks he had collected on what the old fool spent."

Tom laughed. "I'd sure like to see the show," he said. "But I'll have to wait till some other time. Your Dad isn't hiring me to go to shows."

"But, Tom—I—I thought we'd have this evening together. Why, I've hardly seen you since we reached Dawson. I thought you'd take me to the show—and we could enjoy it together."

"We'll spend the evening together, all right—part of it—going over those locations, and whatever instructions your Dad left. Then I'll hit out. The moon will be up by ten o'clock. The show won't be starting till then, and you can take it in. I'll be on the trail."

THE girl made no answer, and the meal was finished in silence.

Leading the way directly to her room, Sue handed him the deeds to the locations and a typed memorandum. "I have some expense money for you, too," she said.

Tom made a note of the locations, and glanced over the memo. He handed the deeds back. "Better keep these here," he said. "I'd suggest leaving them at the bank. These instructions are plain enough—simply to clean up the dumps on the two claims. Never mind the expense money. I've got enough for the present. Porcupine Jack has two men working with him, and I hope to get all three of 'em. Then I'll find a couple of more to work with me on Ophir. I'll slip out and look the ground over. Have they got shacks on 'em—these claims?"

The girl shook her head. "I'm sure I don't know. Dad said something about building sluices——but he didn't mention any shacks."

"Okay. I'll be back as soon as I can make it. I'll need money for sluice lumber—and maybe for shacks. When is your dad coming back?"

"He didn't say. He hired a man named Jim Devine who has a canoe, and claims to know the country. I don't expect them back very soon because Daddy said the man prom-

ised to show him some likely creeks that the chechakos haven't found yet."

Tom frowned. "If he knows so many good creeks, why isn't he prospecting them himself?"

Sue shrugged. "I wondered about that, too. But the inaction of sticking around town was getting on Daddy's nerves, so I didn't say anything. The trip will do him good—and he can afford the twenty-five dollars a day he's paying the man."

"Whether he can afford it or not," Tom said, "I hate to see anyone put anything over on him. Well, so long, Sue. I've got to stop at the store, and by the time I get my supplies to the canoe the moon will be up. Have a good time at the show."

The girl held out her hand. "Good-by, Tom—and good luck." As his fingers closed about hers, the girl felt them tighten—then suddenly her hand was free, and as Tom turned abruptly and disappeared through the doorway, she saw that his face had flushed deeply.

"He does care," she murmured, as she listened to his footfall descending the stairs. "But—he might have taken me to the show."

CHAPTER XVI

A FRAME-UP

TOM reached Hunker Creek just as Porcupine Jack and his men were cleaning up the tailings of Camillo Bill's dump. He hired the three, bought the shack on a claim that had petered out on a small feeder, and set the men to tearing it down. "By the time you get the lumber packed over to our location, I'll be back with tools and nails and whatever you'll need to put it together again," he told them, and struck out for Ophir.

Within a week he was back in Dawson. Going straight to the hotel, he found Sue in her room, and handed her a penciled memorandum. "I bought a second-hand shack on Hunker for seven hundred dollars and have my crew tearing it down and packing it to the claim. It'll cost another hundred and fifty to rebuild it. On Ophir I bought new lumber from a man who has a small portable mill. That shack will cost more. I bought the lumber for sluices, too. Our payroll for the two jobs will come to $2,800 a month. You've got the estimate there. Better give me about six thousand in cash. I'll be hitting out in the morning. I've got that shack and the lumber to pay for, and I'll take the first month's payroll. Might not be back before it's due. I've got a lot of supplies to arrange for. See you at supper."

During the afternoon, Tom purchased the supplies. In the Tivoli he found several of the old-timers at the bar.

Burr MacShane beckoned him to join them, and shoved the bottle toward him. "I hear you're operatin' a couple of claims for Sam Brandon," he said.

"I will be pretty quick, if I have any luck," Tom replied. "Got to build a couple of shacks and sluices first."

"You'll make out, all right," Bettles said. "Jack Fisher's square as a die, an' he told me he sold these locations to Brandon reasonable. Take most of the old-timers, an' a man can go on what they tell him."

"Speaking of old-timers," Tom said, "did any of you ever run across a man by the name of Jorden—John Jorden, in this country?"

The men shook their heads. "John Jorden," Moosehide repeated. "Some kin of yourn?"

"My father."

"Yer father!" exclaimed Swiftwater Bill. "Is he s'posed to be here—on the Yukon?"

"On the Yukon, or some other river—here in the North, some place."

"How long ago was he s'posed to of come here?" Camillo Bill asked.

"Fifteen years ago."

"Fifteen years!" cried Burr MacShane. "Cripes—there wasn't but damn few white men in this country then, barrin' a few traders scattered along the rivers. No one here but Bettles has be'n in the country that long. How about it, Bettles? Ever run onto John Jorden?"

Bettles shook his head. "Nope—never heard the name. I was up on the Koyukuk, them days. There wasn't no white men here in the upper country then, except fur men—traders, an' maybe a few trappers."

"She was a hell of a country to git into, them days," Swiftwater explained. "You had to come in by way of St. Micheals an' on up the river from there. Ain't that so, Bettles?"

"Yeah—an' no way to git to St. Micheals except on some damn whaler. A lot of them ships started out that wasn't never heard from ag'in. The chances is, Tom, yer pa never got here. I know damn well if he'd be'n anywheres in the country fer fifteen years, I'd of heard of him."

"You might ask Downey," Moosehide suggested. "The police keeps a pretty good check on folks."

"Police — hell!" Bettles exclaimed. "Cripes the police never seen this country till eighteen ninety-five!"

Tom nodded. "I asked Corporal Downey, but he'd never heard of him. It's probably like Bettles says. He never got here."

"By God, I know'd Tom wasn't no common chechako!" Moosehide exclaimed. "His dad was a sourdough!"

Burr MacShane smiled. "He would have been—if he'd got here."

"By cripes, he was one!" Moosehide insisted. "What I claim—if a man even started fer here, them days—he's a damn sight more of a sourdough than the ones that gits here, now!"

"Anyways, it shows Tom comes of damn good stock," MacShane opined.

"It ain't who a man's dad was, er what he done, that cuts any figger in this country," Bettles said. "It's what he does after he gets here that counts. If Tom's a good man, it's because he's got guts an' savvy—not because his dad got to some place—er didn't git there."

"I've hired Porcupine Jack and a couple of men to work the Hunker claim," Tom said. "But I've got to find a couple of more to work with me on Ophir. Where do you fellows pick up men when you need 'em?"

"Over to the Palace, mostly. That's where the chechakos hangs out. Most of 'em ain't worth a damn when you git 'em. But it's the best you can do."

"I'll drop in there after supper and see what I can do."

THE talk became general, a few more drinks were had, and Tom left the saloon and proceeded to the hotel. As he passed the open door of the Klondike Palace, a squat, thick-set man drew back quickly and jerked his companion from sight.

"That's him now!" he exclaimed, under his breath. "I don't dast to let him see me. He'd put the police on me, shore as hell."

The other, a tall spare man with a receding chin, and pale vacuous eyes that flickered uncertainly above a scraggly yellow beard, watched Tom enter the hotel. "What's the police got on you?" he asked.

"They ain't got nothin' now. But they would have if he set up a squawk. He claims I an' another guy stoled his boat on Lindemann, an' he turned me over to the constable. But he was in a hurry to git here, so he wouldn't wait to file no complaint. He'd had to go back to Summit an' be a witness. So all the cop done was to take me back to the line an' shove me acrost. But I snuck back."

"Did you steal his boat?"

"Yeah, we tried to. But we run into some bad luck. An' on top of that, the damn kid helt my own rifle on me an' made me help sail the boat back, an' then he throw'd the rifle in the lake. An' not only that, I've got a score to settle with him fer knockin' hell out of me down to Sheep Camp."

"How do you know he's goin' to hit out with this here dough?"

The squat man winked. "I know my way around. I use' to be janitor in a bank, back in Chi, an' many's the job I've tipped the boys off to—like when payrolls was draw'd out. I'd give 'em the office an' they'd clip off the dough, an' slip me my cut. When I got here I was broke, so I worked on the cricks a while an' then hit the bank fer a job. I was in there sweepin' out couple of hours ago when this skirt come in an' draw'd out the money—seven thousan' in bills. An' I heard her tell the cashier it was fer expense money an' payroll that Tom Jorden was takin' out to the cricks in the mornin'. She mentioned Ophir Crick—an' right then I know'd that we had somethin'. I know the trail to Ophir—worked a couple of days fer a guy out there. Hell, I didn't come to this damn country to break my back on the end of no shovel. There's easier ways than that to make a livin', if a man keeps his eyes open. There's an empty shack on a feeder a few rods back off'n the trail. We kin knock him off, an' hide out there till the stink blows over. There ain't no other shack nowheres near."

"Who's this here frail that draw'd out the dough—his wife?"

"Naw. Name's Brandon. Him an' her old man's pardners."

"You mean, we'll foller him out an' when we come to this place, we'll knock him off?"

"We won't have to foller him, 'cause you'll be right there with him."

"Me?"

"Yeah, you. It's like this—I seen him go into the Tivoli a little bit ago, so I follers him in, keepin' back whar he can't see me. When he gits to talkin' with a bunch of guys, I picks up a paper an' sets down to a table clost enough to hear, holdin' the paper in front of my face, like I was readin' it, an' I hears him tell these guys he's got to hire a couple of hands to work on a claim on Ophir, an' where'll he git 'em. An' they tells him over to the Palace, an' he says he'll go there after supper, an' see if he kin find someone. So, when he comes in, you hire out to him, an' ask him where his claim's at. An' when he tells you it's on Ophir, you tell him you got a pardner that's workin' on Ophir, but he'll be through in a few days, an' he'll come to work, too. Then he won't hire no one else from here—see? I'll hit out ahead an' pack enough grub to that shack to last us while the heat's on, an' when you come to the place, you slug him with this here blackjack I'll give you, an' we'll grab off the dough, an' hit fer the shack. Cripes, it's like takin' candy from a kid!"

The other's eyes flickered nervously. "What's the matter with you sluggin' him? I ain't never did no strong-arm work. My grift's pocket-pickin' an' dope peddlin'."

"You ain't goin' to git no chance to pick his pockets—nor yet to sell him no dope," the other growled. "An' as fer me sluggin' him—how the hell could I? I don't dast to show up. If he seen me the hull thing would be off."

"But—I don't know where this shack's at. How would I know when to slug him."

"You can't go wrong. It's where the trail makes a bend around a big rock that looks like a face—got a nose an' a chin to it, an' a kind of slit fer an eye that water is tricklin' out of—looks like the guy was cryin'. It's the only rock like it an' if he hits out in the mornin', like she told at the bank, you'd ort to be gittin' there jest before dark. You kin see this rock quite a while before you git to it, an' then you drop behind, an' when you git there, let him have it. Fetch the jack down on his noggin'—an' don't be afraid to lean on it, neither, 'cause believe me, that guy's tough. If you don't knock him plumb out, there'll be hell to pay."

The other fidgeted and licked his lips. "I—I don't believe I'll tackle it," he said. "I mightn't——"

The squat man leered at him. "You'll tackle it, brother—don't never think you won't. You'll tackle it, er by God, I'll drop the word to the police about that there guy you rolled the other night out back of Harry Ash's place."

"What! How'd you know about that?"

The other grinned. "I know all right—an' someone else knows, too. If we told what we know—you'd be in fer a hell of a stretch—an' the police ain't slippin' no dope to prisoners in this man's hoosegow. Jest think that one over."

CHAPTER XVII

THE FIGHT IN THE CABIN

AFTER Tom's brief report, and abrupt departure, Sue Brandon sat for a few moments slowly drawing the slip of paper he had handed her back and forth between her fingers. She arose, crossed to the window, and watched until he was lost to view among other pedestrians. Then she glanced over the memorandum. "He's certainly got things going," she murmured, and crossing the room, pigeonholed the memo in the little desk that stood in the corner. "But—I wish—— I don't see why he has to be *all* business. He might have told me more about his trip."

The little clock ticked off the passing minutes as she sat there staring straight ahead at the row of pigeonholes in the ugly little desk. Her thoughts drifted back to the first time she had ever seen him—staring at her as she stood at the rail of the boat—and again, as he fought the thug who was robbing the old man on Dyea Beach—and again on the outskirts of Sheep Camp, when he had stepped out of the gloom in the nick of time, at the moment of her abysmal terror. Other highlights in long sequence passed before her mind's eye. But

in no slightest instance did any act reflect to his discredit. "Daddy likes him," she murmured, "and the sourdoughs all respect him. And—yes I do—I love him! I can't help it. And he loves me, too. I know it! But why doesn't he tell me he loves me? There've been times when—when he has almost told me, evenings on the long trip down the river—and other times, too—but——" Vaguely her brain groped for an answer. It's not that he's afraid—he's not afraid of anything. But—why has he never mentioned his past? What is the barrier that lies between us—that keeps us apart? Why doesn't he make any close friends? At Lake Lindemann there were dozens of young men—but always he seemed to avoid, to distrust them. Can it be that, in spite of his conduct since we've known him, he has a discreditable past—even a criminal past?

She glanced at the clock, slipped a checkbook from a drawer and drew a check. "I'll have to hurry," she said aloud, "or the bank will be closed," and putting on her hat, she stepped from the room.

At supper Tom again seated himself opposite, and smiled at her across the table. "Did you get the cash?" he asked.

The girl nodded, and opening her bag, drew out a neat packet and slip of paper which she pushed toward him. "I did it up in a waterproof package," she said. "I found some material at the store—membrane from a seal's stomach, the man said—or maybe a whale's. They even use it for window panes."

Tom nodded. "I got some for the shack windows. Good idea. You can't see through it, but at least it lets in light—and glass would be hard to pack to the creeks."

"I didn't like to leave the money in my room, so I carried it with me," she said. "It's your worry now. Just sign that receipt. Daddy's a stickler for receipts, and things like that. And if I'm going to be 'office man,' I'll have to be, too."

Tom signed the receipt, and slipped the packet into his pocket. "Your dad's right," he said. "Get a receipt for every cent you put out. And be sure and file all the estimate memos, too. I'll want to go over 'em from time to time, to see how they check out with actual expenditures."

"What are you doing this evening, Tom?" she asked, at the conclusion of the meal.

"Got some odds and ends of supplies to get. And hire some packers to get 'em out to the cricks within the next few days, and hire a couple of men to help work the Ophir claim."

"But—will that take all the evening?"

"You bet it will! Men are hard to find—especially good packers. And the damn chechakos won't work unless they're broke. When I get my crew lined up, I'm going to hit the hay. I've been on the go pretty steady lately, and I need some sleep. I want to hit the trail with my Ophir crew at daylight—and daylight comes mighty early, this time of year."

Was he purposely avoiding spending the evening with her—or was he just plain dumb.

Sudden rage flared in the girl's brain. The blue eyes flashed angrily. "You want to hurry back to the saloon, Tom Jorden!" she said. "You've been drinking! I smelled it on your breath when you first came in."

Tom smiled into the angry eyes. "That's right," he said. "So I have. And you're right about my hustling back, too. The saloons are about the only place where you can find men when you want 'em." He pushed back and rose to his feet. "So long, Sue. I'll be seeing you—but it may not be for a month."

Furious, the girl watched him pass between the tables, and disappear through the doorway. With seven thousand dollars in his pocket, would he be seeing her again? Had he purposely fixed the date of his return, so he would have a month's start before any inquiry would be made? Abruptly she left the table, hastened to her room, and threw herself on the bed. Gradually her anger subsided and her face flushed with shame. "I—I was a fool," she muttered. "Suppose he had taken a couple of drinks? He certainly didn't show it. But—he knew I was angry—and he just laughed!" The words ended in a sob, and burying her face in the pillow, she sobbed and sobbed.

LEAVING the hotel, Tom entered the Klondike Palace and stepped to the bar. "Know anyone that wants a job?" he asked of the be-aproned figure that faced him across the mahogany.

A man who ranged himself beside him spoke before the bartender could answer.

"I do," he said. "Where's it at? An' how much you payin'?"

The speaker was a tall man, and Tom noted the pin-point pupils that met his glance out of a pair of faded blue eyes above a scraggly yellow beard.

"It's on Ophir," he said. "And I'm paying going wages—an ounce a day."

"Ophir, eh? Say you don't want to hire another guy, too?"

"Yes, I can use two men. You got a partner?"

"Yeah—an' it works out all right. He's up to Ophir right now. Feller he's workin' fer's jest finishing up his dump. Ort to be through by the time we git there."

"Okay. We'll pull out at daylight. Where'll I meet you?"

"Right here's good as any place. I'll go home an' git me some sleep, an' be here by daylight."

SWINGING along under light packs, the two made good time. The long-legged man seemed tireless, and as they halted at a tiny creek for a noonday snack, Tom Jorden grinned. "If you're as good on a shovel as you are on the trail, it looks like I've hired a top hand. Is your partner as good as you are?"

"Yeah, you won't never have to fire us. You'll find out both of us is tougher'n hell."

Long shadows cast a gloom over the little valley they were threading as Tom, who was in the lead, paused at the top of a sharp rise and wiped the sweat from his forehead. We'll camp pretty quick," he said. "We've had a long day."

"Oh, we kin keep on yet a while," the other replied. "Seems like we'd ort to git as fer as we kin before we quit."

"It's all right with me. I thought you might be getting tired." Tom glanced at the trail ahead. "Look at that rock that sticks out almost over the trail," he said. "Looks like a face. See the forehead, and nose, and chin."

"Yeah," the other answered, wetting his lips with his tongue. "Yeah, that's right —looks like a face. An'—an' there's water drippin' off'n it—like the guy was cryin'."

"That's right," Tom laughed. "You've got a pretty good imagination."

"Yeah," the other repeated, somewhat vaguely. "Yeah—pretty good."

AS TOM rounded the rock, a blinding flash seared his eyeballs—and the next thing he knew he was lying on the ground, and Burr MacShane was bending over him, splashing cold water in his face. His head ached fiercely, and he passed his hand over his eyes, several times as though to rid them of some obstruction. "Is — is it getting dark?" he asked. "Or—am I going blind?"

"It's pretty dark, Tom," MacShane said. "What the hell happened?"

"Where's the other fellow?"

"There ain't no one here but you. I come around the bend there an' damn near stumbled over you."

Tom rose to a sitting posture, and felt in his pocket. "What happened," he said, "is that I've been robbed."

"Robbed! Who done it?"

"The man I hired to help me on the Ophir claim. I drew six thousand dollars for expenses, and we hit out at daylight."

"Did this guy know you had the money on you?"

"No—that is, I don't see how he could have known. I sure as hell didn't tell him. Sue Brandon drew it out of the bank yesterday afternoon, and turned it over to me at supper in the hotel dining room. Then I went over to the Klondike Palace and hired this bird."

"Hum. He could have seen her draw out the money, an' followed her and seen her turn it over to you. You weren't alone in the dining room, were you?"

"No. It was right at supper time. There were a good many in the room."

"An'—in the Palace—did you hunt this fella up? Or did he hit you for the job?"

"Well—since you mention it, he struck me for it. I asked the barkeep if he knew of anyone who wanted a job—and this jasper spoke right up. He was standing beside me at the bar, and overheard me."

MacShane nodded. "He knew you had the money, all right. What fer lookin' guy was he?"

"Tall and thin, with long legs, and a yellow beard that sort of grows in patches all over his face, and pale blue eyes with the smallest pupils I ever saw—just like pinpoints."

"Hop-head, most likely. Their eyes is like that. Come on, if you can stand up. We'll find a campin' place. I'm hittin' fer Dawson. The moon'll be up directly. I aimed to keep on travelin'. But I can't leave you—the shape yer in. Cripes, there's a knot at the back of yer head as big as my fist. The fellow fetched you a hell of a crack."

Tom rose to his feet and took a few tentative steps. Finding that he could navigate, he turned to MacShane. "You go on to Dawson," he said. "I'm not going. If you run across him on the trail, nail him. If you don't, report the robbery to Downey, and give him the guy's description."

MacShane hesitated. "But—hell, Tom—you ain't in no shape to go on! Besides—what the hell can you do? Chance is, the bird hit back to Dawson. You'd stand more show of runnin' acrost him there."

"If he hit back for Dawson, you may overtake him on the trail. We've been hitting a good pace all day, and he'll be tired. And he can't have much of a start. It was already growing dark when he socked me. If you don't overtake him, Downey may pick him up. He can't miss him—I never saw another guy that looked just like him."

"But—where are you goin'?"

"On to Ophir. He claimed to have a pardner working there for some fellow that's just finishing up his dump. There's a chance that he may have shoved on to connect up with this partner I suggested that we camp a while back—but he wanted to keep on for a while. If he'd figured on going back to Dawson, he wouldn't have urged me to keep on going away from there."

MacShane nodded. "There's somethin' in that, all right. Well, good luck, Tom. Sure you're all right?"

Tom laughed. "Sure. Except for a headache, I'm okay. But man—if I ever lays hands on that guy—he'll know what a headache really is!"

Tom started on up the trail through the darkness. His arms hung heavily from his shoulders, and the light pack on his back seemed to weigh a ton. It required a conscious effort to put one foot before the other. A short distance farther on, dizziness and a slight nausea assailed him and he sat down on a ledge of rock. The dizziness and the nausea passed and he raised his eyes to the eastward where the light of the rising moon threw the serrated skyline into bold relief, and accentuated the deep gloom of the narrow valley. As he lowered his gaze his shoulders suddeny stiffened. A gleam of light caught his eye—a light that came from somewhere deep within the spruce and birch undergrowth of the valley. He rose to his feet for a better view, and the light disappeared. He took a few steps to the left, then to the right, peering into the blackness of the valley. But there was no light. Slowly he passed a hand across his eyes. "Am I going nuts?" he muttered. "Did that crack on the head knock me cuckoo, or something?" He sank again to the ledge, and the light appeared. He stared at it for a long time. It was not the flickering light of a campfire. It was a steady yellow glow—the light of a lantern, or of a lamp. He moved his head a few inches to the right and to the left and the light disappeared. And he realized that by a freak of chance he had hit upon the one spot on the trail from which the light was visible. "Must be a shack over there," he muttered. "Maybe the guy's got an extra bunk. Guess I was kind of optimistic when I told Burr I was all right. My head feels kind of fuzzy, and I'm too damn tired to go much further, anyway."

Stepping from the trail he made his way through the thick undergrowth with difficulty. The darkness was intense and he had to feel for each step among the stones and fallen tree trunks. He stumbled on and on, pausing every few feet to peer ahead, but no gleam of light caught his eye. If the man had put out his light for the night Tom knew he had small chance of finding the shack. Then, the undergrowth suddenly thinned and he found himself on the lip of a low ledge of rock thickly carpeted with caribou moss — found himself staring straight into a lighted window, not fifty feet distant. And as he stared, the heaviness left his arms and legs, and his brain cleared. Through the window he could see two men seated at a rude table, above which a lantern hung from a wire. One was the tall man with the pin-point eyes, and the other was the thick, squat man—the man who had cornered Sue Brandon on the outskirts of Sheep Camp—the man who had stolen the boat from the Lake Lindemann Camp.

TOM'S jaw tightened, and his lips set in a hard, straight line. Swiftly he slipped the pack from his shoulders, and stood for long moments studying the set-up. The window through which the light shone was devoid of glass, and the underbrush near the end of the cabin was lighted for a space of several feet. Evidently the door was missing, or had been left open. The squat man sat with his back to his doorway, the other faced it. There was no wind. A deathlike silence hung over the valley, and Tom realized that one false step—the snapping of a twig, the dislodgement of a loose stone would instantly put the men on their guard. Very deliberately he lowered himself over the four-foot ledge. Then, with infinite care he began inching his way toward the shack, placing each foot so as to avoid displacing stick or stone. It was fully ten minutes before he stood at the corner of the shack. Then grimly he unsheathed his belt axe, and with two quick strides, stood in the open doorway.

The tall man's pinpoint eyes widened suddenly. His receding chin dropped and a low mewling cry issued from his open mouth.

The squat one whirled, a pistol in his hand. The hand jerked upward, there was a loud roar, as Tom leaped sidewise into the room. And before the man could fire again the whirling blade of the belt axe clove the man's skull almost squarely between the eyes. The next instant the tall man went down in a heap, his teeth clashing audibly as Tom's left fist crashed to the point of the receeding chin. Blood reddened the floor where the squat man lay, the pistol still grasped in his hand. Crossing to the other, Tom rapidly searched his pockets and explored inside his shirt. Not finding the money he turned his attention to the corpse, but with no better luck. A hurried search of the shack failed to uncover it, and stepping to the water pail he dipped into it, and dashed a cupful of cold water in the tall man's face. He dashed another, and another before the man came to, muttering and sputtering. Twisting his fingers into his collar, Tom jerked him to his feet, backed him against the wall, and shifted his grip to his throat. The man's eyes widened in horror, his jaw sagged open, and he gasped for breath as the fingers of steel tightened about his windpipe, at the same time they jerked his head forward, and slammed it back against the wall in a series of staccato thumps.

Then, suddenly, the fingers loosed their grip and the heaving chest pumped air into the tortured lungs.

"Where is it—damn you? Where's the money—six thousand dollars you took off me when you slugged me there on the trail?"

The man's voice came in a choking gurgle. "I—I never done it. It was him. I ain't got—"

The grip tightened, cutting off the words, and the head-thumping was renewed. "You lie, damn you! Come clean—or by God you'll be as dead as he is before morning—only you won't die quick, like he did."

Again the grip loosened, and again the chest heaved convulsively pumping air. "I—don't know where—it's at. He—tuk it. He——"

Again the fingers clamped down, and again the back of the man's head beat a tattoo against the wall. This time his face was purple when Tom loosened his grip. "I can stand this all night—if you can. And in the morning I'll be alive — and you won't."

"Don't—don't—I—I can't take it—I—I'll tell you—it's—there under the floor—that board—by the wood box."

Slamming the man to the floor where he lay like a rag, Tom stepped to the wood box, raised a loose board, and lifted the packet from the aperture. The covering had evidently been removed and replaced. Swiftly he counted the bills — recounted them, with a puzzled glance at the crumpled heap on the floor, pocketed them.

Lifting the man, he deposited him on the bunk where he lay, whimpering, choking and gasping. "They was seven thousan'—not six—like you said," he whined.

Tom nodded. "My mistake. Put your feet together while I tie you up."

"Tie me up! My God—what you goin' to do?"

"I'm going to tie you up so you can't get loose, and go back to Dawson for Corporal Downey of the Mounted. He'll want to know what came off here."

The man's voice rose in a thin shriek of terror. "Tie me up! You can't leave me

here - not alone — with no dead man! Night'll come before you git back!"

"That's right—maybe two nights."

"I'll starve!"

"You just had a good supper. That'll last till I get back."

"My God—a dead man—in the night—I'll go nuts—crazy!"

"That's all right with me."

"Take me along! Take me anywheres away from here. You can't do that!"

"Can't I? You wait and see." As Tom talked, he trussed the man, hand and foot, and bound him to the bunk with straps cut from the two packsacks and a length of old babiche line he found hanging on a nail behind the door. "I'm going to throw a good feed into me, and then I'll be on my way."

All during the meal which Tom prepared and ate from the supplies the squat man had packed to the cabin, the man on the bunk begged and whined and raved. The meal over, he blew out the lantern, and retrieving his pack from the rock, made his way back to the trail.

CHAPTER XVIII

TOM REPORTS

ARRIVING in Dawson, Burr MacShane reported the robbery to Corporal Downey, and later in the Tivoli, recounted the incident to Swiftwater Bill, Bettles and Camillo Bill. Still later, the bartender repeated it to Jack Gorman, who shortly thereafter met Sue Brandon on the street.

"Hello, Sis," he said. "Too bad about Tom, ain't it?"

"Too bad about him! What do you mean?"

"Why I'd a thought you'd know. Burr MacShane claims he got robbed somewheres on the trail to Ophir. Got six thousan' dollars took off'n him."

"Robbed! Where is he now?"

"Who — Burr? He pulled out couple hours ago."

"No—Tom!"

"Why I don't know. I guess that Burr didn't say. Accordin' to the barkeep, Burr wanted Tom to come back to Dawson with him—but Tom wouldn't."

As the girl made her way to the hotel, icy fingers seemed closing about her heart—fingers of doubt. Had Tom really been robbed? If so—why in the world hadn't he come straight to Dawson to report the robbery to the police—and to her? She went to her room, threw herself on the bed, and for what seemed hours, lay there staring up at the ceiling.

Two days later she met Moosehide on the street. "Have you heard anything of Tom Jorden?" she asked.

"Heard anything of him! No. What you drivin' at?"

"Why—he was robbed."

"Robbed! When?"

"Three or four days ago—somewhere on the Ophir trail."

"An'—you ain't seen him sence?"

"No. I haven't seen him since I turned over several thousand dollars to him to be spent on the Hunker and Ophir claims. That was the day before he was robbed."

Moosehide's brow drew into a frown. "That's funny," he said "—that you ain't seen him."

"Why?"

" 'Cause I seen him last night right here in Dawson. Jest on the edge of dark. Him an' a couple other fellas was hittin' out of town. I hollered at him, but he never turned around. Seems like he didn't want to hear —er he was in a hell of a hurry—er somethin'. I thought it was kinda funny, at the time."

The girl was silent for several moments. "Are you sure it was Tom?" she asked.

"Shore's I'm standin' here."

Sue Brandon walked slowly down the street, her eyes straight ahead—Tom Jorden in Dawson—only yesterday—and he had avoided her—avoided Moosehide. There was a lump in her throat, and her heart seemed like a dull weight in her chest. They had been fools to trust him—she and her father—not knowing any more about him than they did. Oh, well—it only cost seven thousand dollars to find it out. It might have been much more.

THEN, one day a week later, at dinner in the restaurant, she looked up from her menu to see Tom Jorden threading his way among the tables, heading straight for her. She felt the color drain from her cheeks knew that her eyes were staring, as he

drew out the chair and seated himself opposite her. She knew that his lips were smiling, and in her ears was the sound of his voice.

"What's the matter, Sue? You look like you'd seen a ghost. Well, I've got everything going okay. Porcupine Jack and his men will have the shack finished by the end of the week, and will get to work on the dump by Monday. I've got a couple of men working on the Ophir shack. That'll soon be done, and the sluice, too. Then we'll find out how good a deal your dad made with Fisher."

He drew several papers from his pocket and tossed them across to her. "There's the receipts for the shack and lumber payments, and——"

The girl suddenly found her voice—found that it came in jerky sobs—found, also that tears were coursing down her cheeks. "But—Tom—they said—Burr MacShane said you'd been—robbed." She fumbled in her purse, found her handkerchief, and dabbed at her eyes.

Tom grinned. "Oh—that! Sure I was. Forget it. Gosh, Sue—it's nothing to cry about. I got the money back, all right. And listen here, lady—the next time you make up a package of money, be sure you count it right! I asked for six thousand dollars—and receipted for six thousand—and you made a mistake and put seven thousand in the package. That's damned careless. Here's the thousand. Better stick it back in the bank."

The girl was smiling now — smiling through the tears that persisted in welling into her eyes, blurring the face across the table.

"Yes, sir," she said, in mock contrition.

"I mean it, Sue. If you're going to handle your dad's money you've got to handle it right. There's no harm done, this time. And I'll never mention it to him. But stop and think what a spot I'd have been on, if the mistake had been the other way—and you'd only put five thousand in that packet—and I'd receipted for six. Either you'd have thought I got away with a thousand, or I'd have had to dig it up out of my own pocket—and I haven't got many thousands to spare."

The girl's eyes were dry, now, and the blue eyes met the gray ones squarely. "We wouldn't have thought you took the money, Tom. We—we *know* you are honest. But—there's something I don't understand. Moosehide Charlie told me he saw you in Dawson, one evening, only a couple of days after the robbery. He must have been mistaken."

"No, I was here that evening. I had to hire a couple of hands for the Ophir job, and report to Corporal Downey."

"But Jack Gorman said that Burr MacShane reported the robbery."

"Yes—the robbery. But I had to report killing one of the robbers, and tying the other one up. By the way—the one I killed was that damn scoundrel who followed you out from Sheep Camp—and later stole our boat. I had to kill him—he'd taken one shot at me, and was about to take another. I heard Moosehide holler at me that night, but I was in a hurry—wanted to get my men on the job—and wanted to overtake Downey—he'd gone on ahead."

"Oh—it must have been terrible! Tell me all about it. How could you have killed him—if he had a gun?"

Tom shrugged. "There isn't much to tell—a guy I hired slugged and robbed me on the trail. Burr came along and I told him to report the robbery to Downey, and I went on. I located the man and our squat friend in a cabin and started in to get the money back when Squatty took a shot at me. I dodged it, and caught him between the eyes with my belt axe—used to practice throwing a hatchet and sticking it in trees when I was a kid. Then I punched the other one in the jaw and choked him a bit, till he told me where they'd cached the money—that's all there was to it. Downey gave me a clean bill. We buried Squatty and he brought the other one down with him. He's crazy as a loon."

"All there was to it," the girl repeated slowly. "And then you went right on with the job."

CHAPTER XIX

"I'LL NEVER MARRY YOU!"

TOM swung around to Hunker Creek before returning to Ophir to find the shack and sluice finished and work already started on the dump. Porcupine Jack filled his pipe and squatted beside the pile of

gravel. "She's runnin' pretty good, Tommy," he said. "But Jack Fisher had so many irons in the fire that he skipped work on a lot of his locations. This is no hell of a dump, and we'll clean it up in a few days. I expect after that we'd better put in some time cuttin' wood for next winter's minin'. You can tell your boss that he's got a good thing here."

"Sure—go ahead with the wood-cutting when you finish the dump. I'll tell Brandon what you said when he gets back."

"Back? Where is he?"

"Off on a prospecting trip."

"Prospectin'! What does he know about prospectin'?"

Tom grinned. "Nothing. He hired a fellow to take him around. He's an old-timer, or claimed to be. Name's Jim Devine, and he claimed to know where there's a lot of likely cricks, way back."

Porcupine Jack laughed. "Jim Devine!" he snorted contemptuously. "He's an old-timer, all right—an' about the only one of the old-timers that ain't worth a damn, anywhere you put him. I wouldn't trust him around the first bend of a crick. Better tell Brandon not to go buyin' any claims off him."

"I don't think it's a question of buying claims. He's paying Devine twenty-five dollars a day as a guide. This Devine probably won't show him anything worth while—but at least Brandon's learning how to get around the country, and that's probably worth what it's costing him."

THE old sourdough nodded. "Yeah. Most likely. But speakin' of prospectin' trips. I'd shore like to have another go at the Porcupine before someone else hits in there an' locates my crick."

"But—how do you know there's anything up there? Most of the sourdoughs don't think much of the lower country."

"If they knew what I know, they wouldn't be sayin' that. I've got a map. An' I've got nuggets that were taken out of this crick—right on the surface!" Pausing, he thrust a hand into his pocket and withdrew a small dirt-caked mooseshide pouch. Loosening the string he dumped its contents into the palm of his hand. "Look at them. You ain't seen any nuggets like them here in the upper country, have you?"

Tom's eyes bulged as they stared at the irregular, slag-like slugs that showed dull yellow in the man's hand. "Good Lord!" he exclaimed. "Have you showed those to the others?"

"Do you think I want to start a stampede? You're the first one that's seen 'em. Six of 'em—an' if they don't go thirty ounces, I'll eat 'em."

FOR a long time Tom stood looking down at the misshapen nuggets. In his visits to the claims of the sourdoughs, he had seen much gold—but never nuggets like these. When he spoke, his voice betrayed his excitement. "You told me that evening in the Tivoli that if I had money enough to grubstake the two of us for a trip up the Porcupine——"

"That's right!" the other interrupted, his shrewd old eyes lighting. "An' I meant every word of it. Have you got enough?"

Tom nodded, his eyes still on the gold. "Yes," he answered, "I have."

"Your money, or Brandon's?"

"My own. I've got four thousand dollars."

"Okay," the oldster replied. "Like I told you, I wouldn't take a grubstake off any of the sourdoughs—it would be charity. But this ain't charity, Tommy—it's business, an' damn good business, too. When can you start?"

Tom considered. "My agreement with Brandon allows me to quit on a moment's notice. I told him I didn't want to be tied down by a contract—that I wanted to be free to hit out on a stampede, or hit out on my own at any time. But—I can't go till he gets back. I can't leave Sue with these two operations on her hands."

Porcupine nodded. "Shore you can't. An' I've agreed to clean up this dump—an' I'll clean her up. It's the first of July. Of course, the sooner we start, the sooner we'll get there. But if we didn't hit out till the first of August, we'd prob'ly make it, all right. If we can locate the crick before winter sets in, come spring, we'll have a dump of our own to work—an' believe me, she'll be a dump worth workin'!"

"All right. I'll go on over to Ophir and clean up that dump. If you finish the dump, go to work on the wood, and I'll cut loose from Brandon as quick as I can."

THE dump on the Ophir claim was also a small one, and two weeks later Tom weighed up and sacked the last ounce of dust, set his two men to cutting wood, and carried the dust to Dawson.

He stepped into the hotel to meet Sue and her father coming down the stairs. Brandon grasped his hand and pumped his arm heartily:

"By George, Tom—you've done a great job! Heard all about it from Sue, and the sourdoughs—and Corporal Downey, too. Good work!"

Tom smiled. "Glad you're satisfied," he said.

"I've got the Ophir clean-up with me. It wasn't a very big dump, but it panned out all right. Next year you ought to take plenty out of that claim. I've got the men working on the wood, now. And I expect Porcupine Jack will have finished the Hunker dump by this time. I'll slip out there and see. How did you make out? And when did you get back?"

"Got back a week ago. Located a couple of propositions on a creek way back off the river, and recorded 'em. But I had a streak of real luck. I figured on outfitting and hitting right out again. I paid off this guide I had—Jim Devine. Gave him seven hundred and fifty dollars for his month's work guiding me, and he got pretty drunk that night, and the next morning he told me he'd decided he'd better go out to his claim and sluice out his own dump before someone beat him to it. He says that with so many chechakos in the country, some of 'em are apt to slip out there and do some sluicing on their own account, if they knew he was off on a trip. His dump isn't very big. He was sick for a long time last winter and couldn't work. But he says his claim is a good one, and he'll probably take out plenty.

"I offered to buy the claim, if it was any good—but he just laughed at me, said it was so good he wouldn't sell at any price. I thought it was the whiskey bragging, and thought no more about it till this morning, he came here to see me. And what do you think he showed me? A receipt duly signed by the police for nineteen hundred and twenty dollars that he'd paid in as taxes at fifteen percent on the dust he'd sluiced out of his dump in one week. Just think of it, Tom! He took out twelve thousand, eight hundred dollars in a week—that's better than fifty thousand a month."

Tom grinned. "That's right," he agreed. "Some claim! But where does your luck come in? I thought you said he refused to sell."

"He did, at first. But today the poor fellow is all broken up over a letter he got from his old mother back in Iowa. She begs him to come back home at once. His father is dying, and she'll be left all alone. So he agreed to sell me the claim—but not until he works that dump for another week. He wants to get that much more dust out—and also to prove to me that he hadn't just sluiced out a rich spot in his dump. He's going to bring this next week's tax receipt to me, so I can see for myself what he took out."

"Did he name a figure for the claim?"

"Three hundred thousand. That is, providing this coming week's clean-up is as good as last week's. Why—it's a bargain. We can take out that much in six months!"

"You're sure he isn't trying to put something over on you?"

"Certainly, I'm sure. I know he was broke when I paid him off. Where else could he have got more than twelve thousand in dust within a week? I verified his tax payment to the police—just got back from detachment. He had the dust, all right—the police weighed it in."

Tom nodded, and turned over the little sacks of dust. Brandon pocketed them. "I'll have 'em weighed in at the bank. That seems to be a good claim on Ophir—but dust like this will be chicken feed when we get that Devine claim going."

"Could be," Tom admitted, and turned toward the door. "Well, I'll be trotting along. Going up to Hunker, and see how Porcupine Jack made out."

"But surely, Tom," Sue said, "you're not hitting out today! There's doings at the log church tonight, and—"

Tom shook his head with a grin. "Never put off till tomorrow what can be done today. I learned that in school when I was a kid. So long. Be back in a week."

Tom visited the Tivoli Saloon and had a drink or two with the sourdoughs, then after stopping for a few moments at the bank, he hit out of town.

A WEEK later he stepped into the hotel, practically on the heels of Jim Devine. Brandon, who happened to be in the office at the time, welcomed the two, and introduced them, then led the way to his room, where Sue was busy over some papers.

"Well," Brandon asked eagerly, "how did you make out this week?"

Devine handed him the police receipt. "Paid royalty on thirteen thousan', four hundred dollars—eight hundred an' thirty-seven an' a half ounces. That dump's a-holdin' up, all right—gittin' a little better, even. I shore wisht I could stay here an' work it out. But a man can't stay away an' leave his old maw all alone, whilst his paw's a-dying, that-a-way—could he, Mr. Brandon?"

"Certainly not; I—er—believe you named three hundred thousand as your figure?"

"Yeah, that's what I offered it to you for. Wisht I hadn't. Got another party offered me three-fifty fer it, today. But I turned him down. I'm a man of my word, Mr. Brandon. That is," he added, a hopeful gleam in his eye, "if yer still in the notion of buyin'? If you ain't, it's all right with me. I kin git fifty thousan' better fer it, inside half an hour."

"Of course I'm in the notion of buying! A bargain's a bargain, Devine. As you say, you're a man of your word."

"All right, Mr. Brandon. Let's git it over with. The *Sarah* pulls out fer Whitehorse at five o'clock—an' I aim to be on her. Here's the description of the claim—make out the deed, an' I'll sign it."

Tom picked up the description paper. "This claim's on Moose Creek, I see—a feeder to Squaw Creek."

"That's right. It's the only claim on that there feeder."

"And the dump you've been panning is on this claim?"

"Why shore it is! Where the hell would it be?"

"I was just wondering. And you took this eight hundred and thirty-seven and a half ounces out of that dump this week, eh?"

"That's right."

"Work alone?"

"Shore I did. If I'd had help, it would be'n more."

Tom laughed. "If I were you, Devine, I'd take up that other fellow's offer of three hundred and fifty thousand, and then hit out on the *Sarah* before he finds out what a damned liar you are. Mr. Brandon isn't interested."

"What do ya mean?" snarled Devine. "Mr. Brandon knows I was broke two weeks ago. An' I fetched in that dust, didn't I? Them tax papers proves it!"

"Certainly they do, Tom," Brandon exclaimed. "What do you mean by insulting Devine, this way?"

"He paid duty on the dust, all right," Tom grinned. "But he didn't get an ounce of it off this claim—or any other. He bought it at the bank—the day after you paid him off."

"But—impossible! The man only had seven hundred and fifty dollars. The idea's preposterous!"

"That may have been all he had when you paid him off. But I stopped in at the Tivoli the other day, after you'd told me about him, and found out that he cashed your check there and started in to play the wheel. He had a remarkable run of luck

—both on the wheel and at the faro table—and ran his seven hundred and fifty up to twenty-six thousand, five hundred. Then he quit, and got pretty well oiled. Next morning he took the cash to the bank and bought dust with it. It is this dust that he paid the duty on. He went back to his claim all right, and hung around there all

week. So did I—watching him from the rim. But he didn't do a tap of work. In fact there's no dump on the claim—only a little pile of tailings that he had worked dry before he hit out with you on the trip." He paused, and turned to Devine, who was edging toward the door. "Don't forget your location papers, Devine," he grinned. "And you might step around to detachment and try to explain to Downey that you paid duty on the same bunch of dust twice. Maybe he'll rebate you—but I doubt it."

WHEN the man had gone, Brandon turned to Tom. "Why, the damned scoundrel! But—it was a pretty smart trick, at that. And the devil of it is, if it hadn't been for you, it would have worked. How did you happen to suspect him?"

"Porcupine Jack tipped me off that he'd bear watching, when I told him you'd gone on a trip with him. So, after I heard his spiel last week, I made some inquiries and followed him."

"By George, Tom—you're all right! I don't know what I'd do without you."

"Oh, you'll get along, all right. Just keep your eyes open, that's all. The fact is, you are going to have to get along without me—for a while, at least."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm going on a prospecting trip with Porcupine Jack. We're going to try our luck in the lower country."

"The lower country! Don't be a fool, Tom! All the sourdoughs say the lower country's petered out."

"Porcupine Jack don't—and he's a sourdough."

"Probably some addle-pated old mossback, that's wedded to one idea! Have nothing to do with it. Stay on with me. I need you—and Sue—I'll see that you never regret it. I—I'll double your salary."

Tom shook his head. "No, my mind's made up. I promised Porcupine I'd go with him, after we finished cleaning up the dumps. You'll do all right without me. Remember our agreement called for my quitting whenever I wanted to hit out on my own."

"Yes—I know. But damn it, Tom—I—hate to see you go. I think you're making a mistake. But if your mind's made up—I won't stop you. I will, however, call your attention to an understanding we had—that if you should fail in any venture you undertake, you'll come back to me."

"I'll be back if I fail. That's a promise."

Brandon stepped from the room abruptly, leaving Tom alone with the girl. The blue eyes were raised from the papers on the desk and regarded him intently. "I've never seen Daddy so upset," she said. "Oh, Tom—why do you go? You've got a good thing—here—with us. Daddy will see that you have every possible advantage!"

Tom nodded. "I know that, Sue—and it's one of the reasons I'm going. I'm not asking any advantage. I want to make my own way. I don't want to be carried along on Sam Brandon's money."

"But—he needs you. And—and—oh, Tom—I need you, too! Don't I mean anything to you, at all?"

Tom's face flushed a deep crimson. "I—yes—Sue—you mean a lot to me. A lot more than I thought any girl would ever mean to me. And—that's another reason I'm going. Sometime I'm coming back—and I'm going to marry you—but when I do we'll stand on our own feet. We won't ask any odds of your dad—or anyone else. No one can ever say I got along because I was Sam Brandon's son-in-law!"

The blue eyes seemed to deepen as they gazed into his own. Then her lips moved. "I—I will marry you, Tom. But on one condition—that you give up this hair-brained trip—and stay on with Daddy."

Tom shook his head. "No—Sue. I'm going."

The blue eyes flashed as they had flashed across the prostrate man that day on Dyea Beach.

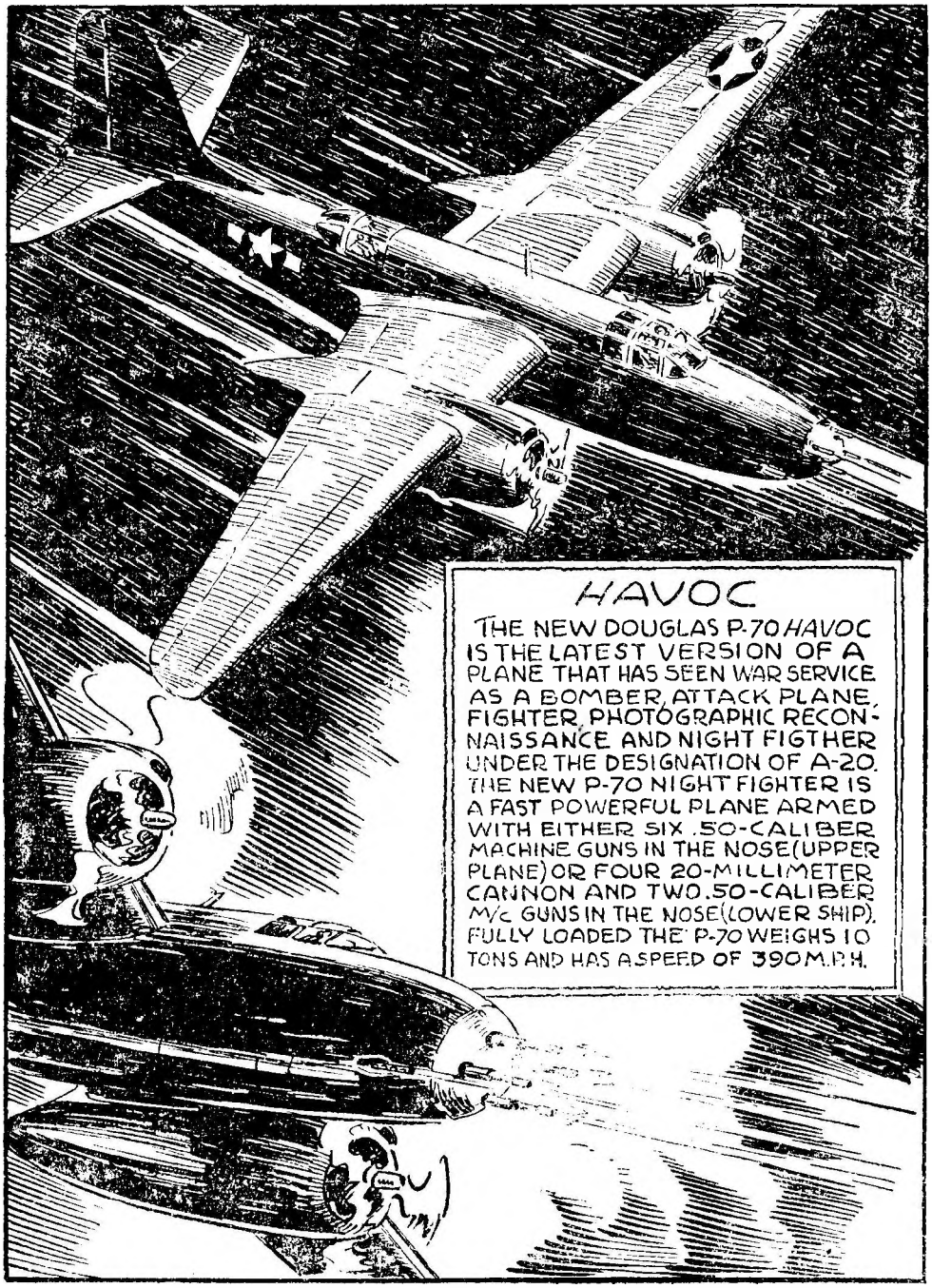
"Tom Jorden—if you go, I'll *never marry you!*"

Tom walked slowly across the room. In the doorway he turned. "Some day," he said, in a low steady voice, "I'm coming back—and you'll change your mind."

(Part III in the next SHORT STORIES)

Wings for Victory

BY Jim Gray



Overseas Mail

UNDER this heading in each issue of SHORT STORIES we plan to publish letters from men in our armed forces overseas. For each one we use its sender will receive a $25.00 war bond. Won't you send us one? We cannot guarantee to return unused ones, but we want representative letters showing what is happening to our young men in their greatest adventure.

Address the Editor, SHORT STORIES, 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York 20, N. Y. Do not send original letters; have them copied.

This one is from a Marine fighter pilot and was written to a friend of his now in Kingsville, Texas.

Southwest Pacific.

Dear Rog:

Received your communique of the 23rd of September just a few days ago. My squadron has just returned from our first six weeks' tour of combat duty, and are back here in the land of civilization again for a rest. Spent all of our time up there looking for Jap Zeros—and what a plane that is! They maneuver like bumblebees, but we had the word on them, and shot 58 down in flames plus 42 more either probably destroyed in the air, or definitely destroyed by strafing on the ground.

My contribution to the total was one Zero down in flames and three more probables, which smoked but weren't seen to flame. Our Corsairs are more than a match for them and just to prove to you that our planes can take it as well as dish it out—I had myself shot up by a "Nip" I never saw, and when I managed to land back home, we counted 105 7 x 7 mm mg bullet holes, plus 2 20 mm cannon shell-holes, one of which removed my whole left elevator, and the other blew a hole 2 feet square through the left wing. Had holes in all three tanks, tail wheel blown out, and no radio. Also had one bullet explode against the bottom of the seat, putting a little shrapnel in my legs—of a minor nature (for which he received the Purple Heart Medal award for later—sender).

You guys are getting a lot more time than we are, but I'll bet we have more fun. I have only a little over 500 hours, of which 150 are in the "Corsair," and 90 of those hours are combat hours. We are due for a resting up soon and then will go up into combat again. After a year overseas, you usually go home, so if I'm lucky I'll be back before you leave. Sorry about the boys who met their end, and it seems a shame that they never had a chance to fight.

Don't be too eager to get out here, Rog, because I think this is going to be a nice, long war, and I assure you that there will always be plenty of Zeros around. Say hello to the gang, and think of me once in a while when you've got a nice, tall, cool blonde in your grasp!

Good luck, Rog,

BRUCE.

"Mike" is a friend of "Art" who's a corporal training at Drew Field, Florida.

Somewhere in Greenland.

Dear Art:

I am very happy that censorship regulations now permit me to tell you that I'm in Greenland. Your guesses as to my location have been very amusing indeed. You have imagined me to be in Ireland, Alaska, Russia and even Iceland. I guess the thought of soldiers ever being sent to this forsaken spot never entered your mind.

Contrary to popular conception, Greenland is further north and is much colder than Iceland. Iceland does manage to get a bit of the warming influence of the gulf stream. Greenland is in reality a huge refrigerator with 90 percent of it covered with a permanent ice cap. Only the outer

coastal fringes have been explored by man.

Greenland is no small island. It rates with the largest in the world being 1,800 miles long from northeast to southwest, and 800 miles wide in its thickest portion. The country is entirely void of trees. This is because of the severe winds. Ninety mile gales are not uncommon.

Everywhere you look, you see ice-capped mountains. There is no level ground. Like Norway, many fjords indent these mountains. To build a road in Greenland is to perform an engineering feat. The frozen fjords are actually the highways of the northland.

The winters and summer seasons are approximately six months each in duration. In the summer it doesn't get dark at all at the pole. You can read a book at midnight by the rays of the sun. The reverse is true in winter. It is amusing to watch the fellows staggering about trying to find the mess hall with only their sense of smell and direction to go by. Then one of them stumbles over a boulder and you can hear a barrage of cuss words.

As one comes south from the pole in the winter season, there will be a couple of hours of daylight. The number of hours will depend on the distance south of the pole. The number of daylight hours increase as one progresses south to about eight in the New England states. This increase keeps up until we reach the south pole where there is continuous daylight, and the seasons are exactly reversed from those at the north pole.

I hope this letter finds you in the best of health as it does me.

Your friend,

MIKE.

Boris Edelman at the U. S. C. G. Academy in New London, says: The following is a letter I received from a very good friend of mine while he was serving with the Army in the African campaign. It might be of interest to know that he was wounded just two days after he wrote this letter, and as a result now wears the Purple Heart, and has been recommended for the Silver Star for gallantry in action. Six weeks ago he was honorably discharged from the Army due to eighteen shrapnel wounds he received in action against the enemy at Fondouk Pass, Tunisia. The following is the letter:

Somewhere in Tunisia.
Date unknown.

Dear Boris:

I just got your letter of Jan. 19, and was very glad to hear from you. Sorry I couldn't write any sooner, but it has been quite some time now since I have written to anyone. I am traveling light these days, and don't even have the makings of a letter on hand. All I have are the makings of a bedroll (my bedding) and I have to wait from day to day until I finally manage to get my hands on a piece of paper here, an envelope there. I'll try to keep you posted from time to time, so don't stop writing.

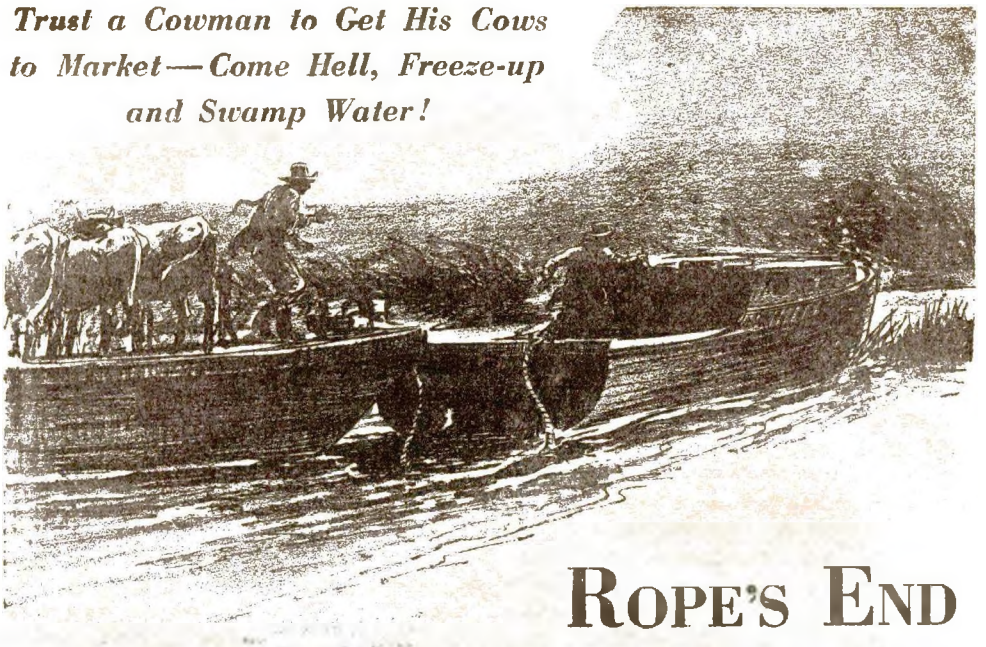
Just a few of the things going on so far are that I haven't bathed or shaved as regularly as I used to. I have already gone four or five weeks before I finally managed to get into a creek and wash up a bit. One certainly does appreciate a bath after waiting that long. And talk about shaving—I've gone for almost four weeks without a shave. The boys on the Bowery have nothing on me. One of the boys had a couple of films left in his camera and took a picture of me before I got rid of the disguise. We don't know as yet if the prints will develop okay, but if they do, I'll send it home, and you can have a good laugh out of it.

There are a lot of things I could tell you, but if I put them on paper, the censor would only cut them out. In all the time I've been overseas, I've only spent four dollars. At that rate I'll be a millionaire if the war doesn't hurry up and come to an end. There is no place to spend money in the front lines, so we haven't been paid yet, and don't know when we will be paid.

By the way—all this talk about us getting more than enough over here is a lot of bunk. Of course we're not starving, but we could use a little more food. There isn't much of a variety, as every meal is made up the same way. No matter how it's made, it's still stew. We also make it ourselves. Can you imagine me cooking up a meal for the boys around here? Well, I've done it, and so has almost everyone else. We take turns at making the meals. There aren't any bum cooks because no one can change the taste

(*Continued on page* 143)

Trust a Cowman to Get His Cows to Market—Come Hell, Freeze-up and Swamp Water!



ROPE'S END

By CHARLES TENNEY JACKSON

Author of "Under the Fleet," etc.

SEA legs didn't rightly belong on a cowhand as Bill Marvin remembered again when he fell off the narrow running deck of this scow down among Burkett's beef critters—if you could call them that. That crazy Cajun engineer who was towing the outfit had hit another cypress snag or a logboom, or something. Marvin heard the motor roaring and the screw threshing, as Larue swung across the black channel and struck mud.

Marvin got up and pushed two cows aside. They were so thin that he thought he heard their ribs rattle when he climbed up. But maybe it was the stanchion chains to which they were head-tied down the middle of this fifty-foot scow with their rumps out to the side runway. The boss tried to see if any more had gone down. Twice he'd dirtied his good Montana rope hauling the weaker ones to their feet after Larue had hit something.

"I bet me," complained Marvin aloud to the cold norther that crashed over the mangroves of the twisting bayou, "that this bunch o' stuff is losing more weight in an hour heading to market than Old Man Burkett could get on 'em in six months down on that damn swamp range o' his. It ain't fit country for cows; it ain't fit no place for a cowpoke. Next week I'm forking west. Stayed my season on contract and it's been plenty tough."

He ambled forward against the gale and yelled at Larue.

"Hey, Frenchy! What kind o' voyage you giving these old canners? If they don't make Comeau Landing market come mornin', we'll have to pry 'em up with a derrick, they're that weak."

The Cajun stuck his face around from the wheel. He had a heavy trapping season's canvas coat, and the warm greasy air from the engine-room came up around his legs and he felt good. Marvin had put on his thin town clothes, intending to go on to New Orleans from the river landing, and out on the scow the wind hit hard.

"Tomorrow, my friend, you see something! The norther he go down, an' then freeze! Neve' but once in my life, when I was little kid, I see ice on bayous. Boy, she cold!"

"Cold nothin'. Get below frost and you

Louisiana swampers holler cold. Say, back on Yellow Lodge I rode with it forty below—"

Crash! The launch swerved into something and the Montana rider nearly pitched over the barge bow. Burkett's beef staggered around and rattled their head gear. Marvin swore and went back to them. He was in charge, so he'd do night watch on the bunch.

That wind was cold, no fooling. It had held the scow back all afternoon in the miles of canal through the treeless swamp prairies that surrounded the ancient brushy rice and sugar fields where Burkett had got the notion he could market-fat the cattle he had bought at starvation prices from a drought-bankrupt ranchman in Texas, and shipped over here by coastal waterways. It hadn't panned out; Burkett had plenty of money and had retired to come south and buy his tumbledown plantation. But he couldn't quit cows.

Had imported two ex-foremen of his Yellow Lodge ranch to come here and look over his experiment in the big swamps.

"First Kilgore; and Burkett should've known better," Marvin grumbled. "Scaly guy, and he trimmed Burkett of course. Then me—and Kilgore quit, sore that the old man wouldn't pay him a bonus and expense money on top a top salary. Then I was sucker—"

THE outfit swerved again and he nearly went off the side down among Burkett's cows. Well, he shouldn't complain; old Burkett had always been mighty good to Marvin since he first went to riding fence for him, a kid job at sixteen. Kilgore had been range boss then, and the kid grew up to be a top hand always in trouble with Kilgore. Then down here Burkett had got through with Kilgore for good and Marvin had replaced him. Kilgore had quit sore, and full of insulting derision for the old man's swamp range venture. Well, Kilgore might be right about that. Marvin had come on to wind it up. This measly forty-two head on the Frenchman's scow was all that were left from two hundred that had wandered and bogged and died in the overgrown jungle fields. There the saltish tides now and then would come up from the Gulf into the abandoned rice ditches, and the ticks and mosquitoes sucked animals blood-thin by summer's end.

Marvin tried to see his stock in the dark. Well, the old man had guts if his cows hadn't. Poor stuff to begin with. "Canners," Marvin thought. "Best the market'll do on 'em—if I get 'em there alive. Boy, we've turned out some good tough chewin' for civilians I bet me; the army gets prime. Okay by me. I came down here to ride and rope, and spent my days tail-draggin' old cows outa mud ditches." He felt the rope over his shoulder; it was one thing he'd take back to the dry range anyway. He got up and tried to look over the wind-whipped mangrove fringes to the slithering grass beyond. When he first had seen the endless grassy seas, they'd seemed a cattleman's dream. Beautiful, open green prairies—and a cow couldn't put foot on them. Sinister, treacherous meadows with bottomless ooze below. Marvin had got to have a strange dread of them. Kilgore swore he'd quit because the swamps had haunted him.

"But he was fired," Marvin thought. "Burkett found him out at last. And Kilgore thought I did it. Wonder if Kilgore started home yet?"

He was a sucker again for this salt-water voyaging for cows. The launch ahead, dragging about a point, seemed to have suddenly slowed and the scow crashed into it. Marvin and the cows milled about on uncertain legs as the cross-channel gale drove the outfit into the shore brush. The motor had stopped and Marvin heard Larue's voice. Maybe the engineer was talking to himself as he himself had been, so Marvin squatted on the foredeck and waited for what next. Nothing he could do about it. Larue, who had trapped this section before he went into the bayou towing business, was boss man aboard ship.

Marvin tried to get out of the wind; when it's cold it's cold anywhere, he reflected. Larue had urged him to come down in the engine-room, for he was no manner of use outside, but Marvin believed a cowhand ought to night herd his cows ashore or afloat. Not that it had made much difference down at Burkett's plantation where he'd seen a mule wearing wooden bog shoes so that it wouldn't fall through the bottom of a cornfield. No more use for a cow horse down there than there was for a rider or a good

roper. Marvin got up impatiently and looked at the bank. Just starlight enough to see windwhipped water and slatting brush.

But he could climb ashore here and go see why Larue had stopped with his towlines warped about this point. He stepped off shoulder-high and forked along listening to some kind of argument now. Larue was excited. Someone was with him. Marvin thought hazily that there were some sort of wartime orders about night-running regular coastal channels but this was some sort of swamp cutoff of Larue's choosing.

Marvin made five yards—and a flashlight was thrust up to his eyes. By the light another freckled hand held a blue gun. He had an odd feeling that he knew the gun and the freckles. Then he did, for a rasping voice came in the dark.

Kilgore. Marvin hadn't seen Burkett's fired boss since last summer. Kilgore jerked cold words at him as he had at old Burkett when he had left.

"Was just lookin' for you, ranny. You and them cows. I'm takin' the bonus Burkett promised for comin' down to handle his crazy outfit."

"If you'd stayed out your contract you'd have got it. Well, say! What's this? Rustler turned pirate?"

Kilgore waggled his gun. "Say that again. You mentioned it once about me back on the Yellow Lodge, seems like."

"And you didn't take me up. Now you got a gun and a gang in the dark you don't fancy the word, hey?"

Kilgore stepped closer. "Still the fresh kid rider, eh?"

LARUE thought Kilgore would shoot perhaps. Anyway, he jumped against the gun. Another man, behind him, slugged him silently. The Cajun slumped against Marvin's legs and Marvin bent over him.

"You birds didn't need to blackjack this little man. He's just full o' grief about you stickin' up his boat. What you aim to do with Burkett's crowbait cows? Can't drive 'em anywhere. This swamp range's got you licked. Scared of it I heard 'em say. Scared."

Kilgore snarled. Swampers had already laughed at him. "Listen, Marvin—you close yore trap. Herd 'em aboard, Means. You guys handle this launch. I'll stick here with these joke cows till we're clear."

Marvin saw another gun in the hands of a big man who motioned it toward a short gangplank from the shore to the foredeck of the big cabin boat that had crowded Larue out of the channel. He went along it carefully lugging Larue who was coming out of his daze. Marvin got him past the engine, forward of a bulkhead partition and laid him on a rough bunk along the side. The cabin, was rough and bare, with small ports, not windows, it belonged to a stout sea boat.

Kilgore came from the cattle scow and there were whispers. Marvin saw the others now by the engine-room lights.

Means was a town-dressed man, dark, shifty-eyed, silent. The big man, grizzled and heavy-faced, ignored the two prisoners after one swift look at Larue and a mutter to Kilgore. A warning perhaps.

Kilgore yelled impatiently down to them. "I ain't turnin' you rannies loose yet. This frawg-eatin' Frenchy'd find a way back to the bridge road and mebbe a telephone. Means, you and me don't know this damned swamp. Leave it to Diebold to take us through."

Larue had been gazing vacantly about, muttering of his launch which had been cut adrift in the windy bayou. But now he nudged Marvin and whispered.

"Diebold? I heard of him. Old time bootlegger. Ran the whiskey loop with his trade boat and lost his papers. No good, my friend!"

"A lot they care. He'll know these swamp channels, won't he? Can take the outfit on to the Mississippi landin's the back way, hey? But he won't dare take Burkett's beef to Comeau. We had a man there who was goin' to buy 'em. When he sees 'em—"

Larue whispered cunningly. "I bet me something! They not go to Comeau! Somewhere, in the river woods, they smuggle your cows off. The black market, my friend. This man, Means, maybe agent, eh?"

Marvin blinked. "Never thought o' that. Maybe Kilgore can get rid of stolen stuff that way. Slaughter 'em in the woods and slip meat to New Orleans dealers? Well, the first time women buy Burkett's beef and give the family a steak there's goin' to be a yell to stop this here war! It was the can-

ners Burkett counted on. Sit quiet, Frenchy."

Larue was listening to the slow drag of the cabin boat's engine. "Off the mud now. I will know all the points he have to make. But what this cowboy man who is mad at you—what he do with us, eh?"

"I dunno. But don't rile an old Montana rider by sayin' it's cold. Lay off that subject, Cajun—it ain't cold to him and me."

"You wait. 'Mornin' you see. Mebbe ice, big, eh?"

Marvin grunted; a fine way to wind up Burkett's contract.

DIEBOLD'S craft had power far above Larue's old launch. Even a cowman realized that. With the scow hitched alongside he held against wind and around the mud points. He had control of throttle and steering wheel, watching the dark but with a pistol handy on a bulkhead. The black market agent, Means, sat in the hatchway and there was no chance of the prisoners forward, rushing them. The cabin ports were open and it was cold forward as Larue remarked again with some excitement. Marvin grumbled.

"Cold, hey? I wish your damned swamps *would* freeze over!"

"Man, she would be a sight, eh? Neve' I see that!"

"You never saw any cold, you Cajun. Lay off the subject. I got plenty to think of. I want to get Burkett's cows back again. Another twenty hours, no feed nor water, them canners won't even make soup bones. Kilgore pulled this to settle old grudges with me and Burkett. Then he'll vanish. Whatever he gets on the black market's all profit anyhow. They'll all go and operate somewhere else. Hi-jackers, that's what."

Larue had been listening to every thrust of the screw, for he knew the bottom and shoal points. Now he whispered, "Diebold is turning. There's but one turn to the right. It is only deep water to the little mud lakes. Trapping country, my friend. The big cane and the little islands float over the mud when tide and wind is right. Nothing but a trapper's pirogue can cross to the south coast bayous. So where this man take us all?"

"Maybe hidin' out to run up to the river tomorrow night in the dark, to some black market hideout in the big woods. Now cows—"

"Man, she cold!" Larue's eyes gleamed with anticipation.

"I said cows—it ain't cold, so what? But I wonder how Kilgore hopes he'll shut us up from talkin' about this job afterwards? An outfit like this can't just disappear like in the middle o' the sea."

Larue stared at him oddly. "So they turn off into the deep swamp before they go to the river, eh? Now, I wonder? Men have disappeared without trace in the places with no bottom, my friend!"

"What you mean? Get rid of us for good? He wouldn't chance it!"

"I have heard of this Diebold; what we call a river rat. No good. You say your Western man, Kilgore, was a cattle thief once?"

"I wouldn't go so far. Where I came from you don't charge a man with things like that—unless you can back them up. It means shootin' out there." Marvin turned to the port; it seemed that something was brushing along it in the wind.

Larue nodded. "The big grass. I can read every turn of this bayou without seeing. We are past the cypress belt to what they call the floating prairies. No channel below, so they will stop soon."

"Stoppin' now. I heard Kilgore yellin' at his pilot."

Diebold was snarling back. "I know what I'm at. You know cows, mebbe, but me boats. I'm shovin' this outfit into big cane along a slough where there's a little shell point. You guys get a line over fore and aft while the wind holds us on broadside."

Means went out. Kilgore cursed in the dark. "I ain't puttin' foot off this boat." He came over and squatted looking past the engine at the prisoners. "Hey, Marvin, you come out. Got a hideout for you two. Diebold's marked a nice spot for your pore dogies to bed down tonight. We ain't havin' you aboard while we're sleepin'."

He waved his gun and grinned. Marvin started aft. Larue whispered, "What he mean? Off this boat there is nothing!"

"Aft," Diebold grunted. "I'm showin' you a spot."

They went on the small aft deck. Thin scud was flying under the stars, and the cane screened the windwhipped water. Mar-

vin looked at the guns. He didn't like this. Maybe Larue was right, but he couldn't believe Burkett's beef was worth murder.

KILGORE crossed to the cattle scow and stared beyond at dim pools among the tall moving cane. There was sort of a fear in his eyes when he turned back. He spoke to the other cowman, not his pals.

"What you think o' this jungle for stock range, hey?"

"Just what you do," Marvin grunted. "And what you think to get out of a bunch of starvin' stuff is beyond me."

"I get cash. Not a lot but barrel head money—to move out on. Fast and far. Tell old Burkett I quit him ahead o' the racket." Kilgore poked his gun about. "Well, what say, Diebold? You run us in here, so shake a foot. I wanta get out this wind."

Diebold poked his gun—overside at Kilgore's feared swamp jungle. "Climb out, you guys. I got a spot for you."

Marvin shook his head. "In a loblolly of mud to my ears? .Say, what's this? Pirate days—man has to walk the plank?"

Little Larue suddenly nudged Marvin and went ahead. He swung over and the cane came to his ears. He felt about and looked up. "She all right here. Shell ridge along the slough. Come on."

Marvin climbed down. He was awkward on a boat and he hung, feeling for solid footing. When he found it he looked up and Kilgore was watching him curiously. Marvin thrust a foot ten inches out in the cane and there was no footing. But Larue was weaving on past the bow of the boat. Marvin struggled after him slowly. Diebold had swung off and he held the flashlight on them. He yelled when Marvin stopped and looked back. Larue grunted:

"Come on, my friend. A man with gun is no good talkin' with. I am swamp man better than this Diebold. I know where it is safe."

"What's this? An execution party? Why'd they take us here? Larry, they've got to get rid of us before they can sell those cows!"

He watched Diebold. Diebold could have dropped them both, and a man pitching off this foot-wide shell trail would be sucked under the abysmal mud in no time. Larue's launch would be found miles away in the bayou, the barge empty at some other uncharted waterway, after the cattle had been smuggled into the river woods—this storm could account for some sort of mysterious accident. Yes, it could happen. So Marvin watched the two guns, Kilgore's on the boat, Diebold's following them along the trail. As Larue broke the cane ahead, Diebold went back, flashing his light upon his boat before he turned it off. Marvin saw the last look in Kilgore's eyes; the man was as afraid of this swamp country as Marvin hated it.

Larue turned about a clump of low brush and squatted out of the wind a little. "Sit down, my friend. End of this little ridge at the lake. No farther we go; yet half a mile across the mud is my old trappin' camp. A pirogue's cached there under palmettos. Old canoe but it do to paddle to the coast—if we had it. But look at that lake!"

There was enough star and then moonlight to see its ghastly spread. A little water here and there rippled by the gale, but mostly crinkly mud with stranded grass islets here and there. The shell trail along the shore was a survival from an ancient Indian gathering place. The tiny *cheniere* across the lake had been a spot where the shellfish eaters had had a village ages ago. Marvin looked across at the only place in miles where footing was sure, while the muddy shells under their feet about the grass hummocks kept sinking slowly.

"Diebold knows this is good as a jailhouse, eh?" Larue grinned. "After he takes the barge away tomorrow we'll be marooned like on an island in middle the sea! Boy, she bad. This is worst spot I know."

Marvin hitched his rope coil higher and bedded some cane under him. A swath of it would hold him from the moily water for awhile. Larue had pulled down the little mangrove clump. Two hundred yards along the sinister lake there was more and larger brush.

Those tough-rooted mangroves would hold if a man could reach them, but it might as well be a mile as ten yards. Larue shook his head when Marvin tested the end of the shell trail.

"No good. I think we sit here till mornin' safe enough. Man, she cold! The wind drop and she more cold! Tomorrow the tidewater come back in the bayous after the wind."

"Water wouldn't do us any good without a boat. Even a cowhand who's still got dust in his ears from regular cow country'd know that. But cold—hell, this isn't cold. Not much anyhow."

"Man, she cold as ever I see! Well, mebbe we sleep little, eh?"

"Yes, until the water seeps up around these grass roots. A man has to keep the stuff under him."

He rumbled to silence for Larue didn't answer. Marvin himself dozed off even with the chilling water about his knees. The cane slatted harshly above him but finally he actually did sleep. Longer than he realized, for the next thing he knew was a mighty silence. A rift of pink over the grassy sea; dawn, windless, clear and cold. Marvin stuck his hand against the sword-like cane blades and they were stiff. He got to his feet and the sunken grass hummocks held him. Frozen. He put a foot on the mud pool and it quivered, depressed like a pie cover, but held him. He smote his hands together to warm them and yelled:

"Hey, Frenchy! Your damned floating prairie is paralyzed. Yeh, it's cold. I'll admit it, Larue. Cup o' coffee would go right. Get up!"

Larue stirred slowly. He shivered and broke an elbow out of the stiff wind. Then he got up and stared about. "Name o' Names! Never I see anything like this. Ice, eh!"

"Terrible! Maybe an inch in some spots. Burkett's cows now, it's a tough cruise for them old canners. If that outfit was frozen in a while maybe we could pull something, but they can break out—it's us frozen in. But the tide'll be back, won't it, and the sun'll fix your ice in an hour. Wonder what Kilgore'll figure next?"

COWS were on Marvin's mind as he looked across the billowed frosty sawgrass at the scow and towing launch. Nothing stirred; the cattle were dumb with misery, and raiders not yet about. He turned to Larue who was cautiously stepping on the grass hummocks along the lake edge. Marvin was impatient, hungry and chilled.

"Love o' Pete, quit starin' at that ice! You drove me nuts talkin' about it, Frenchy. Big freeze, hey? Take a jump on it!"

"So I think," the Cajun muttered. "A man walk on ice—so I have heard. Where you come from, eh?"

"Yeah, but what about it? Burkett's cows—" He stopped, for Diebold had come up from the cabin.

Larue crouched and motioned to Marvin. "Down low! Don't let him see you! This ice—along the edge of the grass we crawl. To the oak *cheniere* around the mud where is my old camp. There is a canoe there. This ice he melt we paddle out south to Bayou Frenet, to Armand's store. Twelve miles."

Marvin was on his knees but he eyed the native. "You got something! Get me a telephone and I break this rustlin' job up, even if the last cow's dead! Get Kilgore—"

"Come on," whispered Larue. "I try first. Kilgore is out now. They are trying to see us across the swamp. He has a gun."

Marvin crawled. "Lead off. I'm a hundred and eighty, and you, maybe one-ten. It's your kind of ice, man, try it."

He followed Larue's heels between the cane clumps. His knees began to break through after twenty yards in the open spots, and slowly he felt warmth to his neck. The sun was clearing the distant line of cypress. Frost was melting on the sword-blade grass which cut a man's hands. But he followed clumsily. They had to crawl around a twenty-foot mud pool and it crinkled darkly.

Marvin thought of something. That rising sun! Then he heard a yell.

Kilgore shoved his rifle up. "You guys get back here!"

Diebold shouted, "We'll get 'em! If they can travel 'that grass we can. I aimed to leave 'em trapped here for a week. Stop 'em!"

He swung off the boat, Means following. Kilgore flinched a moment; he'd heard too much of these evil swamps that smiled up in the sun like open prairie—but he followed. Larue crawled low. Marvin's knees broke the crust. He stopped.

"Big grass ahead," Larue pleaded. "Little shell ridge I used to trap along—"

Kilgore had fired. The bullet crashed the cane above them.

"He means it," muttered Marvin. "Can't let us get away. Boy, I'll be bogged in ten yards. Stuff's crackin' up under me."

"No stop now or you dead man! To your right it is better."

Kilgore had struck across toward them apart from the others. Diebold yelled warnings at him, but the cattle man stopped and fired again. That slug was low, close. Marvin lunged at Larue's heels. He was wet but he felt hot, sweating. Larue stopped once and looked back anxiously. "Old devil sun —he work fast, don't he?"

"Yore beautiful ice won't make a good drink in a minute."

Kilgore had stumbled and sunk; then he saw Marvin and fought on. Diebold and Means had stopped. "You get back, Kilgore—or else go on. That Cajun trapper knows the best goin'—foller him."

"I'm stoppin' 'em. Stoppin' 'em with lead. I'm leavin' Marvin where he don't figure any more in my business." Kilgore lifted the gun and mud chunks fell from the muzzle. He stooped to wipe the metal.

Then he looked about. Marvin stood up uncertainly and eyed Kilgore steadily. The frosty grass sea was glittering, melting water slipping from the saw-like blades. Only the tiny oak clump ahead broke the silent, lifeless expanse. Death-trap for all who stayed.

Kilgore was cursing his gun, and Marvin dropped back to hands and knees. "Anyhow, he can't shoot. What's the matter, Frenchy?"

THE swamper was frightened at last. He straightened up once, saw the crinkling mud lake to his right and dropped back. But he crawled close to the edge as he muttered:

"Quick after me. Ahead there will be a little shell spit running out from the *cheniere*. The only thing that will hold us. Not so far; we must make it."

Marvin wormed along the crushed trail. He heard Diebold's warnings to the others to turn back before they struck the worst. They were in a panic. Means had turned back but Kilgore was floundering off to Marvin's left.

"Lost his head," said Marvin. "Saw you ahead and is trying to cut across to us. He thinks you'd know the best going."

Larue said nothing. He got yards ahead of Marvin and found the first muddy shells of an ancient shore line. Soon he could put a knee on them and he raised himself up slowly. Marvin was crawling on but looking to one side. Through the screening cane he could see Kilgore, still hanging on to his rifle which he had raised above his head with both hands, and trying to drag his legs along. Then he fell. The gun came down under his chest and hung across the cane roots, held him up for an appreciable time.

Marvin got to the first shells and stood up. The stuff was beginning to hold under his feet. Larue had reached to where it was solid enough to stop and he turned to urge his partner.

"Make it to me. Only five yards; then you can sit down, rest. From there to the *cheniere* it is easy. My old camp there, eh? Mebbe we eat and find the canoe to go out south when the tide comes back in the bayous tonight! That was close to a bad death, my friend. No man ever crossed this bit of the floating swamp before."

Marvin stood watching Burkett's cattle scow two hundred yards away. Diebold and Means had made their way back to it, yelling wildly.

But Kilgore had dragged himself to a billow of brown grass that held for a moment. He was closer to the lake edge where Larue and Marvin were crouched than he was to the launch. So he kept on floundering, fell again and crawled slowly to his feet. He wiped mud from his rifle and tried to aim it. Marvin stood up.

"Say, you're clean loco, feller. Just look around you once. Put that gun away and watch your step! Hell with shootin' now!"

"He crazy," muttered Larue. "Look in his eyes. Don't see you!" He clutched Marvin's arm. "He is trapped. Old devil sun got him. You come back where it's safe. That man's gone sure."

"Twenty yards, and no bottom—" Marvin looked closely. Kilgore fumbled with the gun, and his words made no sense. Fear had him; the dread of the swamplands that had driven him to brooding at Burkett's place surrounded by the gaping morasses.

"Hell of a spot for a rider," Marvin growled. "I've roped and dragged calves from Yellow Lodge quicksands, but nothin' like this. Roped? Say now, that's something! Kilgore!"

Kilgore stared at him in cunning silence, then yelled:

"You ain't goin' out o' here alive. You ain't squealin' on me. Ought to of got rid

o' you last night, but Diebold said you was trapped. Said you couldn't get rescued for days; said only a plane could spot you in here. Said—" His voice died away and he wiped mud from his gun sights. Then from the breech, slowly.

Marvin took a step toward him. Larue grabbed his arm.

"You crazy, too! A step off this shell and you sink now! The ice, he goes. Water moving again. Only one way out for us."

"This guy is no good," growled Marvin, "but I'm not lettin' an old cowhand finish like this. It ain't his country no more than it's mine. Kilgore!" He raised his voice. "Don't move. Stick up your arms, Kilgore. Drop that gun! It's sinkin' you."

KILGORE rolled his head drunkenly. Then snarled and took a step from the sinking grass hummocks. He lunged ahead with the gun and fell. Marvin moved his clogged feet toward him. He had loosed his rope slowly and was measuring distance and the thin spearheads where the cane stood. There was a broken spot where Kilgore was fighting the swamp, and he tried to raise the gun. No use talking to him now. He'd lost his wits too much to listen or snarl back.

"Just a chance," Marvin grunted. "Let go me, Frenchy. Out the way o' this rope, back and down." His feet were going deeper as he whirled the loop. High and wide above the cane into the mud pool. Marvin couldn't see more. He tried to stumble back and fell. Larue was down, under his shoulders, dragging at his arms.

The Cajun sat back on the thin shell surface and held Marvin over him. "Roll on your side! Twist your legs. Get hands to the shells. All cowmen crazy, I think! What good you do?"

"I got something on this rope. Get back on solid stuff and drag. I've roped bogged bull calves out o' Yellow Lodge Creek but nothin' like this."

He twisted about and got halfway up to see the mud pool beyond the cane. The rope tightened on something. Marvin turned, his knees to the shells. Larue hauled at him.

"Give a hand, Frenchy. If I've got him around the neck it'll just be a case o' hangin' a rustler before his time. Nothin' we can do about it, but I got to get a rope back. First job o' ropin' I done since I came down here. It ain't cowman's country I keep tellin' you. Don't tell me it's cold either."

"Man, I sweat now!" Larue was on his feet, hauling. Marvin could see Kilgore's head, face down in muddy water. Choking hard.

"Looks like we're sure stretchin' his neck. No, he hung on to his damn gun and I got him over it and both arms. Well, a guy may as well drown as hang. Gimme a drag, Larue."

"Man, never did I see a rope throw for a cow in the swamps!"

"No, and you never will again. Not by me. Well, this critter is comin' along. Out cold, but he's ridin' the rope. Shove back."

Kilgore came out like a shining statue from the mud, through the broken cane and to the shells. But they kept on dragging him, with his death clutch on his gun until they reached the broad shell shore of the oak islet. Then Marvin stood up and yelled. Diebold and Means had been watching from the launch. Suddenly they turned below. Marvin heard a weak bawl from one of Burkett's cows.

"They're castin' the lines off," said Larue. "They go now!"

"Now and fast. I bet the law finds 'em later. First we got to get out o' here, telephone to Comeau's and get a tow on that load o' Burkett's beef. I told the old man I'd get 'em to market—some of 'em. I didn't guarantee how much live weight. Hey, Kilgore!"

Kilgore moved his blue lips. Marvin got his rope off him. Larue took the mud-gummed rifle and started through the wet plumes of Spanish moss on the little oaks to find his pirogue. It was ten minutes before Marvin heard him yell exultantly. By then the black launch had backed away and pounded north. Burkett's beef was adrift again. Marvin shoved Kilgore with his boot.

"Can you hear me, feller? You used to horse me when I was a kid about my ridin' and ropin', didn't you? But I grew up. I guess we're even, Kilgore. First you go to the jailhouse, and then you better not go back to Yellow Lodge. Wouldn't sound nice around a bunkhouse how I roped you like a bogged calf out a swamp mud hole,

and you too scared to use a gun right. Snap out of it."

LARUE was back before Kilgore could sit up and stare about him.

"My old pirogue she leak bad but she carry two. What we do with this man, eh?"

"He can't get off this place anywhere without a boat?"

"Not possible. Like a jailhouse. Tonight, mebbe, the deputies come in from Bayou Frenet and take him out. Come, you and me—by noon we at the store. The tide is comin' back over the mud."

Marvin could see it. Water shining here and there in the vast grassy sea. Blackbirds singing in the little oaks. White egrets over the tidal sloughs, the black mud pools crinkling slowly. Beautiful morning. Wonderful, giant grass for impassable miles.

"A cow back in the dry range country'd see that and think she's gone to cow heaven," said Marvin. "Scares you, Kilgore? It sure gives me a queer feelin'. No place for a cowhand."

Kilgore sat up, his face twitching. But his eyes were clearing and he snarled under his breath. Larue started back under the oaks.

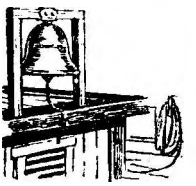
"Come on, my friend. Time, she waste. You hungry, mebbe?"

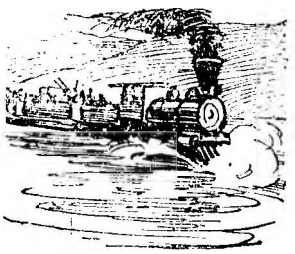
"Come to think of it, yes. But so's Burkett's cows. I bet that spread is losin' hundreds weight every hour. I bet them old canners be so thin their bones'll saw through tin.

Burkett'll laugh. He had his fun tryin' it. Hey, Kilgore! You look mean again so I guess you're recovered. I'm leavin' you for a time. Maybe, time the law gets in here you'll be skinnier than Burkett's cows. But you'll get a chance to feed up in jail and them poor dogies won't. Watch your step, feller, till the Law comes for you."

TIMBER-R-R!

THIS is the epic story of Cap Laird, pioneer, one of the truly rugged individualists who went ahead of civilization to labor with hand and brain, shaving the forests, branding the cattle and mining mountains. Whose creed was "God hates a quitter" and who breathed the very spirit of the American West. . . . . *as told by—*





Basil Gordon Rudd

SHORT STORIES April 10th

THROUGH endless tropic nights in the Army Con Steager dreamed of home. And here it was—he was home. But it was also murder . . . . . *A novelette,*

"The Night Con Steager Died"

by DAY KEENE

Before the Battle, Come the Men Who Prepare the Jungle to Fight

BEFORE THE MONSOON

By

EDWARD DALY

Author of "Package from Aleppo," etc.

OVER the clearing in the thick-matted jungle, the Liberator troop-carrier swooped and sang. In the middle of the clearing, fifty yards back from the silver thread of water that spun through the deep greenery, a derelict hovel stood in a disorder of tree-stumps.

The plane's gunners fixed their sights on the building and the pilots' eyes never left it, watching for the tell-tale puff-balls of Japanese anti-aircraft—watching for anything.

Inside the long bare cabin, Lieutenant Dale Fry sat with his hands clasped about his long legs, his fixed gaze upon Captain Desmond Lorre who was up front, crowding in on the pilots. About him, flanking either side of the cabin, the twenty Sikh soldiers, heavily bearded, laden like Christmas mail-carriers, humped in alert, level-eyed silence. An Indian officer, Subadar Guttram Singh, went among them, checking weapons, parachutes. Fry admired his calm professionalism.

He could feel the tension tighten in the men around him as Lorre turned, elbowing back through the fuselage, smiling. The sepoys eyed him with something akin to worship. His voice boomed pleasantly above

the roar of the motors. "Not a soul about, lads. I go first—Lieutenant Fry last."

Nodding, Fry got up, conscious of the plane vaulting for altitude, the side door opening. Aft of the door in the whipping slipstream he exchanged grins with Lorre before the latter dropped away. The sepoys followed, at precise two-second intervals. As the plane circled he caught rare brief glances of spreading canopies brilliant white against the Burmese teak-forest.

"Like clockwork," he muttered happily. Then he was out himself, going over and over, crazily. The billowing silk peeled out, caught the air reassuringly. It jerked him upright, allaying his inevitable small panic, swung him as he clutched for the shroud-lines, gentling him down till his feet rasped and he fell forward loosely.

The silk collapsed in the dead air. Gathering it, his eyes sought the fringing trees where the sepoys crowded.

The elation of accomplishment fled when a machine-gun thundered in the leaden silence. He dived prone, clawing into the hot hard earth. His mind worked swiftly. That had been a tommy-gun. A sepoy, likely. Grenade in hand, he raised his head, cautiously.

From the deep shade, Guttram Singh was beckoning, frantically, with a full sweep of the arm. Fry shed his harness, ran.

"What's happened, Guttram? Oh, my God!" He followed Guttram's stricken eyes to the still, lifeless figure of Captain Lorre propped against a stump. A deep crimson rosette spread from the bullet-wound beneath the rainbow of ribbons on the captain's tunic.

Guttram said with a helpless shrug, "He was dead when we got to him." The Indian officer stared about him numbly. "We haven't found anybody, but the men thought they saw something just now."

Fry cautioned, "Be careful. There might be a trap." He spoke urgently, the possibility of immediate danger holding off the paralysis invading his mind. He stared down at the man who had been his friend and the heart-beat of this mission.

Guttram's orders sang out, bringing order to the tumult and the confusion of the hunt. The drone of the Liberator dwindled in the northern distance. The sepoys drifted back, sullen at their failure to find the assassin. They crowded round him, hand-picked Indian veterans, trained in the tradition of white leadership, utterly dependent on it. Subtly, unconsciously, they looked to him for guidance, mutely offering their disciplined dependence.

He felt his resolution surge and harden. He said, "Post sentries, Guttram. Everyone, everything, under cover in case the Japs send a plane over."

They enjoy soldiering, he thought, watching the alacrity of their obedience. Other thoughts stormed through his mind: the whereabouts and identity of the killer, the mission which even Lorre had thought suicidal.

THE red ink line on the aerial photographic map marked the progress of the Japanese field battery through the jungle. It pointed like an arrow to the allied base being built in the Assam foothills one hundred miles to the north.

"Destroy that battery," the orders said. He stared at the map spread across the tree stump. It was a very good map, carefully annotated, points of Japanese strength, allied counter-moves, studded it like a rash.

"Halt—who goes there?" The cry rang sharp in the oppressive silence followed by the clip of a bolt action. Fry jerked to his feet, staring at the white man stumbling out of the high back-drop of the forest, too exhausted to resent the sentry prodding him forward with a bayonet.

Fry snapped, "All right, sentry. Back to your post."

The man's face, white and dazed behind a heavy beard, twitched thankfully. His ragged sweat-laden clothes slung damply to his body. His hands were in continuous movement, kneading together. He threw rapid backward glances whence he had come.

Fry said assuringly, "You're all right." Then, quickly, "Think you're being followed?"

The stranger shuddered. "Got away two weeks ago," he whispered, "after six months. Being followed—? I dunno." With an effort, he composed himself, allowing Fry to lead him to the shade. He looked at the curious, silent sepoys in alarm, fearful of the new circumstances in which he found himself.

He said, "Who are you?"

"Paratroops," Fry answered. "Guttram, bring some brandy and a can of ration."

The stranger wolfed the Maconochie ration without dignity. Fry attended him solicitously, elated over his own good fortune, for here was news straight from the horse's mouth, worth a dozen Burmese gudes.

The stranger began to talk, talking as thirsty men drink, insatiably, recalling his adventure. His name Was Roger Pryor. He had been in the teak business. "I worked this very clearing," he declared reminiscently, "with elephants. These clearings border every stream, frequently. Very handy for the Japs—"

"That cuts both ways," Fry declared grimly. "We can use them too, when we start—"

Pryor said curiously, "Just what are you fellows up to?"

"See that red line on the map? That's a Jap battery being dragged north through the jungle. They have five days to beat the monsoon and they're hitting for our base here. The way we figure it, if they get the guns through before the rains come, they might be able to supply them with ammunition, rain or no rain."

Pryor nodded. "So you got to knock it out?"

"Or delay it. The monsoon'll hold them when it breaks."

Pryor nodded doubtfully. "They're tough customers." He studied the map intently. "You have American as well as Indian and British troops at the base?"

"Slews of them," Fry declared. "That accounts for me. This map," Fry went on, "is a fine thing, but we have to rely on guides and reconnaissance a great deal because an army could hide under those trees. For which reason, he said simply, "I look upon you as a gift from Providence—"

The stranger laughed quickly, "I can't tell you much," he said grimly. "I saw no battery. Remember I was dodging Japs—not counting 'em." Seeing the disappointment in Fry's face, he went on, "Let me try and give you a chronological record of what I did see and what I know."

Lo Tan, the Burmese guide, slipped into the clearing in tricky light of the evening, creeping in, unchallenged, till the heavy hand of Guttram Singh fell on his emaciated neck.

Fry stared at the grinning, tattered apparition. The Burman was skeleton thin, his warm brown eyes steady, fearless and smiling.

Guttram said, "It's the guide we've been waiting for," adding in reluctant admiration, "He got by the pickets without being challenged."

The Burman made his report. He had run thirty miles, his English was not good but he *had* seen the battery and Fry warmed to him like a brother. He got the map out, added another inch to the ominous red line. There was another clearing ten miles downstream. An advance party of Japs was already in position and the battery was ten miles below that.

Pryor whispered, "Can you trust him?"

Fry said, "I think so. He certainly does not look as if he's in this thing for his health."

A VAGRANT breeze brushed through the clearing in the chill hour before dawn. Fry sat up stiffly, absorbing the dark mass of the girdling forest, the minute sounds of sleeping and guarding men. Nursing his knees, he planned his course of action. Ambush seemed to offer the best possibilities. Whatever form their attack would take, there seemed little chance of his personal survival. Such a contingency was never publicly discussed but he had to face it in his own mind. "You have to lead these men," Lorre had said. "Funk and they will funk, fight and they will outdo you."

He would hold a council of war with the Burman. Pryor, too, though the latter had been a disappointment. He liked Lo Tan. There was something comforting in the Burman's monstrous thinness. You felt he had suffered from the Japs, that his hatred was absolute and consuming.

Pryor was like every other prisoner Fry had seen. They forgot the degradation of their condition in the tonic knowledge of the impending Allied offensive. Compared to some Fry had seen, Pryor seemed to have been fortunate. He had none of the weals, the meager gauntness of those others.

The American felt himself stiffening, a tiny wave of misgiving sweeping through him. Pryor had no fetter-marks. Other escapees took morbid pride in such legacies.

Stifling his alarm, Fry scrambled to his feet, crossed to where Pryor was sleeping.

He stared numbly at the spot where Pryor should have been. He began calling them, for Pryor, then for Guttram. The Indian officer came running.

"Pryor—where is he?"

Gottram shrugged. "Left camp an hour ago. He's been wandering round all night, talking to the sentries."

Fry flared hotly, "Didn't anyone try to stop him?"

"Why? He said he'd be back—"

"Like hell he'll be back. I've been a sucker, Guttram, falling for a white skin and a phony story. He just came to check on us. He was too damn healthy-looking—"

Guttram started, airing the incredible thought that had come to him. "He probably killed the captain." The Indian's face suffused with cold and deadly rage. "Let me go after him, sahib. I'll get him. I'll beat the soles of his feet to a pulp. I'll—"

"No. I'll go. Rouse the guide and two sepoys who speak English. And get me that map from my valise."

Guttram came back, said tonelessly, "The map has gone."

Fry groaned, his mind reeling. Everything was on that map, the complete story of the allied effort. He stood, nerveless at his own stupidity, recalling with what completeness he had supplemented its information. Stubborn calm enveloped him. One way or another, he had to get that map back.

TWO trails led out of the clearing, running north and south, roughly paralleling the stream but discounting its vagaries. The jungle stifled under the morning sun. Lo Tan made a cast on the southern trail, bending low, examining the ground, suddenly hissing with satisfaction, then beckoning Fry and the sepoys to follow.

The Burman loped confidently, setting a pace strenuous for the solid-built sepoys. The canopy of trees made the sky invisible; it was like running through a long great oven. Weariness of limb, heat-langour, enveloped Fry. Angrily he closed his mind to it. The tirelessness of the Burman, starved, ill-nourished, was an affront to his own hardihood.

Lo Tan began to show nervousness. Fry closed up with him, his sweat-lustrous face hopeful.

"Are we going to catch him?"

The Burman shook his head, jerked his thumb to where the trail made a bend. "Jap sentry," he said.

He led them off the trail, into the flanking undergrowth. The brush, compounded of teak, gum and bamboo was dense but penetrable. Thorns ripped at them. The sepoys showed a surprising aptitude for silent maneuver. The Burman raised a hand, beckoning Fry.

Through the thick foliage, he saw the flat profile, the big mouth under the net-draped cap twitching. Overhead, the uneasiness of the birds had alarmed the sentry. Fry covered him with his rifle, thought longingly of a silencer. Lo Tan shook his head emphatically and then, borne over the hum of countless insects, Fry's alert ears discerned a confused, outlandish jabbering.

They were on the fringe of the Japs' most forward position. The map was gone now, he thought bitterly, but the thought of putting a bullet through Pryor clung to him like an obsession. One of the sepoys nudged him imploringly. Fry nodded.

Through the brush, cat-like, Parbit Singh crawled toward the sentry. Fry watched the small drama taut-nerved. The Sikh's normally impassive face was lit with fierce, blistering detestation. Parbit timed his brief movements to the sentry's suspicious, turning head.

Parbit was no longer visible. Fry took a deep breath and held it, watching a heavy twig lob across the trail, fall rasping through the dry foliage, the sentry turning, alert to the disturbance.

Parbit had fought dacoits and knew his business. His leap was tremendous, overpowering. He clove to the Jap's back, one forearm across the throat. They heard the Jap hiss, saw his neck attenuate, eyes bulge under the savage constriction.

Fry did not pause to examine the lifeless body on the ground. "Hide him," he said, "and we'll go and see what they've got." He did not air the raw indignation he felt toward Pryor. It was his simple duty to assess the enemy, but Pryor was something personal. He might get a shot at Pryor.

Lo Tan led them forward again, at the peak of caution.

THE cleared semi-circle by the sluggish stream was almost identical with the one where they had landed. Fry lay rigid in the foliage, his eyes squinting against the glare. His lithe, spare frame twitched with automatic reflex actions against the insects investigating the exposed parts of his skin. He was aware of them without being bothered by them. His eyes were on the Japs—about fifty of them, he thought. Their pigmy industry had its focal point at the north end of the clearing by the water's-edge.

Fry's eyes shifted, a slow curse oozing from his lips. There was a boat there, a river-tug, screened by a canopy of foliage. He went over it, point by point, marking the small cannon in the bow, the steel armor shielding the wheel-house, the mountainous wood-pile for the boilers on the after-deck.

A throaty chuckle on his near left startled him out of his concentration. He swung his head, slowly, cautiously. He raised his hand, countering the impulse of the sepoys to leap, for not twenty yards away, Pryor and a Japanese huddled in agreeable communion over the stolen map.

The impulse to shatter the party with a volley was exquisite, compelling. The Jap major was a caricature in human ugliness. Yellow teeth grinned approval toward Pryor. They were too far off to charge and a shot would raise a hornet's nest. The map, then, would be forever lost.

Cautiously, they began their withdrawal, working round, inches at a time, edging along the ground with such absorption that they were within a few feet of the Jap major before they saw him again.

Pryor had risen. Fry stared after him regretfully as he made his way to the boat. The major was folding the map, carefully.

Fry reached him in one bound. The Jap whirled, incredulity and terror on his face. Fry hit him, joyously, savagely, swept up the map. Parbit caught the reeling Jap, clamping his knee in his back till the officer was a grotesque, twisted thing.

During the brief, swirling action, Pryor had whirled. His first shot from behind a stump brought a swift hush to the activity by the waterfront. Back in the sanctuary of the undergrowth, Fry threw one last regretful glance at Pryor's hiding place, thoughtfully lobbing a couple of grenades toward it. Japs were creeping Indian-fashion round the periphery of the clearing. There was a deadly certainty about their approach.

Fry said, "Lo Tan, take us the hell out of here."

THE more they thought of capturing the river-boat, the better they liked it. "Of necessity," Fry said, "the battery must pass through the clearing. And if we have the boat—"

Guttram nodded. "It would have to be tonight," he said. "Tomorrow, they must aim to be up here. How many men aboard at night?"

"Lo Tan says four." Fry relaxed, flattening in the grass with something like relief. The sepoys, now committed to definable action, made ready. Fry glanced up at the flaming blue sky, aware that it was quenching itself. Evening was almost upon them and they would have to hurry.

The abandoned trail clung close to the glinting river, a narrow defile, close-encumbered. Swifter progress could have been made on the trail he had used in the morning but he figured the Japs would have it under heavy guard.

The Burman led them through the hot and lifeless silence. The Burman's great virtue was his extraordinary capacity for stealth. Beyond that his courage did not go; Fry remembered his mute terror when they had recovered the map.

Suddenly, Lo Tan raised his hand for caution. Warily, the sweating file of men struggled past a python coiled about a branch jutting over the trail. The Indians grinned their fright away when they had passed its threatening immobility.

The Burman began to evidence hesitation. It was an infallible sign. Fry said, "We're getting near."

The Burman halted, freezing in the attitude of a pointing hound, as though sniffing the presence of his enemies.

His alarm flitted like an impulse through the troop. He said to Fry, pointing through the snarl of green trees. "Sentry—this many

steps." He held up his ten fingers three times."

Fry looked at him blankly. The Burman nodded fiercely, defending his own instinct and inspiration.

Guttram whispered, "Want Parbit to take care of him?"

Fry hesitated. "Better wait," he suggested. "Supposing they send out a relief for him?"

On Fry's instructions the Burman slipped away to check on the battery. The sepoys flopped wearily in the brush, indifferent to the swarming mosquitoes. Fry and Guttram pushed forward laboriously, fighting the heavy cover, guided by dappled glimpses of the water on their left, on slowly till they had the boat under observation.

A small teak-wood deckhouse crowned its weather-beaten deck. Forward a tattered tarpaulin stretched to the fore-peak, roofing the three-inch field piece. Aft the cordwood was piled high. From where they lay, Fry could see the thin plume of smoke spiralling upwards.

Guttram nudged him, whispered, "Maybe they're going to pile the guns aboard her."

"Hardly," Fry said. "Too much risk from our bombers."

Their progress had been swift and it was still not quite dark, though the gloom was deepening swiftly. The Japs brought their fevered activity aboard to a halt with the advent of darkness, piling ashore about a field kitchen.

Lo Tan got back as the moon rose, laying an over-all silver sheen, lighting the profound darkness, glistening on the rivulet of sweat between the Burman's breasts. He stood before Fry, white teeth grinning in weary triumph.

"Two more hours guns come here," he panted. "Men sleep here—then go. All plenty tired."

THE sentry had been disposed of and the total Japanese interest was concentrated at the back edge of the clearing where a confusion of darting lights, shrill voices, marked the arrival of the battery.

Barefoot, Fry flexed the fifteen-foot rope running from the fore-peak to a heavy trunk near the water's-edge. Then he was out, over the dark sheen of the water, climbing underhand, his nerves taut, moving along the coarse rope like a climbing toy on a string.

His head bumped gently and he swung over into the scuppers. He lay there till his breath came even again watching the silhouette of the guard by the gangplank. The guard faced shoreward.

Three sepoys struggled up the rope. The Sikhs were heavy, barrel-chested, less nimble than Fry. They made too much noise. Fry's face contorted itself in a warning. The sentry swung about, his face a pale smear in the lambent light. The four men froze breathless, in the lee of the gun. Fry could see relief flit across the sepoys' faces as the sentry shrugged, turned his back on them again. Aft, from somewhere below, there was the sound of two voices raised in friendly bickering.

Fry nodded to Parbit.

The sepoy crouched across the deck toward the sentry, moving with the chill deliberation of a gigantic spider. Parbit swung and the sentry's rifle clattered to the deck. Tensely, Fry watched the tortured swaying, breathed easier when the sepoy stood erect easing the inert Jap to the deck.

WHEN the rifle clattered, the quarreling below momentarily halted. Now it had broken out again. Fry led the sepoys aft, circled the piled lumber.

Through the open hatch, they saw the three Japs below. Two played and quarreled over a game like checkers by the light of a candle. A third sat aloof with a rice bowl.

Fry in the lead, the four men plummetted through the hatch. The Japs' startled faces, grotesque in the flickering petal of light, jerked upward, their outcries muffled in the tumbling onslaught.

Fry closed with the rice-eater. In the hoarse bedlam, the candle was extinguished. The Jap fought savagely, with jujitsu cunning, Fry repelling, countering with a boxer's instinct and training. A pulverizing blow to the plexus brought the Jap's breath whistling. Fry shifted, swung again, felt rather than saw his adversary crumble.

Someone lit the candle again. The sepoys, lacking Fry's inborn racial squeamishness had used their knives. Parbit glanced

at the rice-eater, said reprovingly, "No good to play boxing, sahib. The knife very good. Plenty quick." He grinned.

For the first time, Fry was conscious of their approval of him. He knew their hard professional objectivity. "Deeds, not oratory," Lorre had said. Now, in the narrow, evil-smelling boiler-room, he sensed their full acceptance of his leadership, a mute unanimity of recognition that was sweet and fortifying.

At his signal, Guttram boldly led the remaining sepoys up the gangplank. The Japs still clung to the far end of the clearing, oblivious of the swift-moving drama by the water's-edge.

The sepoys gathered about Fry in disciplined confidence. He said, "Build a rampart of cordwood along the gunwale. See to it, Guttram. I got to figure this gun out."

The mechanism was simple, uncomplicated, the breech meshing with an oily caressing sigh. Boxes of shells were piled neatly at the base of the mounting. Fry left it reluctantly, crossed to the wheelhouse, noticing with a start that the night was noticeably lighter, that the formerly vague figures of his men now had clarity and definition.

IN THE wheelhouse, he collided with the pale bulk of a swinging hammock. Recoiling, he fumbled for his revolver for there was a man in the hammock.

"Pryor!"

Pryor sat up, peering nearsightedly in the inadequate light. His eyes met those of Fry in mute astonishment. His tongue flicked at his lips, then his hand began to move, cautiously, beneath his body. Without shifting his feet, Fry jerked one end of the hammock from its hook, sending Pryor tumbling to the deck.

Scrambling to his feet, Pryor drove for Fry, fury, incredulous venom distorting his face. Fry met his first wild rush with the controlled savagery of an uppercut. The renegade white man reeled back against the forward bulkhead, snarling. He looked about him frantically, as yet not fully aware of what had happened. Then Fry saw his face begin ot decompose, the bravado and the hatred fade from it like a dying light.

The American saw the reason for the sudden collapse. The two small windows were solidly filled with the unsmiling, pitiless faces of the sepoys. From the doorway, Guttram said softly, "Ask him about the captain."

Pryor whimpered, "Don't let them. I'll tell you anything. His body seemed shrunken, trembling uncontrollably. He said, "You must know what they can do to a man."

Parbit said, "Play some more boxing, sahib. The knife is good but to play box is more fun."

Fry snapped, "Two of you tie him up. We'll save him for a judge. And back to your posts everybody. There'll be fighting enough."

THE first shot from the field piece boomed throatily across the clearing. It was like a signal gun, heralding violence and animation. It was like a shot in the arm to the weary fervor of the Japs working ashore; it touched off the clamor of the sepoys' small-arms, raised an indignant furor among the birds of the jungle.

Closing his mind to all else, Fry concentrated on the battery, six light field pieces, on wheeled mountings, long drag ropes tied to the trunions, ringing the inside of the tall trees.

His first shot was high, clearing the first gun by a full ten feet, crashing back into the mass of the forest.

Lowering his sights, Fry fired again, knew that he had scored a hit when the sepoy helping him load grunted approval. Moving down the precise orderly line, he fired steadily, jolting each gun, sweeping back again. A tattoo of bullets began to beat against the armored shield of the gun.

The first comic surprise of the Japs had now spent itself. From a loose, inept mob, their officers had marshalled them into orderly, planned opposition. One group swarmed over the battery, intent on saving it at all costs.

They pulled, tugged and died as the sepoys decimated them.

Three guns were definitely out of commission, lying twisted, inert. Two more tilted drunkenly; but successive waves of Japs were having some success wheeling

the sixth and last, pointing the slim barrel at the tug.

Smoke, the sweet stench of cordite began to fill the clearing. Fry worked feverishly, under the stress of desperation, exhorting the sepoys above the din, laying a halo of fire about the sixth and final gun.

The gun had a charmed ability for survival. A shell billowed from it, screamed across the boat. Fry wiped the sweat from his eyes, took aim and prayed.

The shot lifted the gun bodily. It fell on its side, one wheel riven, the body of a Jap plastered to it. Guttram scrambled across the deck, hoarse with approval.

Fry exalted, "I'll go over them once more. Stand by to cut loose."

The Japs formed, charged, en masse, racing for the boat, breasting the blistering fire of the sepoys. Still intent on the guns and ammunition train, Fry was obliquely aware of the line wavering, breaking, the Japs retiring pell-mell to the trees, pursued by the relentless fusillades of the sepoys.

There was sudden, uncanny silence. The sepoys had ceased firing for lack of evident targets. Fry felt uneasy. It could not be that the Japs were giving up, for Japs rarely gave up. They had the tenacity of vermin. He wondered what they were up to behind the trees and the haze of smoke.

Nonplussed, Guttram said, "I think we've done all we can."

Fry nodded. "Say a prayer to your gods, Guttram, that I don't ground the boat."

IN THE deckhouse, he struggled with the unfamiliar wheel. The sepoys lacking all mechanical sense, struggled heroically to follow his orders. The tug jerked into motion, away from the green snarl of the bank.

Fry threw quick, apprehensive glances at the mute, tall trees where the Japs were hiding. It was all wrong, somehow, contrary to his experience. Midstream, the heat smote them, flat, blanketing. Fry began to think his luck would hold.

Then a shot rang out. A sepoy staggered drunkenly across the deck, collapsed. The single shot rose to a clamor. Men aboard the boat began to reel and fall as if stricken by some dreadful malady.

Guttram shouted, "They're in the treetops!"

Craning his neck, not daring to let go the wheel, Fry could see the tiny puffs erupting from the roof of the forest. The sepoys were on the verge of panic, returning a loose, ineffectual fire. Another two minutes and the Japs would have them completely obliterated.

"Break off the action! Behind the woodpile everyone."

Dragging the wounded, the sepoys scrambled for cover. Immediately the Japs shifted the weight of their barrage to the deckhouse.

Fry crouched low, ignoring the flying bullets in the desperate urgency of getting away. His body clove to the protection of the shield, outstretched hand maneuvering the wheel.

Guttram screamed, "You're running for the right bank."

The tug was under way, gathering momentum. The necessity for keeping under cover blinded Fry to its progress and direction. He had to rely on Guttram's hoarse directions, spurred on by volley after volley from the Japs.

THE tumult ended as the tug rounded a bend into the tranquility of the upper reaches. Fry stood up in the sudden, profound stillness, grappling with the wheel, looking over his shoulder to Guttram.

The Indian officer reported, "Five dead, five wounded."

Fry nodded. It had been a heavy price. He said, "They'll be surprised to see any of us come back."

"We aren't back yet. The Burman wants us ashore. He'll get us back." The sight of a dense flock of white gull-like birds winging low over the trees roused the Indian out of his weariness. He said, "Monsoon birds. The rains will come tomorrow."

Fry said, "The weather man says we have three more days."

Guttram grinned. "These birds never heard of the weather man." His face clouded. "With five wounded men, we'll be handicapped."

Fry said, "We'll stick to the boat. The river goes our way for some twenty miles. When it turns east, we'll go ashore."

The low hum grew in his consciousness, coming out of the heat and distance. Fry cocked an ear to its rising insistence. A

sudden chill of foreboding swept through him. "Planes," he muttered. He looked round, but the Indian officer was aft with the wounded. His eye caught Pryor lying in the shelter of the deckhouse. The sound of the planes seemed to lift the renegade out of his dull exhaustion. There was a gleam of triumph in his eye.

Guttram came up, his face gray under the brown pigment of his skin. "Maybe they're our planes," he said hopefully.

The two Misubishi bombers swept in as he spoke, skimming the tree-tops, banked over. After one look at the swift-passing triumphant faces of the pilots, Fry rammed the wheel over, hitting the bank where the overhang offered the most of its frail security.

The sound-charged air was vibrant with impending disaster. The bombers were upstream, turning.

The sepoys crowded in the bows, leaping to the shore, easing the wounded down.

The first bomb fell squarely upon the piled deck fuel, jolting the tiny vessel. The second was a near miss in the water. Gunfire pattered the deck like a leaden rainfall. The near miss had catapulted Fry ashore.

Winded, he clung to the support of a tree-trunk. Guttram eyed him closely, grinned when he saw the white officer was unhurt.

"We're all ashore," the Indian said. He crouched, watching the effect of the bombing. "Let them bomb the damn boat."

Fry's mind cleared. He struggled to his feet, took a quick canvass of the prostrate sepoys in the undergrowth. "Where's Pryor?" he demanded.

The Indian officer shrugged. "Still aboard," he said. "No time to take him off." Guttram's regret was almost cheerful.

The destruction of the boat was proceeding with grim, clockwork efficiency. Flames began to lick the stricken hulk. A scream, heartrending in its shrill appeal, rose from it. It jerked Fry out of his apathy and weariness, sending him stumbling toward the boat.

Guttram's great arms enveloped him from behind. Fry struggled futilely against the other's massive strength. He snapped, "I can't leave him there. I have to try and get him off."

The Indian's face was hard and set. "It is no good, sahib," he said gently. "You can do nothing. There is justice in it. Look—"

Under the impact of the last bomb the tug had collapsed like a pack of cards. The core of the debris was a small, roaring inferno. Fry shuddered. Pryor would be exactly in the heart of it.

"He made his own funeral pyre," Guttram said.

IN THE morning the sun did not break through the overcast and a chill damp wind sifted through the small natural amphitheatre where Fry and the Indians huddled, waiting for the Burmese guide.

Lo Tan appeared suddenly, unchallenged, grinning at the chagrined sepoys who had missed his noiseless, wraithlike approach.

"The Japs very angry," the Burman said cheerfully. "Small bands—five, six men—look everywhere for you in the woods. One has a Naga—"

"A Naga head-hunter," Guttram said quickly. "They're good."

The Burman's face was scornful. "Good," he repeated, "but I am better. I take you home."

Fry nodded agreement. There might be further fighting with roving bands of Japs, but he had the assets of his own resolution and the Burman's uncanny ability. At his signal, the small party got into motion, moving slowly, geared to the pace of the wounded.

A great sigh rustled through the forest, prelude to the solid downpour drumming against the tree-tops. The sound of it had a tonic effect on the sepoys. They grew spirited, jaunty, trudging through the gloom of the jungle. Fry recalled the words of General Stilwell:

"The monsoon is worth ten divisions to us."

Logs Are Ammunition, Too!

WAR CHUTE

By CLAY PERRY

Author of "Air Trap," etc.

SAM SMILEY slid down from an ice-sheathed rock ledge into Camp Nine on the Meggissi Range, feeling as if he had come to the end of the world. He had come from afar, from the west coast, in fact, to help his old friend, Henry Harris, pass the ammunition. He had come in a hurry, by plane, making a too brief call at Harris' home on the hill at Fort Frances, just long enough to say hello and good-by to Virginia, who happened to be Henry's daughter. She likewise happened to be Sam's dream of the end of the rainbow. He would be away from her up here for at least five, perhaps six months, practically incommunicado, a hundred miles up the Eagle Rock waterway, where there were no roads, railroads or even good trails. It was hard rock country. Hard going, too. He had chugged out of Fort Frances, across Rainy Lake, up Redgut Bay and the long route, as far as Kaopsikamak Lake in a fine

cedar canoe, with his halfbreed canoe-boy, John Jim Jack. Then the ice stopped him and he had to take to the woods with a tump-line pack and trudge twenty wet, rough miles to camp.

Sam was greeted by a grinning, raw-boned creature who looked a lot like a wild longhorn steer in human form. He stood in the door of a small shack, the camp wanagan, waiting, peering at Sam in an inane if not insane manner from little, bloodshot eyes. His coarse red mustache bristled widely over a snaggle-toothed grin.

Sam Smiley didn't smile. The condition of the camp told a tale that accounted somewhat for the blockade that was worrying Harris, a threatened shortage of logs to make pulp to make gunpowder and shell cases and such munitions of war. The camp stank. Wet jackpine logs of which the miserable shacks were built, a steaming garbage dump and the strong, cheesy stench from ungroomed horses formed a combination odor which wood smoke and tar-paper did little to alleviate. A pack of mangy dogs rushed from under the wanagan and threatened to eat Sam alive. The long-horn spoke in a rush of unpunctuated sentences:

"Howdedo come in outa the damp and set on the stove it won't burn ye the wood's wet and me name is Mister Riley the woods boss and who might ye be up so early in what's supposed to be spring?"

"I'm the new woods boss, Mr. Riley," Sam replied. "I've come up to help get this season's drive down this season instead of next. This drive of logs has got to be down in Redgut Bay by July. Pulp has now got AA-1 priority. And the mills will have to close down if they don't get pulp-wood before another freeze-up."

"Drive down in wan season—it's nivir been done and 'tis a shame ye should have such a bad job put onto ye, but come in and t'row yer duffel on that lower bunk. The roof leaks some but thim blankets on the top bunk pertects the under one. Ye might of waited till we worked the drive to the foot of Kaopsikamak and thin brung up a relief crew of river-rats to untangle the jam we always have in Red Rock Rapids. This crew is crummy and hasn't been out in nine mont's and I ain' been out in thirteen and they's mostly cripples or criminals anyhow."

Sam thought that Mister Riley might be among the latter. He had a mild Mephistolean expression on his rough, ruddy face. He had shifty eyes and a sarcastic tone to his voice. Sam didn't like his looks or his language.

"There'll be no relief crew this year," Sam said bluntly. "There's not a lumberjack left in Fort Frances or across the line in International Falls. We'll have to make water work for us."

RILEY regarded Sam in seeming stunned silence. Actually it was more than that. Riley had confidently expected to remain in charge here, following the forced departure of Hansen, woods boss, who had been nearly killed when an ice-laden tree cracked suddenly and fell on him. Hansen had been dragged out on a sled over the last winter ice. He had been too battered to talk much but Sam had seen him at the hospital and learned that Riley who was acting boss, had been camp clerk and had a contract with the Harris Company to feed the horses and the men. He had been voluntary, lone camp watcher the previous summer, staying on when the crew went down with the drive.

Sam now felt that Riley was a bit on the queer side, perhaps touched with cabin fever from staying in the woods so long at a stretch. He did not suspect that Riley was as dangerous as a time bomb, but the wretched condition of the camp showed that the man had let things go to pot. Tar paper torn off the roofs by wind remained unmended, stables were heaped with frozen manure, slops had been thrown on the ground close to the cook-shanty, a portable saw-rig was unsheltered and rusting, a broken-down 'gator frozen in the ice, its donkey-engine unprotected, and there were other evidences of neglect.

Sam had been seasoned in modern camps on the coast, where there was cleanliness, comfort, machinery in A-1 condition to do the heavy work. Camp Nine was indeed a crummy outfit, fourth rate. Gaunt, shabby horses driven by slow-moving teamsters furnished the only motive-power for snaking logs into the rollways, which had all been done. Some logs were already in the water, or on the sagging ice, waiting the final breakup of Kaopsikamak, belated by a cold snap in mid-April. That 'gator should be

in action, now. And Sam wanted the portable mill working, for a purpose.

Ninety crooked miles it was to the mills at Fort Frances, and the waterway was a succession of lakes with narrows or portages between, not always navigable even in canoes. Several bad bottle-necks for moving logs, and these were not puny pulp-sticks, but full-length logs, jackpine, red pine, balsaam, spruce, tamarack. Ten million feet of timber, or rather pulp-wood, right now as important as lumber.

Sam had made a survey of the worst bottle-necks on his way up. The first and worst was at the foot of the lake and here was where he intended to start speeding things by making water work for him. The logs moved slowly, driven by the wind when it was right, towed in huge booms by the 'gators—huge scows with winches; hauled over the portages by these same amphibious tractors, and rushed through rapids by the force of the current — sometimes to jam badly.

"Sure," prattled Riley mournfully, " 'tis a bad bunch of bums Hansen brung up last summer. The agencies rigged a sort of jail delivery and sent up them birds on parole and I wouldn't trust wan of thim the len'th of me arrum. They's wan specially that'll bear watchin' constant, which would kill a man soon as look at him and so—"

The low, hoarse call of "grub-pile" was a welcome interruption to Riley's dour chatter, but Sam could believe some of it when he sat at the head of the long, greasy table in the cook-shanty and looked down the double row of faces that flanked it. He thought of the Forty Thieves. Red eyes, cold eyes, shifty eyes regarded Sam with a sort of general, sneering hostility which he could feel as sharply as he could smell the stenches of the camp.

"This is the new boss, boys," Riley announced shortly. "Mr. Smiley's come all the way from Longview, Washin'ton, to push this stuff down to the mills in a hurry he says this season . . . pass the beans."

What seemed ample evidence of the surly temper of the men came when a burly jack, rising suddenly from his seat, bumped a cookee, carrying a pot of hot coffee, some of which spilled on the jack's leg. He kicked the slender lad with his heavy boot and sent him sprawling, the coffee spraying on the floor and provisions stacked along the wall. Nobody said or did anything about it, and the kicking bully swaggered to the door.

"Just a minute," called Sam. "I'll be with you, outside."

He strode out. The man turned to face him, with a "What the hell—?" and caught a hard fist in the side of his jaw that knocked him down in the slop-ditch. He got to his hands and knees and glared at Sam like a wolf at bay, reaching down to the top of his felt-lined boot from which projected a knife-handle.

Sam raised a hob-nailed boot in front of the jack's face and he did not draw the knife.

"Get up and clean yourself," Sam commanded. "And tomorrow you take a gang and clean up this camp. Or pull your freight."

"It's Riley's dirt," growled the fellow, rising. "I'm not hikin' no ninety miles through the woods this time o' year, neither."

"Mop up or get out," Sam snapped and turned to re-enter the cook-shanty. He went to his place and spoke quietly, standing.

"I want half a dozen men for camp police, no goldbrickers. I've just appointed a straw boss, that boot-jack who just went out. I want the garbage dump buried, the roofs repaired and I want the mechanic to pick a crew and fix the mill and the 'gator to run. The rest of the crew will start dumping the rollways and making up booms at six o'clock, sharp. We're going on overtime—at time-and-a-half pay and better grub

and more of it, five meals a day. Mr. Riley will see to that. Any softies who don't like this program can go over the hill—tonight. That's all."

As they rose and trooped out nobody said anything save one grizzled, wiry old fellow who came with his hand out, announcing himself as Charley Haight, the mechanic.

"Mr. Smiley," he said, "I worked in the Longview Camps in Washington state, when your dad was boss. I'm an old logger. I like your program a lot. I'll get at the 'gator, first off. It's a sort of a wreck from bein' froze in but I can fix her. She won't have much pull or push to her, though."

"Get her so she'll float, and travel, Charley," Sam responded warmly. "I've got to get the portable mill onto her and take her down to Rocky Rapids at the foot of the lake. I've two good 'gators coming up to help winch the booms across the big lakes, and a tug will meet the drive at the head of Redgut Bay. When we get to Grassy Portage we'll load some pulp on the C. N. Railroad to shoot it to the mills ahead of the booms. They need it that bad. We've got to pass the ammunition, fast."

"You bet we'll do it!" declared Charley eagerly. "I got two boys over there."

Sam went into a huddle with the cook, a fat Canuck who had served what Sam considered a fourth-rate supper. Mister Riley stood by.

"You heard what I said about grub," Sam said. "Break out some of your best and plenty of it. Three squares and two hot lunches is the program, every day save Sunday. Understand?"

"Su', su' t'ing, eef it's all ri' weeth Mr. Riley, 'bout dat grub." He gave Riley a side glance.

"Ye see, there's such a food shortage we can't be expectin' to git any more up here till the ice is gone, anyhow, and I've been havin' to skimp a leetle and—"

"Skip it," snapped Sam, looking down the long room, on each side of which were stacked tons of supplies, bags, barrels, boxes, hams, bacon. Enough for a small army, it was evident. "You've got supplies enough to last another season, it looks to me. Cook, you set some traps for the rats."

The place was evidently alive with the rodents which had gnawed into flour and oatmeal sacks all over the floor.

"M-m-mister S-Smiley," stammered the slender cookee who had been kicked. "I-I'm afeard of-of that big fellow that-that kicked me down. He's a bad one. He-he's always after me. D-did you fire him?"

"No. But I think I've inspired him to lead a better life," grinned Sam. "If he bothers you, let me know. And I want you to clean up this shack, boy. You can have some help if you need it."

BACK at the wanagan Sam got out some maps and spread them on the single deal table, excusing himself from Riley's invitation to a game of cribbage. On the maps he had marked the strategic points where he most needed machinery, and he had starred heavily the rapids at the foot of the lake, known as Red Rock Run. He slid the map across the table over Riley's solitaire game of greasy cards, and tapped the star with a pencil.

"There is where we're going to build a log-chute," he said.

"A chute ye say?" gasped Riley.

"Yes, a plank chute on stilts to carry water—and logs—past the rocks."

"A wood chute a quarter mile long—you nivir can get it builded this summer, to say nothin' of bein' sure of headwater to carry thim. We ain't got no good wood-butchers in this crew and—"

"You're wrong about two things, Mr. Riley," Sam interrupted. "The distance and, probably, about the carpenters. We don't need skilled carpenters for this job. I've built chutes on the coast with ordinary jacks for labor."

"Sure, an' ye c'ud mebbe but—"

He was plunging off into another of his palavers when there came a visitor. It was the big fellow Sam had knocked down. He was holding to his jaw and he mumbled something about it being broken.

Mr. Riley began to "awh" and "oh" and jabber and Sam said:

"Let me see!" and before the grumbling bully could object, he found himself in a chair with Sam examining his slightly swollen lower jaw with deft fingers.

"It's a slight greenbone fracture," he said. "Not broken through. I'll strap it for you. You'll have to eat soft stuff for a few days. You'll have to stay in camp—on the clean-up squad—and of course you'll get compen-

sation for the—accident. This is a sharp knife you carry in your boot."

He had frisked out of the jack's boot-top a long-bladed knife, made from a steel file, and he tossed it, with seeming carelessness, at the wall. There it stuck, its point buried an inch deep, quivering.

"You won't need it around camp," Sam remarked cheerfully.

The jack's eyes bulged as he regarded the knife, so swiftly taken from him and so expertly thrown.

"Now, I'm going to give you a nice shave so the tape won't tangle in your whiskers," Sam went on, and from his own pack he took soap, brush and a razor. There was hot water on the stove. Riley watched with an odd look in his eyes, his mouth open, silent for once.

When the dual operation was over and the lumberjack had gone, with a furtive, backward look at his confiscated knife, Riley burst out:

"Hell! Ye've tamed a timber wolf, and let me tell ye I nivir seen nothin' like it afore. Why, that bohunk was in jail for half killin' a man with that knife or wan like it, but the guy wouldn't show up to testify agin him so he's out on the loose and ye busted his jaw, took his knife away, shaved him and stuck him together and he nivir said a wurrd!"

"What's his name?" inquired Sam casually.

"Nick Petooski, but he's half Canuck and I wouldn't thrust him the len'th of me arrum and belike he'll be startin' a ruckus in the bunkhouse this night."

"He'd be a fool, with that bum jaw—and I don't think he's a fool," Sam retorted. "Now, about this grub situation—"

He went through half an hour of detail with Riley, and Riley squirmed a score of times during the session, evading questions and trumping up objections to the five-meal-day program. Sam began to distrust the man more and more.

SAM was wakened in the middle of the night by stealthy sounds near the foot of his bunk, where he had hung his pack-sack and where the flung knife had remained stuck in the log wall. There was no light save a flicker from the cracked stove. He lay still, but drew the three thick blankets which covered him, tightly up to his neck, grasping the edges, preparing to hurl himself and the woolen shield at an attacker. He suspected Petooski had sneaked in to recover his knife—and might use it.

For a breathless minute he waited, then a rustling of canvas and the tinkle of a buckle told him something that brought him out of his bunk to scratch a match into flame.

Mr. Riley stood stupidly against the wall, his back to the hanging sack. The knife was gone.

"What's this mean, Riley?" Sam demanded, lighting the lamp without taking his eyes from the man. "What are you doing? Where's that knife?"

"Sure, I must 'a' been walkin' in me sleep as I do sometimes. I'm sorry I disturbed ye but the truth is I heerd someone come in the door and got up to see and sure enough the knife is gone and that Petooski musta slipped in and got it whilst I was still asleep on me feet."

Sam was sure the door had not opened but he decided to seem to accept the explanation for the time being. But for the first time he felt a touch of fear of this voluble, shifty character. He waited until Riley went back to his bunk across the room, then he turned the lamp low and left it burning, saying simply:

"I want to get up pretty early. Guess I'll just cat-nap a bit."

He did not even cat-nap, after that. He decided that Riley was either touched with lunacy or else a very dangerous man, obsessed with a desire to sabotage the new program. He was pretty sure his pack-sack was being searched in the dark when he had wakened, but in the morning he said nothing of the incident of the night to Riley. The man seemed willing to drop it, himself.

This was the first of several sly incidents which put Sam on guard, but it was the only one in which he actually caught Riley in the act. Things went wrong with the repairs to the 'gator from the start, puzzling the mechanic as well as Sam. A bilge-plug was found removed one morning after the water had been pumped from the scow shell, and the scow was thwart-deep with water again. An entire day was lost. Riley was always on hand to pour forth wordy regrets and explanations.

SAM slept, now, with his automatic under his pillow, and he suspected it was this gun, in the bottom of his pack, that Riley had been trying to get. There was nothing else he could covet or use to advantage—or to Sam's disadvantage.

Meeting Petooski in the yard, in charge of a gang of men who seemed to be doing a good job of policing up, Sam said to him:

"I suppose you'd like your knife back, Nick?"

Petooski blinked his eyes and gave a shrug.

"Well, sir, boss," he mumbled through his bound-up jaws, "it's funny. I feel better without it. I—I guess you did me a good turn with that sock in the puss and takin' the knife away. Sort of cleared me up with myself. You can keep the knife."

"Thank you, Nick, and you'd better come in tonight and let me look at your jaw again."

He was sure, now, that Riley was the thief in the night, and soon had opportunity to confirm it. He frisked the shanty while Riley was down at the rollways one day, and found Nick's knife hidden inside the cover of Riley's mattress. After supper that night Nick showed up at the shanty office and Sam made a careful examination of the cracked jawbone. It was healing nicely. He ripped off the tape and Nick stood the pain without a murmur, then he asked, his face reddening:

"I was wonderin', would you want to give me another scrape with the razor, boss. It felt so good to have my face clean again and I've no razor of my own. Or I could mebbe borrow yours."

"Well, now, Nick, maybe you could use that knife of yours to shave with," remarked Sam. "It's sharp enough."

He looked up at the wall where it had been, and exclaimed: "Why it's gone!"

Riley seated at the table, at his eternal solitaire, jumped to his feet and pointed angrily at Nick.

"Sure, I told ye he sneaked it out that night and he's tryin' to make out he ain't got it, the dirty louse—aw!"

His final exclamation came as Sam, with a swift motion, plucked the file-knife from his own boot-top and sent it hurtling to the wall, hardly an inch from where it had been stuck before.

"The hand," he said dryly, "is sometimes quicker than the eye, Mr. Riley—but on the other hand, the eye betrays the hand. You must have been sleep-walking again. It's a bad habit. One of these times you'll run into something dangerous, perhaps fatal."

It was a subtle declaration of war—and Sam followed it up, swiftly.

"I'll have to ask you to give up your bunk to Nick, for a while," he said. "I want to make sure his jaw mends well. You can exchange with him."

"Me in the bunkhouse?" demanded Riley, his face going livid, his eyes darting to the knife in the wall, his body tensing, almost crouching toward it.

"Yes," said Sam, standing so that he was between Riley and the knife. "I think you'll sleep better. I know I shall. Good night, Mr. Riley!"

Riley went out, mouthing a sort of gibberish, chiefly profane.

Sam turned to Nick Petooski, who had remained frozen to his bench, his eyes fairly flaming, his fists clenched.

"Why did you carry such a knife, Nick?" Sam asked quietly.

"Because of him, boss," blurted Nick. "Because of Riley. It's him that got me into jail after trying to kill me, down at Fort Frances, when I'd complained of the way the camp was being run. I fit him back and—well, I had to, to save my own life but he had it on me. So I got charged with assault with intent to kill—but then he reneged on the charge and got me out if I'd play in with his game. I had to. I got my head hurt in that fight and ever since, until you knocked me down, boss, it had been—funny. Made me ugly, mean. I ain't that way, natural. Boss, that Riley is as crooked as a root!"

"I've been so suspecting, Nick," Sam responded dryly. "And from now on, you're camp boss and will bunk in here with me. Think you can handle the job?"

"Boss, I'll try—but we got to watch out for Crazy Riley, hard."

"Is that what he's called?"

"Yes. He was in the nut-house, once. It'd be best to get rid of him, boss."

"I see! Well, I'll send him down to Red Rock Rapids on that sluice job, tomorrow."

Sam went swiftly through the camp clerk's books and papers that night and found plenty of evidence of Riley's crookedness. He had been buying supplies, by and large, with a kick-back from the purchases to his own profit. Worse than that, he had skimped the crew on food, so that huge quantities were left over at the end of the cutting season. This was pronounced uncatable, and supposed to be dumped in the lake—but Riley, as an unsupervised camp watchman, sold it to the Indians through a halfbreed middleman. Sam's canoe-boy, John Jim Jack, helped confirm this. He lived on the reservation.

Sam gave Riley his orders next morning and the man took them with surprising calm and seemingly complete satisfaction.

"Sure it'll be a grand experience to be buildin' the chute-way at the Rapids and see how it wurrks as ye plan it," he said, speaking reasonably. "I've come to belave it'll be a surprisin' success."

He rambled on and on. Sam kept his newly roused suspicions to himself. He intended to get down to Red Rock himself within a day or two. He would go down with the remainder of the crew which was left breaking out rollways and making up the last big boom or float of logs to be drifted and shoved across Kaopsikamak. He would leave not one but two men as camp watchers, until he could get to Fort Frances with his report on things in general and Riley in particular. And logs for pulp.

It was four days before Sam could leave camp, and three more before the booms could be driven to the foot of the lake. Fortunately a warm rain came and finished off the broken ice, and Sam found that the promise of two new 'gators had been kept. Also a small bulldozer had been sent up aboard one of the 'gators. With this machinery, the work of constructing a stout

log and earth dam at the head of the rapids had progressed well and already piles of planks were stacked high, and some lengths of the log-chute had been erected.

THE chute was being built in the shape of a wide letter U, supported by crossed legs, made of small logs, in the shape of the letter X. The upper end of this chute was to be fitted into the sluice-way in the dam, the water held back by a rude gate of planks until the chute was finished. Then the gate would be opened and logs pushed through, to be whisked down the chute by the overflow. The drop in levels between the lake and the nearest deep water below was sufficient to furnish a swift, full stream in the chute. There would be leakage, of course, but with plenty of headwater in Kaopsikamak, that would not matter. This was Sam's confident belief, based on careful engineering plans he had drawn himself.

Based on solid rock, the X-legs had to be planted, in places, in the rush of water in the rapids, and men worked knee-deep in the icy stream, shifts being changed every two hours. Temporary shanties were erected of boards and tar-paper with tin stoves roaring inside where the water-rats changed clothes and warmed themselves and ate enormously. They kept their camp clean. Sam's new regime had brought a big change in the attitude of the crew, but Riley remained a complex problem. He proved to be an expert sawyer and was given charge of the busy little mill. One day he would be violently enthusiastic about the chute rig, the next day, dubious and volubly discouraging. When the eight-hundred-foot sluice-way was finished and the first logs ready to be floated in at the head, he gloomily predicted that the chute would not carry them through.

It didn't. Midway of the long runway, where it passed high above a deep, boiling pool on the stout stilts, it sagged suddenly, under the weight of water and timber. Logs began to spill over the sides and drop thunderously into the maelstrom. Sam rushed down to the break and found Riley, standing on the rock ledge above the pool, leaning on a pike-pole, a sneering grin on his face, and making no effort at repairs.

"Do you think this is a picnic?" said Sam,

walking up to him. "Get your men busy here. I've shut off the water above. Those legs were—"

He stopped short as he caught sight of a log-end, a piece off one of the stilts, broken off, but only halfway through. The stilt leg had been *sawed part way through.*

No one but Riley could have pulled such a trick, and it must have been deliberately done. Sam's anger rose and he faced Riley, shouting above the roar of waters.

"Get off this job, you saboteur! Pack your turkey and hike."

He turned to look down at the pool, pointing to the short log, which bobbed about among others in the pool, and Riley suddenly swept the long, heavy pike-pole in a vicious swing, striking Sam in the back and unbalancing him.

He had the presence of mind to grab at the pole handle as he toppled toward the frothing water below and its hook caught in Riley's mackinaw, pulling him over the edge. They both went plunging into the swirling water, ten feet below.

Sam came up, beside a bobbing spruce log, almost barkless from its rough journey. He grasped one end and heaved himself up, straddling it, then got to his feet on the whirling log. He wore calked shoes now, and he was a birler, an expert at running round timber and he stayed up there, watching for Riley to appear. The man came up, gasping, at the side of the spruce and flung his arms over it, struggling to get on. Sam helped him by rolling the log and in a moment the two men faced each other, standing on the same log, as it was moved erratically about the eddies of the deep pool.

Riley was, evidently, an able roller, but he looked frightened and Sam began giving him a lesson. He birled the heavy spruce so that it carried Riley right beneath where a miniature waterfall poured down from the broken chute and gave him a cold shower, which nearly upset him.

"I'm going to give you the water cure, Mr. Riley," Sam shouted. "Watch yourself!"

"I can't swim!" yelped Riley.

"Trot timber, then, and trot hard and fast," Sam advised, and he spun the log swiftly under his mailed feet.

Half the crew had rushed to the rock ledges above the pool and were gaping

at the show of which Sam made a swift performance. Nick Petooski ran down and scrambled to where he could reach out with a pike-pole and clear the pool of other logs, shoving them downstream, leaving the pool clear save for the single spruce.

Sam soon rolled Riley off, but again helped him get back on, only to topple headlong on the other side. For ten minutes or more the strange duel went on, until Riley, after a fourth fall, gave a wild cry, and flung himself toward the rocky ledge. He never would have made it, save that Nick thrust out his pike-pole and hooked his clothing, dragging him ashore.

Sam traveled the log to the same spot and jumped off. "Had enough, Riley?" he demanded of the choking, shaking man.

"Hell, yes, I've had plenty! I'm full of water to me ears and it's runnin' outa me eyes and nose and don't push me in any more for I'll drowned for the love of God. Please don't! I'm half froze a top of it all."

"Come up top and get warm," Sam suggested grimly, and when they reached the level of grass-grown soil, he sailed into Riley with his fists.

The man put up a desperate battle but he finally went down under the attack, blubbering.

It was the end of Riley's sabotage campaign—and he confessed to Sam, as the lumberjacks ringed them, showing in their faces their readiness to maul the cheating clerk, that he had deliberately tried to block the drive so as to enjoy another season's privileges. He made the thin excuse that it had always been the custom to take two seasons to deliver logs and that he was violating no rules.

"No rules except those of wartime necessity," Sam said. "You ought to be turned over for trial under the Defense Act."

"And I second that motion, boss," cried old Charley Haight. "I'm thinkin' of my own two lads, mebbe waitin' for us to pass the ammunition, which this rat has been delayin' with his dirty tricks."

"All right, now, boys, get busy and prop up the chute here with sound timber. Nick, you make a careful inspection of every stilt in the line."

"They ain't no more bad ones I swear it, Mr. Smiley, and I'm goin' down on me

knees and crossin' meself and will give meself up at Fort Frances soon's we get the drive down and take what's a-comin' to me. What with the water-cure and the fist-cure and all I no longer want to live the life of Riley such as it was which was wicked and I see it all now like in a lookin'-glass to be sure."

He looked his professed penitence, all bloody of face and bedraggled and beaten.

"Get back to the mill," Sam said to him, "and see if you can cut your way out of the swamp you've been mucking around in."

Repairs were made in a rush, the water was again turned in, logs slid and rolled and leaped down the wooden raceway and jumped from the lower end into fast but unobstructed current and sailed on.

Charley Haight told Sam that he estimated they had saved a solid month of time with the chute.

"And that means we can get the drive in the clear before mid-October, when she begins to freeze up," he added. "I got that old 'gator haulin' like a forty-mule team, now. I found what was wrong. What was wrong, Mr. Smiley, was Riley, pullin' a pin, every night, so the winch was slippin'."

"Well, I think he's had his pins pulled, now, and won't trouble us further," said Sam, and now he smiled.

The first boom-load of logs reached the railroad at Grassy Portage Bay as a thin film of ice was forming along the shores. Sam was there to supervise the loading and he was on the train when it rumbled into Fort Frances. Virginia met that train and a very warm reception from a bearded woods boss, bringing him the first news he had had in five months.

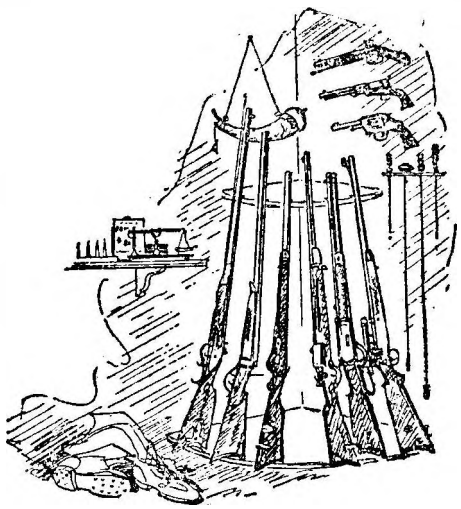
"The big Allied push is on, Sam," she said. "And they're going to need more and more munitions and everything. Dad wants to know if you'll stay on the job over the winter."

"And you?" asked Sam.

"I—I'd love to—to go up with you—to help pass the ammunition, Sam."

"I'll have a nice new log cabin built—for two," he promised. "If you get tired of it, any time, we can get you out on the ice."

"I'll stay!" declared Virginia. "You'll see."



THE SHOOTER'S CORNER

Conducted by
PETE KUHLHOFF

Practice Pays Off in the Game Field

THE two most important shooting positions for the hunter are offhand (for near shots or woods hunting) and sitting which is the position that pays off on the long ones. The prone position of course is good, but it is in most cases out, due to tall grass, etc. Anyway, the average shooter in most cases can shoot as well sitting as he can prone, especially without the use of the sling.

Correct position or form has to be learned in shooting just the same as in golf, tennis, or any other sport. In the offhand position (right-handed shooter) the right elbow should be at least as high as the shoulder, and many fine shots hold it a bit higher. The left hand should be just far enough out on the fore-end to be directly above the left elbow, except when shooting at run-

ning game when it can be a little bit further out to give more leverage in swinging the gun. The gun should be supported by bone structure rather than muscle.

A lot of shooters use the right hand for pulling the trigger only. This in my estimation is a heavy mistake as I think this paw should also hold the rifle back against the shoulder, using the left to support the weight and to swing the gun.

It takes a lot of practice to develop into a good offhand shot, and I want to say right here that I have never seen one of these natural born shots who can hit anything and never "wastes" time at practice.

Every hunter should spend a lot of time practicing offhand position, even if only "dry shooting."

I *have* noticed that the shooter who uses skill of hand in his profession or business such as surgeon, dentist, draftsman, artist, etc., and consequently has good coordination between brain and hand to begin with does seem to develop faster than the person without this training. This is especially noticeable in target shooting.

Even if a hunter is an excellent offhand shot he should always make it a rule to assume a steadier position if time and circumstance permit.

Except for close shots in timber the sitting position is probably the most useful. It is assumed as follows:

First adjust the hasty sling on your arm, sit down at an angle of about 45 degrees away from the target, spread your feet apart, heels on the ground with knees straight up.

Next, place the elbows well over and I mean *over* both knees, not directly on top of the kneecaps as this position would no doubt be less steady than offhand.

Now lean forward, bringing the body and knees close together, so the position will be steady. You might have to draw your legs inward or stretch them outward, until the correct height is attained—and you're ready to shoot. This position is almost as steady as prone, is quick to assume and will clear high grass and weeds.

Perhaps some shooters have never used the hasty sling. It certainly is an aid to steady holding. If you've never tried it—it goes like this:

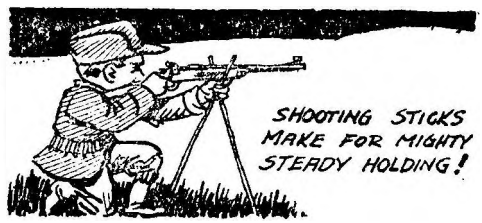
Unhook the bottom section of the sling and hook it below the connecting link.

Grasp the rifle with the right hand. Twist the sling halfway to the left. Extend the left arm between the rifle and sling. Then pass your hand clockwise around the sling, before gripping the rifle at the balance.

If necessary, lengthen or shorten the sling until it is adjusted to the proper length. Otherwise it may not help to steady the rifle and provide you with the feeling of support you want.

I believe I like the jacknife sitting position best, as I can hold it definitely as steady as prone and it puts me higher above the grass—also there is no messing around with the sling. The position? Here 'tis:

Sit down and spread your feet apart, heels on the ground with knees straight up, now draw 'em, the knees and feet, as close to the body as possible to form a secure, compact, steady position. You have to be able



to bring your knees close to the body and sit without being unbalanced—if you're thin you can do it easily.

Wrap your right hand around the small of the stock, with thumb across—and place both arms on top of the knees, with the rifle on the crook of the left arm, and across the left hand over the forearm of the right hand.

Align yourself with your target and shoot.

A good way to check these positions is to close both eyes for a moment, then open them and glance through the sights—if the position is correct the rifle sights will still be on the target.

The kneeling position is not so hot. The line of sight isn't so much higher than that of sitting and it isn't nearly as steady—in fact, some shooters can do no good at all in this position.

Speaking of steady holding, did you ever use the shooting stick? Chances are a hundred to one you haven't. Many of the old buffalo hunters used the sticks—and you

know what they did to that unfortunate animal.

The sticks generally consist of two pieces of good stout hickory about 40 to 45 inches long, pinned together about four or five inches from the top ends. The lower ends are sharpened so they can be pushed into the ground. To use these sticks just open them, plant them in the ground in front of you. Rest the rifle barrel on your fingers placed in the crotch near the top. It's a known fact that the old buffalo hunters could and did kill as many as 200 animals with as many shots.

Yep, you can certainly hold steady, and I might add that these sticks are a great help in woodchuck hunting where extreme shots are taken with super-accurate, flat trajectory rifles.

The point is, the shooter should make all shots count in this day and age when we are so short of both ammunition and meat.

OVERSEAS MAIL

(*Continued from page* 109)

of stew. The meals can't be spoiled because they aren't any too good when we get them.

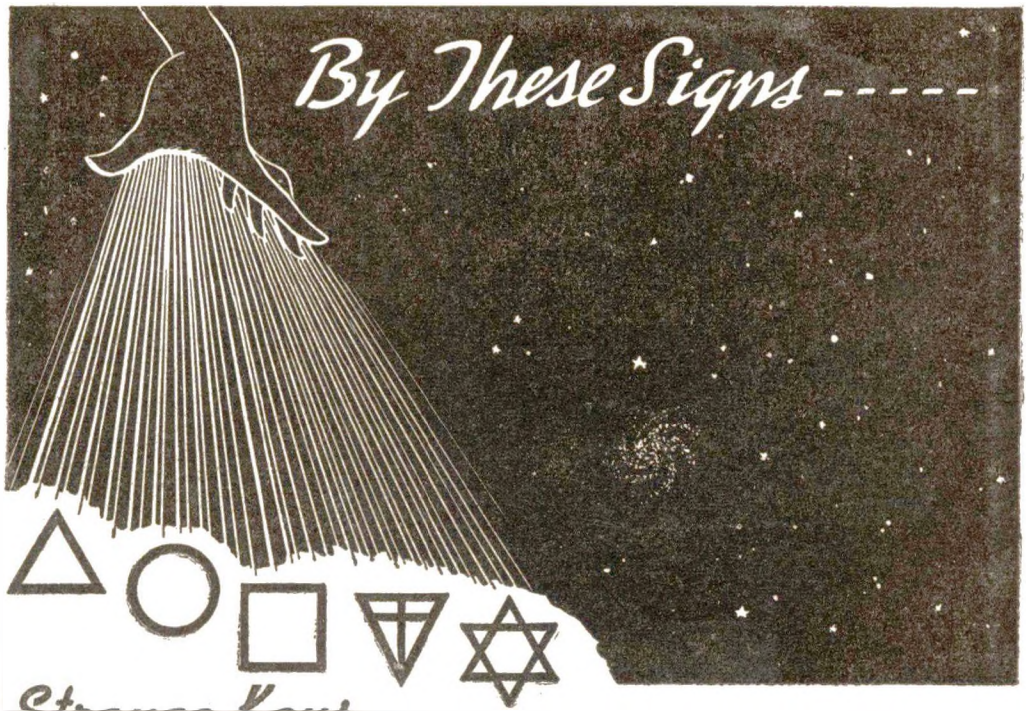
I wonder what it's like to get undressed and go to bed. I haven't had my clothes off for so long I'm beginning to think that they are growing on to my back. (One can't get undressed in a fox-hole, and I've lived in some of the best.) The only time the clothes come off are for that occasional bath, and is that a relief.

Don't get me wrong, Boris, I'm not griping. I owe America all this because there isn't another place like it in the world. All the boys over here with me feel the same. Our main thought is a quick victory so we can get home to the States.

I see my paper is used up, so I will have to close now. Don't forget to keep writing.

BOB.

Buy all the bonds you can—and then buy some more. It's a long, tough war but we'll all win it together.



Strange Keys to the Powers of the Universe

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Have you a desire, *something you wish to accomplish* in life? Put your finger on a dot. In whatever direction you move your finger from the dot, you have made a beginning. Thus a dot is the symbol of *one*—or a beginning. Your desire then is also symbolized by *one*. If you follow the *proper method* or way to accomplish what you want, you have arrived at point *two*. Whenever these two symbols are brought together—the idea and the right way—you produce point *three*—the success of your plan. Success, therefore, is symbolized by the three equal sides of a *triangle*.

In planning your personal affairs—business, domestic, or the welfare of your family—do you use a *Cosmic formula?* Do you determine whether your acts are in accord with Divine truths eternally expressed in symbols? Why does the circle represent completion? Why is it said that a man is on the square? These symbols are used by astronomers and scientists to prove the physical laws of the universe—why don't you apply them to the problems of your everyday world? Learn what symbols, as powers and forces of nature, you can simply and intelligently use in directing the course of your life.

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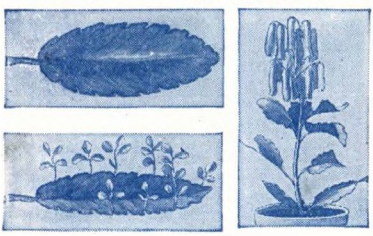

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