"Fort Benton, 1846," CUSHMAN — "New Talent on Halfaday," HENDRYX

Short Stories

October 25th

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"Clown Face" by PAUL ANNIXTER

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Short Stories

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LAMONT BUCHANAN

October 25th, 1946

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COVER—A. R. Tilburne

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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WILLIAM J. DELANEY, *President and Treasurer.* M. DELANEY, *Secretary.*

The Story Tellers' Circle

The Early Fur Trade

THERE were many things about Dan Cushman's "Fort Benton—1846" yarn that intrigued us. For instance, we were interested by the way Cushman uses the word "bourgeois." He speaks of the "bourgeois" of Fort Union, as an example.

"I copied the spelling from one of the early chronicles of the Missouri River fur trade in the Montana Historical Library," amends Dan Cushman, carrying on.

"St. Louis, center of the early fur trade, was a French settlement, hence a person finds lots of French terms in use. For that reason, in the Missouri River fur trade the term bourgeois was used approximately the same as 'factor' by the Hudson's Bay Company. A bourgeois was generally a manager of a trading post.

"'Factor' must have had some use, too, for when I was a reporter on the Great Falls Leader *I was sent to interview Chief Bull of the Piegan Blackfeet. Chief Bull told me that his father was once factor at Fort Benton, and was one of those who came up the Missouri with Alexander Culbertson to establish the fort in 1846.*

"The idea of writing a piece of fiction based on the establishment of Fort Benton was probably born at that time, though I laid it aside, and it was a considerable time before I got to it. I intended, of course, to use the Chief's father as one of my characters, but somehow I never managed to fit him in.

"It is of interest that Chief Bull's grandfather, a Spaniard named Sanduval, was killed by Malcolm Clarke, a man whom I did fit into the story. Relatives of both men now live around the Blackfoot reservation near Glacier Park, Montana, and I guess they're the best of friends. After all, Clarke knocked over old Isadore Sanduval more than a hundred years ago.

"The Chief, incidentally, is quite a lad. He was born in the old adobe fort which Culbertson built to replace the log structure about 1850. He graduated from college at Carlisle where he recalls Jim Thorpe as a kid around grammar school. He is highly intelligent, and possesses a complete knowledge of the original Blackfoot sign language. Recently he made a record of it via film for the Smithsonian Institute—and high time, too, considering how few of the old fellows there are left.

"Despite the ornate headdresses of eagle feathers donned by the Blackfeet at rodeo time, most of the present-day tribesmen would be more adept at explaining the intricacies of removing a V-8 clutch than in maneuvering their fingers through the sign 'Cree ride cayuse damn fast'—a statement which, by the way, would still be literally true."

Dan Cushman.

Pandas and Fireplaces Are Fun

YOU might know, after reading Paul Annixter's "Clown Face" that the author enjoyed writing animal stories. He admits himself, among other "get-acquainted" thoughts.

Reveals Mr. Annixter:

"I began writing in early school days in Fargo, North Dakota, innumerable short, adventurous yarns, and my only readers for years being my teachers and my grandmother. In 1916 I took up a timber claim in northern Minnesota and that was the start of my writing for the markets. That was the year I sold my first story; an animal tale based on my own experience. Though I have written many human-interest stories since, I have always liked stories dealing with animals best. Incidentally, I have published some four hundred and thirty of them since, covering nearly every magazine in the U. S., Canada and England.

"In 1918 I journeyed up into the Peace River country of northern Alberta, when that wonderful region was just opening up and was still a virgin hunting ground. I came back with a wealth of material which I have been drawing on ever since.

"In 1920 I married Jane Levington Comfort, who has since become a novelist, and

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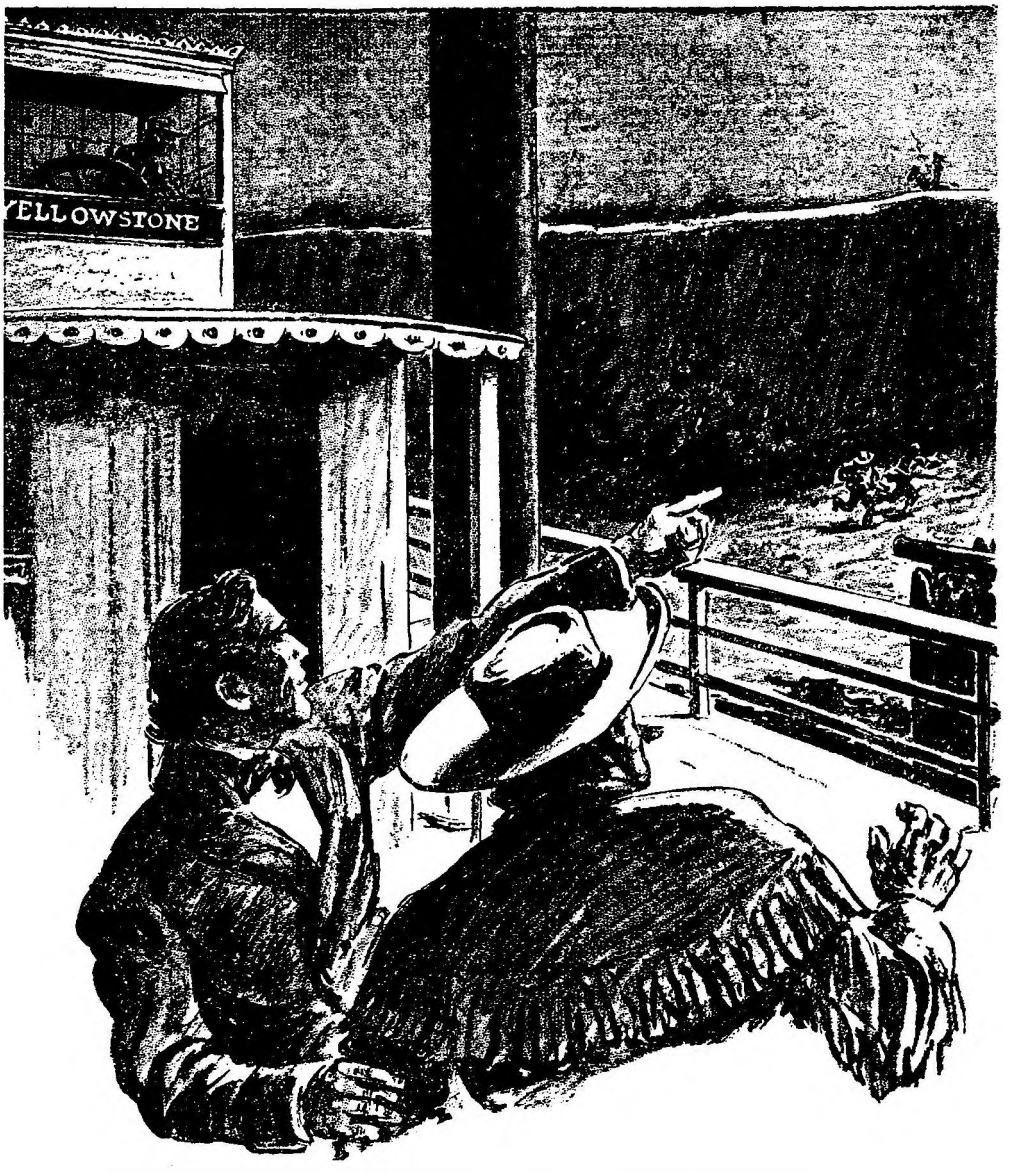


FORT BENTON—1846

By DAN CUSHMAN

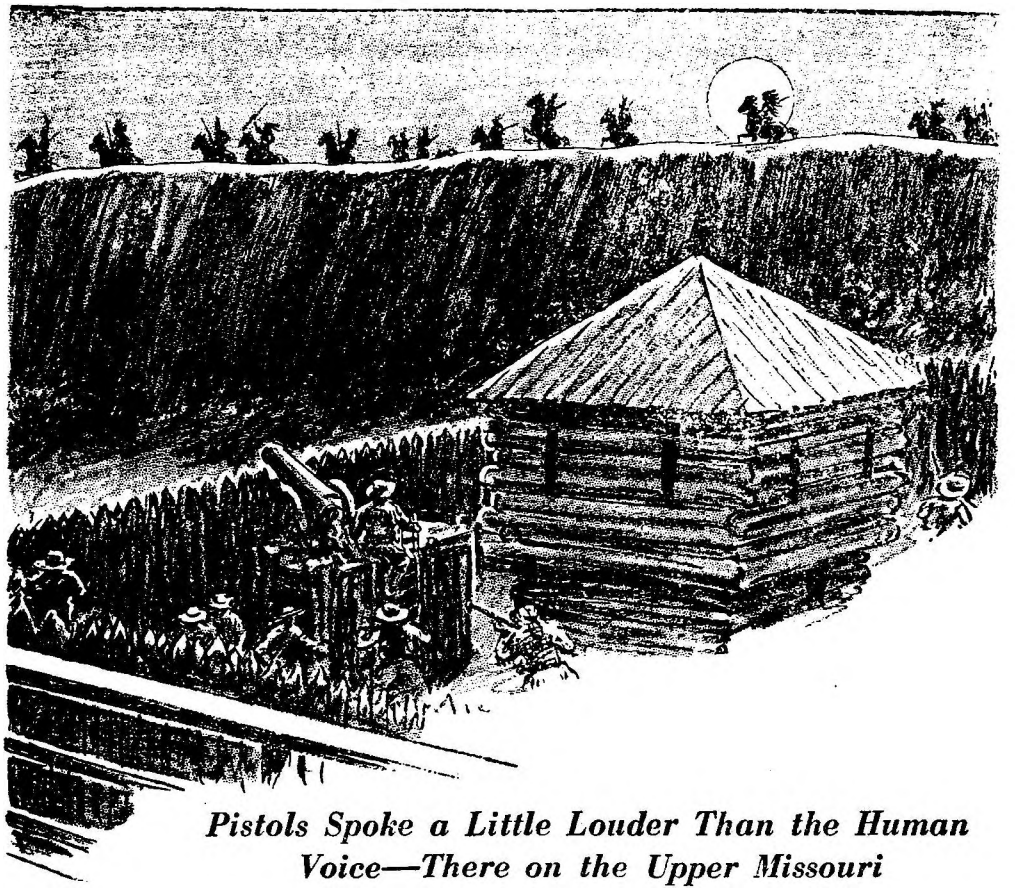
PART I

THE BELLE OF LEAVENWORTH

DOCTOR JEFFERSON CLAGGETT arrived at his customarily early hour, and stood with elbows resting on a sugar hobshead, absorbing the sights and the peculiar smells of the St. Louis waterfront.

No one who saw him standing there would have imagined him to be a doctor of anything, let alone one of the nation's foremost ornithologists. In fact, there weren't many in St. Louis that spring of 1846 who could have told you exactly what an ornithologist was.

The great Audubon himself had warned young Claggett of as much before he ac-



Pistols Spoke a Little Louder Than the Human Voice—There on the Upper Missouri

cepted the invitation of Pierre Chouteau and Company to journey to the wilderness of the upper Missouri aboard the annual steamboat.

"That's a raw-rough river town," Audubon had said, "and you'll find that her citizens are more interested in having their birds stuffed with onion dressing and served from a dripping pan, rather than being stuffed with sawdust under glass."

Audubon had certainly spoken the truth, but right at the moment, standing there, letting the early spring sunshine warm his broad, young shoulders, Dr. Jefferson Claggett cared none whatever.

A slave trundled a bolt of cloth into the hold of the steamboat *Yellowstone,* singing in a sonorous baritone:

"Callie-co, callie-co
Hyar come a bale ob callie-co!"

Somewhere in the depths of the boat, other voices answered in excellent harmony.

It happened that the bolt of cloth actually was calico, though every variety of fabric, from cheap linsey-woolsey to the sheerest silks of Japan had gone aboard while Claggett was standing there. Just what those sheer silks would be used for in the wild, Indian country of the upper Missouri, he could not guess.

But then, there had been such an incredible variety of things taken aboard in the weeks that he had watched—dried apples from New York State, beaver traps from England, iron bars from the infant smelting industry of Pennsylvania, dyed chicken feathers from Bavaria, bed ticking, and fry pans, and sugar of lead, and patent medicine, and vermilion, until only heaven and the clerks of the Chouteau company knew what.

A voice with a thick Scottish burr sounded right behind him. "Weel, m'lad, it taks more'n a wee pinch o' beads and vermilion to trade wi' the savage, noo, dinna ye agree?"

Claggett turned and smiled down on Bruce MacMillan, "partisan" of this partic-

ular expedition, and the bourgeois of Fort Union far up where the domains of Cree, Assiniboine, Sioux and Blackfoot joined.

MacMillan was a short, heavy set man of about forty, his face ruddier, and his spirits higher than usual this morning by reason of his advancement to a one twenty-fourth partnership in the concern of Pierre Chouteau and Company, and the "wee drappie" he had taken by way of celebration at one of the uncounted riverfront tap-houses.

"Aye, mon! It takes a bit o' doin' and a bit o' investment when ye go into the Indian trade. Ye'll find that out yoursel' before ye coom back wi' your stuffed birdies next summer, I'll wager."

Although MacMillan shared the community's low opinion of science, he was glad to have Claggett along, if for no other reason because of the fifty gallons of grain alcohol which the Indian agent had allowed for the pickling of specimens.

MacMillan must have been reminded of the alcohol too, for he stopped and looked down the riverfront toward the dock where the steamboat *Blackfoot* of the newly organized opposition Fur Company was loading, and his jaw went a trifle hard.

"They'll be sneakin' through plenty of the ardent spirit, I'll wager ye! Them, with their liquor company backers! A fine thing the government policy is, m'lad, and I'm hopin' ye'll say a bit aboot it when ye gae back to the great city. Deny whiskey to the only company with the conscience to use it right, while every outlaw trader sneaks it from Canada and the Arkansas by the barrelful! I tell ye, mon, Senator Benton weel jar them loose of their pot-gutted New England complacencies one o' these days!"

MACMILLAN was feeling his whiskey, so he got a trifle more confidential than was his usual habit.

"Ye coom on a braw year, son! Aye, what with the opposition company ready to carve the scalps from all honest men for the Blackfoot trade. See them doon there, mon. See them loadin' their craft, leavin' plenty of room for alcohol to be carried in durin' the dark o' the moon! And James Leacox leadin' them! Aye, Leacox! I dinna care how little else ye may say for him, Leacox knows how to fight!"

With that off his chest, MacMillan strode away to inspect the loading, his fine serge suit and beaver hat given a comic note of incongruity by the beaded moccasins which encased his feet.

This was the first direct word Claggett had had from any of the Chouteau firm regarding their apprehension of the opposition company, but it wasn't news to him. The opposition company had been born of a war within the ranks of the old Chouteau concern itself, and along that St. Louis waterfront in the spring days of 1846, there was scarcely a trapper, a trader, or a painted Sioux Indian who did not express the opinion that "hair would be lifted" before the season's trading was over.

MACMILLAN was gone in the hold for a half-hour, and came out chuckling with satisfaction.

"Aye, we'll leave tomorrow and have the jump of that damned opposition company. Three days at Fort Leavenworth, four at most. Then on to the land o' the wild Blackfeet, m'lad. It'll be best to have that Leacox mon behind us. I dinna trust him."

When Claggett got up the next morning, the *Yellowstone* was already decorated with gaudy bunting, and her decks were a-swarm with engagés and their families, filling the air with farewells. It was a long trip to the Indian country. For some of the men it would mean years of separation. Danger, too, for this year the Chouteau concern planned to establish a post among the hostile Blackfeet, close beneath the rapids of the Great Falls themselves.

A brass band marched to the dock, playing martial music. Steam was making a high sound in the gauge cocks. The St. Louis riverfront, always a scene of disorder, was more crowded than Claggett had ever seen it, for a good share of the city's thousands had turned out to see the yearly departure of the "fur boat."

The whistle gave a warning blast. Visitors stampeded, mixing with late arrivals trying to get aboard. Down the dock, stevedores of the opposition company had paused to watch.

A tall man with an arrogantly handsome face walked from the texas with MacMillan and Pierre Chouteau. He was James Leacox, the opposition leader, paying the customary courtesy call. There seemed to be no hard

feelings as the three paused on the hurricane deck, talking.

Chouteau and Leacox shook hands with MacMillan, and walked shoulder to shoulder down the plank. In a moment there was a squeak of rope blocks as the plank was raised, a sigh of steam as it was relieved by the swing of pistons.

The *Yellowstone* backed into the current, swung upstream, just shaving the mile-long line of steamboats from Orleans, Cincinatti, and Prairie du Chien, leaving them rocking in the waves of her wake.

In a few minutes the Metropolis of the West became a dark area surrounded by a country of prairie and spotty woodlands. Then a bend, and all except the steeples of her churches vanished.

Bruce MacMillan stood with his legs spread like a true seafaring man, looking back at the spot where he had last seen James Leacox. He noticed Claggett standing near him and said, "Ah, it feels good to get the stink o' civilization off a mon's clothes." With that, he turned his back on St. Louis and looked upstream toward the spot where the Mississippi and the Missouri joined. "Twelve days to Fort Leavenworth! Aye, Fort Leavenworth, the home o' brave men and bonnie lassies!"

Without explaining this last remark, he strode back to the texas. A young French clerk named Deschamps who was sharing Claggett's stateroom winked significantly.

"Know who the 'bonnie lassie' is?"

Claggett did not.

"It's Madame Kate!"

The name "Madame Kate" meant nothing to Claggett, but Deschamps had pronounced it with such glowing significance he decided not to admit as much.

"*The* Madame Kate?" he asked.

"The very one! You knew that MacMillan just got back from New Orleans a month or so ago? He bought her a square-cut diamond on a chain. And if you'd look in his cabin you'd see something else—a potted flower!"

Claggett did not like gossip, but he did not care to offend Deschamps, either, so he stood by the rail, watching the wake roll away, frothing and yellowish, listening to Deschamps' eager chatter.

"I'll tell you about that flower—it's a Chinese slipper. Madame Kate's favorite! He's kept it blooming in its pot for two months just so he can pick it and give it to her when he arrives in Fort Leavenworth. That's why he was in such a rush to beat the opposition boat from St. Louis. Jim Leacox has his eye on Madame Kate, too, and Mac wanted to get there first."

Deschamps wandered off, whistling a tune but Claggett kept thinking about Leacox, and MacMillan. That night he asked Deschamps, "Do you think MacMillan and Leacox will have trouble over that woman?"

"There'll be no trouble if Mac knows when he's well off!"

"I have an idea MacMillan can take care of himself."

Deschamps gave him a pitying look. "I guess you don't know much about Leacox, professor. Have you ever seen him use a pistol?"

"No."

"He's the best shot on the entire river, and I'll not except that gambler Akin, either. Brings down pigeons with an ordinary dueling pistol. Mind that—an ordinary dueling pistol!"

Claggett went to bed. He lay there, feeling the vibration of the boat as it struggled with the youthful current of the Missouri, thinking of those last words from Deschamps. He dreaded what fate might bring at Leavenworth.

IN THE morning they took wood from a flat near the settlement of St. Charles, then on up the swift Missouri, past Ramrod Whirlpool, Isle au Bon Homme, and the snag-filled waters beyond Tavern Rock.

The *Yellowstone* repeatedly rubbed her bottom across bars and submerged logs that would have torn the very keelsons from the fleet Mississippi packets, for she had been built to take the abuse of the raging Missouri.

After reaching the pine-covered country of the Gasconade where sawmills cut lumber for rapidly growing St. Louis, the bottom became dangerous for even the stout *Yellowstone*, and a skiff was kept in the lead all morning taking soundings.

MacMillan paced the hurricane deck impatiently watching the procedure, perhaps wishing he had authority to order full steam ahead and damn the caution of Captain Price and the two pilots. Now and then

MacMillan would turn and scan the gray stretch of river astern.

Deschamps came up behind Claggett and nudged him,

"See what love can do to an old man? He's already worrying about Leacox beating him to Leavenworth and Madame Kate."

On the fourth day they paused a few hours at the village of Jefferson City. Beyond, the country became progressively less settled, the gelds small, with woodsmen's shanties built close to the river. On the tenth day Fort Osage was reached, and MacMillan again stamped his impatience while the rudder was repaired, and Fort Leavenworth was not reached until the fourteenth day instead of the expected twelfth.

Fort Leavenworth lacked even St. Louis' small amount of polish. It was a rough town of muddy streets and hell-hole saloons where mountain men, and keelboaters, and bullwhackers of the Santa Fe trade drank a raw variety of home-made whiskey. Somewhere or other Doctor Jefferson Claggett had read of such towns, but up until now he had considered such accounts to be gross exaggerations.

Deschamps walked with him up the assortment of corduroy sidewalks to the most imposing structure outside the military cantonments—a two-story building of rough sawed lumber called the Mexico House.

Most of the Mexico's extensive ground floor was turned over to a combination drinking-gambling room and variety theatre. Even then, at that morning hour, it was getting a fine play. There were merchants and fur buyers in serges and homespuns, soldiers in blue, picturesque Dons of the Spanish trade a-sparkle with silver ornaments, trappers in the buckskin of Indian country, professional gamblers in linen and kersemere, women in fluffy knee-length dresses. At one side, beneath a gilded ceiling, was an unlit stage with the curtain drawn, and along each side were private boxes fronted by Jap-silk screens where substantial men of the outpost could attend without being seen.

Unlike the dives, the Mexico served liquor of the more fastidious tastes—at a price. Sherry wine, which was a nickel in St. Louis, cost a two-shilling piece here.

Although Deschamps had said nothing, Claggett suspected that this was the domain of Madame Kate.

"Is she here?" he asked.

"Kate? This early? Not on your life! She's still having her beauty sleep in her suite upstairs. About three this afternoon her maid will bring her hot brandy and *pain d'épice d'Orleans,* and after that she will receive guests in negligee while she smokes cigaroos. The common herd like you and me will be lucky to get a look at Madame by ten tonight." Deschamps stopped his bantering tone and said seriously, "But make no mistake about it, professor, she's worth waiting for."

"Is she beautiful?"

"Well, maybe not according to the usual standards."

"What do you mean?"

"She's high yellow, you know. A little of that, a little of the French, and a whole lot of God only knows what. I don't know how to describe her. Claggett, you'll just have to see her for yourself."

MACMILLAN came in and walked immediately to a back room. He came out a few minutes later looking peeved.

"See!" chuckled Deschamps. "She won't see him, and he's mad. Probably thinks she's entertaining a guest already."

MacMillan hurled himself into a chair near the wall and ordered a bottle of Kentucky corn whiskey. He was still there at three o'clock when Claggett came back from wandering the muddy streets of the settlement.

MacMillan leaped suddenly when the rumble of a steamboat whistle came through the air.

He seemed to recognize it. He stood, opening and closing his hands, while the other guests of the Mexico crowded to the sidewalk.

The boat was the opposition company's *Blackfoot,* just steaming around the eastern bend of the river, her twin chimneys pouring black pitch smoke.

Claggett watched her swing up to the public docks and make fast. Her plank was run ashore, and the first man down was James Leacox.

Claggett disliked Leacox, partially through instinct, and partly because he was of the opposition, but he admired the man, too. Leacox was in some ways the sort of man Jeff Claggett had dreamed of being himself.

although the two were as far apart in character as gall and ambrosia.

Leacox came through the crowd which had gathered at the dock, pausing here and there to shake somebody's hand. He smiled each time, but a certain abruptness in his manner showed how impatient he was with such small delays.

Leaving the area of plank docks, he climbed the steep rise from the river, his English-weave trousers drawn tight around his powerful legs, a bit of silver and blue riband fluttering from his waistcoat pocket.

Claggett was right in guessing he was headed for the Mexico.

"Hello, Claggett," Leacox said, pausing a moment to shake hands. "You see, we're close in your wake. You'd better reconsider and make our steamboat the base for your scientific pursuits. And if you do, bring your fifty gallons of alcohol with you."

Leacox smiled as he said it, but that did not dull the point of his words. He strode on through the heavy, oaken doors of the Mexico.

Jeff Claggett walked down to the steamboat docks. He was angry with Leacox, but more angry with himself for letting MacMillan talk him into taking fifty gallons instead of the ten which was really necessary. A person would think it was the Chouteau concern which planned to trade whiskey with the Indians rather than the opposition.

Slaves were carrying sacked grain aboard the *Yellowstone*. She would take on a few horses, too, and some Mexican blankets and ornaments of the Santa Fe trade. She would be ready to sail in a couple or three days. He wished she were sailing, now. He wanted to go aboard, but something pulled him back to the Mexico House.

It was twilight, with dozens of candles and whale oil lamps burning. Men were deep around the games of chance, and though the show was not yet started, half the seats in the theatre were filled.

Leacox was not in sight. The table where MacMillan had spent his hours of the afternoon was occupied by strangers. Here and there Claggett saw a familiar face, but no one paid him a glance.

He felt uncomfortably alone. Out of his orbit. The thick smoke of the place, the press of bodies, the fumes of alcohol, combined to produce a stultifying effect.

He hunted a way through the crowd, looking for MacMillan. He rammed against someone. His weight drove the man backward. A pock-marked man in buckskins. Claggett recognized him to be Tonie Faillet, a trapper with the opposition company.

Faillet tripped and went down, slamming the back of his head on the floor. He raised himself up, brushing cigar stubs from his uncut hair. Men were laughing at him. He rose, snarling curses and drawing a Green River knife.

It took Claggett a second to realize that the knife was intended for him. The crowd drew back, leaving him standing there alone. Himself and Faillet. Outside of a few affairs of honor in school, Claggett had never had a fight. And here, in this frontier dive—it was preposterous.

Faillet came in, swinging the knife from the floor, the keen belly of the blade aimed at Claggett's bowels. Someone was trying to pull Claggett backward, but he twisted away. Afterward he had a dull recollection of knocking the knife to one side, but he did not remember swinging his fist. All he could clearly remember was standing there with Faillet down on his side, spitting blood from mashed lips.

"Any more of you opposition men want to play with our man Claggett?" Deschamps asked behind him.

Claggett located young Deschamps, his face glowing from liquor. There were a couple of opposition men there, a trapper and a riverboat man, but neither of them accepted Deschamps' swaggering invitation.

"Let's get out of here," said Claggett.

"Get out? Not on your life! Let those damned opposition men get out. Come on over here."

Deschamps led the way and they found a table at one side of the theatre. After much table-hammering and shouting, Deschamps got one of the slave waiters to bring him a bottle of brandy. Over by the bar, one of the opposition men had revived Faillet whose face looked as if a mule had kicked it.

"What a right hand you have!" chuckled Deschamps gleefully. "Why, it sounded like a sledge hitting a pumpkin."

"Where's MacMillan?" Claggett asked.

"Mac? He'll be in hell before the night's over, likely."

"What do you mean?"

"Why, you saw him. Waited all afternoon for Madame Kate to let him in her boudoir. Then Leacox comes, and—*voila!*" Deschamps kissed his fingers toward the gilded ceiling of the theatre. "The scarlet carpet is rolled out just as though the opposition chieftain was the king of France!"

"She saw Leacox, then?"

"All I know is that he went upstairs with the Madame's black man leading the way, while our unhappy MacMillan sat down here with his whiskey, his Chinese slipper flower, and his breaking heart."

"Where's MacMillan now?"

"Following Leacox to fight it out with him, I suppose."

"You can't let him do that!" Claggett cried.

"*I* can't? What have I to do with it? Have you ever tried to reason with MacMillan? You can't do that while he's sober, nothing about when he's taken a quart of Kentucky corn for his comfort."

Claggett sat back. His head cleared a little, and he got to thinking more reasonably about MacMillan. After all, MacMillan had spent fifteen years along the utmost frontiers of the New World, so he should be able to take care of himself. Certainly he needed no protection from a young doctor of philosophy fresh from an Eastern university.

The candles were lighted in a nearby theatre box. The Jap-silk screen was removed, revealing MacMillan who had just seated himself at the little table. Claggett expected to see someone else there with him, Madame Kate, perhaps, but the other three chairs remained unoccupied. He didn't seem quite so dark with anger as he had that afternoon, and he was no longer carrying the little box with its Chinese slipper flower.

"Can I believe my eyes," asked Deschamps. "Perhaps our bourgeois got in to see Madame Kate after all. And look, there's Leacox by the bar."

Claggett didn't know whether Leacox had come from outside, or down one of the half-circle staircases from the second floor. But there he was, drinking with friends, and being congratulated on the expected success of the fort he intended to establish in the Blackfoot country. Claggett noticed that the silver and blue riband was gone from the breast pocket of Leacox's coat.

An orchestra composed of zither, two violins, and a cello took places near the stage and commenced to play. Men surged to the variety theatre, taking every seat and lining four and five deep along the walls. After ten minutes of overture, the curtains slid back on wire guides, and three women dressed in short, ruffled pantaloons tripped in from different directions to perform the tawdry "Girl from Baltimore." After several encores, a farce play was commenced. Claggett had seen it a couple of years before at one of the New York variety houses, but this was a gaudy version with considerable broad humor and buffoonery to suit the lusty tastes of the frontier.

"Isn't it time for Madame Kate?" he asked.

"Now don't get impatient," answered Deschamps, not turning his head for fear of losing some of the ribald humor.

THE crowd was very dense by now. MacMillan still sat by himself in the box. Leacox and three of his friends were at a table four or five steps away, sharing a bottle of French brandy.

The play was completed while the rough audience raised a choking cloud of dust from the floor by stamping boots and moccasins while roaring approval.

"There's Madame Kate!" cried Deschamps, nudging Claggett with his elbow.

Claggett expected her to come from between the drawn stage curtains, but he saw everyone looking at the stairway on the far side. A woman was slowly descending, swinging her hips, smiling arrogantly.

She was in her early twenties. A short woman, thin-waisted, with the breasts of a young Gypsy. Her skin was a deep brown, like a Spaniard's, and soft as the skin of a peach against the cream color of her low-necked satin dress. Her hair was jet, her eyes large and dark. She had a rather flat nose and broad cheeks, yet, despite such commonplace features, she was beautiful. Her beauty was a hard thing to pin down, but it was there. It was the smoldering beauty of the Caribbean—the subtle blending of Europe, Africa, and the Americas. Technically a slave, she had once been sold on the New Orleans market for the fantastic price of four thousand dollars, and later lost to a river gambler on a turn of

the cards. How she had ended in Fort Leavenworth nobody knew.

Claggett tried to see if she was wearing MacMillan's flower. She wasn't. Instead, pinned to the front of her dress, was the riband of silver and blue which had recently decorated the waistcoat of James Leacox.

"No flower," he said.

"No—but she's wearing the square-cut diamond that Mac gave her," Deschamps answered.

MACMILLAN was half risen from his chair, watching her. Leacox sat back with a half-smile on his straight, handsome lips.

Madame Kate paused a couple of steps from the bottom and signaled to the zither player who commenced twanging his harp-like instrument with slow, melodious rhythm.

"That doesn't sound like the Weeping Willow Tree!" said Deschamps.

It seemed to be common knowledge that she would sing either "The Weeping Willow Tree" for MacMillan, or "The Yeller Gal of Natchez," if she favored Leacox.

"And it doesn't sound like the Yeller Gal, either," Deschamps added.

Madame Kate commenced to sing, her rich contralto rising at times with inflections of purest melody. It was a voice as unusual as her beauty. Lovely, but at the same time corrupt. Claggett couldn't have explained it to himself, let alone to anyone else.

"My dearest dear, the time draws near
When you and I must part
But you little know the pain and woe
Of my poor aching heart . . ."

The song was a favorite of the rough trappers and Santa Fe men who made up the bulk of the audience.

She sang verse and chorus, then she walked on, smiling, weaving her way through the packed theatre until she was close to Leacox's table. MacMillan leaned forward from his box seat, trying to catch her eye. She must have seen him, for scarcely ten feet separated them, but she did not even favor him with a glance.

Fully conscious of the dramatic nature of the moment she made a languid gesture to the zither player. The musician misunderstood and started out on the melody of "The Weeping Willow Tree." Leacox started with an involuntary twitch of muscle, veins standing out on his forehead. Madame Kate gestured again, and the zither stopped abruptly. Then, without waiting for her accompaniment, she started to sing:

"I have a lass in Delaware
And in Mobile by the sea,
A creole in old Orleans town,
A dark-eyed Cherokee"

The words, and the reckless swing of the tune were new to Claggett's ears. It was obviously a song picked up from the river dives of the Mississippi.

"They weep their eyes, and tear their hair
And sigh all helpless-lee,
For the Yeller gal of Natchez
Is the only one fo' me!"

The zither player was twanging his instrument in fine style. One of the fiddlers grabbed up a five-string banjo. MacMillan was standing now, fists doubled. Madame Kate did not glance at him—she hitched herself to the edge of Leacox's table and leaned over so the ruffled shoulder edging of her satin gown brushed his shoulder, and the square-cut diamond, glittering on its chain, almost swung in his face.

"O gamblin' man, O gamblin' man
You wear the ring of gold,
I'd rather have my yeller gal
And shovel in the coal.
You can take me in yo' parlor
And hold me on yo' knee,
But the Yeller gal of Natchez
Is the only one fo' me!"

The song was finished, but Madame Kate sat where she was, smiling into the triumphant face of James Leacox. Men were shouting and stamping, shaking the room so that the whale oil lamps swung on their chains.

Several of the opposition men gathered near the bar commenced shouting Leacox's name. He heard them and acknowledged by showing his strong teeth in a smile. Half rising from his chair he leaned forward and swept Kate towards him. He held her for a moment, looking into her face. Then he

crushed her close and kissed her full on the lips while the room cheered.

She made no resistance. Her full, womanly body seemed resigned, pliable to his wishes. Her dark fingers reached and slowly stroked his curling hair.

Claggett noticed that MacMillan was gone from his box. He looked around without locating him. Perhaps he would acknowledge defeat, and leave the building. Then, the next moment, he located him pushing through the crowd.

Claggett jumped up and started over to intercept him, flinging men from his way. He grabbed MacMillan and turned him around. MacMillan pulled away without even seeming to notice who it was.

"MacMillan, use your head!" Claggett cried, jerking him around again.

"I'll thank ye to mind your own business!" he snarled.

MacMillan shoved on. Deschamps pulled Claggett back. Madame Kate was still in Leacox's arms when MacMillan paused, a step or two away.

"Leacox, tak your hands from that woman!"

It was the first warning Leacox had had that the Scotsman was coming. He relaxed his embrace, and looked up, beyond the soft line of Kate's bare neck and shoulder.

"Tak your hands from that woman, I say!"

Leacox set Madame Kate on her little, slippered feet. She stood, looking at MacMillan contemptuously. MacMillan reached toward her.

"Come wi' me, woman!"

She spat at him, venomously, with feline intensity.

Claggett could not see MacMillan's face, only the broad back of him, as, with a slow movement, he wiped his cheek with the sleeve of his serge waistcoat.

Unexpectedly, MacMillan lunged forward. He seized the diamond that dangled on its chain in the hollow of Kate's breast. He twisted, powerfully, breaking the chain. For a second the diamond was a twinkle of fire, swinging from his clenched fingers, then he stuffed it in his coat pocket.

"Then ye will na tak my gifts, ye yellow snake!"

She screamed, from pain as well as surprise and anger, rubbing her hands to the back and sides of her neck where the chain had bruised her skin. A second later she recovered and would have clawed him with her long, chalky fingernails had not Leacox pulled her back.

"MacMillan—"

"Ha, ye opposition hypocrite! Pretend to be a mon's friend, and—"

Leacox struck him. Not with his fist, but with his open palm. The sound of the blow was like a pistol through the room. MacMillan was knocked sprawling to his side. He sat up, skaking his brow and gray shock of hair.

"You're a coward, MacMillan," said Leacox, his voice cutting through the excited babble of the room.

MacMillan made it to his feet. "I am na' a coward!"

Leacox shrugged. He drew a double-barrelled cap-and-ball pistol from his waist, and clomped it down on the table. He stood, smiling, hands on hips.

"You have a gun, MacMillan?"

"Aye!"

MacMillan drew a similar pistol and stood holding it in the flat of his hand.

Leacox went on, "Then perhaps you would like to take twelve paces with me!"

"Aye!" cried MacMillan.

The crowd tripped over itself making way as Leacox strode toward the door. He did not glance at MacMillan who was close on his heels.

It was dim outside, no starlight, only the glow from windows reflecting on the vitreous mud of the street. It was raw with an April wind blowing down from the land of the Dakotas.

Leacox strode on, sinking almost to the ankles of his horsehide boots with every step. He drew up abruptly in the middle of the street, waiting for MacMillan.

"Ready?" he asked.

"Aye!" shouted MacMillan, placing himself back to back with Leacox.

"Twelve paces, agreed?"

IT WAS a nightmare scene. The darkness, the reddish lights, a tin sign across the way creaking in the wind. Jeff Claggett wanted it to be a dream, but it wasn't. The two men were standing there, pistols in hand.

He saw tall, rawboned Jack Boggs, one of

the factors of the Chouteau company, and second in command to MacMillan.

"Why don't you stop him?" Claggett asked.

"Me?"

"Of course you."

"He's his own boss, I allow!"

Something about Boggs told Claggett that he would be glad if MacMillan were killed.

Madame Kate had come from the door and was standing so close he could detect the odor of her perfume.

Even with those men out there he had to glance at her. Her eyes were bright with a strange fire. He wondered what she would do if MacMillan won. Probably throw Leacox's blue and silver riband in the mud and treat his body as though it were carrion.

"Count!" cried Leacox.

"One!" shouted MacMillan. "Two! Three!"

The men paced away from each other, the successive numbers seeming to be jolted from MacMillan's lungs by the force of his boots.

At the cry of "twelve!" MacMillan spun around, but Leacox merely bent his long body double, aiming parallel with his chest. There was concussion, a red streak of flame.

MacMillan hesitated with his pistol at a forty-five degree angle to the sky. His knees bent as the heavy ball tore through him. He tried to bring his pistol to bear on the shadow form down the street. The second barrel of Leacox's gun streaked flame, smashing MacMillan to his side.

MacMillan lay still, a darker spot in the dark street. His hat had fallen off, and a stray beam of light from one of the saloon windows revealed a lock of hair shaking in the raw, north wind. The man was dead—there was no doubt of that.

Even in the rough settlement of Leavenworth, the sight of such a death shocked the crowd to a sort of muttering hush. Leacox strode toward the door of the Mexico House where Madame Kate awaited him.

Anger rose above Jeff Claggett's horror. He strode over to confront Leacox. They almost collided.

"Leacox, that was premeditated murder! You badgered him into that duel. You wanted to get him out of the way!"

Leacox stopped. The eyes that met Claggett's were as cold as twin pieces of chipped ice. He said in a brittle voice, "Are you carrying a pistol?"

"No!"

"I assume you go unarmed for your own safety."

With that, Leacox strode on to the door where Madame Kate was waiting for him

PART II

UP THE WILD MISSOURI

WHEN Claggett turned, he saw Boggs standing with one moccasin propped against the log front of the Mexico House. He met Claggett's gaze, and suddenly seemed to realize he should do something just for the looks of things. After all, he was leader of the Chouteau expedition now that MacMillan was dead.

"Call a doctor!" bellowed Boggs. 'Damn ye, call a doctor from up at the army cantonment."

The doctor came half an hour later and pronounced MacMillan dead. MacMillan was buried next morning in the cemetery atop the bluffs. There was no mention of anything being done to Leacox. After all, a duel was a duel, and St. Louis was many miles away.

Down at the boat, Boggs began his rule by jangling about small matters with Captain Pierce and the mate. The cargo, he said, was loaded improperly. Although Boggs knew no more about storing cargo than did a Cherokee squaw, nothing would do but a large part of it should be transferred to the deck where it stood at mercy of sun, rain and thief. And then he stopped work altogether, claiming it was necessary to dicker for a hundred sacks of locally grown wheat.

During this time, things were progressing in fine style with the opposition boat which was loading grain and flour—yes, and alcohol, too, if the truth were known, right here beneath the noses of the army authorities.

Claggett waited impatiently, his suspicions of Boggs mounting hourly. He spoke to Captain Pierce, who protested that he was only the steamboat man. Then to Deschamps:

"Is Boggs in with the opposition?"

Deschamps shrugged.

"Does Pierre Chouteau have any way of finding out what's going on here?"

"Not unless some message goes back on the steam packet."

"I think you'd better go back and let him know."

"Listen, Claggett, I don't get wages enough to be worried about things like that. And I don't think you do, either, seeing you're getting nothing at all. Let the big fellows fight it out, I say. If Boggs wants to—"

"You should be ashamed of yourself!"

Deschamps strode away in a huff and stayed to himself most of the day. Claggett saw him dangling his legs from the dock, watching the steamboat *Blackfoot* making preparations to sail. Late in the afternoon he came back and asked with a hangdog expression, "Do you really think I should sneak aboard that packet and go back to St. Louis? After all, it's likely to be called desertion."

Finally, after considerable indecision, Deschamps decided to leave on the packet when it set out early next morning, but word of it got around, and Boggs collared him on the main deck.

"What's this I hear about you fixing to desert?"

Deschamps was afraid of Boggs, and it showed in his eyes. Still, he tried to put up a bold front.

"I'm not deserting!"

"Then why were you over buying passage on that St. Louis packet?"

Deschamps would probably have lied out of it if he could, but he knew there was no use.

"I was going back to St. Louis to tell Chouteau how you were holding the boat here. I was going to tell him you were in with the opposition, just as you are—"

Boggs spun Deschamps around and stopped him with his fist. Deschamps' head snapped back. He reeled away two or three steps and bounded off the rail. A second blow put him on the deck.

Boggs charged forward to stamp him under his heavy boots just as Claggett leaped from the boiler deck.

Boggs spun around. He snarled when he saw who it was.

"You're the troublemaker! Now, get your damned birdcages together and get off the boat. I'll give you just ten minutes."

To show he wasn't joking about the ten minutes, Boggs drew a big, brass watch from his pocket to check the time.

Claggett answered, "Pierre Chouteau invited me on this voyage, and it's not in your power to put me off!"

"If you're still on here ten minutes from now, we'll find out."

CLAGGETT had no intention of leaving the boat. He helped Deschamps to his feet, and half carried him to his bunk.

"You'd better look out for Boggs," Deschamps moaned, sitting up and trying to make his abused jaw function. "He's a killer. You'd better get off the boat."

"I'm going to make this trip!"

When Claggett was through taking care of Deschamps, his ten minutes were up. He expected Boggs to be waiting for him when he walked from the stateroom, but the hurricane deck was deserted. There was a babble of voices coming from below. He descended the stairs and saw Boggs with a dozen rough crew members gathered around him. There were several engagés there, too—docile young Frenchmen taking no part in the powwow.

"There he is now!" said a snaggle-toothed sailor in dungarees.

"Your ten minutes are up!" said Boggs. "Are you leaving?"

"No!"

Boggs spat over the side of the boat and walked forward, smiling a little, stretching out his right hand.

"Shake before you fight, that's the code of the Missouri."

Claggett reached to shake. Like the snap of a spring, Boggs seized the hand and drew him forward. He was off balance as Boggs smashed him with a left to the mouth.

Claggett went down and came to hands and knees, spitting blood. He saw Boggs coming in, swinging his horsehide boots. One of the boots landed. The force of it was broken by Claggett's forearm. The other boot took him in the ribs.

Claggett was still groggy, but he had wits enough to lunge forward and wrap his arms around Boggs' knees. Boggs tried to kick free, but Claggett was strong.

He rose, lifting Boggs high in the air. He carried him three or four stumbling steps, and fell forward. Boggs' head slammed against the deck, stunning him for a second.

He staggered up, hand beneath his buckskin jacket.

"Knife! Knife!" screamed a young French engagé.

It was the second time since arriving in Leavenworth that Claggett had been attacked with a knife. And this time as before, by a man rising, swinging the blade with a disemboweling stroke.

He had no time to brush the blade aside. Instead, acting wholly through instinct, Claggett went face first to the deck. Boggs missed, and the force of his lunge carried him on, off balance. He tried to catch himself, and drive down with the knife, but Claggett twisted to his back and drove both feet to Boggs' abdomen.

Boggs snapped double. The knife flipped from his fingers, tearing one long splinter from a deck board as it struck point first. Boggs backpeddled and hit the rail. He caught himself as Claggett rolled to his feet. He drove a long, defensive left that was brushed away. Claggett's fist swung with the force of a sledge, driving Boggs to the deck.

He was down, but this time Claggett had learned something of the rules of the frontier. He'd learned not to step back and wait for your opponent to rise. He'd learned to fight on, seizing every advantage he won.

So he bent over, seized Boggs by the collar of his buckskin jacket, snapped him to his knees. He lifted Boggs high overhead and balanced him there for a moment, then he hurled him as he had seen mighty slaves hurl sacks of grain. Boggs sailed clear of the rail and splashed into the turbid waters of the Missouri.

He sank from sight, and reappeared a moment later, clutching for the planking at the edge of the boat. He looked up into the eyes of Jeff Claggett, then he rolled over in the muddy water and swam to the steps leading up to the dock.

"Damn you!" he shrieked, shaking his dripping fist. "I'll come back with soldiers. I'm partisan of this expedition. I'll have you thrown in irons and sent back to St. Louis."

Claggett stood by the rail, watching, as Boggs reeled away, trailing water toward Leavenworth's main street.

An hour later, Captain Pierce found Claggett in his stateroom.

"You're elected!" he said by way of greeting.

"What do you mean?"

"You're elected to hold this expedition together until we reach Fort Union where Alexander Culbertson will take over."

Culbertson was a one-twelfth partner of the Chouteau concern, and top man of the Upper Missouri.

"Me take over? Why, I've never been west of Cincinnati before in my life. I'm a scientist. A curator of birds. I'm—"

"You're the man who did what all of us knew should be done. You threw Boggs overboard where he belonged. I'm thinking you'll do all right."

"But my authority—"

"This is the frontier. A free election by the parties of an expedition is as good as a sealed order from the grand factor himself."

"Very well, seeing I'm the new partisan, or whatever you call it, here's my first order —stow that cargo back as it was when we left St. Louis and see if you can beat the *Blackfoot* from port."

THE air of somnambulism left the crew of stevedores, and the cargo was stowed away in jig time, once more balancing the *Yellowstone* so she drew six feet of water fore, and five feet aft, and arrangement best suited for upstream travel at that season of the year.

All night the furnaces were stoked with pitchpine. A hundred yards away, fires were roaring in the furnaces of the *Blackfoot,* too. By morning, black smoke from the chimneys of the two boats made a layer of haze over Fort Leavenworth.

Captain Pierce had not slept. He kept pacing the decks, pausing now and then to curse the engine room through his speaking tube, and demand more pitch on the fires.

By noon steam was whistling through gauge cocks. The pilot waited at his wheel for a few last-minute tasks to be completed. Claggett, who stood forward of the pilothouse noticed a commotion in the crowd which had accumulated down on the dock.

Half a dozen men were pushing their way toward the *Yellowstone's* plank. Five of them wore blue uniforms—the sixth was Boggs.

Claggett ran down the steps and met them as they pushed their way up the plank.

"That's him!" shouted Boggs.

"Mr. Claggett?" An officer wearing the insignia of a colonel asked.

"I'm Claggett."

"And I am Colonel McClelland," he said, bowing stiffly. "You have been accused of usurping the authority of the regularly installed leader of this expedition, Mr. Boggs."

"The men of this boat have chosen me to serve as their leader until we reach Fort Union where Alexander Culbertson is to take over.

"That's a damned lie!" shouted Boggs. "He's started a reign of terror. That's what he has. A blasted reign of terror."

McClelland pondered, looking from one man to the other. It was his first year at Fort Leavenworth, and he was only temporarily in charge while his superior, General Busby, was to the south pursuing some recalcitrant Cherokees. Busby had warned him of the necessity for getting along with the big fur companies under penalty of the rage of Senator Benton, so he said in a manner designed to placate Boggs and at the same time not offend Claggett.

"Mr. Boggs has shown me a letter signed by Mr. Pierre Chouteau, Jr., empowering him to take charge of the expedition as far as Fort Union in the event of Mr. MacMillan's incapacity."

Captain Pierce came charging down from the texas.

"Then that letter is a forgery! I've never heard of Mr. Chouteau issuing such a letter. Claggett is in authority here."

McClelland thought a while, then decided to postpone the evil moment. He said, "I'm afraid I can't recognize the authority of either Claggett or Boggs without investigating further."

"How long will that take?"

"A week. Maybe a trifle more."

"Damnation!"

OVER on the dock, the crowd had started to cheer. Claggett looked and saw the reason. The *Blackfoot's* lines were being lifted and she was getting ready to sail. The air trembled with the deep vibration of her whistle. There was a hiss as her wheels churned water. She backed her stern from the dock, and was whipped around as the swift current of the Missouri caught her. Then she plowed away, the sooty smoke from her chimneys rolling over the waiting *Yellowstone*.

Claggett demanded, "You mean you're going to hold us here while the opposition beats us to the *Blackfoot* trade?"

McClelland moved uncomfortably. It occurred to him that any delay of the boat would place him in an unfortunate position with Chouteau. Still, he had spoken, and there was no way he could back up.

Claggett tried to argue with him, but McClelland shook his head, nervously tapping the toe of his cavalry boot on the deck boards.

Captain Pierce stamped away. They could hear him bellowing through a megaphone, and distantly, from the engine room, came a tinkle of pilot's bells. The boat trembled. It lurched with an unexpected movement that made McClelland stagger and grab the rail.

Up above, the blocks were rattling as the stages were lifted.

"Halt!" shouted McClelland. "Stop this boat."

By now she was a stone's throw from the dock, and swinging in the current.

"Damn it, you can't do this!" McClelland raged. He seized Claggett by the jacket. "Order this boat to stop!"

Claggett stood for a while pondering. Then a slow smile spread across his face. "I have no authority. You said so yourself."

This threw McClelland into an even greater rage, "I said to stop this boat!"

"I must repeat, sir—"

But McClelland was striding away. He climbed to the hurricane deck, two steps at a time. Captain Pierce was just going inside the texas. McClelland rushed after him. The captain's door was closed. He hammered. After a while Pierce opened it, looked at McClelland with feigned surprise.

McClelland shouted, "You're a captain here, aren't you?"

"Aye, aye, sir."

"Then order this boat back to the dock!"

Pierce seemed to be shocked by such a suggestion. "You must know the federal regulations better than that, Colonel. According to an act of Congress, no one can issue an order to a pilot when the boat is in motion."

McClelland stared at him for a moment, then, without saying another word, spun on

his toe and strode toward the pilothouse. He jerked open the door.

"Take this boat back to Fort Leavenworth at once."

The pilot, a tall, spare man, lured from the Mississippi by the fantastic wages of eight hundred dollars per month, turned and looked at the colonel like a king might look at a peasant who had suddenly gone mad. Then, without answering, he returned to his wheel, holding the boat close against a point to avoid the booming current of mid-river.

"I *do* have authority enough to put you ashore in a skiff, said Pierce when McClelland flung himself out.

"Very well. But you'll hear about this!"

There was a furrow between Claggett's eyebrows as he watched the skiff carrying the men to shore, but Pierce only laughed.

"Son, don't worry about that soldier. You'll find out that the army amounts to damned little in these parts."

THROUGHOUT the hours of afternoon they kept in sight of the *Blackfoot,* but next morning her location was revealed only by a smudge above the leafless trees in the far distance.

"Let her go!" fumed Pierce. "She looks good now, but wait till we reach the upper river! We'll see how much alligator she has in her when she tackles the *real* mudbars."

On the succeeding days, the Missouri rose with the run-off from the land of the Sioux. The river would drop again after this first rise, and then reach a second high stage when the snow melted in the distant Rockies. Before that second rise had vanished, it would be necessary for the steamboats to be well out of the country if they expected to get out at all.

They made their way through the flat country of the Joways, the Kickapoos, the Saukies, and the Omahas. Here and there was a trapper's cabin, occasionally the ruins of a military post. April went by, and it was well into May when they passed the Council Bluffs where Lewis and Clark had smoked the calumet with chief of the plains tribes forty-two years before. And after the Council Bluffs, the mouth of the Big Sioux, deadline between the hunting grounds of the Omahas and the Dakotas.

Claggett was busy collecting specimens of birdlife, especially those species missed by Audubon a few years before, and he had almost forgotten the existence of the opposition company, when, unexpectedly, the *Blackfoot's* twin chimneys loomed above a bend in the river. The steamer, with only a faint hint of smoke rising from banked fires, was tied to an undercut bank at the lower end of a Mandan village of fifty or sixty buffalo-skin lodges.

"I hope she burned her gullet out for good!" Captain Pierce growled.

The *Yellowstone* was low on wood, so she tied up at the opposite end of the village, but there was no formal exchange of courtesies between the two boats. Later in the day, Claggett found out the *Blackfoot* had smashed a section of her wheels on some projecting rocks while negotiating a crossing, and would probably be laid up for two or three days.

When night came, the *Yellowstone's* woodhawks were still carrying fuel aboard. Claggett watched them, working beneath the light of pitch torches well into the night. He went in the texas to smoke a cigar with Captain Pierce, and was there when running feet thudded on the lower deck.

He was on edge, expecting trouble from Leacox, so the sound brought him out in a hurry.

IT WAS dark, with a mist rising from the broad Missouri. The air commotion had stopped, and he could hear the rhythm of tom-toms over in the Mandan village. A Chouteau clerk appeared in the companionway and told him that an Indian girl had crept aboard and was hiding somewhere in the hold.

Pierce came up and said, "Damn it, get that squaw off. We don't want any trouble with these Mandans. They're a treacherous lot at best."

Claggett sent a dozen engagés through the hold with torches but there was no sign of the Indian girl. He climbed back to the texas and had just entered the crosshall when a movement back on the hurricane attracted his attention.

He paused to watch. It was a woman. An Indian. He could tell that by her easy, soft-footed manner of walking.

She started forward, keeping in the deeper shadow beside the pilothouse. She paused and seemed to be listening. She

turned back and came directly toward the door where Claggett was standing.

She opened the door and stepped inside, drawing back suddenly when she touched Claggett.

She would have fled, but he seized her by the wrist. She struggled, and it was like holding a bobcat. Neither spoke. There was only the quick sound of breath from their nostrils.

Although Pierce was inside his cabin not a dozen steps away, he did not come to the door. She was a small girl, her head barely reaching Claggett's shoulder, but still it was all he could do to force her against the wall.

No Mandan, this girl. She was unlike any of the Sioux nation he had ever seen. She was not dressed in the tanned antelope, deer or buffalo calf hides of the Mandans either. She wore a dress of cotton material, with a new trade-blanket of wool tossed over it.

"What are you doing here?" he asked, expecting the inevitable "no savvy."

Instead, she surprised him by asking with good articulation, "Are you Mr. Claggett?"

"Yes, I'm Claggett."

"Then you are the one I came to see."

He released her, and she made no effort to escape.

"I am Lola," she said. "My people call me Akka-Makkoye. I am the daughter of Heavy Rattle, a Blackfoot chief of the Piegan tribe. The government sent me to the Indian school in St. Louis. The Holy Sisters of Charity—"

"You were on the *Blackfoot?*"

"Yes. But you will not tell them I am here. You will not tell First Rider—"

"Who is First Rider?"

"He is my brother."

"Is he on the *Blackfoot,* too?"

"Yes."

"Listen here, I can't get the expedition involved in any family quarrel. You'll have to—"

"Please!" She spoke with such intensity that he was startled. "Please! First Rider is young. He does not understand. It is about Leacox—"

"What about Leacox?"

"He says he will make me his squaw, just as a white woman would be his squaw. He says he would speak the holy words before a blackrobe. But he would not. First Rider does not understand. He believes this Leacox and—"

"In other words, Leacox has been making love to you, and you don't trust him?"

She nodded, lowering her eyes.

"Then by the gods, they won't make you leave this steamboat."

There was a thump of boots in Captain Pierce's room. He opened the door, and lamplight filled the crosshall, giving Claggett his first good look at Lola.

She was very dark. Her cheeks were flat below their high bones. Her hair was jet, parted in the middle and drawn tight in two braids.

On the frontier she would have been considered beautiful, though Claggett did not find her so. He was still too used to the standards of blonde loveliness to appreciate the belles of the dark races. But her face held him for all that. Perhaps it was her intelligence, or perhaps the fear that filled her midnight eyes.

Pierce drew up sharply when he saw her. "Say, you can't sneak aboard this boat. You get back over to the village before—"

"She did not come from the village," said Claggett.

"No? Well, I guess she's not a Mandan after all."

"I am Akka-Makkoye, whom white men call Lola. I am a Blackfoot of the Piegan tribe—"

"What are you doing here?"

She told him, and Pierce cursed under his breath. "You'll have to go back to your own boat."

"No," said Claggett, "she won't."

"Listen, Claggett, my job is to take this steamboat through to Fort Union. If Alexander Culbertson orders me to sink her when I get there, well and good. I'll sink her. But this business of fighting Leacox over a squaw—"

"You forget something, Pierce."

"What's that?"

"You forget that I was elected partisan of the expedition back at Fort Leavenworth."

"Oh, *that.* Well, you got rid of Boggs, but now—"

"I'm perfectly capable of throwing you overboard, too."

Pierce bristled like a Louisiana fighting cock, then he seemed to see the humor of it.

"By the gods, I almost believe you would! Well, what now?"

"We're going to give the young woman passage as far as Fort Union. If Culbertson wants to take her on to Blackfoot country, that's his business."

Pierce strode out to the hurricane deck and looked across the water at the opposition boat, her stacks and superstructure silhouetted against the night sky, a sprinkling of lights in her cabins, a faint glow reflecting from her furnace doors. By the time Claggett followed him out his attention had been drawn to a pitch torch that came bobbing along the shore. For a while it was only a point of yellow light, then, as it neared, they could make out the shadows of a half-dozen men.

Pierce noticed Claggett and Lola standing beside him and said, "Well, my noble partisan, it looks as though your decision might produce some unexpected complications. And there comes one of them right now."

Claggett shrugged, showing an unconcern that he did not feel.

"Leacox?"

"Sure. Listen, Claggett, I may be only the captain, and I may be speaking out of turn when I try to advise my betters, but don't forget you're a long way from the St. Louis police. Pistols speak a little louder than the human voice here on the upper Missouri, and if I were you I think I'd at least stick a derringer in my belt."

"MacMillan's pistol didn't help him. Captain, will you take Lola inside your cabin until I get rid of our visitors?"

Claggett went down to the main deck. It was Leacox, all right. Leacox and five others. One of them was a tall, rather handsome young Indian. That would be Lola's brother, First Rider. The others were rough, bearded hunters of the opposition.

He wished his own hunters were there, but they were on the far bank, skinning out some elk they had shot. There were plenty of engagés and voyageurs carrying wood aboard, but he'd often been told they amounted to little when it came to a fight. A company trader named VanDemark sat on a barrel, twanging a jew's harp for the entertainment of a couple of free-trappers, so he would have these at his back, anyway.

He paused by the rail and watched Leacox come along the muddy edge of the river. Leacox saw him there and lifted an arm in greeting:

"Ah, my friend the scientist!"

He strode on up the stage. VanDemark stopped playing the jew's harp. Even the woodhawks sensed the situation and stood with bundles on their shoulders, watching.

"Or aren't you a scientist?" Leacox went on, pausing a step or so away, smiling. "Perhaps that ornithologist handle was only a clever blind for smuggling fifty gallons of alcohol past the army at Fort Leavenworth."

"What do you want, Leacox?"

"You know well enough what I want."

His men ranged behind him, four trappers armed with pistols and knives, and the young Indian with a blanket around his shoulders, an eagle feather upright in his hair.

Leacox went on, "I'm here to get that girl you let aboard. It so happens we have a commission from the Indian agent to take her home to her tribe. Oh, come, Claggett! Don't put on that surprised expression. A couple of Mandans saw her come aboard."

Claggett's pulse raced, and his legs felt weak from anger, excitement—or fear. But his voice sounded calm as he answered, "She will stay aboard this boat if she pleases."

"You admit she's here then?"

Claggett was silent.

"I'll give you five minutes to bring her out."

"And then what?"

"Why, then we'll go in after her."

THE young Indian, First Rider, elbowed his way to the front and stood very tall, as he probably had seen great chiefs stand at the council fires of his people. He was no more than eighteen, but he made his voice roll with a mighty sound when he said:

"Behold! I am First Rider, a chief, the son of a chief, and he the son of a chief. My father is Heavy Rattle, my grandfather is Eagle Head, chief of all the Piegans!"

Claggett was quite sure this First Rider could speak English as fluently as his sister if he chose, and that this posture merely reflected his fierce pride of race.

"Behold, I tell you to give up my sister, Akka-Makkoye, whom white men call Lola."

"Why?" asked Claggett with disconcerting shortness.

"Because I, First Rider, demand it. Because—"

"Because you want to give her to your friend, Leacox."

First Rider started to answer, but Leacox put him out of the way. "What do you mean to suggest?"

"Lola told me about you, Leacox."

"Stop avoiding the question."

"You're trying to force your attentions on that girl, and First Rider there is fool enough to let you. But as long as I'm around—"

It was hard to see by the wavering light of the torches, and Leacox's fist was too far on its way for Claggett to move aside. The blow landed high on Claggett's jaw, sending him down as if he had been struck by a club. He was on the deck with his arms thrown over his head. He rolled over, expecting Leacox to come in, swinging his boots. But Leacox remained where he was, scorning his advantage.

Claggett staggered to his feet, and noticed that Leacox had this thumb hooked in the front of his shirt, just above the butt of his double-barreled pistol.

"I see you're still unarmed, Claggett!" he said with pretended surprise. His next words were spoken with slow articulation so his voice would carry across the boat, and to the voyageurs who gathered along the shore. But maybe I have misjudged you. Maybe you've only forgotten your gun. Maybe you'd like to go to your cabin after it and take twelve steps with me."

Claggett glanced around. He saw the faces of the Chouteau men. Of VanDemark, of the two trappers, of the voyageurs and the engagés. They were all watching him closely, waiting for his answer.

He wanted to talk to them, to explain it was not cowardice for a man to refuse certain death. But he knew how hopeless such an explanation would be. He'd walked down here to make a stand, and he could not back out without being branded a coward.

Leacox was smiling a little. He was intelligent, he understood men, and he knew the thoughts that were running through Claggett's brain.

The silence hung very heavy; with no sounds except the low hiss of steam from the boilers and the beat of tom-toms over in the Mandan village. The men of the *Yellowstone* bent forward to hear Claggett's answer.

"I have no gun," he said.

There was an exhalation. A triumphant smile flashed across Leacox's face. He would have enjoyed killing this pup, but he enjoyed proving him a coward all the more. However, Claggett's expression was not that of a beaten man.

"You're challenging me to a duel, Leacox?"

"Yes!"

"Therefore it is my privilege to choose the weapons. Or don't you go by gentlemen's standards?"

This was a new twist, and Leacox didn't like the expression in Claggett's eyes. He shrugged as though the weapons were of scant importance. If Claggett hauled out a set of dueling swords he imagined he could handle them satisfactorily.

"What *are* your weapons?" he asked.

"You're carrying a knife."

This was better than Leacox had dared to expect. Bowie knives—a handkerchief in the teeth—yes, he could take care of himself in this bloody contest born of the Santa Fe trail.

Claggett went on, "When I was coming up the Ohio River I heard of a classic manner of dueling among the old-time keelboat men. I believe they call it half-horse half-alligator style. Let's try it in that manner."

Leacox knew what it was. The left wrists of the two duelers were tied together with a leather thong, and the two go overboard each with knife in his right hand. It is a test of strength and swimming ability as well as skill with a knife. Sometimes one man died, sometimes both—it all depended on whether the victor had strength left to cut himself free.

Claggett had chosen the contest deliberately. He knew himself to be strong, and a fine swimmer. As a boy in New York State he had become adept at water wrestling. Only the knife would be new.

The tables were turned now. Leacox was the one being watched. He could not insist on pistols after such a deadly suggestion as this half-horse half-alligator business without being stamped as a coward.

"As you choose," he said, his voice sounding off-hand, as though the manner of fighting was really of little concern.

CLAGGETT started to strip off his clothes. There was a mutter of unexpected satisfaction from the crowd when he stood naked. He was six-feet-one, he weighed around a hundred and eighty. Now they could see that none of those pounds was wasted. In the flare of torchlight his skin seemed tawny, his muscles flowed easily beneath it like the muscles of a cougar.

Leacox pulled off his waistcoat, his fine linen shirt, kersemere trousers, his horsehide boots. He was more massive than Claggett, his muscles showed the thickening caused by heavy work on the keelboats of the Missouri, but he lacked Claggett's excellent symmetry.

Leacox leaned over and drew a bowie knife from the scabbard that had hung at his hip, and stood with it, waiting.

"May I borrow your knife?" Claggett asked VanDemark.

VanDemark drew a short skinning knife and tried its point on his thumb. He put it back and turned to one of the trappers.

"Give him yours, Ned."

Ned drew a light, long bladed knife. He reached it out handle first.

"Think you'll ever get it back?" Leacox asked with a hint of a smile.

"I don't know, Leacox. I think I have an even chance."

Captain Pierce came clomping down from the boiler deck. "What the devil's going on down here?"

VanDemark answered the question, "Why, the boys are going to fight it out—half-horse half-alligator style."

"Claggett! You're insane. Let him talk you into a contest like that? I won't—"

"Will you bind our wrists together, Captain Pierce?" Claggett asked.

Pierce recognized the finality in Claggett's voice, and ceased arguing. Claggett was a very stubborn young man, and the Captain might have known he would end up on the bottom of the Missouri. VanDemark tossed over a leather moccasin thong and Pierce went to work—two wraps around Claggett's left wrist followed by a tight knot, then a six-inch length of thong, and the two wraps around the left wrist of Leacox.

Pierce had seen two Mississippi River raftsmen go over the side like this back in '34 and neither of them was seen again.

"You fellows better think it over," Pierce muttered as he drew down the final knot. "The upper Missouri is a mighty big country. There's plenty of room for both of you."

"Are you arguing for the life of your friend?" Leacox asked.

PIERCE closed his lips in a tight line. Leacox and Claggett were held close together by the thong. For a second or two they met each other's eyes.

"Let's try the deep end, Leacox."

"As you wish."

They had been standing at the shore side of the boat beyond the main wash of the current. The water was only three or four feet deep, so they crossed to the other side, shoulders drawn closely together by the thongs.

It was dark over there, for the pitch baskets had not been lighted, and nobody had thought of bringing a torch.

Claggett swung one leg over the rail, his muscles hair-triggered, expecting Leacox to attempt some surprise thrust. Leacox followed suit. They balanced, wrists together, bodies drawn apart by the length which the thong allowed. A few feet below, the Missouri ran with a swift, mysterious voice.

It seemed a long time they were thus, then Leacox sprang backward toward the water, and Claggett followed him face first.

Leacox twisted as he went, swinging his knife. Claggett saw the movement, and struck the water with left arm flung far out, making the blow miss.

Claggett had his course planned. He would go deep, merely trying to parry the knife thrusts. His chief moment of danger would be on impact with the water, or shortly afterward. Once they sank, all movement would be slowed by the water. But when they touched bottom—that would be his moment. He would jerk Leacox forward by his thonged wrist, and rise from solid footing to plunge the knife.

But there was something Claggett had not taken into account—and that was the Missouri herself. The river had a swift, lashing current unlike the placid streams where he had water-wrestled as a boy. It seized him the moment he struck. He was hurled off balance.

He had a momentary impression of Leacox pulling back his thronged arm and

swinging the knife in a short arc. Claggett stopped the blow, and drove his own knife in answer.

He sensed his disadvantage, and thrust himself to arm's length as they sank. They were under the surface, borne along by the swift current. No bottom, no air, no sense of up or down. Just the black waters of the river. It was a nightmare struggle in which all sense of time and place were lost.

Unexpectedly Claggett touched bottom. It was a muddy, sticky bottom without sure footing. Leacox was no longer at arm's length. They were tangled in a death struggle there against the muddy bottom.

Claggett felt the burn of a knife point against his ribs. He ripped around with his own blade. It was the blow he had hoped for, but Leacox was not where he should be.

Claggett's lungs were bursting. He had a desperate desire to free himself—to cut the thong that held him and reach the surface. It came to his half-consciousness that Leacox was lashing around above him. He felt a hand—and that meant that Leacox had dropped his knife.

It would have been easy. He had merely to pull down and drive his blade home. But however the lust for battle might burn through Claggett's veins, he was not a killer. He fought his way to the surface. It was not so far as it had seemed in sinking. Perhaps seven feet. Someone was shouting. Was it possible they were only a dozen yards from the boat? But there it was, with the faces of thirty men peering over the rail.

Someone threw a line, and he took it in his thonged hand before Leacox could pull him down again.

Claggett cut Leacox free and helped drag him aboard. Leacox was on his hands and knees, coughing water from his lungs. He staggered to his feet, blood mixing with water and spreading across his chest. He had a shallow wound running from his shoulder half across his chest. Claggett was bleeding from cuts, too.

Someone tossed Leacox a rag and he mopped blood and muddy water.

"Next time it is I who will choose the weapons, Claggett!" And with that he walked back along the deck to find his clothes.

"You should have killed him when you had the chance, lad!" Pierce said. "He'll show no mercy the day he gets the upper hand."

Claggett dressed and returned to the texas where Lola was waiting.

"Your brother was here with Leacox," he told her, "but they agreed not to take you away."

She nodded, her large, dark eyes very serious, "I know. I was watching."

Claggett colored a trifle, but she didn't seem to notice.

She went on, "They laughed at you aboard the *Blackfoot*. They said you were a hunter of bird's eggs. But now I know what kind of bird's eggs you seek. It is the eagle's eggs!"

Claggett's first impulse had been to laugh. Later he was glad he had accepted the compliment with the same serious manner it was given.

IN THE days that followed he found Lola to be very simple and direct. She was unfettered by all the fictitious modesties of a white man's world. She represented a side of Indian nature he never knew existed. Until Lola, he had thought of all Indians as howling savages.

For two weeks they saw no more of the opposition steamboat. Claggett spent many hours with Lola, listening to her stories of Indian life—of the nomadic home along the foot of the great mountains that she had left two years before.

One afternoon a smudge appeared downriver. A sandbar took a hand, and the *Yellowstone's* donkey engines were straining at the blocks when the *Blackfoot* went past with a single, derisive blast of her whistle.

The *Yellowstone* had no chance of catching up. Every few days she would draw up at the mouth of some broad, silt-yellow river for a rendezvous with bullboats and keelboats manned by bearded, buckskin-clad men from the little forts that supplied Sioux, and Cheyenne and the other tribes of the vast prairies north of the Oregon trail.

The country became ever more barren. For days the river ran between monotonous gray cutbank walls. Sometimes a strip of coal would add interest, winding like a ribbon for many miles. The cutbanks would fall away, and the plains would slope down to the water's edge, and then the banks would start again, as endless as before.

The river rose a little when they reached the land of Assiniboine and northern Sioux. It was here Claggett saw his first buffalo, although they had long been in buffalo country.

A vast herd of them were strung down from a saddle of the country, they crossed some wide shallows to the opposite bank, and then wound like a dark serpent across the pastel green prairie as far as he could see. There was no way of estimating their numbers, but the boat was forced to wait for more than an hour while the shaggy brutes pawed, and swam, and snorted their way across.

In the early days of June the boat reached the Missouri's most northerly point, coming close to the forty-ninth parallel which, in less than a month's time, was to be ratified as the boundary between American and British territory. Claggett had just seen James K. Polk elected President of the United States on a glorious piece of fiction, "Fifty-four forty or fight," but it was to be the forty-ninth, anyway.

The river swung south, passing the mouth of the Yellowstone, a stream almost as wide as the Missouri. Forty or fifty Indians appeared there, racing along the bank, firing their rifles in the air. Soon there was a sound like thunder. That was the cannon saluting from Fort Union whose flagpole was just coming into view beyond a point of the river.

PART III

MEN OF THE FUR FRONTIER

FORT UNION proper was a quadrangle barricade of pointed pickets surrounding a dozen log buildings. On the southwest and northeast corners were blockhouses, each with ugly little cannon muzzles projecting from loopholes in such a manner that they could not possibly be overlooked by the Indians who came to trade.

The buildings inside the enclosure were sun-bleached log structures, all ugly and planless save for the mansion of the bourgeois which had two stories, a double veranda, and a considerable expenditure of French glass.

After a week spent unloading at Fort Union, the *Yellowstone* once more poked into the current, this time under the direction of Alexander Culbertson, so-called "king of the upper Missouri."

Culbertson was a shrewd, even-tempered man of about forty. He was kindly, yet there was a manner about him that commanded respect of Indian and white. His two chief subordinates joined the expedition to the land of the Blackfeet, too—these were Malcolm Clarke, an adventurous young firebrand who had once been enrolled at West Point, and an older, harder-faced trader named Jim Lee.

Lola remained on the boat, expecting to meet her brother at Fort F. A. Chardon at the mouth of the Judith.

The river, now smaller and not so muddy, wound through prairie for a while, and then cut deeply through barren country of clay hills and sculptured sandstone, "bad lands" which extended for more than a hundred miles as the crow flies.

This was the land of the Blackfoot, and it became standard practice to send scouts ahead each time hunters or woodhawks landed.

"Audubon told me the Blackfeet were at peace with the fur company," Claggett said to Culbertson one afternoon as the two men stood watching the smoke of a signal fire puff in successive billows from one of the barren hills.

"They were until Chardon and Harvey massacred them at Fort McKenzie."

"But that's a Chouteau fort!"

"And they are Chouteau men. You see, Chardon was bourgeois there, but he could never leave the bottle alone, and he was afraid of Harvey to boot. There was some trouble, thievery, an engagé killed. And that temper of Harvey's—like a rattlesnake in August. A level-headed trader would have overlooked the matter, but Harvey must get his revenge. He waited until some Blackfeet came to trade, opened the gate, and met them with a charge of grape from the cannon. Can you wonder the Blackfeet are after our hair?"*

A trapper hailed the boat one morning and waded to his armpits to get aboard. He

*Despite the villainy of Francis Chardon, he was kept on by the Chouteau concern, being sent to Fort Clark, fifty-five miles above the present site of Bismarck, North Dakota. Alexander Harvey, who instigated the slaughter at Fort McKenzie, and was later associated with the opposition company, died at that same Fort Clark in 1854.

was a half-breed whom Culbertson called "Dubois."

"Fort McKenzie she's no more," said Dubois in a heavy *homme du nord* accent. "For sixty day those Blackfoot besiege heem. Then Harvey, Chardon and maybe eight more we sneak away downriver in mackinaw boat. They follow and shoot from bank, but we fight them off. By'n-bye smoke, much smoke—that was old Fort McKenzie, those *sauvage* burn heem. So we build new fort called Fort F. A. Chardon at mouth of Judith where we hole up all winter. But those Blackfoot he's ver' bad there, too."

"Where are Harvey and Chardon now?"

"Chardon—you have no see heem?"

"No."

"I guess Harvey run heem out with gun. He's say he go down river to Fort Union."

"Is Harvey at Fort F. A. Chardon?"

"Sure, he's at Fort F. A. C."

"How about the opposition boat—and Leacox?"

"Ha! They have beeg talk, Leacox and Harvey. Drink much strongwater, big pow-wow. I do not hear much, but I guess. Pretty soon those opposition steamboat sail away."

"You think Harvey's lining up with the opposition?"

Dubois shrugged.

THAT day, at the noon meal, Malcolm Clarke asked Culbertson, "You're not going to let that cutthroat Harvey get away with it, are you?"

Just what the *it* referred to, Claggett wasn't exactly sure. Jim Lee, the trader, and Jake Berger, a grizzled interpreter who looked as though he hadn't washed since the previous fall, stopped chewing while listening for Culbertson's answer. The moment seemed tense, as though this were some sort of showdown. Ever since leaving Fort Union, Claggett had been hearing whispers that Clarke, Lee and Berger were out to kill Harvey on sight.

Culbertson answered in an easy voice, "I'll take whatever measures I consider appropriate." Then more directly, "I don't want any trouble at Fort F. A. C. At least no trouble that we've started."

Clarke's strong young face became hawk-like and cruel, but he did not argue.

An hour later two men appeared on the southern shore and rode splashing across the shallows and sandbars, hailing the boat. Indians frequently did that, hoping to be taken aboard and given presents of tobacco, beads and vermilion, but these men were not Indians. One was a lanky, skinny man dressed in khaki trousers and a blanket capote, the other was heavy, black-whiskered, dressed in fringed buckskins that had turned blackish and shiny from wear.

Claggett noticed a tenseness among those along the deck as the pilot swung as close as he dared to the south bank.

"Who is it?" he asked Clarke.

"The black one is Harvey. The old one is Tom Rodin."

When the boat stopped, Harvey handed his bridle to Rodin and waded out to be pulled aboard. He was a powerful man, well over six feet, between thirty-five and forty years old. He had a strong-boned face, intelligent though flinty eyes, and a swagger about him that displayed confidence and an arrogance toward danger.

He shook hands with Culbertson, and with Berger. Then he extended his hand to Clarke.

"Let bygones be bygones, hey?" he asked, smiling.

"You go to the devil!" said Clarke.

"What's the trouble with you?" Harvey snarled, his face revealing the vindictive cruelty that had guided his career for twenty years along this wild frontier.

"I'd just as soon shake hands with a Gros Ventre dog."

"Clarke!" Culbertson took a step forward. He wanted no quarrels with Harvey. Not, at least, while the man was a guest on the boat. Clarke moved in the clear. Harvey's fists were doubled and his face was dark from rage.

Berger moved to Harvey's rear on one side, and Jim Lee on the other. At that moment Claggett realized how neatly planned this thing had been. It was a deadfall.

He suddenly felt sick. Although Harvey was a killer, an advantage like this was too unfair.

Culbertson started to say something more, but Clarke sprang on Harvey with a tomahawk. The weapon's polished steel head flashed in the bright June sunshine, aimed to split Harvey's skull. A heavy bronze pistol was in Lee's right hand. Berger was at

the rail with his long, Kentucky musket ready for action.

In the fraction of a second that the tomahawk was swinging, Harvey seemed to sense the entire position. He drove for Clarke, thus keeping both of them in the line of fire. The tomahawk caught Harvey a glancing blow, splitting his scalp. He seized Clarke by the wrist and they wrestled across the deck.

Clarke's strength was no match for Harvey's. Neither Berger nor Lee dared fire, but Berger sprang forward and swung the barrel of his rifle to Harvey's skull. Harvey shook the blow off, lifted Clarke in his arms, and staggered with him toward the rail. He would have flung Clarke into the river had not Lee struck him with the heavy bronze pistol.

Berger let Clarke fall. He saw the rifle swinging in Berger's hands, and went shoulder first over the side.

Berger fired, but the shot was too late. Harvey struck the water and went deep. Lee ran along the rail, pistol in hand, following Harvey's course by the line of bubbles which appeared. Harvey came up unexpectedly and immediately went under again. The current carried him out of range and he made shallow water without drawing a shot.

He splashed up the gravelly shore, climbed a steep clay bank to the sagebrush flat where Tom Rodin was holding his horse.

There, safely out of range, he shook his dripping fist and bellowed invective until the pilot jangled bells, and the boat resumed the slow journey upstream.

The whole business left Claggett befuddled. Until now it had been a clear contest between Chouteau and Leacox, between an honest trader and a whiskey trader, between right and wrong. This seemed to change it. He saw now that there was plenty of villainy on both sides.

CULBERTSON must have guessed the thoughts that ran through his mind, for after Harvey disappeared around the grayish clay hills, he plucked Claggett by the sleeve and said, "If you're not a killer when you come here, this Blackfoot country is likely to make a killer out of you." He started away, smiling a little, and then paused to add, "And I've noticed you're a mighty fine swimmer, Claggett."

Clarke overheard him and started to laugh. He laughed until Claggett became angry and walked away. Then the humor of it appealed to him and he had to laugh, too. Yes, he was a fine swimmer, a far better swimmer than Leacox, and that was why he had chosen the horse-and-alligator way of dueling.

Fort F. A. C. came in sight about mid-afternoon. It consisted of one log building and a small stockade of pointed pickets. The gate was closed, and there was no cannon salute. Half a dozen men stood on the catwalk with heads and shoulders, and the barrels of their rifles visible over the picket points.

There was no docking place, so Culbertson went ashore in a skiff.

"The damn fool!" muttered Clarke. "Harvey will shoot his head off."

Culbertson walked across the sage-dotted wedge of flat land between the Judith and the Missouri toward the rude front gate. He stopped a few steps away and Claggett could hear him shout:

"Harvey!"

There was an extended wait, then Harvey came through the gate. They argued for five or ten minutes, then they went inside and stayed for an hour.

"How'd you come out?" Berger asked when Culbertson rowed back to the *Yellowstone.*

"He's releasing the fort to us."

Later on Claggett learned that Harvey had agreed to leave only after receiving an order for wages in full, and a strong character recommendation, neither of which he deserved.

Harvey and his bearded crew left next morning, heading across the southwestern bench country with a pack string. Culbertson took possession at Fort F. A. C., moving out what trade goods were left, and burning the building afterward.

With bad lands and mountains behind, the Missouri made a wide swing to the south. They passed the mouth of the Marias and the blankened ruins of two former posts, both burned by Blackfeet.

"There's the opposition!" the pilot shouted down.

They rounded a bend near the ruins of Fort McKenzie where Chardon and Harvey had massacred friendly Blackfeet the year

before, and there was the opposition steamboat, just across the river, unloading on a newly constructed log dock.

Leacox was standing by the sill logs of what would probably be the trade house. He watched the *Yellowstone* steam by, and made no sign of greeting. Someone walked up beside Leacox, flinging his arms in a derisive gesture—that was Harvey.

In five minutes a bend of the river took them beyond sight of the opposition fort. They went on until dark, spent the night anchored in mid-river, and resumed the journey at dawn. Finally, about ten o'clock, the long trip came to an end. They had reached Cotton Bottom, where a portion of old Fort Cotton was still standing.*

At Fort Cotton a single Blackfoot greeted them. The Blackfoot was First Rider. He was naked to the waist, his body streaked with vermilion and ocre, his new percussion rifle the only evidence of his two years spent in St. Louis.

He rode a pinto and led a wiry sorrel for Lola. She mounted and rode away as one born to the saddle. Claggett watched her leave, and a feeling of loss was on him for the rest of the day.

Culbertson wasted no time there at Fort Cotton. He renamed it "Fort Benton" in honor of Senator Benton of Missouri, the greatest friend the fur company ever had, and directed engagés to enlarging and repairing the stockade and buildings while the crew rushed the remaining trade goods ashore. Three days, and the chimneys of the steamboat disappeared down the river, and thus vanished the last link with the civilization Claggett had known.

"How are the birds coming?" Culbertson asked one day when Claggett drove a horse in, dragging a gable-log.

Claggett laughed. He had not made a single classification since arriving at Cotton Bottom. He would have felt like a shirker hunting birds while the company struggled to prepare for the two great enemies of the upper Missouri—winter and the Blackfeet.

The fort was soon finished, but trade was slow. The reason soon became apparent—Leacox, fifteen miles down the river, was trading in the unlawful commodity prized next to life itself by the Indian—whiskey.

Then something more serious was injected. A free-trapper named Mace came in with a party of halfbreeds and reported that "Jemmy-Jock," a halfbreed renegade, was stirring up trouble among the Blood band of Blackfeet, and that white hair had been taken in the region of Cow Island.*

Subsequent reports added to the alarm at Fort Benton. War Chief Hawk of the Bloods camped with two hundred tents near the mouth of the Marias and was making big medicine with the opposition.

The day after Mace came, Claggett asked Clarke, "Do you think Hawk is planning to attack us?"

"He's not planning a social tea!"

Later on, Claggett asked the same question of Culbertson and received a more thoughtful answer.

"Hawk and his Bloods won't attack alone. Not the fort. It's not easy to take a barricade. He ran into grape one time down at the Three Forks, and I doubt that he'll be anxious to do it again. He'll need upwards of a thousand horsemen to overrun this fort, and the only way he can do it is to get the Piegan Blackfeet to go in with him."

"Is that Eagle Head's band?"

"That's right—Lola's grandfather. And First Rider's grandfather, too. That makes it bad. I understand First Rider has been making medicine with Hawk and Leacox."

Next morning a free-trapper staggered in, one side of his buckskin jacket caked black with blood. Culbertson probed and removed a three-inch iron arrowhead.

"One of ours?" asked Clarke.

"Hudson's Bay," answered Culbertson.

The free-trapper was delirious for two days, repeatedly tearing off the pack of damp moss that was bound to his wound. He died without being able to tell who had attacked him.

That night a column of Blackfeet in full war regalia made a parade of riding the

*Fort Cotton was established by Fox, Livingstone, Cotton and Jim Bridger a few years before. This combination of traders had the reputation of being free with the whiskey bottle (as what trader wasn't?), but their enterprise was not successful.

*"Jemmy-Jock," or James Bird, was an intelligent but vindictive renegade known from Winnipeg to the Oregon Trail. Maximilian, Prince of Wied, met him in Fort McKenzie thirteen years before and expressed the opinion that the fur company should put him out of the way. Father DeSmet, who hired him as an interpreter the year before Culbertson founded Fort Benton, also had a low opinion of his character. After taking many white and Indian scalps, Jemmy-Jock became respectable, attended church regularly, and died at Two Medicine, Montana, in 1892 at the age of 107 years. His half-brother, Dr. James Curtis Bird, was speaker of the Manitoba legislature in 1873-74.

horizon of the bluffs overlooking Fort Benton.

Claggett went over and found Culbertson sitting near the idle buffalo press.

"I think I might have a little influence with Chief Eagle Head," Claggett said.

"How the devil would *you* have influence?"

"Perhaps through Lola."

"A squaw doesn't speak very loudly at the council fires of the Blackfeet."

"Still, I have heard that they will not shoot a guest."

"And you want to ride over and hold pow-wow, I suppose."

"Yes. It shouldn't be more than half a day's ride. I hear the Piegans are camped on the Teton."

"Listen, Claggett, I have in my possession a letter from Pierre Chouteau warning me to take all necessary precautions for your safety, and those are instructions I intend to observe."

"I'm not a child."

"You're a scientist, and that's worse."

"Damn it all—"

"The answer is *no*. You stay here."

IT WAS twilight when Claggett left the storehouse. A couple of engagés were patrolling the catwalk along the stockade. The gate was still open, and some of the men were gathering the horses to run them inside the enclosure for the night. He saw Berger, standing in his dirty buckskins, watching.

"You understand Indians, Berger," Claggett said.

"Me? I rightly should. Man and boy I've lived among Injuns for thirty years. I can tell any tribe from Fort Clark to Pend Oreille by the smell of their moccasins. It's the bodily fluid they use in the tannin', you know, and no two—"

"Do you think Lola would have any influence with Eagle Head?"

"I reckon." Berger scratched his tangled black whiskers. "And I reckon you'd have a bit of influence with the gal, too, Claggett."

"Do you think I could get out of here with a horse tonight without Culbertson finding out?"

"I guess."

That night, when Claggett slipped out through the big gate, Berger had a bay horse saddled and waiting.

"Cross over to the head of the island," Berger said, pointing the way. "Then go through that notch in the bluffs. Keep right on the north star, and you'll come to the Piegan camp, if it's where it generally is. Just ride in. Trot, but don't gallop. There's somethin' about a gallopin' rider that an Injun will always shoot at. And whatever you do, don't let 'em know you're scared."

Claggett touched his moccasins to the bay's side, and headed across gently sloping ground to the river's edge. The bay took to the water without objection. The river was low, scarcely more than belly deep, although a swift current tired the horse by the time they reached the opposite shore. Claggett paused for a minute and located the notch that Berger had pointed out. It was distinctly silhouetted against the pinkish light which still hung in the western horizon. Behind him Fort Benton was a mass of darkness.

He rode on across the sage-dotted bottoms.

The moon came out, revealing a dim trail next to the barren clay hills. The horse seemed to know where he was going, so Claggett gave him his head. Soon they were following a zig-zag gully bottom. A couple miles of this, then a steep climb to the prairie bench land. When he looked back he could see the river like a piece of flat steel in the moonlight. Before him was the prairie, vast and desolate. Miles and miles of it.

He struck out, following the north star, keeping the bay at an even, jogging pace. There was a hint of dawn over the mountains when at last he reached the Teton—a country of little clay hills cut by a planless web-work of gullies.

He drew up, and with eyes long used to the darkness made out the Teton River, really little more than a creek, its borders solid with frost-tinged cottonwood, and scattered along the sagebrush bottoms, the pyramid shapes of many Indian lodges.

Doubt, and perhaps fear, tingled at the ends of his fingers as he turned his bay down one of the wry watercourses, but he did not even consider turning back. The watercourse made a hundred unexpected turns and came out on level ground with the first

tepees of the encampment just in front of him.

At least a hundred dogs started howling when he approached. There was a movement to one side of him. A sentinel. He had been seated not a stone's throw away, but so immovable that Claggett had taken him to be a part of the country.

He rode to a sort of trail that wandered through the encampment where he was surrounded by jabbering, excited Indians that came pouring from every tepee flap. Men, boys, squaws—they seemed more excited than hostile.

"Pitah-Ococon!" he said, lifting one finger. It meant "Eagle Head" in the tongue of the Blackfeet, and was all of the language he had learned.

"Pitah-Otocon!" the voices jabbered.

A tall warrior came up, adjusting his eagle feather, squinting suspiciously from eyes filled with sleep. He asked something in Blackfoot, then, when Claggett did not understand, he said, "You see Eagle Head? Eagle Head great chief. Tepee far. Me Chief Spotted Horse. You talk me."

"Pitah-Otocon!" Claggett repeated.

SPOTTED HORSE gave up after a few more tries, gestured, and stalked ahead with Claggett riding close behind him. The encampment reached for more than a mile, and Eagle Head's lodge was at the far end of it.

It was large, perhaps forty feet across the base, made of many buffalo skins sewn together, decorated with symbols of the owner's glory.

Spotted Horse lifted the flap of the great lodge and went inside. He stayed for about five minutes, then he crawled out and stood straight in a manner which indicated how great was the honor of speaking to the chief of all the Piegans.

"Eagle Head!" he said, pointing to the entrance.

Claggett bent double and went inside. A piece of bull-back fat had been thrown in the embers of the lodge fire, and it burned with a bright, sputtering flare.

For a moment Claggett could see nothing except the flame, then he became conscious of a man squatting behind it on a heap of buffalo robes.

The man was very old. His face was sunken and wrinkled until it looked like a withered potato. The flesh of his hands and arms had disappeared until they were dried skin stretched over skeleton. He looked at Claggett for a while, and then lifted one hand in a signal of greeting.

"How!"

"How!" responded Claggett. "I am Claggett of Fort Benton."

"Yes. You come on steamboat to look for bird. You look for bird tonight?"

Claggett was surprised to discover the ancient chief knowing so much about him. Then he thought of Lola. She must have told him.

Eagle Head drew a feather-decorated redstone pipe from beneath the robe at his feet, and laid it across the points of his knees while he rubbed tobacco and dry willow bark together. He stuffed the pipe bowl full, and started it smoking with an ember dug from the heart of the fire. All this took about five minutes. When he was finished he motioned to Claggett to sit across from him.

The smoke of the pipe was bitter, but Claggett puffed it as he had seen Assiniboines doing at Fort Union, blowing at the ground, the sky, and passing it back with his right hand.

"I have come in peace," Claggett said. "The great white chief, Culbertson, wishes to be friends with the Blackfeet. He is hurt because the Blackfeet do not come to trade. He has been told the Blackfeet trade their robes for strongwater at the fort of Leacox, and that Leacox tells them to bring him the white man's hair."

Chief Eagle Head slowly drew on his pipe. After a long wait he answered.

"Strongwater like smallpox in bottle. Bad for Blackfoot. Old company enemy of Blackfoot, too. Last year at Fort McKenzie my children were called to trade, and then met by bullets from the strong-gun."

Claggett told him it was Harvey who fired the cannon at Fort McKenzie, and that Harvey was with the opposition, but the chief remained expressionless. He waited until Claggett was finished, then he slapped his palms together, and a squaw advanced from the shadows.

The movement surprised Claggett. He thought that the chief and himself were alone in the vast tent. Now he saw there

were several others—squaws, and boys too young for eagle feathers.

A squaw carried a couple of little iron trade bowls to them. They were filled with hot, native tea.

"You drink before you ride," said Eagle Head.

Evidently the meeting was at an end. Claggett tasted the liquid. It was bitter, with a flavor of sage about it. He drank it and stood. Eagle Head said something to the squaw. She went outside, and in a few minutes a young warrior entered. The warrior was First Rider.

He stood hawklike, as though Claggett was a stranger.

"Hello, First Rider," Claggett said.

First Rider raised his palm, and said something in the Blackfoot tongue.

EAGLE HEAD issued a command, "Take white man to the bluffs of his fort. He is our guest. He came in peace. He must return in peace."

First Rider made an abrupt movement with his hand to indicate the order would be carried out. Dawn was coming up over the distant line of mountains when they went outside. A squaw was holding Claggett's horse. He mounted, and waited while a boy brought First Rider's pinto. As they rode from the encampment, two other riders joined them—a middle-aged warrior with a scarred face, and a heavy-set man who looked as if he had considerable white blood.

First Rider took the lead. They rode slowly along the bottoms past many little groups of tents, then up a trail which zigzagged along the steep face of a hill. From there a ridge pointed straight for the bench country.

Claggett had had no chance to become very familiar with the country, but a simple process of triangulation with the most prominent escarpment of the Bear Paw mountains gave him the direction of Fort Benton. It was in the deep cut of the Missouri, almost directly to the south, but First Rider turned his horse along the edge of the bench land and headed east.

After half a mile he called to First Rider. First Rider rode straight on, pretending not to hear. Claggett shouted again, then he drew up on the reins. First Rider spun his pinto round on a tight hackamore so he danced in a circle, the scar-faced warrior came up on one side, and the powerful man who seemed to have white blood on the other.

"Where are you taking me?" Claggett demanded.

First Rider sat with his spine as rigid as the lance he carried in his hand. Naked to the waist, his face and chest striped with Chinese yellow—he looked older than his nineteen years. He started to answer in staccato monosyllables, but the heavy man cut him off.

"Why, Claggett, we're taking you to another chief—War Chief Hawk down on the Marias."

He spoke like a white man. Claggett turned and gave him closer scrutiny. Like the others he was painted and naked to the waist, but he was more heavily boned and powerfully muscled. He was dark, but it was not the bronze darkness of the full-bloods, and a black stubble of beard grew around his square chin.

"You're a white man!" Claggett said.

The fellow laughed as though the statement amused him.

"You do not know who I am? My name is Bird, and the worst half of me is white."

"Jemmy-Jock!"

"Jemmy-Jock he calls me! Yes, I am Jemmy-Jock, the half-white who hates all whites."

"Even the white man of the opposition company?"

Jemmy-Jock's lips twisted in sort of a smile. "Chouteau, Opposition, Hudson's Bay—I hate them all. Listen—I look for the day when there will be no white men beyond the forks of the Yellowstone. Perhaps just one—that blackrobe, DeSmet, so I can baptize my babies. Tell me, Claggett, what did the old chief say to you?"

"We smoked a pipe, that is all."

Jemmy-Jock turned suddenly, nudging his horse close, throwing his short-barrelled percussion rifle to his shoulder and aiming so the muzzle was close to Claggett's temple.

"Tell me what he said!"

Claggett sat very still, his stomach gone bottomless at the prospect of being blown to eternity, but he repeated in a voice that sounded calm, "We smoked a pipe."

"Perhaps you do not believe that I would pull this trigger?"

"Then how could you take me to Chief Hawk?"

"No. Then I could not take you to Hawk." Jemmy-Jock lowered the rifle with something like admiration in his dark eyes. "He is a real chief, Claggett. He is not old, and brittle-boned, with the chill of winter in his heart." He kept his gaze on Claggett, but he was speaking for the benefit of First Rider, "Eagle Head was great once, but now he would rather sit in his lodge and talk to white men than to ride the war trails of his enemies. He needs a younger chief to take his place. A war chief like First Rider. Do you not agree?"

"First Rider? A chief?" Claggett laughed. "He would sell his people for a few bottles of Leacox's strongwater."

The shot went home. First Rider had not forgotten the incident on the boat, the accusations of Lola. Furthermore, he had a secret awe of Claggett after the duel. He thought Claggett was a mighty chief among the white men, and that made his derision hurt the more.

"Come!" said Jemmy-Jock. "We will ride to Chief Hawk!"

PART IV

THE WARLIKE BLOODS

CLAGGETT was unarmed, but it would have been suicide to attempt an escape across the prairie anyway. He relaxed the reins on the big bay and followed along.

In an hour they reached a point of the hills looking on the confluence of the Teton and Marias Rivers. There were a couple of hundred tepees down there. It looked like the Piegan camp, or the camp of any plains Indians, but these were the Bloods, the most warlike band in the Northwest.

They took him to a tepee as large as Eagle Head's, and even more gorgeously decorated in red, yellow and white paint, telling in pictures the war triumphs of its owner—Chief Hawk.*

Hawk must have had some warning they were on their way, for he was sitting by a little fire in the middle of the lodge with a half-dozen lesser chiefs when Claggett was pushed through the entrance.

Hawk was a tall, raw-boned man with vicious eyes. He had scar decorations on his cheeks, his ears were pierced and fitted with small gold rings which jiggled rapidly with his nervous movements. His eyes impaled Claggett from the first moment, and did not shift as Jemmy-Jock talked rapidly in the Blackfoot tongue.

Hawk asked something, bobbing his head jerkily, and Jemmy-Jock translated: "Hawk asks what Chief Eagle Head said to you."

"We smoked a pipe in friendship, that was all."

First Rider started to say something, but Hawk quieted him with a flip of his hand. He repeated more questions, and Jemmy-Jock relayed them. "How many cannon were at Fort Benton?" "How many men?" "How much strongwater?"

Claggett answered each question promptly, doubling the number of cannon, doubling the number of men, but making the strongwater none at all.

Jemmy-Jock stood, translating rapidly, cleaning dirt from beneath his nails with the point of his Hudson's Bay skinning knife. Suddenly he spun around and pressed the point of the knife to Claggett's throat, just over the juglar.

"How many cannon?" he asked.

Claggett stood rigid, trying to match the impassiveness of the Indians seated around the lodge. He answered the same number as before.

The chiefs muttered to one another, and one of them, an old, flat-faced man named Hump Fat, beat knuckles against his knees, objecting.

THERE was a sharp exchange between Hawk and Hump Fat. Hawk sprang to his feet and strode the lodge. This activity seemed to burn some of the nervousness from him. He sat down cross-legged, and for several minutes he stared at the little flames of the fire without moving. Still without shifting his gaze, he dipped his long fingers into the pulverized earth of the floor, allowing repeated handfuls to trickle through, so the air became difficult to breathe. He reminded Claggett of a soothsayer, reading a fortune. At last he gave

*Hawk became an enemy of the Chouteau Company and all other whites after a journey across what is now Wyoming where he observed the many wagon trains crossing the Oregon Trail. Although usually relentless, he showed unexpected quirks of sportsmanship, once sparing the life of a cornered trapper and feasting him on buffalo hump because he admired the man's tomahawk technique.

a command, and Claggett was led away.

He was taken to a much smaller lodge than Hawk's. There he was made to sit on the earth while his wrists and ankles were bound with harsh rawhide thongs. An old warrior sat down just outside the flap where he could see both inside and out.

THE sun rose high. Although the air outside was cool with approaching autumn, it soon became stifling inside the lodge. At last, toward late afternoon, Jemmy-Jock came and stood over him, smiling in a satisfied, philosophical manner.

"You were lying about the cannon, and about everything else at Fort Benton," he said. "You thought you could frighten the Hawk. But you were wrong. Wrong, just like the other white men. You and your kind are no match for the Indian. No match for Blackfeet. You might have found that out if it had not been your fate to die young."

"You intend to kill me?"

Jemmy-Jock looked far off, as though the blackish skins of the tepee were transparent and he could see some object through them. He spoke musingly.

"Of course, there might be such a thing as making yourself too valuable to kill. For instance, now, if you chose to tell the *truth* about things at Fort Benton—"

"I'm not a traitor."

"No? You will tell us nothing? But perhaps you will. The Blackfeet have many tricks. Tricks which make it easy for a man to talk. For instance, there is the little matter of placing live coals between the toes. The pain makes you writhe, and scream, and sweat all over your skin. And the smell of burning flesh—that is not pleasant, either. And then there are the porcupine quills, thrust beneath the fingernails, one by one, and little by little. That is good. And there are all those other things the squaws know how to do with cactus, and rawhide, and stone flesh-scrapers."

Claggett tried to answer confidently. 'Curbertson expects me to come back by nightfall. If I do not, he will go to Eagle Head to learn the reason. How will it be between the Piegans and the Bloods when Eagle Head learns you disobeyed and brought me here?"

Jemmy-Jock's eyes became thin slits in his deeply browned face. Then he shrugged and spat.

"You're a liar, Claggett. You're a pretty good one, too—but still a liar. However, if Culbertson does come looking for you, so much the better. I can think of no hair I'd rather have to decorate my lodgepole."

Jemmy-Jock cut the thongs binding Claggett's feet and motioned him to get up.

"Come. We have a visitor you will enjoy meeting. An old friend of yours. The master of the opposition company."

"Leacox?"

"The same."

'You are a fool, Jemmy-Jock."

"Why?"

"How will it benefit the Blackfeet to beat the Chouteau company if the opposition is only made strong?"

"Ha! And you call me a fool! Listen, I will tell you. You have seen a Cree bow? One of those shortbows made of elk horn? There is no man with strength to break one of those bows. But if you unwind the lashings, any squaw can break the pieces, one by one. So with the fur companies. We will take them one by one. After Chouteau is smashed, we can play with the opposition as we wish."

They went outside. A cool wind swept the flats of the Marias, refreshing as water to thirst after the suffocating heat of the tepee. Above, the yellowed leaves of the cottonwoods fluttered on their wiry stems. Squaws were carrying water from the river in leather bags, laughing and chattering their half-Oriental tongue.

He noticed several horses waiting with dragging bridles outside the tent of Hawk. He stepped inside, and the heat almost staggered him. There was a fire going in the center, adding to the heat of the sun. He paused with eyes smarting from smoke. Twenty or twenty-five men were sitting cross-legged around the council fire, the light from the flames reflecting from their oiled and painted bodies.

All of them were Indians except one—Leacox, who sat directly facing him, looking very powerful in his fringed buckskins.

Claggett walked forward, but his pace was too slow to suit Jemmy-Jock who gave him an unexpected shove. His hands were still tied behind him. It effected his balance so that he stumbled forward and went to his

knees, ramming one of the chiefs almost into the fire.

Jemmy-Jock pulled him back, laughing under his breath. Such things appealed to his satanic sense of humor.

"How many cannon now, white man?" asked Hawk.

Hawk had pretended to need an interpreter that morning, but now he spoke passable English.

Without hesitating, Claggett named the same figure as before.

"That's a lie!" said Leacox.

Claggett gave no sign of hearing him. He stood straight, looking into the eyes of Hawk. Leacox was enraged at being thus ignored. He sprang up and strode around the circle to face Claggett.

"That's a lie. I know how many cannon there are at Fort Benton."

"Then why does Hawk have to call me here to ask me?"

The shot was a good one. Someone translated it, and there was a mutter around the council fire. Leacox heard and his rage leaped out of control. He stepped forward, swinging a brutal blow to the side of Claggett's head.

Claggett reeled backward. Leacox followed with two quick, springing steps, and aimed a second smash. Claggett came to with his face in the pulverized dirt of the floor. He struggled to his knees. The Indians did not seem to have moved. They merely watched him with expressionless eyes.

Leacox had walked back to his old place on the other side of the fire. He stood, rubbing the knuckles of his right hand, smiling a little. He sat down, cross-legged.

Jemmy-Jock leaned over Claggett, his dark eyes sparkling.

"You see—you are no match for your white brother."

"Take these bindings off my wrists and I'll show you if I'm his match or not."

Jemmy-Jock's eyes really shone now. He asked something in the Blackfoot tongue, but Hawk shook his head.

"The Fort Benton man will die!" intoned Hawk. "Take him away."

A couple of warriors were called to escort Claggett back to the tepee. The same old guard was there, waiting. He stood, drawing a rawhide thong from beneath his robe of spotted buffalo calf. Claggett sat down and the warriors stood near as the old man again bound his ankles.

The sun slanted down, turning the clay hills to gold. It sank beyond the horizon, and the hills became purple. With early darkness, a tom-tom commenced to beat. Another tom-tom joined it, and another. Indians commenced the *ki-ya, ki-ya* chant of a war dance. It rose in volume and intensity with more and more voices until it became a wild bedlam. A great fire was burning, casting flickering yellow through the tepee flap.

The guard, who had dozed from time to time, now sat up, holding his feather-decorated lance in a warlike manner. Claggett made use of his preoccupation by twisting at his bonds, but the hard rawhide was ungiving, and it only bit his skin.

He sensed something behind him, a slight vibration of the lodge, a hint of air passing. He thought someone had entered, but he did not turn. He remained rigid, staring straight ahead. A minute passed, perhaps two. He decided it was imagination—only a breeze shaking the lodge, only his tight-stretched nerves.

"Claggett!"

It was Lola. Her voice was the barest whisper, scarcely discernible over the beat of tom-toms, the cries of dancing, drunken warriors.

She went on, her lips so close he could feel the stir of her breath against the back of his neck.

"You must not try to escape. They will not kill you before tomorrow."

He nodded to show that he had heard. There was no sound of her leaving. Not even the tremble of the lodge. Nothing but his instinct to tell that she was gone.

OUTSIDE, Lola crept into the shadow of some travois poles which had been heaped against the side of the lodge. She crouched for a while, unseen in the dense shadow, then she crept out and walked swiftly along the trail winding along the middle of the encampment.

She went past the fire of cottonwood trunks where two or three hundred Indians were working themselves into a frenzy on the liquor Leacox had brought.

Lola had no direct word, but she was sure

there would be an attack on Fort Benton next day.

She found First Rider standing apart, watching the dance.

"Why are you here?" he asked darkly.

"I came to learn why you have not returned to the encampment of your people. Are you now a Blood?"

"I am a Piegan."

"Is it a Piegan who is traitor to the orders of his grandfather and a chief?"

"Did you come to spy on me?"

"I came to learn if it was true you gave Claggett to his enemies as it had been rumored."

First Rider was silent for a while, then he blurted, "They promised no harm would come to him. Jemmy-Jock promised. He promised there would only be questions."

"Then you have been tricked?"

First Rider did not answer. Instead, he asked, "You are going to tell Eagle Head?"

"Yes. And he will have you whipped with your own breechclout, and you will be disgraced, and you can go live with the Bloods, or the Gros Ventres, or—"

"What do you ask that I do?"

"Free the white man. Do as you promised Eagle Head—take him safely to the bluffs overlooking Fort Benton."

First Rider signed with his hand, and turned away. He scarcely glanced at the ever-widening circle of braves who danced and chanted for the destruction of Fort Benton. He went on along the trail to the flats where horses had been gathered for the night. There he caught his paint pony and a bay for Claggett, and led them through the brush of the Marias to a point opposite the middle of the camp.

By then the darkness was dense. No moon yet, and a hint of autumn haze dulling the stars. A grove of cottonwood gave concealment as he walked up from the river and crossed the flat. After leaving the cottonwoods, he crept on hands and knees along a little dry wash to the edge of the camp.

The first tepee was a poverty-ridden affair of discarded hides. It was deserted, with every last squaw and papoose gone to see the great singing and dancing of the warriors.

He moved more slowly now. A gaunt black dog bounded from the shadow and commenced a furious baying. First Rider made no sound. He rose to one knee, slid his shortbow from his shoulder, fitted an arrow. There was a little twang of bow sinew, the whisk of a shaft through the dark, the thump of the heavy iron head as it smashed through the dog's chest.

The baying stopped. He moved on. There was the lodge where Claggett was prisoner with the heap of travois poles heaped at the back.

He moved quietly among the poles, slid beneath, felt along the bottom of the lodge. A peg had been removed. He slid under, making no more sound than a night-prowling bobcat.

The lodge was dark, but he could make out Claggett's shadow. He was sitting about in the middle. Beyond him was the V of the flap, with the guard sitting there, profile lighted by the war fire.

First Rider came on slowly, pausing only an arm's reach from Claggett. Claggett must have known he was there, but he sat still, and very straight.

First Rider did not risk a whisper. He drew his hunting knife, slid the blade between Claggett's wrists, cut the thongs with one, quick twist.

Claggett's wrists were free, but he remained the same, rigid, looking straight ahead.

The guard sensed no movement. He heard no sound. He still watched the dance. First Rider rocked back to a cross-legged sitting position. Once more the shortbow slid from his bare shoulder, an arrow was drawn from his quiver, it was notched in the sinew. He drew back with a powerful swing of his arm and drove the arrow. The breeze of its passage fanned Claggett's cheek. There was a thump like an axe striking rotten wood as the three-inch head drove through the guard's ribs, the shaft plunging until only its split feather tail protruded.

The guard sucked breath with a high, screaming sound. He sprang up, his cry turning to a death rattle in his throat, and slid face foremost to the ground.

Claggett prayed that the cry would go unnoticed amid the general bedlam of the dance. He heard someone shout down by the next lodge. Others answered him. Moccasined feet came thudding that way.

First Rider vaulted Claggett and cut the thongs at his ankles. Claggett started to stand, but there was still one twist of raw-

hide around his knees. He stumbled and fell forward.

"Come!" whispered First Rider.

Claggett asked for the knife. It took three or four precious seconds to cut the thong. The Indians were right outside the lodge now. They had paused to look at the dead guard.

Claggett tried to locate First Rider. He was already escaping beneath the edge of the lodge. Claggett wriggled out after him. The travois poles tangled him. He stood, battling his way free.

It seemed light after the darkness inside the tepee. First Rider grabbed his elbow. "Quick! The river! Horses!"

First Rider commenced to run. Claggett took a step to follow, but an Indian loomed unexpectedly in front of him. The Indian was watching First Rider, probably mistaking him for an Assiniboine on a horse raid. He threw his musket to his shoulder, but Claggett rammed him, sending the shot wild.

The Indian spun around, grabbing his musket by the barrel, swinging the stock at Claggett's head. Claggett shifted inside, catching part of the blow with his shoulder, part with his skull. He smashed the Indian backward. A second blow drove him to the ground. The Indian was drawing a tomahawk. It fell and Claggett snatched it up.

The Indian was crawling away on hands and knees. Claggett started in the direction First Rider had taken, but several warriors had appeared, cutting him off. Others were coming around the lodge in both sides, too.

It was shadowy there, where he was standing. Deeper shadow just behind, among the tangled travois poles. He went to hands and knees, crawled to the edge of the lodge, ducked inside the same way he had escaped.

He ran across the lodge, through the flap, stepped over the fallen body of the guard. He stood still for a second while warriors fresh from the dance orgy ran by within arm's reach. He moved over to the shadow of the next tepee.

A painted warrior faced him suddenly. It was as much surprise for one man as the other. Claggett had a momentary impression of his yellow-circled eyes and striped cheeks —his breath, too, reeking of the cheap trade whiskey that Leacox had brought.

It took the warrior a second to get his bearings. He sprang with a broad-bladed dagger swung high over his head. Claggett deflected the blow with his forearm, whisked out the captured tomahawk, and drove it for the warrior's head. It connected. The warrior fell, but Claggett did not know then, nor did he ever know, whether he had killed the man.

THE entire camp was crying the alarm now. Even squaws were out, armed with clubs. Claggett ducked inside a lodge and stood, very quiet, amid the darkness and the familiar, smoky smells of the Blackfoot home.

The hubbub continued for a long time—maybe fifteen minutes. Many of the warriors were still chanting the words of the war dance. He recognized Hawk's voice, shouting commands.

The noise became less. Claggett felt safe to peep from the tepee flap. Torches had come alight all over the camp, and small groups seemed to be searching from tepee to tepee.

It was only a question of time. He had to escape. He discarded all his clothing except his moccasins. In the heaps of robes along the side of the lodge he found a clout of buffalo calf. He tied it around his waist. His hair was long enough to be drawn in a clump at the back of his head. He streaked his body with charcoal from the dead lodge fire, thrust the tomahawk in the tie-string of his clout, and stepped out into the central pathway.

No one glanced at him. He walked, trying to imitate the speed and actions of the others, watching for a chance to move away into the darkness. He began to notice that most of the searchers were not warriors at all—they were squaws and boys. The warriors were gathered in a dense mob down by the war fire.

Hawk was there in the center of things, dancing on the toes of his moccasins, shaking his scalp-bedecked lance above his head, his voice ringing in a series of staccato utterances. His speech became more and more a chant. Other voices joined in. It became a wavering babble to the time of hundreds of stamping moccasins. Now and then a gun would ring out, sending its streak of burning powder into the dark.

A warrior, naked except for his breechclout, rode through the camp on a buckskin cayuse, running one herd of horses, leading others by their tie-strings. More warriors came, and more horses. Hawk was gone from the dancing fire. The crowd was breaking up into dozens of shouting groups, every man looking for his mount.

It puzzled Claggett for a while. All he could think of was himself. Why the horses to search for him? Then he guessed. Hawk thought he had escaped and was on his way to warn Fort Benton. Therefore, to preserve surprise, the attack would have to be then—that very night.

Suddenly the thought of his own safety seemed of secondary importance. He would have to get through and warn the fort.

He thought of First Rider and what he had said about the horses down by the river.

He knew the approximate direction.

He headed across the encampment at a swift trot, passing close to warriors who were too filled with Leacox's whiskey to see through his disguise. He passed near the tent where he had been prisoner, crossed a sage-covered flat. The river was there, running between banks overgrown by rose briar, chokecherry and cottonwood.

He stopped and looked around. The melee of the camp was distant now. He could hear the soft sounds of water over stones.

He walked slowly, picking his way through bramble, fending briars from his naked chest and shoulders. The brush became deeper, almost impenetrable, and there was a mile of it where First Rider could have concealed the horse. He came to an ancient box elder tree with three trunks rising at forty-five degree angles. He climbed to the middle and looked around. The brush was solid on every side — no trail, no break where a horse had trampled it down.

A half moon was up, breaking through goosefeather clouds. The Bloods were riding away, three and four abreast, legs hanging long, bodies bounding stiff-spined with the trotting movements of their horses. They carried lances decorated with feathers, trinkets and bits of human hair. Many of them had long guns, some were armed with bows and quivers of arrows, all carried round shields of buffalo back hide, tough enough to stop many a rifle ball.

They made a long column across the cottonwood-studded flats. They splashed across the Teton near its mouth, riding belly deep through water silvered by moonlight, and went on toward Fort Benton.

Hopelessly Claggett went on searching for the horse. He kept to the knee-deep buckbrush along the edge, turning in at every little trail or trampled spot. He decided there was no horse, or that First Rider had taken it with him.

And then, unexpectedly, he came on the bay, tied to a two-inch chokeberry trunk.

Instantly time became vital again. Perhaps, if he rode swiftly, if the horse was strong enough, he could reach the fort in time.

The bay was half-wild, and tired of standing. There was no saddle, only a piece of red blanket tied on with thongs. On his

lower jaw was a rawhide hackamore, or "Blackfoot bridle."

Claggett was a couple of minutes getting on the horse's back. He managed to stay by tangling his fingers in its mane.

His first intention had been to cross the Teton where it joined with the Marias and follow the ridge of hills which looked down on the Missouri. Now he could see that an area of bad lands lay between. The best he could do was ride on the heels of the war party and hope to beat them when they reached the prairie.

The horse was willing to travel. Claggett gave him his head and galloped across the flat.

Mud from deep-sunk hoof tracks was still drifting into the Teton's clear current at the ford. Beyond, the trail was easy to follow, marked first by the wet from hoofs, and then trampled buffalo grass and sage.

HE CAUGHT sight of the Bloods many miles away, winding up the zigzag trail to the bench lands. They were too far. No chance of overtaking them. Still, he rode on. From the rim he caught sight of them again far out across the moon-silvered prairie.

The bay became unwilling when it meant going toward Fort Benton rather than to the camp of the Piegans. Claggett had to fight him continually, twisting his low jaw with the hackamore.

The Bloods dropped from view in the deep depression of the Missouri. There was a grayness of dawn over the faraway line of mountains. To the east and south he could see for a hundred and fifty miles through the dust-free atmosphere. The country was undisturbed, lifeless. As limitless as the firmament overhead.

The frenzied happenings of the past day seemed improbable now. A nightmare. He, Jefferson Claggett, PhD, curator of birds, naked to the waist, streaked with charcoal, dressed in moccasins and breechclout, carrying a tomahawk. He remembered what Culbertson had said to him that summer aboard the boat—about the Indian country making a killer of a man. Well, perhaps he was. It should follow that he feared this Indian country, but he didn't. Its breadth, its primeval nature appealed to him, seemed a part of him. The wild winds of the prairies with their odor of sage and cured grasses was like a drug, urging him to forsake all the softness and ease of the civilization he had known.

Over the steady rhythm of the horse's trot came something that shook like thunder. He drew up. The sound came again, the sharp, staccato sound of rifle fire, the faraway cries of Indians.

The attack was on.

He lashed the bay with the string of the rawhide hackamore. The hoofs drowned out the sound of fighting. It had stopped when he reined in at the edge of the bluffs overlooking Cotton Bottom.

The sun was near rising now, and far below the horses and riders were plain in miniature, like ants. He watched as a column of them veered around and started toward the fort, fanning wider and wider. A second column came, and then a third.

THERE was only an occasional shot. The ringing shouts of charging warriors came plainly. It seemed to take them a long time to cover the distance. He began to notice things—dark objects strewn along the ground—those were fallen men and horses.

The charge swept on toward the fort, its fanning line once more converging. They seemed very close—almost ready to overrun the stockade. A flash came from among the pickets. It was a signal, and the whole stockade sparkled with gunfire in the early light. Later, after what seemed many seconds, the sound of the shooting reached him. Then the cannon blossomed with large masses of yellow.

Against the weight of grape, the charge broke in several segments. It became disordered. The shooting from the fort was frenzied and intermittent after the first concerted blast. One by one the cannon cut loose again.

The Bloods drew back out of range. They retreated farther and farther. One file of riders commenced picking its way through the broken hills in defeat. Others started up the draws. It occurred to Claggett that he was alone, and a single white man would get scant mercy from the Bloods this morning.

He headed northeast to where the bluffs sloped down to the Missouri. Once at the river, he could cross if necessary and follow in the cottonwoods which grew solidly along the east bank.

It was a five- or six-mile journey. One group of Indians came up in sight of him, but they did not follow. He stopped for a while atop the steep, two-hundred-foot bank looking down on the river. There was no trail, and it took considerable urging before the bay would go over the edge.

The horse finally set his feet and started down, sliding on haunches through the friable clay. Claggett stayed on by holding to the mane with both hands.

Halfway down he glimpsed a trio of horsemen. Bloods. There was no stopping. The Bloods drew up and waited. He was only forty or fifty paces away when the bluff eased off. There was no chance of making a run for it. He rode on, trying to make a brave front.

Seven more riders appeared. One of them was a white man. Leacox! Jemmy-Jock was there, too.

Jemmy-Jock kicked his horse to a trot, came close, and cried:

"Claggett!"

He turned and shouted something in Blackfoot. Hawk rode up, tall and truculent. Leacox right after him. This was no ordinary band of escaping Bloods. This was the high command itself.

Lecox drew up, sawing savagely on the bit so that his horse was forced half-around. It took him a second to recognize Claggett in his charcoal and breechclout.

"Claggett. Yes, it *is* Claggett. Like a bad penny. But you'll not turn up on me again. You've dogged me as far as you're going to."

Claggett saw the pistol come up from Leacox's belt. He knew it was aimed. He expected the flash. Fear? It had all happened too quickly. He had no time to fling himself to the ground. No time for anything.

The gun roared, its muzzle so close he could feel the sting of burning powder, but the aim had been spoiled by the swinging arm of Jemmy-Jock.

Leacox cursed him and tried to draw down with the second barrel, but Jemmy-Jock rode close, thrusting the pistol high. The two horses milled around, kicking dirt. The pistol fell to the ground.

Jemmy-Jock bent down, holding the mane with one hand, snatched up the pistol and thrust it in his belt.

"What the devil—?" started Leacox.

Jemmy-Jock shook his long, black hair and laughed.

"Leacox—let me tell you. All white men are equal in my eyes. You of the opposition only a trifle worse than the rest."

Leacox twisted his horse around to face Hawk. Hawk had not changed expression. His face was bold, highly accentuated by the morning light, his eyes sharp with hatred. Leacox had intended to remonstrate, but the answer was so plainly written on Hawk's face that he said nothing.

Perhaps Hawk would have called for the deaths of both white men, but Jemmy-Jock had a better idea.

"I heard a story from First Rider—a strange story. He told me how you two white men once fought a duel. Tied together, wrist to wrist, and each with a knife. He said you fought in the water, but that would not be good to watch. I would rather see it here, on the shore."

The Indians were in a circle, one blood-smeared from an arm wound, all grotesque in their war paint. One of the warriors knew enough English to catch what Jemmy-Jock said. He spoke rapidly to the others, gesturing with abrupt movements.

There was a mutter of approval. A cackle of laughter. The eyes turned to Chief Hawk. Hawk sat straight, unchanging. Without speaking he drew a long, keen Green River knife from the beaded scabbard at his waist, and tossed it end over end to Claggett.

"Ha!" cried Jemmy-Jock, hopping down from his horse. He cut a saddle thong and held it in the air, motioning for the two men to dismount and come forward.

Death had seemed very close to Claggett a moment before. Inevitable. This fifty-fifty chance was a reprieve. Maybe a pardon. He felt relief rather than fear as he slid down from his horse and walked over with

Hawk's Green River knife in his right hand.

He extended his left arm for the thong. Leacox was there a moment later, his own knife in his hand. He looked at Claggett with glinting eyes and thrust out his arm. It trembled a little, though not from fear, rather from the hatred that burned him.

Jemmy-Jock fairly danced with elation as he tied the thongs. He bound the wrists close together, then he said: "You will wait until I give the signal. When I—"

Leacox had his head turned and seemed to be listening. Without warning he twisted, bringing the knife blade up underhand. It was aimed for Claggett's groin, a round, bent-arm sweep, blade first.

Claggett was caught off balance. He twisted enough to escape part of the blade. The knife bit into the folded leather of his breechclout and hung up for a second. Leacox cursed and came forward in an attempt to sink the point, but Claggett rolled, bending double.

He was powerful. As powerful as Leacox, and as heavy. The move propelled Leacox from his feet. He sailed over Claggett's doubled body, the wrist thong stopped him and snapped him down so that he struck the earth on the tail of his spine.

It was a punishing blow. Leacox had been unprepared for it. He had been thinking only of the knife. He twisted over, half stunned. Claggett was above him with Hawk's knife. Leacox had no chance to strike back. He screamed and with the quickness of reflex hacked the thong that bound his wrist. He rolled free, and rolled again, and again.

He sprang up, looking for the knife that had been knocked from his grasp. It lay glinting, half-buried in the dirt. He tried to snatch it up, but his fingers missed. Claggett was coming towards him.

He screamed something—a cry for mercy. It was a strange sound to be coming from Leacox. Claggett thought it was a trick to win a second. He jumped forward to kick the knife out of reach. Leacox ran down the slight slope to the river, he stumbled and fell among the knee-high sagebrush, sprang to his feet and went on. Claggett watched him. Jemmy-Jock shouted and laughed. Hawk made an abrupt, exasperated gesture with the flat of his hand, threw up the short-barrelled musket he carried, froze the head on Leacox's back, and fired.

LEACOX took a few steps, stumbling over his toes, at last to plow cheek foremost in the white, clay dirt. He lay still with a little, dark spot on the back of his buckskin jacket becoming larger and larger as the rough-dressed leather soaked up blood.

Claggett looked at the still form of Leacox while the fire of battle cooled in his veins. Hawk swung down from his horse, plucked a scalping knife from the belt of one of his warriors, strode to Leacox's body, and with a swift, practiced movement, took his scalp.

Claggett felt a trifle sick. He thought of himself. He wondered if there would be a bullet for him, too. He looked at the inscrutable face of Hawk, at the half-smiling Jemmy-Jock, at the others. He noticed that the Green River knife was still in his hands. He reached it toward Hawk, but Hawk made no move to take it.

Claggett understood. The knife was a gift. A gift meant that he would be spared. It called for some gift in return. He twisted the heavy gold ring from the third finger of his right hand and gave it to Hawk. Hawk tried it on each of his fingers, and ended by placing it on his thumb.

No more was said. Claggett caught his horse, climbed on, and rode away with the Indians silently watching him.

It was a relief when he was out of range.

He drew up at the edge of Cotton Bottom. The gate of the fort was open and white men were wandering over the battleground.

Claggett was certain then, as he was certain of anything, that he would not be on the steamboat when it left next year. He would stay on in this vast, new country. He could not have explained his decision, nor why it had occurred to him then.

He relaxed his grip on the hackamore, and the horse turned toward the bluffs. Claggett did not stop him. He let the horse go up one of the interminable twisting gullies to prairie rim, and after that in the direction of the encampment of the Piegans—toward the lodge, where, he was certain, Lola would be waiting for him.

. . . . the Steel Cage Had Proved Strong Enough to Hold a Gorilla

CLOWN FACE

By PAUL ANNIXTER

IT WAS a land of breath-taking superlatives, of sheer perpendiculars. Mountain peak upon stupendous mountain peak soared upward, tier on tier to the turquoise sky. The lower slopes were choked with dense woods of fir and deodar, high as cathedral spires, shooting up out of thick, black jungles of rhododendron and all bearded with hanging, gray lichens which dripped eternally because of the ceaseless mists which lay between the peaks. Between forest slopes where the winds never slept, and white-toothed peaks where the storms never abated, pitched bare four and five thousand foot slopes covered with snow, rock rubble and boulders.

In one of the high valleys a field party of three white men and eight natives were encamped. For a month they had been here, existing amid hardly believable dangers and hardships, spied upon by fierce, inimical eyes they could sometimes feel, but never saw. They were Beaumont and Seldes, one Briton, one American, partners with a con-

siderable reputation as wild-animal collectors, out at present after living specimens and camera studies of some of the rarer Himalayan wild life. The third white man was a Mr. Corning, of Los Angeles, nominally in charge of the expedition, said to be an experienced big game hunter and rather famous for getting what he went out after. In the present venture, however, he had gone farther and got less than ever before in his high-pressure career.

The natives were Kashmir hillmen and Gurkas, for this was one of the high, remote corners of the Tibetan province of Sze-chuan.

Here was one of the few remaining spots on the globe still virgin to the ravages of the magazine rifle and the all-seeing eye of the motion-picture camera. In this mighty jumble of unused plant material—the Tibetan Himalayas—animal life was still antediluvian. Wild life here was as though of another world and age. Here the predatory clans were at their fiercest; bigger, more savagely primal, for here the life struggle was keenest. For these reasons and at great expense—for both the Tibetan and Indian authorities had to be paid and placated—the expedition had been financed to penetrate this remote fastness. Its chief objective was the capture, alive and unharmed, of a specimen of the almost mythical giant panda, which, if successful, called for a cash payment of thirty thousand dollars, a detail which Mr. Corning was prone to reiterate whenever things went wrong.

So far, the one best bet for the success of the expedition was that the services of Beaumont and his side-kick had been secured. When you thought of Tibetan big game you thought of Beaumont, just as you linked Martin Johnson with Africa and Frank Buck with Malaysia. Beaumont was one of the few white hunters who had ever bagged a bull takin, which is a yanu, if you prefer; which is also a devil and a catastrophe on four goat-like legs and the rarest prize left in the category of the big game hunter.

But in spite of Beaumont's presence, the outfit had not done well. The rigors and the altitude had taken it out of the white men. The mystery, cruelty, silence and desolation of this grim land had been wearing them dangerously near to the quick. Corning had brought in motion picture equipment, but the ceaseless mists had made that practically useless. Each day they had tramped the forested slopes to the limit of endurance. Two or three times they had sighted a distant band of takin. Beaumont had shot a bharal, which is a species of mountain sheep, and Corning had bagged an argali, one of the rarest and shyest of living things. Beyond that—just emptiness, combined with a maddeningly noncommittal attitude on the part of their native hunters in regard to any knowledge of the ways or haunts of the panda, the real prize for which they strove.

EITHER the natives knew nothing about the strange beast, or would not tell. Seldes, the most casual member of the party, was quite willing to concede that the panda had become extinct, and let it drop at that. His most imposing thought of the past two weeks had been that every day's march in, meant another grim day's journey to get out; and it had taken them nearly a month to get in from the nearest railroad point of departure. Even Beaumont, supposed to be somewhat of an authority on panda, could only shake his head, his manner a sort of "You never can tell."

"We'll find them on the mountain slopes close to the dense bamboo belts around the twelve-thousand-foot level, if anywhere," he had told Corning. "They feed almost entirely on young bamboo. But the panda is not only the rarest beast alive, he's probably the shyest. We'll have to trek for him and wait for him and he's going to take some finding."

"He's taken some already," Corning said testily. "And I want action."

"I know it, but it isn't jack-rabbits we're out after," Beaumont said thoughtfully. "It's practically the last of a dying species."

From the outset, Corning seemed to expect Beaumont to produce all the big game Tibet had to offer, including the panda, as soon as the party reached the slopes of the Sze-chuan mountains. Now they had been here over a month and save for twice coming upon panda spoor, they were no nearer than before to the consummation of their quest. In the natives they had contacted they met only a sullen silence or an oily indirection on all questions pertaining to the *bei-shung,* as the Tibetans called the panda.

"This is my third trip into this country and I've yet to catch my first glimpse of a panda," Beaumont said. "We'll get no help from the natives. If they know where these parti-colored bear are certain to be found, they'll not tell us. They seem to hold the beast in reverence and a sort of superstitious awe. They won't say anything, but they'll be dead against our shooting a panda and they may give us no end of trouble when we come to attempt to bring one out alive—"

"But there's no law against it," cried Corning. "We're paying them and we're paying the government—handsomely!"

"There are some things money won't buy in this man's country," Beaumont answered. "You can't hurry Tibet; it's just sticking around long enough that'll get us a panda—"

ONE morning at dawn they were awakened by two of the men bringing word that an ounce, or snow leopard, had been caught in one of the pit traps baited with young kid. In twenty minutes the white men were at the pit mouth, yet it was mid-afternoon before the big cat had been safely netted, dragged forth and loosed in a strong new bamboo cage. The ghost-gray creature seemed possessed of a strength and ferocity out of all proportion to its size, which was no greater than that of an American cougar. Its struggles were maniacal, its will seemed indomitable. In the last minutes of the battle, its strength apparently exhausted and its will broken, came an unguarded moment for Seldes. The balled, throbbing, hate-torn body of the great cat struck the bars like an unleashed tornado, and one forepaw shot out, lightning-swift, each bared claw gleaming and razor-sharp.

A shout from Beaumont; the rush of four or five bodies; yells, and the spitting yowl of the gray-white devil as it drew back, licking something from one claw tip with avid tongue. Seldes sat upon the ground where he had been flung as by a giant's slap, a hand over the three-inch gash that had appeared on his left arm.

"Don't ever take the slightest chance with him again," Beaumont warned, when he had inflicted rough surgery on his friend to prevent infection. "Even a Bengal tiger would be easier to tame than this customer and there'll never be a moment when he's not watching for another chance."

"Don't worry, old man," Seldes said wryly. "I'd sooner fool around with a buzz-saw."

For a day or so Corning was appeased by the new catch, a prize rare enough to justify an expedition.

"Just fancy this fellow in one of the big cat cages back home," he gloated, sitting before the leopard's bars. "Here's one bad kitty the public's never had a chance to rubber at."

Then reaction set in; he became meaner to get along with each day, every nerve of the others worn ragged under the strain. Corning might have earned a name as a big game hunter on the African veldt, but he stacked up as a total loss in Tibet. Still, Beaumont, in charge of field operations, would not hear of doubt on their main objective. He, too, had a reputation for getting what he went out after. He had vanished into many a howling unknown and returned in time with everything from giant serpents and crocodiles, to rhinos and four-ton hippos.

Seldes, familiar with the type of burning zeal to which his partner was geared, watched with growing concern the look on Beaumont's lean, leathery face. He had never known the other to be so high-fire on any project—a sort of cumulative urge. Beaumont had come to rest scarcely at all, seemed to rise earlier each morning and his gray eyes of late had taken on an incandescent look. So engrossed had he become that even the grim and equivocal quality of the landscape was quite lost on him—the unnatural hush of the surrounding peaks, the lugubrious drip-drip of the firs.

None of this was lost on Seldes. There were aspects about those empty days that he despaired of ever writing down or telling about when he got back to civilization. The continual conviction that the natives weren't really working with them was part of it, combined with an almost intangible sense that this Tibetan fastness was going to hold on to its own against all invaders.

"Lord, Lord," he groaned one night in the fifth week of their stay. "I wonder if these trees ever stop dripping. I wonder if the wind ever did blow down here among the firs. Just listen to it humming its devil's

song up there at tree line. I say, just how much longer do we aim to hang out in this man's woods?" This was becoming a theme song of Seldes' of late.

"What are you thinking of, Mart, a trek deeper into the mountains?"

"Truth was, I was thinking we hadn't been down to Nepal once in all the time since we landed here. We haven't even seen those little Mongolian dancing girls do their stuff, or the priests or the fire walkers they tell about. Our young lives are wearing away from trailing these beasts. Maybe—it's just an idea—the gods of this land aren't liking such persistence."

FROM somewhere down among the firs came a thin squalling cry. A tiger perhaps—the stubby, thick-bodied Tibetan breed, so different in temperament from the Indian species. The far distance stirred with the tonguing of wild dogs on the trail of some quarry—bigger and heavier than mastiffs, they were—an insensate sound to their cry as if a thread of madness leered through it. Beaumont glanced at Corning.

"Not a bad idea, going down to our main camp for a day or two," he said. "We can bring back the rest of our equipment and fresh pack animals."

"And a new batch of natives, too, old bean. I'm voting for that right now."

"Double that order," grunted Corning.

"Just look at 'em now," said Seldes. "There they sit right under our noses, but the rocks and the trees are more demonstrative and reassuring. Gives a chap a creepy feel—"

They were silent a minute, listening to the murmuring that came from the men's camp. The carriers squatted about their fire in their uncouth yak-skin garments. They were self-obliterating, silent, always obedient, yet ever there was a sense that they were as antipodal as the country itself to the white men's presence here.

"Maybe they talk to the pandas," Seldes muttered whimsically. "Set up warning signs. They're communing with something most of the time, you'll notice, and that something isn't us."

A smile formed on Beaumont's lips.

"We'll arrange for some new porters if possible, but we've got to have men—lots of manpower. I've decided to bring back the steel cage this trip. I've a strong hunch we'll be needing that cage soon in spite of all setbacks."

"It'll be put to good use, never fear, panda or no panda," grimaced Seldes. "Personally I'd sleep a lot easier in a good strong cage—"

"Oh, don't rot. I tell you there's a gold mine in here for us—animals—rare, practically unknown species, no end. If we just wait long enough we'll surely be rewarded for our patience."

"I think you're right," Corning broke in sneeringly. "The hitch is, who would carry out the sad news? I tell you, I've had about all I can stand of this waiting. From now on I've got to have action."

He had risen and now abruptly left the fire and disappeared in his tent.

NEXT morning they trekked down to their base camp, but their stay there was short. Beaumont's restless urge had them back again next day. Following them, came the big cage Beaumont had spoken of, a heavy contraption four feet wide, six feet high and eight feet long. Its bars were three-quarters of an inch thick. It had to be dragged laboriously on wooden runners by two Yunnan mules and eight sweating porters.

This same cage had been with the partners on innumerable trips. Once it had held an insane gorilla for weeks; at another time it had housed a fear-maddened tiger from Sumatra.

"There's luck in that old cage," Beaumont affirmed, as he and Seldes stood before it next day. "It's never failed to deliver for us yet; it won't this trip."

Seldes grinned. "You actually figure we're going to cage one of these spooks when we haven't even seen one in seven weeks?"

Remember, these fellows have never been trapped nor hunted, even with spears or arrows. Not man-wise nor gun-shy, and that's one up for us at the start."

In Beaumont's eye was a look that Seldes understood well. Always, after the American's own hope and patience had quite worn away, Beaumont would come through with a renewed assurance, some cool and laughing power that wooed and won the gods to surrender, or so it seemed. For days Beaumont had been visibly keeping alive the waning

hope of Corning, who had developed an active hatred for his camp mates as well as Tibet herself, every stick and stone of her.

Just here an insistent shout rose from Corning, down at the edge of the cane jungle. As they ran up they saw one of their porters struggling in the boss' grip.

"Look at that patch of wet earth," Corning panted, still holding the native. "Fresh tracks—panda! Not a doubt of it. And what do you think this zombi was doing when I came up? Rubbing the tracks out with his bare feet! A swell lot of stallers we've hired—I don't think! I've suspected it all along."

Beaumont was silent for a minute. The native was one of several Yunnanese who knew not even a word of English. To make a wrong move here might do lasting harm, for the porters were unified as one man. He decided to let the matter drop and with a few threatening words and gestures sent the man back to camp.

"So it's got to be a crackpot race to see if the natives can undo plans faster than we can make 'em, is it?" Corning railed. "My God, we'll be letting the pandas put us in cages next!"

"I believe it's almost a life and death matter to the men that no panda is caught or killed in this territory," Beaumont said, unruffled. "However, we're getting warmer every day. And we've got to have all our manpower to get our stuff out in the end. In short, we've got to carry on in this country under Tibet's own terms—"

Next day another pit-trap was dug near the spot where the tracks were seen and the big cage, with its door open, was placed at the edge of the cane, baited with neither meat nor bamboo-tips, but with a jar of honey and an ancient alarm clock, wound and running. This was following a hunch of Beaumont's, which called forth a snort of derision from Corning. The natives were forbidden to go near the spot.

"It's like tying up your left hand to keep it from undoing what your right has done," said Seldes.

During the next two days other panda tracks were found, all possibly made by the same animal, undoubtedly a mature beast of great size. Once spoor was found high above camp, and once within forty feet of the men's camp.

"Interested in our little doings," grinned Seldes.

"Doubtless decided we were dead or dumb and decided to bring the game to us," caustically from Corning. "But I'd like to see the lad that left dinner-plate prints like that."

"Most people have no idea of the size and power of a full-grown panda," Beaumont said. "Their idea of him is a sort of harmless teddy-bear, but this customer is apt to weigh around a thousand pounds."

"But how could he have got so close without some of the porters seeing him?"

"There may be an answer to that, maybe not. Anyway, it's only waiting does it now."

"Damn their shady ways," Corning fumed. "Only one of the beggars in the whole country by the look, and he takes his workout at night."

THE days became tense, yet absorbing. Corning fluctuated between spurts of anticipation and morose silence. Small meannesses cropped out in the man. Most of the time he was petty, sorry and in the way, in his faultlessly tailored hunting kit.

Seldes lost the remainder of his hope. A half-superstitious conviction grew on him that the country plus the natives formed an obstacle impossible to surmount.

Beaumont remained as determined as ever to make good on the expedition, but he avoided Corning's presence whenever possible. The latter now wanted to leave—talked of nothing but getting out of the country, the quicker the better. Then came the day of showdown, Beaumont at the end of all patience and resource, Corning exercising his full authority to terminate the party's stay. The latter was making a great show of packing in his tent, when there came a dull clatter down among the bamboos, followed by a muted squawl. Then Seldes' shout as he ran toward the spot:

"My God, we've caught a panda cub!"

It was so. The spring-trap door had worked perfectly. Within the big cage was the most amazing black-and-white toy of a creature imaginable, uttering strange whimpering cries as it scrambled round and round, slipping and daubing its coat in the upset jar of honey. Less than three feet in length, almost as broad as long, the panda baby was like nothing so much as a figure

of fur and sawdust made for the gift-shop trade. It seemed dressed in an absurd black-and-white clown suit, with black arms and legs, the face entirely white except for the jet black ears which seemed sewn onto the blunt head and the black spots like goggles round the eyes. He seemed a bear, a perfect diminutive bear, except for something utterly unbearlike in his movements—a sly, ludicrous look in the little mica-bright eyes that seemed keyed to some other and elfin world.

"Lordy, Lordy," Seldes panted above the murmur of native tongues. "This is the prize of a lifetime."

His words were drowned by the vicious slap of Corning's rifle. The boss was firing at a vast silver-black bulk that came rushing toward them from the cane. Another panda, doubtless the mother, a mature beast with almost the bulk of a grizzly, had appeared from the bamboo, furious, dangerously close and bent on destruction.

There was a scuttle of natives to all sides. A second shot from Corning and the onrushing form seemed to quiver, faltered an instant—but kept coming. Both white men were backing in the direction of the tents now, Seldes quite unarmed.

Again Corning fired. The panda visibly shrank, almost fell—but did not.

"Damn these steel-jacketed bullets," breathlessly from the boss. "I've stopped—lions—with 'em—lions, I tell you—but I'm damned—" Corning fired again. The panda still came on, living up to the tall tales told of grizzlies for "carrying lead."

Then the click of the firing-pin on emptiness, the panda but ten yards away, still coming, inexorable as a boulder rolling downhill, the heavy fur swaying from side to side on its broad back, the little eyes like wind-fanned sparks. The pith suddenly went out of Corning. He whirled and fled—just as Seldes stumbled backward over a rock.

The black and white beast was almost upon him when Seldes gained his feet. He ran then, face blanched, the panda so close behind that the panting grunt of its breath seemed at the back of his neck. His eyes sought some refuge, but there was nothing at hand, nothing closer than the distant tent into which Corning had just popped.

Through moments that burned themselves into his brain like a negative exposed to the light all day, Seldes raced on unseeing, the lead of terror in his limbs. A sheaf of long grass tripped him. He sprawled flat with a gasping cry and a mad desire to scream in his paralyzed throat. And in that little instant came interruption.

Almost upon him, the panda stopped in her tracks, for to her ears had come the one sound to which her being was keyed—the barely audible wailing of her cub. Perhaps some other enemy was attacking the youngster while she pursued the man. It was an appeal she could not resist and wheeling, she rushed back to the cage.

It was later, in camp, Seldes lying on his bunk with a badly wrenched ankle and something else deep inside, wrenched more badly. Beaumont, who had hurried back to camp at sound of the rifle shots, was quietly drawing the story out of the others in broken bits, after his fashion.

"No," Seldes repeated, "I don't think she actually got a swipe at me—the ankle must have twisted as I went down. She was right over me, understand, could have struck me down, but just there, as I fell, came a whimper from the cage. That was all she could think of for the moment, so it's the youngster in the clown suit down yonder I have to thank for being with you this lovely evening."

"From the look on your face as I came up, I can believe anything you say, old man," Beaumont grinned. "Anyway, there's not a mark on you, tooth or claw."

"There are plenty of marks on the old girl, though," said Corning's voice. "She's carrying four doses of steel under her hide. If she hasn't died, we'll track her down tomorrow."

"Yes," Seldes drawled wearily, "men like us always get what we go out after, one way or another—"

"Meantime," Beaumont cut in quickly, "we've got to take turns watching the youngster tonight. Between the natives and the mother apt to return any minute to claim her own, we can't afford a lax minute."

DURING the next few days, Seldes, confined to camp, found time to marvel anew at Corning. A touch of victory had turned the man into a dynamo again. His mind functioned with the swift surety of a field marshal's and the effect of its rapidly

moving machinery tingled the atmosphere. Forgotten were the days when he lay in his bunk, the most flattened creature the sun ever rose upon, unable to keep his lank hair out of his eyes. He took innumerable pictures of Clown Face, as they called the baby panda, for a big new idea had come to him for an epic picture, to be filled in and finished on some Hollywood lot.

He and Beaumont combed the countryside for the wounded *bei-shung*. They were able to track the creature to a remote nest in a hollow spruce, but this lair had been deserted, and beyond that there was not a trace to follow. Perhaps the animal had died of its wounds.

Then Tibet herself took a hand in the game. The nights grew colder and colder. Each morning the men arose with a rime of frost on their bearded cheeks and the wind off the white-toothed peaks was eerie with threat of imminent storm.

"It's high time we were getting out of this devil's kitchen," said Seldes on the first day he was able to stand on his injured leg. "Look." A deep shadow was filling the high valley, like a pall of smoke, and out of it a few flakes of snow came swirling.

"Yes, we'll have to pack up," Beaumont said. "Bad weather's not far off and it would be fatal to be caught here. Anyway, we've got what we came after."

Corning was belligerently opposed to leaving, but the elements themselves proved Beaumont to be right. Overhead it was woolly as a lamb's back when at noon next day the party got under way.

In camp that night ten miles down the valley, there was a deal of banter about their two prizes and the cages that held them; the gaunt, bloodthirsty leopard with thews of steel in his constricted cell of bamboo, the diminutive panda rambling about in a steel-bound cage large enough for a grizzly.

"This is all his party and he knows it; he's just a showman at heart," grinned Beaumont as they watched the antics of the orphan, as it rolled and turned ludicrous somersaults. "But I shan't feel easy about this young clown till he's safe aboard a westbound ship," the Englishman added. "Of course, we're standing watch again tonight, turn and turn about—"

It was just before the gray of dawn that Seldes was awakened quietly by Beaumont, who had taken the final watch of the night. A pressure on his shoulder admonished silence and Seldes was up instantly, knowing it had to do with the cages.

Snow was falling in the gray light, swirling through the bars of the big cage as they approached, beginning to cover the tilting floor, and it was a minute before Seldes realized that it was empty. Two of the heavy bars were sprung apart as by the grip of giant hands, one of them wrenched free of its teakwood socket.

"The old *bei-shung* herself?" Seldes whispered incredulously.

"Yes. I must have dozed for a few minutes," Beaumont said. "I'd moved over to that tree to get out of the snow—only twenty feet away. But the cold and snow played in with them. Both gone, and all that tremendous exertion, but not a sound out of them. I didn't know until five minutes ago—"

The cage that had balked a grown gorilla and a tiger, had been vanquished by the power and patience of mother love.

"Imagine her trailing us all that way—watching and waiting her time—"

"And the natives watching and waiting with her," Beaumont grunted. "I'm certain the cage was tampered with, but when, I don't know. And two of the men are missing—gone in the night. We'll get nothing out of the others. They were too much for us. From the start we've been bucking the impossible here."

"I knew it, too," said Seldes, "but I didn't speak. Tibet will hold on to her own."

They followed for a way, the intermingled tracks—one tiny, the other round and large. They led up the valley to the blue-back shadows of the evergreens that furred the lower slopes. Useless to think of tracking. Already the snow was obliterating the prints, and in that jungle of fir and spruce, thick and close as a stand of devil grass, all trails ended where they began.

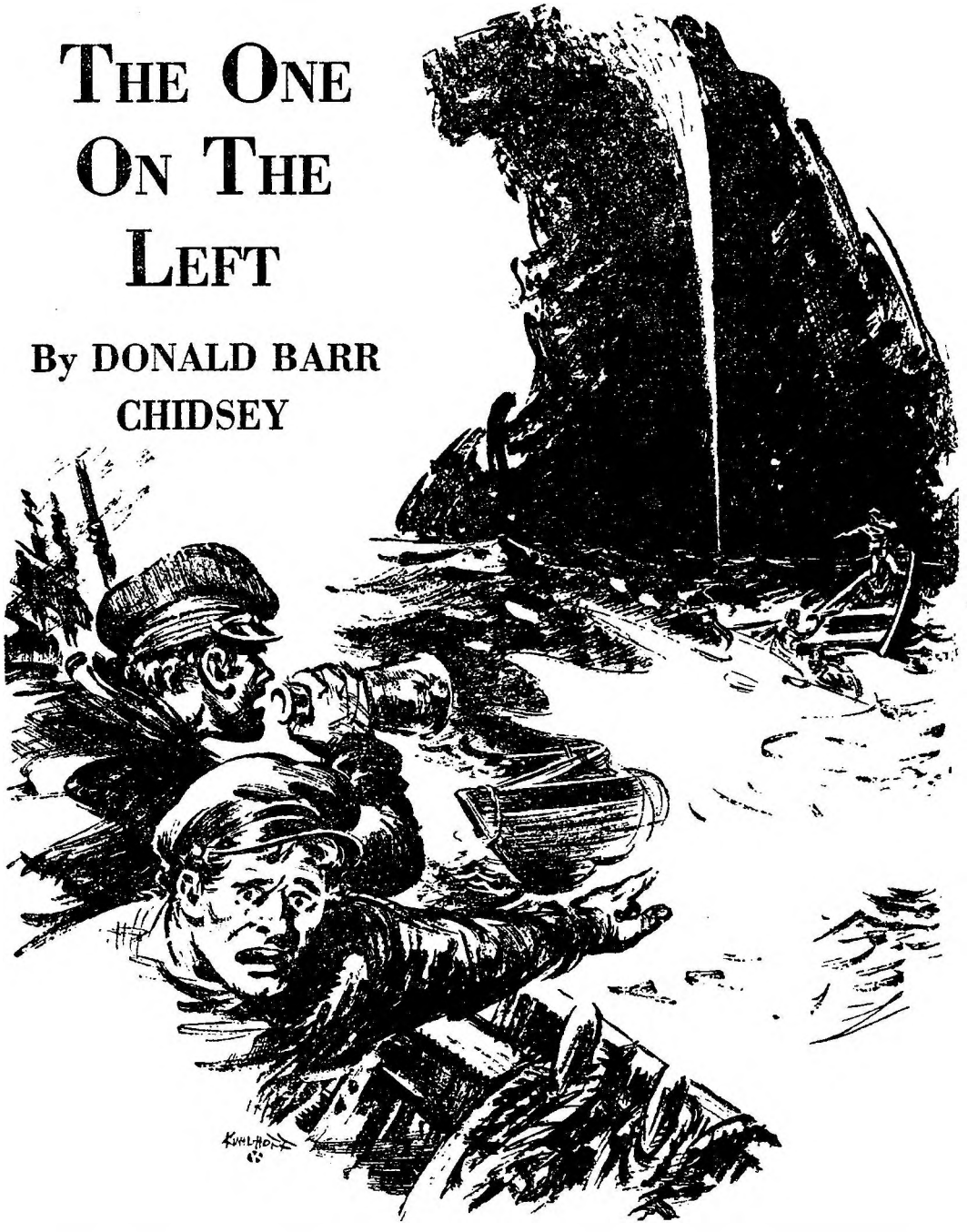
In silence they turned back to camp. Seldes knew just what this meant to the other, knew what was turning over in his mind. Beaumont, however, was a game loser.

"Now for the fireworks," he said with a gray-lipped smile, as he went to waken Corning.

Do You Think That Speed Is Something That Somebody Just Thought Up Only the Other Day?

THE ONE ON THE LEFT

By DONALD BARR CHIDSEY



SO YOU just broke the transcontinental record, eh? Sit down, and have a little chat with your grand-uncle. Take a swallow of that cocktail. They're giving me this sherry-wine here. Don't even want me to have that, but I got to drink *something,* don't I?

Well, sir, it's a long while since you visited us, Harry. Yes, since before the war, when you was in college. And now you're breaking speed records? Well, that's good. Only thing is, don't get the idea you're the

only man who ever *did* break a speed record. I don't want you to think speed is something that was just invented a little while ago.

You been around the grounds, have you? You notice the graveyard, over between here and the Earls' place? Yes, I reckoned you would of. The Earls and the Lakesmiths have been getting themselves buried there a good many years, Harry.

Well, did you notice the two stones side by side near this end? You can see them right through the window here now. Yes, that's them. Captain Elisha Lakesmith and Captain Jabez Earl. They're lying there pretty quiet, ain't they, Harry? Well, it's hard to believe that each of them once held the trans-Atlantic speed record. Oh, yes, Harry! You don't think you're the only fast man this family's produced, do you?

The one on the left, that's Elisha Lakesmith. I remember him when I was a boy. He died right here in this house, Harry. He was my grandfather, so that would make him your great-great-grand-uncle, I guess. The one on the right was Jabez Earl, who lived over there in the Earl House. They were the best friends in the world.

They didn't even know one another in boyhood. They met as midshipmen on a tea vessel when they were both fourteen, but they considered themselves men by that time —and by God, they both did a man's work! No, they both came from Connecticut, but the Lakesmiths and the Earls hadn't settled here then. Matter of fact, it was Captain Jabez and Captain Elisha built these two houses. Old Elisha practically founded our fortune, if you could call it that. You wouldn't have been sent to Yale college if it hadn't been for old Captain Elisha—if it hadn't been for the *speed* he made! In case maybe you begin to feel a little too pleased with yourself about flying from Los Angeles to New York in an hour and a half, or whatever it was, I want you to remember that. I don't want you to forget that Captain Elisha Lakesmith was fast too. And so was Captain Jabez Earl.

That's Captain Elisha, in that picture right over your head, Harry. Looks sort of old-fashioned and slow, especially with that coat and those sidewhiskers. But I can remember him as the sweetest grandfather a kid ever had.

Drink up your cocktail, boy, and I'll tell you how it happens the two of them are out there side-by-side.

WELL, sir, they'd both been around the world four times before they were out of their teens, and they were first mates by then. Elisha was twenty-one when he got his first command. Jabez was twenty-two. They didn't think there was anything unusual about that, and neither did anybody else.

They didn't see so much of one another after they'd got commands, because those voyages used to last a year or more. They'd meet at Macao or Canton now and then, or they'd get together in New York for a while, and they were good friends, and even in those days they were planning to buy land up here. They were saving up. "I want to be buried in Connecticut, where I came from," Jabez Earl used to say. "You'll be buried right at the bottom of the ocean, if you don't do a little more reefing in a blow," Elisha would retort. "Hab Jones, that mates for you, he told me t'other day you half scared the almighty living gizzards right out of his belly there a few times coming in. And he don't scare easy, either." "They're good strong spars I got," Jabez would say. "All the same," Elisha would say, "that's what's going to happen to you if you don't watch out!"

They'd talk like this, but they went right on planning these houses. Didn't either of 'em inherit money. Jabez Earl was an orphan on both sides, and as for Elisha, well, I guess the less said about his folks the better. Not that he wasn't good to them, long as they lived! They're buried out there too.

Neither of them ever had a famous clipper. But anyway there wasn't either of them a Bob Waterman, though they might have been if they'd had a *Rainbow* or a *Sea Witch.*

They had good ships, but not as good as that. But if they didn't break any records they made wonderful runs, and they never lost a mast nor a man, and they never failed to turn in a handsome profit. Captains had to be business men in those days, you know, Harry.

Well, they both had fine records, and nobody was surprised when they, both of them

at practically the same time, got offers from the packet people.

The packet ships were the fancy trans-Atlantic carriers. They were American, an American idea in the first place, and they were the best in the business. They started up just a mite after the second war with England and they went on until almost the Civil War. They were so much better than any other sailing ships any other nation could put on the seas that—well, sir, there just wasn't any comparison.

The packet ships went on schedule. They didn't wait for winds. They didn't care for hurricanes or anything else. If they said they'd sail at four o'clock every other Thursday afternoon, then it was four o'clock every other Thursday afternoon, and if a passenger or a piece of freight got there at five minutes past four—well, sir, it just didn't go. Nobody's heard of anything like it. Sailing ships had always waited for the right wind, days sometimes, sometimes even weeks. But the packets sailed on time, come hell or high water.

'Course, nobody could promise when they'd get there. Nobody but God would know a thing like that. You can't predict the winds. But one thing you could be sure of was they'd get there before anybody else. They were not only the strongest ships in the trade, and the most regular, and the most elegant, but they were the fastest too. They were the safest too, for all the speed they made. You look up the insurance rates they got, if you don't believe me, Harry. The lowest in the Atlantic. That says something, don't it?

That was because they had the best skippers and officers. The foremast hands were mostly Swedes and English, but especially English, but the officers were all American, and they were cracks, every one of them. Most of them, like Jabez and Elisha, had made names for themselves in the China trade.

A PACKET ship skipper was something special. In the first place, he had to be a crackerjack sailing man. In the second place, he had to be strong. Either Elisha or Jabez could have killed an ox with his fist. Packet skippers never knew when they might have to stay up night and day for half a week. The final responsibility was their own. They used to have themselves lashed in armchairs on the quarterdeck, and have tea brought them there. Very few of them drank anything stronger, at sea. And they had to have courage to crack on canvas like that, day after day, night after night, and to be always ready to handle a rebellious crew of Liverpool Rats, the meanest fighting men in the world, and also be ready to hold back a stampede of the steerage passengers, who were locked between decks in dirty weather and often used to get panicky. And finally they had to be society men. The mates had their own mess, but the skipper must always eat in the grand dining saloon, which was all mahogany.

It wouldn't have been a bit unusual for Elisha, or maybe Jabez, after staying thirty-six hours on deck, to go below and face a mob of ignorant vicious steerage passengers who would be demanding that the ship go back, and after that, with his mates behind him, go to the forecastle and dish out a little belaying-pin soup and handspike hash, as they used to call it, and then finally after *that*, and after straightening his cravat and wiping the blood off his knuckles, to make a last survey of the canvas and then go down to the dining saloon, where he'd exchange chit-chat all through a sumptuous meal with a duchess on one side of him and an ambassador on the other.

Well, sir, it was the sort of life that suited Elisha Lakesmith and Jabez Earl just fine. Elisha worked for the Black Ball Line at first, while Jabez worked for the Williams and Guion people, and they kept getting better and better ships. They both ran to Liverpool. They were never on the London run. The Liverpool-New York run was the shortest and most important.

Jabez and Elisha, I reckon, were the pushingest pair of skippers on the whole Atlantic. They drove their men. They wouldn't reef for anything less than a full gale. My grandfather Elisha told me one time he had an old retired East Indiaman captain as passenger on the westward run. A very famous old crust o' pie, my grandfather told me. Been on the sea all his life. Got rich by it, and was in Parliament, and they even made him a knight or an earl or something. Well, sir, this man used to come up on deck now and then, my grandfather told me, and he'd take one look at the canvas, and he'd

cover his face with his hands and go below, screaming that they wouldn't last another hour. It wasn't that he lacked courage, but he knew too much. He was the most amazed man when they reached New York without carrying away a sail or a spar—and more amazed when they slid right up to the wharf as gentle as a canoe, saving the owners the price of tug hire.

That was the reason the foremast hands were more frightened than the passengers in nasty weather. They knew too much. That was why a bucko mate was needed to keep them in their places, and sometimes the Old Man himself to clout a jaw or two. Those Liverpool Rats, they had guts all right. Nobody could stay in that business who didn't have guts. But sometimes they got to imagining that the Old Man was trying to commit suicide and take them all along. Sometimes they supposed that they knew more than he did about how much an American ship could stand. And at night, when the Old Man was below, having dinner with the toffs, or maybe snatching a little sleep, and the mate wasn't too spry, then they might sometimes sneak aloft and try to take in a little canvas of their own accord.

Anyway they'd carry practically everything, except in the very worst of weather. No let-up. "He'll tear the sticks out of 'er," the Rats would mutter, shaking their heads. But he never did.

ELISHA and Jabez were seeing much more of one another nowadays, and they'd bought this land out here, and had started building the two houses, each one of them supervisin' the other one's job when the other one was at sea. They were doing all right for themselves, and they could see retirement coming. The captains of packet ships never got great wages, my grandfather told me. Only a few hundred a year. But they usually owned a piece of the vessel they commanded, maybe as much as an eighth, which if they couldn't pay for it right-off was taken gradually out of their other income. They got as a rule five per cent of the freight money and one-quarter of the cabin money, besides all or practically all the mail money. That mounted up. Well, they were worth it.

All this time our captains were breaking each other's records. From Sandy Hook to Rock Light, that was the race-course. From the Hudson to the Mersey. The westward passage, naturally, the winds being what they are, was always slower and more uncertain. It still is, even in these days. But they'd compare their eastward passages mighty careful whenever they met, and first one of them would be the faster, and then the other, depending. Then some other ship might come along and beat both their times, the way the *Independence* did in '36 when she was driven over in fourteen days and six hours.

The London run and the Havre run, there were records for them too, but it was the Liverpool run counted most. And that was the one Sam Cunard's steam vessels started on when the British government subsided him so big.

Look at that picture of Elisha and you'll probably figure that there was a narrow-minded old gent who would refuse to recognize progress. Well, sir, if you don't you're an exception. Most people do. As a matter of fact, the very opposite was true. Your great-great-granduncle, Harry, wasn't no fool! Even when he was in his upper forties he could whip any man on his own ship—and that ship he saw to it was always a good one, a new one, equipped with every recent wrinkle and safety device the best brains in this country could think up.

But both he and Jabez were agreed from the beginning that steamships had come to stay. They knew that sooner or later every vessel would have to be equipped with an auxiliary steam engine, and they were sure that the records they held were going to be cut. Maybe they didn't ever foresee a day when ships would operate under steam only, with no sail at all, and get back and forth from Europe here in five days. But then, if it comes to that, I don't suppose Orville Wright ever dreamed about the time when lads like you would fly from California to New York in twenty-five minutes, or whatever it was they gave you that medal for.

Captain Elisha and Captain Jabez, they had nothing against steam. It just wasn't for them, that's all. They were sailing men, and they hadn't any intention of trying to change over into engineers. They were going to retire pretty soon, and settle down here. "You're going to lie there, Elisha," Jabez would say, pointing to the

place where you can see that gravestone out through the window here now, the one on the left, "and I'm going to be buried right next to you, right here." "You're going to be buried in Davy Jones' best mud if you keep your topgallant stunsails set on a tack, the way you had 'em when I last passed you off Montauk," Elisha would reply. "You had every inch of your own stunsail set then! I wasn't tacking!"

Jabez had switched to the Blue Pyramid Line then, and had a ship called the *Hope of the World,* very fast. Elisha had quit the Black Ball people and was working for an outfit called the Bard Line, that had ships called the *King Lear,* the *Richard III,* the *Lady Macbeth,* and so forth—though there wasn't many ships named after women in those days. He sailed their newest and finest, the *Hamlet.* I forget whether *Hamlet* had made the run faster than *Hope of the World* at that time or whether it was the other way around, but anyway the *Independence's* record of fourteen days and six hours still stood. They neither of 'em had beat that.

Now when I tell you these two skippers didn't get get riled about the appearance of steamships I don't mean nobody else did. Matter of fact, there was a great deal of fuss made, and men got worked up and very red in the face and shook their fists. Maybe the fact that the British government had given the Cunard people such a big subsidy for steamships had something to do with it. There's a hell of a lot of patriotism mixed up in the shipping business, and always was. The argument of the men in New York was that steamboats were all right on inland waterways, like the Hudson and Mississippi, which nobody but a half-wit would deny, but they'd be no good out in the Roaring Forties where a ship, to get anywhere, had to be a *ship,* not a damn' smoke-spouting boiler foundry. And when it came to speed, they said, well, why argue? Anybody could see that the smoke-spouters would never amount to anything alongside the packets. The best they could hope for was to carry heavy stuff at low rates and leave the class cargoes to the packets. Maybe it was because they were secretly scared that they got so stewed up. The fact is, none of those first Cunarders could move better than ten knots, and most of them couldn't do that, while a packet ship like the *Hamlet* or the *Hope of the World* thought nothing of clipping off twelve or even twelve and half—in the right wind. Time and again a packet ship would pass a smoke-spouter on the high seas, and the passengers would all screech with delight. But then maybe the packet would catch some bad air, a day or two later, and be lucky to average six knots, while the steamer plugged along her same ten. It was the old hare-and-tortoise story. Except that in that story the hare *could* have galloped faster if he'd really wanted to.

Well, sir, there was a bet made between a group of packet men in New York and a group of steam men, who were mostly English. The bet was that if the record of the *Independence* was lowered within the next three months it would be by a packet vessel —or by a steamship. Or if both a steamship and a sailing ship beat that record inside that time, then whichever made the faster run. The bet was for ten thousand dollars.

Jabez and Earl and Elisha Lakesmith had nothing to do with the making of this bet. They weren't betting men themselves. They were saving their money, sticking it away, and the houses here were all built by this time, and each of them figured he had only about a year to go. But I won't say they weren't interested! Naturally they were! Every dollar extra they could earn made Connecticut just that much nearer. The *Independence's* time had stood too long anyway. I think they were both a little sore about that.

The men who actually made the bet, if they won weren't going to collect. It was a matter of principle with them. The ten thousand would go to the skipper of the winning vessel, sail or steam. He could keep it all, if he wanted to. But of course he wouldn't do that. All the skippers made their officers and hands propositions. It was like the old lay system the whalers used to use. Such a percentage to the captain, such a percentage to each mate, and to the bosun, and the carpenter, and so on right down, even including the stewards. The propositions generally were very fair. Jabez's and Elisha's certainly were. Roughly speaking, the captain would get two thousand, each mate seven-fifty, and so on. The lowest ordinary seaman rated something like

seventy-five dollars if his ship won. Which was something to work for.

There was a hell of a lot of noise about it on both sides of the ocean, and many a sailing man had his lay all counted in advance and had figured out how he was going to spend it. But the weather wasn't obliging. The winds that blew didn't blow the right way, or maybe they didn't blow hard enough or at the right times. Anyway, for more than two months never a packet ship got even near breaking fourteen days six hours, while the steamships crunched along, even and steady, but still not quite getting there under the time either. *They* depended some upon the wind too, for they all carried auxiliary sail.

ELISHA LAKESMITH, Harry, had only one more round-trip to make before the three months was over; and for a little while, running for Liverpool, he had his hopes. But then everything went wrong. He was lucky to raise Rock Light in fifteen and a half days, as it turned out. Then he gave up hope. He knew he'd never make it up on the run back. Nobody ever thought of that's being possible. The best Elisha could hope for was that his friend Jabez Earl, who was in New York with the *Hope of the World,* would get the break he'd lost.

But a crazy thing happened. The wind started good on the westward passage, and it went right on being good! Elisha just poo-poohed, knowing that it wouldn't keep up—but it did keep up! The crew began to get excited. The passengers did too. Elisha warned his mates that they mustn't expect such a wind to continue—which they knew perfectly well for themselves—and he instructed them to spread this information among the crew, who knew it too. But you can't help hoping.

Also, to make it crazier, this was November, which is ordinarily about the worst month of the year for a westward passage.

Just the same, the wind held. And they flew.

The twelfth day they passed a Cunarder which had started out of the Mersey seven or eight hours before they had. She was making good time too, that Cunarder, and it took the *Hamlet* almost all day to pass and put her below the horizon. And that steamship was the fastest the Cunard people had.

The passengers were cheering and waving, much too boiled up to play cards. They hardly ate. The crew was wild, ready for anything. Elisha Lakesmith seemed calm He warned the hands not to count their dollars before they were hatched. No such wind had ever been known before, and he declared that it simply *couldn't* last. But everybody went right on being excited, and I guess Elisha Lakesmith was too.

I guess he prayed a good bit during that run, for he was a very religious man. But I don't think he prayed for very long each time. Because, after all, you can't very well pray on a quarterdeck, and the quarterdeck was where he was most of the time.

But when the *Hamlet* got off Narragansett even Elisha himself must have admitted the thing was done. In fact, that's what he confessed to me afterward. It was coming on night, and they had everything set but the cook's shirt—and for all I know they had that up too.

Sandy Hook in the morning. Then he would be the greatest skipper in the world. And he would resign.

It was just after dark when they saw the flares.

Those were new things then, and nobody was quite sure what they meant, including even Elisha, who kept up with new things, like I told you. But anyway Elisha changed course and bore down on the flares, and they hove to and picked up a boat. It was a longboat from the *Hope of the World.* Oh, no shipwreck! No, no! Those packets just didn't get wrecked. They were too good for that, and too well handled. But all the same, though he never admitted as much to me, I guess Elisha's throat was pretty full when they picked up that longboat. He knew that Jabez would be in this part of the Atlantic at that time, starting his eastward run—which would be the last chance Jabez would have of breaking *Independence's* record within the bet limit.

There was a fourth mate named Ferguson in charge, a long-legged youngster who came from Mystic, Connecticut. Ferguson didn't beat around the bush. He explained it right out. Captain Earl, facing his last possible chance at the bet money, had ordered everything cracked on—and held there. They'd been making yaws no other skipper in the universe could make and live,

Ferguson said. "Begging your pardon, sir," Ferguson added. "Go on," said my grandfather.

Well, sir, something had broke loose. Ferguson himself didn't know yet what it was, for he hadn't had much time to look around, having been below and asleep when this happened. He was still in his nightshirt and boots. It probably hadn't been a spar, or not a whole spar anyway. But it had been something pretty heavy. It had thrown the helmsman twenty feet and slammed him against the rail, with his shoulder busted. It had sprayed the officer on watch with splinters. It had knocked the breath out of the lookout, and also his teeth. And it had taken Jabez Earl clear overside.

They'd hove to, of course, and they'd put out all boats, and they'd tossed every flare they had, for the past two hours. And they hadn't found anything, leastways as far as Ferguson knew. That was the ship over there, Ferguson said, and pointed to where there were rockets going up now, whee-boooom! whee-booom! They were the signal, Ferguson said, to quit looking and come in.

Well, sir, that could mean either that Jabez or his body had been found, or it could mean that that first mate, name of Chance, a good man, a man my grandfather knew well, had decided to give up hope.

My grandfather had 'em move closer, as close as he reasonably dared in those seas. They weren't really gale seas, but they were high and long. They didn't have disagreeable tops, but they had a lot of strength, and it was hard to hold the *Hamlet* around. That took a lot of work. But my grandfather, Elisha Lakesmith, went over to the *Hope of the World* in that longboat.

"No, sir, we haven't," Chance told him. "But he can't possibly be alive now." He had part of a spar or something when he went overside, didn't he?" "We ain't sure, sir. We think he did. But in this water—well, we've looked everyhow we know." "Look more," commanded my grandfather. "You don't know Jabez Earl as well as I do." "Captain, this is my command now, and while I want to do everything possible to find Captain Earl—" "You ain't thinking of that skipper's share of the ten thousand, are you, mister?" asked my grandfather. "Because if you are, you won't make it anyway. And you wouldn't dare to touch it if you did." That graveled Chance, who was all right as a man, the way he was really all right as a sailor. Maybe he was flustered, but he got sore.

"Captain Lakesmith," he said, "if you wasn't almost twenty years older than I am, and if we wasn't here in the presence of all my passengers—" "Keep looking," said my grandfather. "*I'm* going to. I'm putting out all boats."

THEY found Jabez Earl along around dawn. That is, they found his body. He was still hanging onto a spar, which was what it turned out to be. Both his legs was busted, but he was hanging on. But he was dead.

"I'm sorry, Captain," Chance said. "You was right and I was wrong. I'm glad you came by."

"Yes," said my grandfather, and he looked at his friend.

"If you want to attend the services—We've got a big enough flag, and if you want to wait just a little longer—"

"No," said my grandfather. "No, don't slide him in. That ain't where he wanted to end up. I know. He had a place all picked out. You just let me have him, mister. I'll see he gets there."

"Certainly, Captain."

Well, you can depend upon it that the crew of the *Hamlet* was good and upset. Ten beautiful hours wasted! Elisha Lakesmith didn't pay any attention to them, and he didn't even talk to his mates, until they fetched Sandy Hook—fourteen days and seven hours, just one hour longer than *Independence's* time. And it turned out when they got alongside that the Cunarder had passed them in the night, not near enough, I suppose, to give the Cunarder credit, for her to see their flares. Well, sir, the Cunarder had made it in thirteen days and twenty-three and a half hours. Which gave her the money.

When they heard this, my grandfather didn't say anything about it for a while. The Rats were seething. They were all for a rush right then and there, right up alongside the wharf. I guess it was only the sight of Elisha Lakesmith that stopped them. *He* was arranging to have his friend's body

took ashore, before he talked any business with owners. He turned to a mate.

"Tell 'em they'll get their damn' money," he said.

That was all. Except that they did get it. They got every single last penny of it, just the way they would have if *Hope of the World* had never been overdriven. Only, of course, it came out of Elisha Lakesmith's own pocket. Which is why it took him three more years before he could finally afford to retire, like he'd planned. Then he came out here and lived a little longer before he died and got himself buried out there next to his friend. That's his grave right out the window there now. See it? The one on the left.

Well, sir, we better get into the dining room. I hear your grandaunt calling, and she'll be hotter'n mulligatawny if we don't show up soon. Sorry I talked so much, Harry. I just wanted to tell you about it in case maybe sometime you might think speed was a new-fashioned idea that somebody just thought up only the other day. No, that's all right. That's *all right!* I'm perfectly capable of getting there myself, thank you just the same.

NEW TALENT ON HALFADAY

By JAMES B. HENDRYX

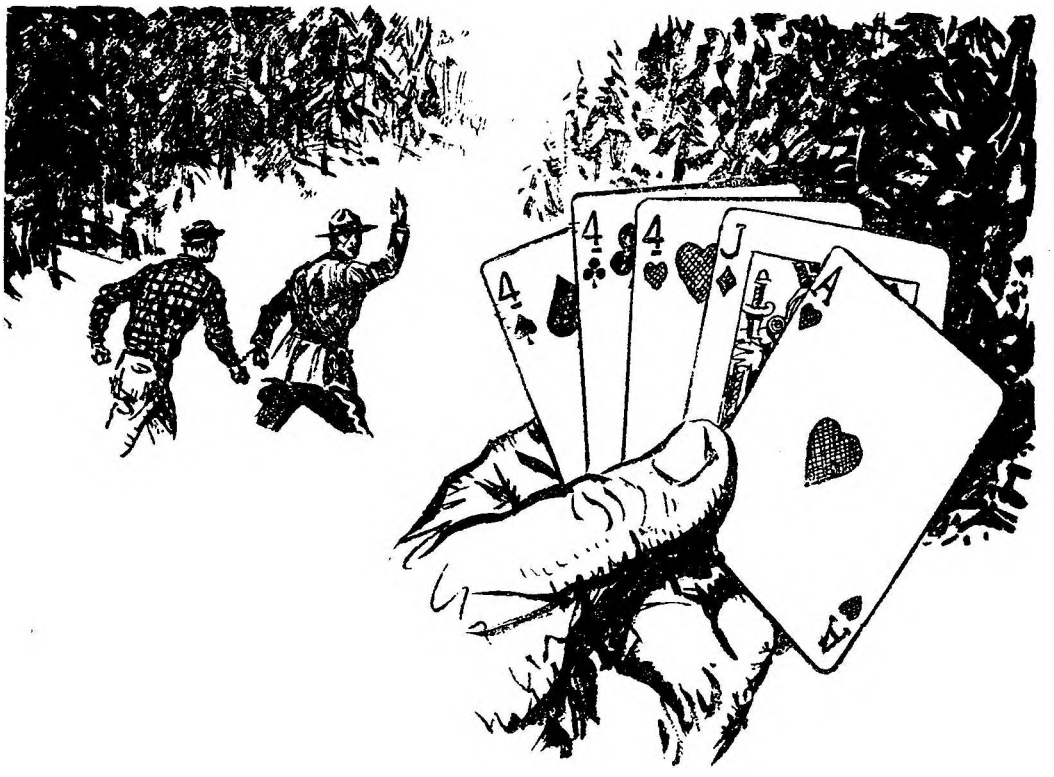
I

OLD CUSH, proprietor of Cushing's Fort, the combined trading post and saloon that ministered to the wants of the little community of outlawed men that had sprung up on Halfaday Creek, close against the Yukon-Alaska border, folded the month-old newspaper and returned it to the back bar, from which he took a bottle, two glasses, and the leather dice box as Black John Smith entered and crossed to the bar. "I was readin' a piece in the paper where it says that out in Utah they elected some fella name of Brigham H. Roberts to Congress, an' when he went to Worshin'ton the rest of the congressmen kicked him out on account he had three wives. There's three treys in one shake. I'll leave 'em."

Picking up the box, Black John rolled out three fives, and came back with four deuces, which Cush failed to beat. Reaching for the bottle, he filled his glass.

"Havin' only one wife apiece, these other congressmen was jealous of him, I s'pose."

"No. Accordin' to the paper they claimed



Black John Vowed That His Interest in the Case Was to Frustrate the Machinations of a Scoundrel; the Nuptial Angle—Old Cush to the Contrary—Was Purely Incidental

it was onlegal—he had two wives too many. But what I claim, by God, he had three too many!"

"How could they kick him out of Congress, if he was duly elected?"

"The paper says they done it by votin'. An' I claim fer onct they done right."

The big man grinned. "I don't know why you'd look at it that way. Cripes, you've had four wives, yourself."

"Yeah, but I never run fer Congress. An' besides, I had mine one to a time, an' he had his'n all to onct. I s'pose they figgered if he was damn fool enough to have three wives at the same time, he'd be a damn fool about other things, too, so they kicked him out."

"A dangerous precedent, I'd say."

"He wasn't president—only a congressman."

"I said precedent—not president. Meanin' that if Congress should institute the practice of eliminatin' all the damn fools that was elected to it, there wouldn't be enough of 'em left to get a quorum."

"Huh—as long as part of 'em's Democrats, an' part Republicans, they'll git quarrels enough. You don't need to worry about that. But what would a man want with three wives all at onct? Hell, one wife kin run a man ragged—what with wantin' this, an' wantin' that, an' 'where was you last night when you claimed you had to work an' extry shift?' But—three of 'em—all soundin' off to onct! Scappin' over the cookin', an' the kids, an' the dish worshin'—cripes, it would drive a man nuts!"

"Maybe," suggested Black John, "he didn't keep 'em all in the same house."

"He'd have to be rich, then—with rents what they be in them cities."

"He might have 'em scattered around in different towns—so no one of 'em know'd about the other two."

"Huh—anyone would know you ain't

never be'n married! Listen—they ain't no three towns fer enough apart, but what every damn one of them wimmen would know about the others—an' what they didn't know, they'd guess! What I claim, a man's a damn fool to marry any woman—let alone three of 'em."

"O-o-h, I don't know. Accordin' to what a man reads an' sees, there's be'n quite a few successful marriages."

"Yeah—but what a man reads an' sees ain't only the half of it, the best half. It's what the fella that wrote it wants him to read. No one would set down an' write about how he got made a damn fool of. An' it's the same with what he sees. Take it with them first three wives of mine—cripes—anyone seein' us out on the street together, like goin' to a show, er comin' out of one, would think we was successful as hell. It's after a man gits home, an' gits his shoes off an' sets down to read the paper—that's when they start in on him. Trouble is they got all day whilst a man's off workin' to set around an' figger out what to raise hell about."

"But there was your fourth wife. You never had any kick comin' on her, did you?"

"No. She was a good woman. An' that's jest the trouble. If they're on the up-an'-up they die. An' if they ain't on the up-an'-up, they're two-timin' you in the daytime an' raisin' hell with you nights. A man ain't got no peace till he's shet of 'em."

"But," persisted Black John, stifling a grin, "if you'd never seen the first three, an' if you'd married the last one first, an' if she hadn't died, you'd have an entirely different slant on matrimony."

"Now you've hit the nail right square on the head, John. That's the trouble with marryin'—there's too damn many 'ifs' in it!"

"Nevertheless," replied Black John, "barrin' all its drawbacks, I predict that marriage, as an institution is here to stay."

"Yeah, an' that jest proves that the Good Book is right where it says there's a sucker borned every minute."

"SPEAKIN' of suckers," Black John observed, "when I was off on that moose hunt, last week, I swung over onto Rat Crick—'tain't only about three hours, straight acrost from here. Old man Douty an' his wife an' daughter come up on the snow, this spring, an' located a Discovery claim there, an' now there's a dozen claims filed along the crick, an' more bein' staked every week. That's the way it goes—let some sourdough locate on a crick an' it ain't no time at all, till it's staked from one end to the other. I stayed a couple of nights with Douty, an' he claims the surface indications are good."

"Why would they be suckers if they staked on a good crick?"

"It ain't their stakin' I was referrin' to. It's their gamblin'. There's a tinhorn, name of Jack Whitlo located about a mile above Douty's, that looks to me like a pretty slick article. He's put up the biggest cabin on the crick, an' runs a stud game damn near every night. Douty an' I set in the game the second night I was there an' from what I saw, I figure Whitlo's pretty good as a second dealer, an' a hold-out artist, to boot."

"How much did he take you fer?"

"He didn't take me. I lost a few ounces—but it was the regular run of the cards. He didn't try no fancy work on me. You see, Douty, he introduced me to Whitlo before the game. Whitlo claimed he'd heard of us boys up here on Halfaday, an' he was proud to meet me. Said he was comin' over one of these times for supplies. They're figurin' on cuttin' a trail acrost so's to make packin' easier."

"I don't want none of their trade," Cush growled. "I got all the business I want, right now. Cripes, it's hard enough to git the supplies fer Halfaday freighted in, without some other crick pilin' in on me."

"But hell, Cush, the more stuff you sell, the more you make!"

"I'm makin' enough the way it is. First thing you know I'd have to make the storeroom bigger, an' mebbe hire me a clerk—an' who the hell wants a clerk? An' besides that, if this here Whitlo didn't take you, why would you give a damn if them others were suckers er not?"

"W-e-e-el-l, my interest in the matter is purely academic, you might say."

"I mightn't. 'Cause it wouldn't mean nothin' when I got it said."

"Meanin' that my inherent sense of rectitude is outraged by an iniquitous manifestation of cheap legerdemain, when such manifestation is detrimental to my fellow man."

Cush scowled. "Oh. An' barrin' that, you don't give a damn, eh?"

"That's right. Besides rakin' every pot for all the traffic will bear, this Whitlo is cheatin' those poor devils out of their eye-teeth. You know that breed they call Jocko that works along the river, takin' poling-boat freight jobs an' whatnot? Well, he's located on Rat Crick, an' Whitlo's already got what cash an' dust Jocko had, an' is holdin' better'n ten thousan' dollars of his I.O.U.'s to boot."

"Huh—I'd claim it was Whitlo that's the sucker on that deal. Jocko ain't never goin' to pay them I.O.U.'s. Even if he had the money an' I.O.U. ain't no good if it was give fer a gamblin' debt."

"Whitlo knows that, an' he's got around it by writin' on each one of 'em that they was given, some of 'em for goods delivered, an' some for services performed. Of course, Jacko'll never pay 'em in cash. He'll never have that much."

"No, nor he won't pay 'em in dust, neither. I never seen a breed yet outside of Skookum Jim an' Kultus Charlie that ever had ten thousan' dollars in dust."

"That's right. So that leaves only one medium of exchange by which he can square that debt—services."

"What kind of services could a breed give ten thousan' dollars worth of?"

BLACK JOHN'S brow furrowed in mock concern. "My good man, syntax seems to bother you not at all."

"Whatever that is I'll say it don't, nor neither if some breed owes more'n what he kin pay some tinhorn, that don't bother me none, neither."

"But it does bother me," Black John said. "Accordin' to Douthy, Jocko's got one of the best claims on the crick. Whitlo is deliberately gettin' Jocko right where he wants him. When the time comes, he'll demand payment, an' when Jocko tells him he can't pay, what's to prevent Whitlo from takin' his claim, an' his boat, an' his rifle, an' everything else he's got, to satisfy those I.O.U.'s?"

"Well, it wouldn't be no skin off'n your nose, if he did."

"No. But suppose Whitlo was to offer him an alternative?"

"The breed wouldn't know what to do with one if he took it—no more'n what I would."

"Suppose he'd say—here, Jocko, right here in my hand is paper enough to ruin you. I've got a little job for you. Do it, an' these papers are yours. You can tear 'em up, or burn 'em up, an' keep what you've got!"

"What kind of a job?"

"W-e-e-l-l, just possibly, a little job of murder."

"Who," Cush asked, "would this here Whitlo want murdered?"

"Well, I've got a hunch, from certain things I seen an' heard—it's just a hunch, mind you—that the sudden an' permanent demise of young Tom Gregory wouldn't pain Whitlo none."

"I never heard of no Tom Gregory."

"He's a young fella that's located on Rat Crick, Number Two Below Discovery. Like I said, I spent a couple of nights with old man Douty an' his wife an' daughter. This daughter—Nellie, her name is, is a mighty likely young woman—pretty as a picture, an' smart too. She——"

"Is that why you laid over fer two nights?" Cush interrupted, eyeing the big man sharply. "If there's a good-lookin' woman comes along you allus——"

"My interest in women, Cush, good lookin' or otherwise, is merely superficial, an' wholly impersonal, I assure you."

"Yeah—an' some time one of 'em's goin' to hook you so damn personal you'll wisht you never seen her!"

"Be that as it may," Black John grinned. "Time will tell. But gettin' back to the case in p'int—I hit the rim of Rat Crick, it's maybe an hour after sundown, an' follers along it huntin' a place to get down when I come to where the rocks leaves off, an' the hill slopes gentle right down to old man Douty's cabin. I starts down the slope amblin' along kind of slow like, takin' in the beauty of the scene, an' about halfway down the door of the cabin opens an' a woman comes out with a pan in her hand an' starts callin' the hens."

"Hens!" Cush exclaimed, a note of disbelief in his voice. "You mean real live hens—on Rat Crick?"

"I never heard of no imitation hens. An' I never heard a woman callin' any dead ones. These were alive, all right—the way they dug into that feed she scattered around. Six of 'em. She fetched 'em up from Daw-

son. Well, sir, the sight of them hens, an' that woman standin' there watchin' 'em eat, an' the soft glow of the sunset through the spruces on the rims, an' the faint tinkle of the crick runnin' over a rock rapid, an' the green slopin' hillsides took me back to the scenes of my childhood, an' not bein' in any particular hurry, I set down on a log beside a spruce thicket, an' lit my pipe, an' just set there contemplatin' the beauties of nature, an' women, an' hens.

"I'd be'n settin' there maybe ten minutes when I heard voices, an' I shoved along the log to where I was hid by the thicket, an' pretty quick a man an' a young woman hove in sight walkin' toward me along the hillside. They come to a stop in this open space an' stood lookin' down at the cabin, an' them hens skitterin' around peckin' up the last of the feed the woman had throwed to 'em. The man was talkin'. I couldn't get what he said, his voice bein' kind of low an' wheedlin' like, but when he'd got through, the girl turned an' faced him, an' then it was I seen she shore was a knockout for looks. She begun talkin' then, an' bein' as she was half facin' me I could hear what she said. 'No, Jack,' she says, 'I'll never marry you—an' that's once an' for all. I don't love you, an' even if I did, I'd never marry a gambler. I walked out with you this evenin' to get it over with—to tell you I don't want you to try to see me any more. There's only one man I love, an' he's the only man I'll ever marry—an' that's Tom Gregory. We're goin' to Dawson an' be married in the fall.'

"The man, he'd turned to face her. 'All right, Nellie,' he said, smilin' good natured. 'Maybe you'll marry Tom Gregory, an' maybe you won't. I won't bother you no more, if you don't want me to. But I'll be thinkin' about you just the same. An', come fall, if for any reason you should—well, change your mind about Tom, I'll try again. Who knows—for your sake, I might even quit gamblin' an' start workin' my claim.'

"She said somethin' I couldn't hear, an' then she turned an' walked down the hill, an' into the cabin. The man he stood there till the door shut behind her, then he turned an' headed back the way they'd come. He passed clost beside me. An' if I ever seen murder in a man's eyes, it was in his. 'Maybe you'll marry him, an' maybe you won't,' he muttered, 'an' I'm bettin' you won't,' he adds, in a kind of gritty voice. An' then he was gone.

"I set there a few minutes longer, an' then shoved my pipe in my pocket an' moseyed down to the cabin an' raps on the door. A man hollers 'come in.' I done so, an' damned if it wasn't old man Douty. He had a location down on Mastodon, a few years back. Used to trade with Jack McQuesten down to Circle City. He introduced me to his wife an' daughter, an' pretty quick a young fella comes in an' the girl made me acquainted with Tom Gregory. They went on outside, an' me an' the old folks sat there chawin' the fat about them down-river days.

"It must of be'n damn near midnight when the girl come back in, an' Douty give me a couple of extry blankets, an' I went outside an' rolled up on the warm sand along the crick.

"AFTER breakfast in the mornin' Douty claimed they was low on meat, an' so we went huntin'. I hadn't had no luck the day before, an' we worked back into the hills, an' long about four o'clock we run into three moose, an' knocked one over. We butchered him an' had to make two trips packin' the meat in. Then we et supper, an' old man Douty suggests we go up to Jack Whitlo's place an' set in the stud game.

"Young Gregory had gone back with us the second trip to help with the packin' an' he stayed to supper, an' he went along with us up to Whitlo's. I could see that Nellie Douty didn't like it none too well, but she was smart enough not to say nothin', so we pulled out.

"We was the first ones there, an' after Douty had made me acquainted with Whitlo, he fetched out a bottle, an' we all had a couple of snorts, durin' the course of which I invites him to come over to Halfaday some time an' set in our game.

"Whitlo had be'n down to Dawson an' fetched back quite a bunch of stuff, Jocko an' three, four of them Ladue Crick Siwashes helpin' him freight it in. He had some new blankets an' young Gregory was admirin' 'em. 'Like 'em eh?' Whitlo says, 'Well, take one along with you, then.'

Gregory offers to pay for it, but Whitlo wouldn't take any pay. 'Take it along,' he says. 'It ain't costin' you a cent. Hell, can't a man give a friend a blanket, if he wants to?'

"Gregory thanked him, an' then some of the boys dropped in, Jocko amongst 'em an' the game started.

"Hearin' an' seein' what I did there on the hillside, I mistrusted Whitlo from the first. It didn't jibe worth a damn—him givin' Gregory the blanket out of friendship, when out there his eyes had be'n about as friendly as a snake's. As the game went on I mistrusted Whitlo more an' more as I watched him handle the cards. After an hour or so I was onto most of his tricks, but I will say for him he's pretty smooth, at that. He let Douty an' Gregory win moderate amounts, but he shore took it out on some of the others, especially Jocko, who give him three I.O.U.'s.

"This young Gregory's a damn good kid, an' I doped it out that Whitlo is playin' what he thinks is a deep game—professin' friendship for him along the crick, so if anything happens to him, he wouldn't be suspected. I set there hopin' Whitlo would try to pull one of his tricks on me, thereby terminatin' his career, an' savin' young Gregory. But he never done it, an' I figure that owin' to my reputation he didn't want none of my meat.

"The game broke up 'long about three o'clock, an' when we was walkin' back to Douty's I kind of hints to Gregory that mebbe it would be a good thing to sort of keep an eye on Whitlo. But it didn't do no good. He claimed that Jack an' him done quite a bit of huntin' together an' was good friends, indicatin' the blanket he was packin' back with him, as proof of it. So that was that. I sort of like them young folks, an' would like to see 'em make a go of it. But if the damn fool insists on playin' into Whitlo's hand, I can't horn in on it."

"Huh," Cush grunted, "looks to me like you horn in on all the marryin's that goes on in these parts, lately. By cripes, if I had some paint an' a nice clean board I'd paint a sign an' spike it up right over your door: 'MATERMONIAL AGENCY, Black John Smith, Prop.', it would say."

"What do you mean—hornin' in on weddin's?"

Cush shrugged. "How about Ella May Benson an' young Sam Evans here a while back?"

THE big man grinned. "Hell, all I did was to recommend young Evans to Penrose fer a guide."

"Yeah, an' you know'd damn well how it would come out when you done it. Mind you, John, I ain't claimin' you didn't do right. You did. Anything a man would do to git a damn cuss like Penrose knocked off would be all right with me. An' now here comes old man Douty's girl in a sim'lar fix—an' yer at it again. An' the way the country's gettin' settled up there's bound to be other young folks driftin' with the idee of gittin' married—so you might's well hang up yer sign, an' be done with it."

"I just got through tellin' you I ain't hornin' in on this Rat Crick romance. But I'm also tellin' you that if anything drastic happens to young Tom Gregory, I'm callin' a miner's meetin' pronto, an' we'll have the satisfaction of seein' Whitlo kickin' around on a tight one—an' prob'ly that damn breed along with him."

"Rat Crick murders ain't none of Halfaday's business," Cush opined.

"The hell an' they ain't! Rat Crick runs into Halfaday, don't it? It's contiguous an' adjacent territory, ain't it? An' haven't we always held that any crime committed in adjacent an' contiguous territory comes under our jurisdiction?"

Cush shrugged. *You* have. By cripes, if someone was to knock off someone whilst he was a-straddle of the e-quator, an' you didn't like it, you'd rattle off a lot of big words provin' it was conspicuous territory, an' call a miner's meetin' an' hang him!"

"Nevertheless," Black John replied, "it would behoove this man, Whitlo, to watch his step."

II

ONE afternoon a week after Black John's visit to Rat Creek, Whitlo, rifle on shoulder, stopped in at the breed's claim, a mile or so above his own on Rat Creek. The breed paused in his work of building a sluice and, producing his pipe, seated himself beside the other on a squared timber.

"Pretty good layout you've got here,"

Whitlo said, glancing about with approval.

"Yeah, she prety good. I pan out two bits, four bits, sometam six bits right in de grass roots. When winter come I burn in."

"How much dust you got on hand?"

"Got no dust," the man replied. "You git all my dust. My luck, she run bad. Pretty quick she change. Luck she got to change—good luck she change, an' bad luck, too."

Reaching into a pocket, Whitlo withdrew a thick, little packet of papers, glanced down at them and riffled their edges with his thumb. "These I.O.U.'s of yourn," he said. "Know how much they figger up to?"

The breed eyed the little slips and shook his head. "No. Mebbe-so five t'ousan' dollar—mebbe-so ten t'ousan'. I pay um when my luck change. In the spring I kin pay um in dust."

"They figger right around sixteen thousan'. That's a thousan' ounces. Like you say, yer luck's bound to change sometime. An' there ain't no doubt in my mind but what you could sluice enough out of yer dump in the spring to cover these slips. But I can't wait till yer luck changes, nor yet I can't wait till spring. That bunch of supplies we fetched in jest about busted me, fer as ready dust goes. Fact is, Jocko, I got to collect on these here slips now."

The other frowned. "No kin pay, now."

"You kin pay, all right. This here layout, an' yer boat, an' canoe, an' rifle, an' whatever else you've got will cover it. At that I'm takin' a chanct on the claim peterin' out. All I got to do is go down to Dawson an' attach the outfit fer debt, an' the police will come up an' turn it over to me."

The dark eyes of the breed traveled slowly over the layout, the little cabin, the half-finished sluice, his boat pulled up on the gravel, and turned beseechingly to the hard eyes of blue. "My layout here, she all I got. She good layout. I pay you in de spring. I pay you every cent. I pay what you call de interest."

"To hell with the interest! I've got to have that money now. If you don't pay up tonight, I'll be hittin' fer Dawson in the mornin'. You going to pay—er ain't you?"

"No kin pay. I got no money. Got no dust."

"Listen, Jocko, I'm a friend of yourn, ain't I? I've give you more credit than anyone else would give you, ain't I? I've always used you white—paid you good money fer freightin', an' all. Well, as one friend to another, I'm givin' you a tip. I'm tellin' you where, inside an hour after you leave this layout when it gits dark, tonight, you kin get dust enough to wipe out these here slips. When I git that dust I'll hand 'em over to you, an' you can burn 'em up an' fergit you ever wrote 'em."

"Where I git de dust?"

"Old man Douty's cache. When I was comin' down here I happened to locate his cache—laid in the bresh an' watched him go to it an' then I sneaked down an' took a look in it—an' I'm tellin' you, if there ain't five hundred ounces in it, there ain't an ounce. An' agin I'm showin' you I'm a friend of yourn—'cause five hundred ounces figgers only eight thousan' dollars, but I'm lettin' you tear up sixteen thousan' of I.O.U.'s. I'm lettin' you pay them I.O.U.'s off at fifty cents on the dollar. An' what I mean, that's usin' you white!"

"You mean me—I'm rob old man Douty's cache?"

"Sure. Hell—it's a cinch. You slip over there after dark an' h'ist them sacks. They won't weigh over thirty pound. They're in a little holler at the bottom of the rim-wall, right where it breaks off into that slopin' hillside. There's a flat rock fitted into it, but you kin feel along with yer fingers till you find the crack."

The breed shook his head. "Me, I ain't rob no cache."

"Sure you wouldn't, Jocko," Whitlo agreed. "But this wouldn't be no reg'lar robbery. What with the layout you've got here, come spring, you'll be sluicin' out a damn sight more'n any five hundred ounces. Then you kin slip the five hundred ounces back in Douty's cache. Look at it sensible. It's a loan—that's what it is. You could slip in a few ounces fer interest when you pay it back. Douty don't lose nothin', an' you save yer hull damn layout. Douty don't need that dust over winter. Hell, he's takin' out more dust than he needs er he wouldn't of had none to cache. Like I said, I'm a friend of yourn, an' I'm jest tryin' to help you save yer layout—jest like I'd do fer any friend."

The breed was silent for several mo-

ments, his eyes on the gravel at his feet. "She good layout," he said. "In de spring I'm sluice out a t'ousan' ounces—mebbe-so two t'ousan'—mebbe t'ree."

"That's right. Then you kin pay Douty back, an' have plenty left over. Here's how to work it—you git the dust an' fetch it over to my place tonight. The game'll be goin' on when you git there. You leave the dust outside. After supper I'll dump my dirty dishwater in a buckit an' leave it settin' to one side of the door, an' you drop them sacks in the buckit. There won't no one bother a buckit of dirty water. Then you come on in an' set in the game. But don't hold out no dust to buy in with, 'cause the boys all knows you've be'n playin' on the cuff fer quite a while. They think I'm a damn fool fer lettin' you git in so deep. But hell—a friend's a friend, that's what I claim. You jest toss me another I.O.U. when you set down to the table an' I'll shove you the chips. Then in a little while I'll lay out of a pot, like I had to step out back, an' see if the dust's in the buckit. If it is, you stick around after the game breaks up, an' I'll turn them I.O.U.'s over to you an' you kin throw 'em in the stove."

The breed removed his hat and scratched his head. "Mebbe-so I come late, old man Douty t'ink I'm de wan dat rob he's cache."

"No, he won't. Chances is Douty won't be there nohow. He don't play reg'lar. Even if he's there he wouldn't think nothin' of you comin' in late—hell, some of the boys is allus comin' in late, you know that. An' besides, Douty won't know his cache has be'n robbed fer a week, an' by that time he'd of fergot about anyone comin' in late to a game a week back. I heard him say one time he don't go to his cache only about onct a week—an' he was to it tonight. You do like I say—I got it all doped out."

IN THE game that night young Tom Gregory's luck took a sudden and decided turn for the worse. Only an occasional player at first, he had been playing more and more frequently, encouraged by Whitlo's friendly advice to play while his luck was running. "A man's a damn fool not to ride a winnin' streak," Whitlo had said. And he had been winning steadily. His winnings had not been large—but they had been consistent. Then came the break. Pot after pot he lost on good hands. When his dust was gone he scribbled I.O.U.'s. And when the game broke up these slips totaled some eight thousand dollars. "Five hundred ounces," he said, as Whitlo spread the slips on the table. "Well," he added, with a sickly grin, "I guess that cures me of the gambling habit. This just about wipes me out. I won't have more than twenty ounces left." Several of the players, including Whitlo, expressed sympathy. "When you're luck busted, she sure went all to hell, didn't she? Well, that's the way it goes sometimes. A man's a damn fool to quit loser, though. Next time she'll prob'ly swing the other way, an' you'll git it all back, an' some more on top of it."

Gregory shook his head. "Nope. About a hundred ounces of that five hundred is winnings. The other four hundred I worked for—and worked damned hard. I'll just charge it off to education, and forget it."

Bill Crawford, one of the few sourdoughs on Rat Creek, grinned. "Guess you've got the right idee, Tommy," he said. "If I figgered that way when I was yore age, an' stuck to it, I'd be me money ahead—plenty. Trouble with me, I'd set in a game if I know'd I was goin' to lose."

The others laughed as they rose to go. Gregory turned to Whitlo. "I'll bring the dust up today," he said.

"That's all right, Tom. I wouldn't bother you fer it so quick, except I'm damn low myself. Had to lay the dust on the barrel head fer that freight I fetched in. I sure need that dust er I might have to shove out some I.O.U.'s myself—an' that wouldn't look so good, fer a man's that's runnin' the game. An' by the way, boys, there won't be no game tonight. I got some work to do tomorrow, an' I won't git no chanct to sleep."

Tom Gregory delivered the dust to Whitlo late in the afternoon, and that night, after dark, Whitlo slipped along the rim-wall and returned the little sacks intact to Gregory's cache. Then he went to bed.

III

CORPORAL DOWNEY paused on the high rim and looked down on the little valley of Rat Creek. It was late afternoon,

smoke from the supper fires rose lazily from the stovepipes of cabins, and the shadows had already climbed high on the opposite rimwall. "That smoke shore looks good to me," he muttered. "I'm hungry as a bear. Cripes, I can almost hear the moose steaks fryin' in them pans! Someone better be slicin' off another steak—'cause he's shore goin' to have a visitor fer supper, if I can find a way down off this rim."

Following along he came to a place where the rimwall slanted off into a long, sloping hillside, and headed down into the valley. A cabin was visible at the foot of the slope, and when he had nearly reached the foot of the hill he halted abruptly and stared. "Well, I'll be damned—hens! Must be a woman here—no man ever fetched no hens to a place like this. An' how the hell's she goin' to feed 'em when winter comes?"

A few minutes later he was greeted by old man Douty and his wife and daughter, sourdoughs all, whom he had known at Circle City.

As Downey had anticipated, another thick steak was sliced off a prime quarter of moose. "Me an' Black John got this un about ten days back," Douty explained, as his wife slapped the steak into the pan. "It's hung long enough to be good."

Nellie was setting the table as Mrs. Douty turned from the stove where a cloud of savory smoke was billowing up from the sizzling steak. "You men wash up now. Supper'll be ready in a minute, an' if you get to chewin' the fat, everything will be cold before you get around to eat it."

Contrary to man custom, the meal was liberally sprinkled with conversation. Downey answered inquiries as to the whereabouts of this old acquaintance and that, and detailed many happenings of interest along the big river.

"You huntin' someone," Douty asked, as the conversation lagged, "er jest out on patrol?"

"B'en over on Ladue Crick checkin' up on Sebastian's village. Couple of guys reported that the Siwashes had run 'em off the crick. But I guess they had it comin' Accordin' to old Sebastian, these two damn cusses was botherin' around the women. Then I cut acrost to see how you folks here on Rat Crick was makin' out. We heard about the Rat Crick strike this spring, an' this is the first chanct I've had to get up here."

"Looks pretty good," Douty reported. "Mebbe nothin' big, but accordin' to what we're pannin' off'n the bars an' out of the grass roots, she shows promise. Next spring'll tell the story—when we sluice out our dumps. I've worked a damn sight harder on other cricks an' took out a damn sight less."

"How many locations on the crick?" Downey asked.

"Eighteen, so fer. Most of 'em's chechakos, but there's a sprinklin' of sourdoughs—me, an' Bill Crawford an' Dave Guffetha, an' Pete Griggs. An' Jack Whitlo, if you want to call him a sourdough. He's been in the country long enough, but he never done no hell of a lot of minin', fer as I kin see."

"No," Downey grunted, 'an' he never will as long as he can make a dollar without workin'. The boys run him off Bonanza last year for runnin' a crooked stud game, an' he went up to Whitehorse, an' got run out of there. Before that we heard he was mixed up somehow with Hooch Albert, on the lower river, an' Al Mayo met him comin' down the Sixtymile jest about the time a couple of prospectors was supposed to have disappeared up there. He's a slick article all right. We've never got nothin' on him—but sometime he's goin' to slip."

"He's runnin' a game here on the crick," Douty said. "I wouldn't say it's crooked. I set in sometimes, an' so fer I'm a little ways ahead of the game. I guess he's took that breed, Jocko, fer plenty, though. An' two, three nights ago young Tom Gregory lost five hundred ounces. He'd be'n playin' a little ahead, too. But when his luck changed, it shore changed big. I wasn't settin' in that night, but accordin' to the boys Tom kep' gittin' nosed out on good hands all evenin'."

"I'm glad his luck did change," Nellie Douty said. "It taught Tom a lesson. He's quit gambling for good. I kept telling him his luck would change. But he'd just laugh at me, an' keep on going up there."

"Might be a good thing if someone else's luck would change," opined Mrs. Douty, with a meaning glance at her spouse. "But even if it did, it prob'ly wouldn't do no

good. Some folks ain't got sense enough to quit when they learn their lesson. There's no fool like an old fool, they say."

Old man Douty grinned and winked at the officer. "She couldn't be referrin' to me, could she, Downey? No, it couldn't be me. Must be you she's drivin at."

"You know who I'm drivin' at, Tim Douty!"

"But cripes, Ma—I ain't never made no heavy losin's!"

"No? How about them three hundred ounces you dropped down to Jack McQuesten's, that night—an' the two hundred you lost at Bergman's, an' the hundred an' fifty you lost playin' with them soldiers down to Eagle?"

"Yeah, but how about the seven hundred ounces I took the boys fer in the Tivoli, that night, an' the——"

"Yeah—an' how many of them ounces did I ever see? You went on a week's drunk, an'——"

"Now, Ma," Douty soothed, "you know damn well that's the only week's drunk I ever went on in the twenty-five years we be'n married. Cripes, I was willin' to fergit it the next day—but Ma, she's be'n sputterin' about it, off an' on, ever sence. What I claim, a man's got to have a little fun onct in a while. He can't work all the time, kin he, Downey?"

ACROSS the table the woman's eyes softened, and a smile twitched the corners of her mouth. "You do work hard, Pa—an' long hours, too. An' I guess you paid up fer that drunk. Fer three days after it was over, you was the sickest I ever seen you.

"I guess I ain't got no kick comin' on what little gamblin' an' drinkin' you do. Anyways, I wouldn't trade you fer any man I ever seen—bar none."

"An' I guess," Downey smiled, "that's about as good a recommendation as any man would want." He turned to the girl. "Do you think you'll be sayin' that about your husband after you've be'n married fer twenty-five years?"

The girl smiled and blushed. "I hope so. If Tom and I get along as well as Ma and Pa do, I won't have any kick coming. Ma's got to sound off about once in so often, but Pa just lets it go in one ear and out the other, and goes ahead and does what he wants to do."

When the laughter that followed this sally died down, Downey glanced at Douty. "You said Black John an' you got that moose the other day—does he get over here often?"

"Nope—it's the first time he was here. Claimed he was moose huntin', but I figger he jest ambled acrost to look us over. He know'd Rat Crick was settlin' up. 'Tain't only about seven, eight mile acrost to Cush's, accordin' to Jocko. The boys is talkin' about swampin' out a sled trail over there, come winter. It would be a handy place to trade. Black John, he's a great hand to keep his eye on things. There ain't much gits past him. A man would have to have his eyes open to handle all them outlaws they claim hangs out on Halfaday."

"I've heard that Black John is an outlaw himself," Nellie said, "but I don't believe it. He seems like such a nice man—so jolly and smiling behind that black beard of his."

"I'll bet some of them damn cusses he's hung didn't see nothin' jolly about him," Douty opined. "Ain't that so, Downey?"

Downey nodded. "He's a peculiar mixture, John is. I guess nobody really understands him—not even himself. I've known him to go to great lengths, both in dust and hard work, to help some poor devil that was down on his luck. And on the other hand, I know he can be hard as green ice when it comes to giving some crook what's coming to him. The talk is that he's an outlaw—but we've never got anything on him, this side of the line. An' the way he handles those shady characters on Halfaday has saved the police many a headache. If there's any crime on Halfaday, it's competently handled before we even hear of it."

"You goin' back to Dawson from here?" Douty asked.

"Yeah, I'll be pullin' out in the mornin'. Might slip on over to Halfaday first to see how Black John an' Cush are makin' it."

"Tell you what I wish you'd do fer me. We pulled out of Dawson early in the spring—come up on the snow. I worked fer wages all winter an', what with prices what they be, I didn't have enough money to pay fer the outfit we fetched along, so I run my face at the N. A. T. & T. fer right around four hundred dollars. If you don't

mind, I wisht you'd take down the dust an' pay that bill. I'm goin' good here, an' I don't want to take the time off to go down there. It won't heft yer pack up much—only twenty-five ounces."

"Shore I'll take it. The heft ain't nothin'. I'll pick up a canoe on Halfaday an' go down by way of the river. I left mine at Sebastian's village when I cut acrost here."

"I'll git the dust then," Douty said, and stepped from the room. Five minutes later he paused in the doorway, wide-eyed, his voice shrill with anger. "By God, Downey, I be'n robbed! Someone's robbed my cache! Every damn ounce gone—if I find out who done it I'll blow his guts out!"

"Hold on," Downey soothed, "take it easy, an' we'll——"

"Take it easy—hell!" Douty roared. "Five hundred ounces! More dust than I've had sence my claim run out on Mastodon! More'n I ever expected to have agin—an' it's gone!"

MRS. DOUTY came to the officer's aid. "Button yer lip, Tim!" she commanded. "If them ounces is gone you ain't goin' to git 'em back by standin' there yellin'. Corporal Downey's right here, an' the quicker you ca'm down, the quicker he can get to work huntin' the thief."

"That's right, Daddy," the girl seconded. "We've got to help Corporal Downey all we can."

"Cripes sake! You wimmin talk like losin' five hundred ounces—every cent we got in the world ain't nothin' to holler about!"

"It ain't the losin'—it's gettin' it back, I'm interested in," Mrs. Douty, replied. "If you think you can get it back by hollerin', jest stand there an' holler yer head off. I'd ruther put my faith in the police."

Douty managed a wry grin. "Guess yer right, at that, Ma. There ain't no use wastin' time. Come on, Downey, I'll show you the cache."

Corporal Downey filled and lighted his pipe. "Set down here, first," he said, "an' let's kind of figure things out. When was the last time you went to the cache?"

Douty glanced at the calendar that hung on the wall. "This here's Wednesday," he said. "I went to the cache Sunday night an' the dust was all there then. Sundays I weigh up the dust I git out durin' the week, an' when it gits dark I go to the cache with it."

"The robbery's pretty fresh, then," Downey said. "Now let's run over the men here on the crick." He turned to the girl. "Jest fetch me a pencil an' a sheet of paper, an' I'll write the names down as yer pa calls 'em off." When the list was completed, the officer studied it. Deliberately he drew a pencil line through four or five names. "We don't need to worry about them. They're sourdoughs. Jocko's a sourdough, too—but he's a breed. We'll jest leave his name on fer the present."

Glancing over his shoulder, Douty approved. "Yeah, we don't need to worry about the sourdoughs, an' me, I'd scratch off Jocko, too. I ain't never heard nothin' agin him."

Downey nodded, and drew a line through the breed's name. "All the rest are chechakos, with the exception of Jack Whitlo—is that right?"

"That's right," Douty agreed.

"Whitlo's a sourdough. But I ain't scratchin' his name off—yet."

"There's one checkako's name you can scratch off," Nellie said. "Tom Gregory would never rob a cache. He's got a good location, and we're going to be married in the fall."

"Okay," Downey smiled, and drew his pencil across Gregory's name. "Has any strangers showed up on the crick lately?"

Douty shook his head. "Nope. If anyone had showed up we'd heard about it. Anyways, it looks like someone done it that had had time to snoop around an' locate my cache. No stranger could of jest walked in an' found it."

"How about this Black John?" Nellie said. "He seems like such a nice man, but, after all—they say he's an outlaw."

Downey shook his head. "We can forget Black John. If he's an outlaw, he's not the kind of an outlaw that would rob a prospector's cache. I'll bet my life on that. Time an' again he's turned dust over to me that he's taken off some thief that did rob a cache. An' I might say," he added, with a grin, "most always he's taken it off the thief's corpse."

"Anyways," Douty added, "it's be'n ten days sence Black John was here, an' the cache was all right Sunday night."

"One more thing," Downey said, "then we'll go out an' look over the cache—not that it will do much good, I'm afraid. What with the ground dry as it is, there wouldn't be no tracks showin'. There's always a chanct though—like if the thief dropped somethin' that could be traced. We've got to check all angles. About this dust—is there any way you could identify it?"

"Nellie an' I could identify those sacks" Mrs. Douty said. "We made 'em."

"Of course," Downey said, "ten chances to one the thief wouldn't leave the dust in them sacks. He'd pour it out an' destroy 'em. But there's the odd chanct that he mightn't. Once or twice I have grabbed off some thief that wasn't smart enough to git rid of the sacks." He turned to Douty. "How about the gold? Was it all dust, or was there some nuggets in it—mebbe some odd-shaped ones?"

"By cripes, there was one funny nugget in one of them sacks!" the old man exclaimed. "You rec'lect that there nugget I showed you a while back, Ma—the one shaped like a H. It would go about an ounce. Two side pieces come down, an' a crossbar run acrost the middle." The woman corroborated the description, and Douty nodded emphatically. "Yes, sir—jest like a H, it was. I'd know that nugget if I seen it in hell!"

"Okay, we've got that much to go on," Downey said. "One odd-shaped nugget, an' some identifiable sacks. It ain't much. But it's somethin'. He paused, his eyes on the penciled list. "We'll start in with Jack Whitlo. Like I told you, his reputation is none too good along the river. An' offhand, I'd say he was our likeliest suspect. But you can't convict a man on his reputation. The law demands evidence."

IV

WHITLO greeted the two cordially as they reached his cabin, invited them in, and set a bottle and three glasses on the table. "Legal stuff, Downey," he grinned, as the officer glanced at the bottle. "Fetched up a couple of cases from Dawson along with my freight."

"Must taste kind of funny to you, don't it," remarked the corporal, returning the grin.

"Oh, I've got used to it. Ain't fooled with no hooch fer quite a while. That mix-up was over on the American side, anyway. First time you've be'n up here, Downey? Well—how do you like us?"

"I can tell you more about that, later."

"Drink up," Whitlo invited, shoving the bottle across the table. "If you come up to set in the game yer a little early. The boys won't be showin' up fer an hour er more."

"I come up to set in a game, all right. But not a game of stud. The fact is, Whitlo, Douty's cache was robbed sometime between Sunday night an' now. An' I want to know what you know about it?"

"What I know about it!" the man exclaimed. "I don't know nothin' about it. What the hell do you mean?"

"I mean, I'm goin' to locate that dust of Douty's. You got any dust on hand?"

"Yeah, I've got some. Not no hell of a lot, though, on account it took about all I had to pay fer the freight I fetched in, an' it left me about broke. How much dust did Douty lose?"

"Right around five hundred ounces."

"Five hundred ounces, eh?" As the man repeated the words Corporal Downey thought he detected a flicker of the cold blue eyes. "An' you say his cache was robbed sometime between now an' Sunday night?"

"That's right. How much dust you got on hand? I'd like to look it over."

The man grinned. "Sure, Downey—look it over. But you'd have a hell of a time pickin' out Douty's dust from anyone else's. That is, onlest the one that had it was dumb enough to leave it in Douty's sacks."

"In this case it might not be so hard as you think. There's one odd-shaped nugget amongst Douty's dust—a nugget shaped like an H."

"Okay, I'll fetch the dust an' you kin look it over. But I'm tellin' you I never had nothin' to do with robbin' Douty's cache. I got my faults—same as anyone else—but I ain't no damn cache-robber."

The man stepped from the room and returned with a stout metal box which he placed on the table and unlocked with a key he drew from his pocket. "There you be," he said. "Look her over."

The three peered into the box, as Downey's fingers combed through the loose metal—fine grains, coarser grains, an occasional

small nugget. Suddenly Douty uttered a roar. "There she is! Right there where yer thumb jest plowed her out! My nugget shaped like a H!"

Downey retrieved the nugget, and the three examined it. The officer glanced at Whitlo. "It looks," he said coldly, "like it's your turn to talk." The man hesitated, cleared his throat, seemed about to speak but remained silent. "All right, Whitlo. The jig is up. You might as well tell us what you done with the sacks."

"Listen, Downey," the man said, "I never robbed Douty's cache. That there nugget—mebbe it ain't the one Douty lost. It might jest look like it."

"Don't be a damn fool, Whitlo. You've be'n in the country long enough to know that there couldn't be two nuggets as odd-shaped as this one—not in a thousan' years, there couldn't. If you don't know it, the jury will," he added significantly.

"Yeah—I guess yer right, at that," the man admitted, with well-feigned reluctance. "But fact is, Downey, I don't know no more about where them sacks is than you do."

"What do you mean—you don't know where they are?"

"Meanin' jest like I say. If five hundred ounces of this here dust come out of Douty's cache, I didn't know nothin' about it. It was paid to me fer a debt."

"What kind of a debt?"

"A stud debt. Three nights ago this here party's luck went back on him, an' he dropped five hundred more ounces than he had on him so he give me an I.O.U. Then day before yesterday he come up an' paid me the five hundred ounces, an' I dumped 'em in the box there on top of about a hundred ounces of my own."

"Who is this party?"

"He's a damn good friend of mine. Friend of Douty's, too. That's why I hate to name him. But it looks like I've got to, er else git the blame fer robbin' that cache. It was Tom Gregory."

"That's a damn lie!" cried Douty. "Tom Gregory never robbed no man's cache."

Whitlo shrugged. "Whoever done it, Tom had the dust. Ask any of the boys that was settin in the game the other night. I'll tell you who they be. They seen him lose, an' they seen him give me his I.O.U. Bill Crawford, an' Dave Guffetha, an' Pete Griggs was there an' seen it. They're sourdoughs. Ask them. They wouldn't lie to you. An' hold on—by God, I believe I kin show you the I.O.U. with his name signed onto it. When he paid over the ounces I give him his I.O.U. an' I rec'lect he tore it in two an' throw'd it in the wood box, there." Crossing to the wood box, Whitlo removed the wood, and after a moment's clawing about among the chips and bits of bark in the bottom, he fished out two scraps of paper which he handed to Downey. "There you be," he said. "Right in his own handwritin'."

THE officer fitted the two scraps together, and for several moments, the three stared at the I.O.U. Finally Downey spoke. "This Gregory, Douty—how much do you really know about him?"

"I know he's a damn fine young fella that wouldn't rob no man's cache—least of all, mine. Why, him an' Nellie's goin' to git married in the fall! He had right around five hundred ounces in his own cache—why would he rob mine? About a week ago, he was over to the cabin, an' he was tellin' how he'd took out right around four hundred ounces, an' on top of that he had a hundred ounces he'd took out of the stud game. I know he lost five hundred ounces the last time he sat in Whitlo's game, but he never paid that debt with my dust—I'd bet on that."

"But," persisted Downey, "how long have you known him? Who is he? Where did he come from?"

"I've know'd him ever sence he come in early this spring an' located on Two Below Discovery. Nellie she located One Below. He was green as hell when he come. I seen he was a good lad, an' had a good location, an' I teached him how to go at it. He's smart an' he ketched on quick. Then he got to courtin' Nellie. An' they aim to git married."

"That's all you know about him, then?"

"Yeah—that's all. But, hell, Downey, that's all a man knows about anyone, when you come to think about it. Take the three of us right here—none of us knows where the others come from, nor nothin' else about us, except jest what we've seen an' heard."

Downey rose. "Okay," he said. "We'll go down an' see what Gregory's got to say."

He turned to Whitlo. "There ain't no question in the world but what you've got the five hundred ounces there in that box that was stolen out of Douty's cache. An' I'm tellin' you——"

"You've told me enough already, Downey—you an' Douty. If that there is Douty's dust, I don't want a damn ounce of it! An' to prove it, I'm weighin' out them five hundred ounces, an' handin' 'em over to Douty, right now, and he kin take 'em along with him. Damn' if I want to be mixed up in no cache robbery, one way er another. I'm goin' along down to Gregory's, though, an' I'm takin' this I.O.U. with me, an' if he's got five hundred ounces in his cache, like Douty claims, I'll collect what's owin' me."

The late summer twilight was deepening into dusk as young Tom Gregory greeted his three visitors in the cabin on Two Below Discovery. Douty introduced Corporal Downey, who came directly to the point. "Did you make a losin' in a stud game up to Whitlo's three nights ago?"

"Why—yes, I did."

"How much did you lose?"

"I lost what dust I had with me—fifteen or twenty ounces, maybe. And on top of that I lost five hundred ounces. I gave Whitlo my I.O.U. Jack could have told you that."

"Yeah, he did tell me. Did you take up yer I.O.U.?"

"Why, sure, I did! I paid Whitlo the next day, and he gave me my I.O.U. and I tore it up and threw it in his woodbox." The young man glanced inquiringly into the grave faces. "Why? Isn't everything all right?"

Downey ignored the question. "What did you pay Whitlo off with?"

"Why, dust, of course."

"Where'd you get the dust?"

"Out of my cache."

"How much was in yer cache at that time?"

"Maybe twenty or thirty ounces over the five hundred I paid Whitlo."

"How much is in it now?"

"Just what I left in it when I took out the five hundred ounces."

"You be'n to your cache, sense you took out the five hundred?"

"No. I took them out day before yesterday. I do the same as Douty does, deposit my dust in my cache once a week."

Downey nodded. "Okay. Let's go have a look at the cache."

"What's all this about?" Gregory asked. "Whitlo knows I paid him. Why do you want to look at my cache?"

Downey's shrewd gray eyes met the younger man's gaze squarely. "I'll tell you why. It's because sometime between the night you set in that stud game an' now, Douty's cache was robbed of five hundred ounces of dust. Whoever robbed the cache was smart enough to destroy the sacks, but he wasn't smart enough to do away with one peculiar-shaped nugget that Douty had. We found that nugget in Whitlo's strong box, along with about six hundred ounces of dust, five hundred of which ounces Whitlo claims you paid him day before yesterday."

The young man's face paled. "And—and you think I robbed Douty's cache?"

Downey shrugged. "Someone did. Whitlo had Douty's dust in his strong-box—an' he claims he got it from you."

Gregory turned to Douty. "Do you think I robbed your cache?" he asked in a low, hard voice.

"Not by a damn sight, I don't!" the oldster replied. "I believe Whitlo done it, an' turned back the dust to keep out of trouble! He claims he got that dust off'n you. Come on, son—let's go look in yer cache. An' if it's like you say—only twenty, thirty ounces in it—Whitlo's goin' to talk a damn sight faster'n what he has yet to keep out of jail. Ain't that so, Downey."

"That's right," Downey agreed. "It looks like the cache will tell the story."

Leading the way to the rimwall, young Gregory knelt at the bottom of a rock-crack and withdrew a stone, then he drew aside, and glanced at Downey. "There's the cache," he said. "Go ahead and check up on it."

Dropping to his knees, the officer reached into the aperture and one after the other, drew out seven little sacks, six of them stuffed like sausages, full eighty ounces apiece—the other about a third full. With the sacks on the ground before him he looked up into Gregory's face. The young man's eyes were staring in horror at the little pile of sacks, his jaw sagged open, and his face had gone dead white. "What have you got to say now?" he asked.

Gregory's lips moved, but at first no

words came—then they came in a torrent. "Those are my sacks—the sacks I paid over to Whitlo! I don't know how they got back here in my cache!" He whirled on Whitlo. "This is your work! You put the sacks back. You robbed Douty's cache, and put my dust back so they'd think I did it. I never robbed Douty's cache."

Whitlo scowled into the outraged eyes. "It looks from here like it was you that tried to double-cross me—playin' me with Douty's dust, so it would git found on me. It was a damn dirty trick. But it didn't work. Yer story don't make sense, Tom. If I'd robbed Douty's cache, an' wanted 'em to think you done it, I'd of slipped Douty's dust in yer cache—not yer own. Fact is, I couldn't neither of robbed Douty's cache, nor put nothin' in yourn. I didn't know where either one of 'em was."

"And I don't know where Douty's cache is, either!"

"Livin' as clost to Douty as you do," Corporal Downey said, "it wouldn't be very hard fer you to find out, if you wanted to. I guess yer cache has told the story, all right. Yer under arrest for robbin' Douty's cache, an' it's my duty to warn you that anything you say may be used against you. I'll hole up here overnight, an' in the mornin' we'll be hittin' fer Dawson." He turned to the others. "You two will be needed fer witnesses, when the trial comes off. Tell the others that set in that game that night that they'll prob'ly be wanted, too. You'll be served with subpœna when the time comes."

Whitlo turned to Downey. "I'm takin' these here five hundred ounces he owes me," he said. "They rightly belong to me."

Downey shook his head. "No, you ain't. I'm takin' 'em along fer evidence—Douty's dust, too. An' that I.O.U. you've got—that's evidence, too. I'll receipt fer the stuff, an' you can get it back after the trial."

V

IT WAS nearly noon, a few days after Corporal Downey's departure from Rat Creek with Tom Gregory in custody, that Black John turned suddenly from the bar in Cushing's saloon as a shadow darkened the doorway. "Well, dog my cats, if it ain't Nellie Douty! Step right up an' meet Cush. Did yer pa come along with you?"

"No," the girl replied, advancing to the bar. "He don't know I came over here. No one knows. I told him I was going to try and get a moose. I—it was something Corporal Downey said—that he'd known you to—to help people who were in trouble—and I—we—Tom Gregory and I are in terrible trouble." The words came gropingly, and it was evident that the girl was very near tears. "Maybe I oughtn't to bother you—but I——"

THE lips behind the black beard smiled reassuringly as the big man interrupted. "Listen, Sis, don't you worry none about botherin' me. Fact is, I ain't very busy today. You go ahead, like one sourdough to another, an' onload what's on yer mind. Sometimes somethin' that looks like terrible trouble turns out to be nothin' more'n a passin' annoyance."

"This is no passing annoyance. Tom Gregory is in jail. Corporal Downey arrested him for robbing my father's cache!"

"H-u-u-m—so that's where the lightnin' struck, eh?"

"What do you mean?" asked the girl, a puzzled expression in her eyes.

"Meanin' that the worst ain't happened, after all."

"Tom and I were going to be married in the fall—and now Tom's in jail. What could be worse than that?"

"Well—he might be dead."

"He'd rather be dead than have people think he'd rob a cache!"

Black John smiled reassuringly. "What folks are thinkin' now, an' what they'll be thinkin' in the fall might be two different things. S'pose you go ahead and tell me what come off."

"Corporal Downey had been up on Ladue Crick, and he cut across to see how things were going at Rat Crick, and he stopped overnight with us. He said he was going back to Dawson, so Pa asked him if he'd mind taking some dust along and paying a bill he owed at the N. A. T. & T. When Pa went to get the dust out of his cache it was empty—five hundred ounces gone. They made a list of everyone on the crick, and Corporal Downey decided to start in with Jack Whitlo. They went up there, and sure enough, Pa's dust was in Whitlo's strong-

box. Pa knew it was his on account of an odd-shaped nugget.

"A few nights before Tom Gregory had lost heavily in Whitlo's stud game, and had given Whitlo an I.O.U. for five hundred ounces, which he paid the next day. And Whitlo claimed that the dust in his strongbox was the dust Tom paid him.

"So they went down to Tom's claim, and Corporal Downey asked Tom where he got the dust to pay Whitlo, and Tom told him he got it out of his cache, and that it took just about all that was in it. He took them to the cache to show them—and they found over five hundred ounces in it—the same dust that Tom had paid to Whitlo a couple of days before. Tom accused Whitlo of robbing Pa's cache, and then returning the dust Tom paid him back in Tom's cache—but it didn't look reasonable. So Corporal Downey arrested Tom and took him down to Dawson. And he took Tom's dust and the I.O.U. along for evidence."

BLACK JOHN nodded. "Yeah, the law's strong for evidence. Take a miners' meetin', now—an' we go more on common sense. How about yer pa? Does he think Tom robbed his cache."

"He didn't, at first. But in the last day or so he's kind of switched around—says when Whitlo found out the dust in his box was Pa's, he returned it to him without a squawk—and how it isn't reasonable that he'd have returned Tom's own dust to his cache—that if he had robbed the cache and wanted to throw suspicion on Tom, he'd have planted Pa's dust in his cache instead of returning his own. But I *know* Tom Gregory never robbed any cache. And I know Whitlo had something to do with it—but I can't prove anything.

"Whitlo's been coming down to our place—but I won't see him. He tried to sympathize with me when Corporal Downey took Tom away, and I told him I despised him." The girl paused and sighed, heavily. "I just *know* that Tom is innocent," she reiterated. "But if the law says he's guilty, I suppose there's nothing anyone can do."

Again the bearded lips smiled. "W-e-e-l-l, I wouldn't go so far as to say that. Personally, I ain't got no vast respect for the law's acumen. I'll sort of look around a little. There might be somethin' turn up that Downey overlooked."

"Oh—if you only could find something—something that would clear Tom's name, we—we never could repay you—but we'd always know that you're the grandest person in the world!"

The big man laughed. "Some claims I'm the grandest—an' some the damndest. It's just accordin' to the angle I'm viewed from."

"Well, I'll be going back, now," the girl said. "Somehow, I feel better, just telling you about it."

"You can't go clean back to Rat Crick without eatin'," Cush said glancing at the clock. "It's noon. You go around back, an' tell the klooch I says to throw a big feed into you. Mebbe you'd like a little snort first. The house is buyin' one."

The girl smiled. "No, thank you. But I am hungry. I believe I will stay to dinner."

As the girl stepped from the room Cush eyed Black John across the bar. "There you be—right plumb in the middle of another marryin'. It's jest like I claimed—you might's well take out a marryin' license an' be done with it."

"As far as I'm concerned, the nuptial angle of this situation is purely incidental. I'm interested merely in frustrating the machinations of a damn scoundrel. Methinks I'll hie me to Rat Crick an' fraternize with Jack Whitlo."

"Does that mean hang him?"

"Certainly not. If we're to have the pleasure of hangin' him you may rest assured it will be done by due process of a miner's meetin' held right here in this room. An' just to facilitate matters, if it comes to that, I want you to get holt of Red John an' Short John, them two bein' the shrewdest of the stud players, an' tell 'em to be here tomorrow night for a game. Tell 'em I'm bringin' a crooked tinhorn over from Rat Crick to set in the game, an' I want 'em to take particular notice of how he handles the cards.

"Tell 'em he's a handy second dealer, an' pretty good on the holdout, an' in cut-slippin'. If we decide to hang Whitlo, we want everything fair an' reg'lar, so no one could claim he didn't get all the breaks that was comin' to him. If he's too smooth for 'em, an' they can't catch him at his tricks, they can take my word for it that he's pullin'

'em just the same, an' can so testify at the meetin'. They know I wouldn't lie a hangin' on no one that didn't have it comin'. Tell 'em, if they do get onto his work, not to say a damn word, or let him know they suspect him durin' the game—just keep on playin' an' let him work his neck further an' further into the noose. When the time comes for action, I'll call on 'em."

"Why can't you tell 'em yerself?"

"Because I'll be on Rat Crick. I'll go over an' set in Whitlo's game tonight, an' invite him over to ours tomorrow night."

"When you goin' to Rat Crick?"

"Just as soon as Nellie Douty gets through eatin'. I'll go back with her."

"By God, if a good-lookin' young woman hits the crick you allus work it so's you git on the good side of 'em! Here you git to walk around amongst the hills with a pretty girl on a nice warm afternoon whilst I gotta stay here in this damn saloon an' talk to guys like Red John an' Short John."

"You seem to forget, Cush, that in this business of livin' each one of us fits into his own particular niche. As the immortal bard of Avon so aptly put it:

'All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women, merely players:
They have their exits an' their entrances,
An' one man in his time plays many parts.'"

"Yeah," Cush growled sourly, "but it's a damn wonder that one of them times I wouldn't git some good part."

"Here comes One Armed John," the big man said, glancing toward the doorway. "I'll send him after Red John an' Short John."

VI

AS THE two neared the Rat Crick rim, Black John turned to the girl. "You better slip along home now, Sis, an' don't let on to anyone that you've seen me. I'll just sort of filter around amongst the boys a bit an' see what's goin' on."

Seating himself on a stone he filled his pipe as the girl disappeared down a draw that led into the little valley.

An hour later he greeted the half-breed who was working at his sluice. "Hello, Jocko! How they comin'?"

"Oh, pretty good. My sluice—I git her finish' today."

"That's good. 'Cause I got a job for you."

"W'at kin' of job? I got to cut de wood, so she be dry for burn in my shaft dis winter."

"It's a freightin' job—you an' yer boat. I'll pay double wages, an' it won't take you long. The stuff'll be at the mouth of the White, an' I want it run up to Cush's. I'll go along, an' have plenty of help. You drop down Rat Crick tomorrow an' hole up in Olson's old shack on Halfaday for the night, an' I'll meet you there next mornin'."

The breed grinned. "A'right. I be dere. Everyone say dat bes' you keep on de good side Black John, eh?"

The big man returned the grin. "It ain't no bad idea, at that—in this neck of the woods. I'm a man that sticks by his friends —an' vicy vercy. Jack Whitlo still runnin' his game?"

"Oh, yeah, he run de game a-right."

"How's your luck runnin'? Last time I was here it wasn't so good."

The man shrugged. "She run ver' bad. But sometam she boun' to change."

"Guess I'll loaf on up to Whitlo's—might lay over an' set in, tonight."

Whitlo greeted Black John cordially, and produced bottle and glasses. "What you doin' over our way? Huntin' moose agin?"

"No, not this time. Fact is, I've got a sort of hankerin' fer a game of stud."

"How about Cush's? Cripes, I thought you boys over on Halfaday played every night!"

"No, it kind of runs in streaks. Fact is, the boys over there are kind of dumb when it comes to poker an' stud. There ain't what you could call a good player on the crick. They've all got plenty of dust, what with nowhere to spend it but Cush's, an' I've often thought what a hell of a killin' some guy could make in that game if he was really good. In the winter we play more often, but it's got so lately a man's got to go up an' down the crick an' drum up a game."

"It's a good thing I didn't go acrost then. I've be'n aimin' to ever sence you was here, but seems like I never got around to it."

"Yeah, I wondered why you hadn't showed up. I remember invitin' you over.

So today I come acrost to see how you was makin' it. Figure on settin' in your game tonight, an' then mebbe you'll go back with me tomorrow an' sort of get acquainted with the boys. I got a game all ribbed up at Cush's for tomorrow night."

"Why, sure I'll go! Drink up an' have another." As the glasses were emptied and refilled, Whitlo glanced across the table. "You know, John, I've be'n figgerin' fer quite a while that me an' you ort to hook up together."

"Yeah, in what way?"

"Well," the man replied with a wink, "there's things you know—an' there's things I know, too. What both of us knows is that there's easier ways of makin' a livin' than breakin' yer back on the end of a shovel. What with you on Halfaday, an' me here on Rat Crick, we might sort of put two an' two together, an' do pretty well fer ourselves."

BLACK JOHN nodded. "The thought is worth ponderin'. But you know as well as I do, there's a lot of angles to a deal like that. I ain't a man that rushes into a thing without givin' it some thought. Fact is, Jack, we ain't neither one of us very well acquainted with the other. I'd want some time to sort of look you over, an' I s'pose you feel the same way about me. S'pose we jest let the idea simmer along for a while. Then, if we're both satisfied, an' somethin' good turns up, we might be able to figure somethin' out."

"Okay, we'll leave it that way. 'Course I kin see how you don't know no hell of a lot about me. But, fer's I'm concerned, from what I've heard tell about you, I'd be willin' to throw in with you right now."

The big man shook his head. "Don't never go on what you hear about a man, Jack. Take it on a hook-up like that, a man can't afford to depend on hearsay."

"Yeah, I s'pose yer right, at that." The man glanced at the clock. "You set an' nick away at the bottle, an' I'll light the fire an' git supper, so's we'll have it out the way agin' the boys come."

The game broke up about three in the morning, and after a few hours sleep and a hearty breakfast, the two set out for Halfaday, Whitlo carrying a belt ax. "You've be'n acrost here enough to know the shortest cut," he said, "so I'll jest blaze as we go 'long. We figger on swampin' out a sled trail acrost to Cush's agin snow comes."

The game, that night at Cush's, went off without incident, Whitlo won steadily, and Black John noted that, without seeming to. Cush together with Red John and Short John from beneath low-pulled hat brims, had their eyes on the visitor's hands as he dealt. Along toward morning the game broke up, and Whitlo accompanied Black John to his shack for a few hours' sleep.

After breakfast they returned to Cush's for a few rounds of drinks pending Whitlo's return to Rat Crick. The big man raised his glass. "Well, here's to you, Jack," he said. "Seems like you done pretty well for yourself last night."

"Yeah, my luck was runnin'. That's the way it goes—sometimes one way an' sometimes another."

"Shore. But it ain't all luck neither," Black John opined. "You play a damn good game of stud. Cripes, you must have won right around five thousan'."

"Four thousan', two hundred an' fifty," Whitlo corrected.

"Besides all the fun you had," grinned Black John. "Yes sir, you done all right. But luck like that can't hold—even admittin' you play a better game than we do. The boys'll be hankerin' for another game, one of these nights. They'll want the chanct to get their money back."

"Why, sure, John! Any night you say. All you got to do is let me know an' I'll be here with bells on."

"It'll be a couple of weeks, maybe. Like I told you, we don't play so often in the summer. I'll let you know when we can rib up another game. The boys'll be glad to see you back. Here on Halfaday we like anyone that's in for good clean sport—ain't that right, Cush?"

"Yup," Cush grunted, and strangled slightly as he gulped his drink.

"I'll be here, all right," Whitlo said. "Guess I better be pullin' out, now. It'll be supper time agin I git home, an' the boys'll be wantin' a game tonight."

"Well, so long, Jack. Like I said, you play a damn good game of stud—but even at that, I think you're dumber'n hell."

Whitlo shot the big man a quick glance "What do you mean?" he asked.

"Meanin' the way you run yer game over

there—lettin' a damn breed like Jocko get into you as deep as he is. Of course, it ain't none of my business, an' I don't know how much you've got chalked up against him—but it must be plenty. He was givin' you I.O.U.'s the first time I was there—an' still doin' it night before last. Any damn fool ort to know he never can pay out."

Whitlo grinned. "Speakin' of most breeds, you'd be right—but not Jocko. He's got a damn good claim there on Rat Crick. You don't need to worry about me, John, I know my way around. An' jest to show you I ain't so dumb, I'll tell you he's already took up all them I.O.U.'s except jest what he's given me in the last couple of games."

Black John's eyes widened in surprise. "He has—well I'll be damned! An' here I was afraid you was gettin' stuck with a lot of worthless paper! Have another drink. No hard feelin's, I hope—me callin' you dumb."

The other laughed. "Hell no, John! A lot of folks has made the mistake of playin' me fer a fool," he added with a wink. Swallowing his liquor he turned toward the door. "Well, so long. I'll be seein' you."

WHEN the man had gone, Cush glowered across the bar. "Huh, if I was you I wouldn't be callin' no one dumb—dumb as what you be! Settin' there all night an' lettin' that damn tinhorn pull off one raw deal right after another, an' never opened yer head! Cripes, I was jest a-bilin' under my collar—an' so was Red John, an' Short John, too. An' we didn't dast to say nothin' on account that's what you told us not to. An' here I drop eight hundred, an' some of the boys is out better'n a thousan' apiece—all on account of you fetchin' that damn crook over here an' lettin' him git away with it."

"You figure he's got away with it, eh?"

"Well, hell—he's gone, ain't he? An' he's packin' better'n four thousan' of our money with him, ain't he? Cripes, we figgered you was lettin' him go so's we'd have enough on him to hang him, this mornin'. I've got One Armed John stickin' around out in the kitchen right now, 'cause I figgered we'd be sendin' him up an' down the crick to call a miners' meetin' as soon as you an' Whitlo got up. An' all you do is stand around an' drink with him, an' tell him he's a good stud player, an' a good, clean sport—when you know damn well he ain't nothin' but a lousy tinhorn which he'd steal the coppers off'n a dead man's eyes!"

Black John nodded thoughtfully. "I'm inclined to agree with you, Cush, that certain of Whitlo's manipulations might lay his integrity open to question."

"Open to question! He's a damn thief!"

"Well, that's statin' it forthrightly an' onequivocally. But even so, I've got a hunch we'll never hang him. Be that as it may, time will tell. I'm pullin' out now. Be gone mebbe a couple of weeks or so. You tell the boys I say to figure out how much they lost in the game last night an' keep track of it. I'll promise to pay 'em back double."

"Pay us back double! Hell, John—you was money out, yerself!"

"Oh shore. I'll pay myself double, too. I don't expect Whitlo will show up durin' my absence, as he wouldn't figure there'd be a game."

"Yeah, an' there's another thing—you tellin' him we don't play very often in the summer, when you know there's a game goin' on in here damn near every night."

"Oh shore," the big man grinned, "but with the days as long as they are, the nights don't get here as quick as they do in the winter."

"How's that agin?" Cush asked, a look of perplexity in his eyes.

"You'll have a couple of weeks to figure it out," Black John laughed. "But if Whitlo should happen to show up while I'm gone I want you boys to treat him with consideration and respect. Remember, he's a means to an end."

"Yeah, an' he'll come to a mean end if he sticks his nose in that there door. I'll wham him right between the eyes with a bung starter!"

VII

SWINGING a packsack into his canoe, Black John stepped in and dropped down the creek. He landed at Olson's old shack to find the breed waiting. Seating himself on a stone, he eyed the other. "Set down, Jocko," he said, filling his pipe, and tossing over his tobacco pouch. "Set down an' fill up." When the pipes were going,

he eyed the man stonily. "Jack Whitlo was up to Cush's last night," he began, "an' after the game busted up, I invited him to come over to my cabin an' roll in in my spare bunk. Before we crawled in we done some talkin'—about this an' that—like men will. Jack, he'd had quite a few drinks, an' his tongue run a bit loose—for his own good an' yours."

"W'at you mean—for my good?" the man asked, his black eyes widening slightly.

"Well, for instance, when I kidded him about lettin' you get into him so deep you could never pay out, he told me you had paid all except a few late I.O.U.'s. Said you paid him five hundred ounces in dust a while back. Is that right?"

"Yeah, I pay him."

"Where did you get them ounces you paid him?"

"Why—I git um out my cache."

"That ain't where Whitlo says you got 'em. He claims you got 'em out of Tim Douty's cache—"

"Dat's a damn lie!" the man interrupted, a look of terror in his eyes.

"No, it ain't," Black John insisted. "It's the whole truth—an' you know it."

"Tom Gregory rob Douty's cache. Co'p'l Downey arres' him an' take him to jail."

"Yeah, Whitlo told me about that, too. He claimed that he laid in the brush an' saw you rob Douty's cache, an' when you paid him with Douty's dust he figured on shuttin' up an' lettin' you get away with it. So when Downey arrested Tom Gregory, Whitlo kep' his mouth shut. But he claims that Douty's girl an' Gregory was goin' to be married this fall, an' he says she feels so damn bad about Tom bein' arrested that he's plumb sorry for her. He says he's waited a while to see if she wouldn't git over it—but she's gittin' sadder an' sadder all the time, ontil Whitlo claims he just can't stand it any more. He says last night to me, he says, 'John,' he says, 'my conscience won't let me set back an' see that pore girl suffer a damn bit longer. An' besides that, it ain't givin' Tom Gregory no square deal, neither. Jacko robbed that cache—an' I seen him do it. He ain't nothin' but a damn breed, nohow—an' why should I set back an' see two young white folks suffer like they're sufferin' all on account of a damn, thievin' breed. An' what's more, he says, 'I ain't goin' to. I'm goin' to hit out fer Dawson tomorrow, an' tell Corporal Downey the truth, so he can turn Tom Gregory loose, an' arrest that damn breed."

As Black John talked, the blood drained from the other's face, leaving it a dead clay color. For several moments he sat stunned, thick spittle running down the stem of his dead pipe and dropping to the ground. When finally he spoke, his voice sounded flat and tired.

"Whitlo, he liar."

"You mean — you didn't rob Douty's cache?"

"I rob de cache a'right. I pay de dus' to Whitlo. But Whitlo tell me to rob Douty's cache. He come to me an' say you got to pay dese I.O.U. right now. I say I no kin pay till spring w'en I sluice out my dump, an' he say he no kin wait. He say ol' man Douty got five hundred ounces in his cache. You rob his cache an' pay me de five hundred ounces an' I let you tear up all the I.O.U.'s. I'm friend of you, he say. I let you pay off fifty cent on de dollar.

"I tell him I no want to rob no cache, an' he say a'right, tomor' I go to Dawson an' git the paper for take all you got—you claim, you boat, you gun, everyt'ing. So I rob the cache. An' now he squeal on me, an' I lose all I got, an' go to jail besides. So, I t'ink I shoot dat damn Whitlo!"

"Listen, Jocko," Black John said, "shootin' Whitlo wouldn't get you nothin' but a hangin'. I've be'n watchin' your eyes, an' listenin' while you talked. An' I believe you've told the truth. You know me. You know I never double-crossed anyone—that didn't have it comin', don't you?"

The man nodded.

"Okay. An' I'm givin' it to you straight. The best thing you can do is to beat Whitlo to Corporal Downey, an' tell him the whole thing—just like you told it to me."

"Downey, he no b'lieve me. He say, like Whitlo—Jocko de damn breed. He lie like hell."

"No he won't, 'cause I'm goin' with you. An' I tell Downey you ain't lyin'. I know Whitlo's a damn skunk—an' Downey knows it, too. Accordin' to the way the law is, the one that instigates a crime—that means dopin' it out—is a damn sight guiltier than the one that does it. Whitlo put you up to that robbery, put the screws onto you, till you

give in. Up to now your record is clean, an' Downey knows that, too. I'll promise you that if you'll tell Downey what happened, an' agree to testify agin Whitlo on the witness stand, you'll get off easy. I can't promise you'll go plumb free. That'll be up to the police an' the Crown Prosecuter. But I can promise that they'll make it easy as they can for you—an' you know dam well I never go back on a promise. It's your only way out. 'Cause if Whitlo gets to Downey first, you'll be doin' time from now on."

Without a word, the breed dashed into the cabin, reappeared with his packsack and tossed it into the canoe. "Come on," he said, "let's go!"

VIII

CORPORAL DOWNEY looked up from his desk in detachment headquarters in Dawson as Black John, closely followed by the halfbreed stepped into the little office. "Hello, John! An' you, too, Jocko. Heard you was workin' a claim up on Rat Crick. Don't tell me you've moved over on Halfaday."

"No," Black John said, "Jocko's still workin' his claim. An', speakin' of Rat Crick, how's young Tom Gregory gettin' along? Has he confessed to robbin' old Tim Douty's cache, yet?"

Downey frowned. "No. With all the evidence against him, he hasn't got a leg to stand on—yet he insists he had nothin' to do with the robbery."

"Got plenty of evidence to convict him, whether he confesses, er not, I s'pose?"

"Shore I have. Listen to the facts—he loses five hundred ounces in a stud game at Whitlo's one night, promises to take up his I.O.U. the next day, an' does so—usin' the dust that he stole out of Douty's cache to pay Whitlo off with."

Black John interrupted with a grin. "This is evidence I'm listenin' to—not necessarily *facts*. Sometimes there's a big difference."

"Yeah, but not this time. I happened to be right there when old man Douty discovered his cache had be'n robbed. I started in on Whitlo, on account of his reputation bein' none too good, an' located Douty's dust in Whitlo's strong-box — identified it by an odd-shaped nugget. Whitlo handed the dust over to Douty without a squawk, claimin' he'd got it from Tom Gregory, an' produced the I.O.U. Tom had tore in two an' throw'd in the woodbox, after takin' it up. So we went down to Gregory's claim, an' when I asked him where he got the dust to pay Whitlo off with, he said he got it out of his cache, an' that it took about all the dust he had—claimed he didn't have only twenty, thirty ounces left. But when I examined his cache, I found five hundred an' twenty ounces in it. He pretended to be surprised as hell, claimin' that the five hundred ounces was the ounces he'd paid Whitlo. So I arrested him."

"H'u-u-m, kind of dumb, wasn't it—even for a chechako—to pay Whitlo off with Douty's dust, when he could just as well have used his own, an' cached Douty's somewheres else, an' showed his own cache as empty as he claimed it was."

Downey nodded. "Shore it was dumb. Thank the Lord most all crooks make at least one dumb play in committin' a crime, or we'd have a damn sight harder time than we do. It's them dumb plays that gives us a break."

"So you've got enough to convict Gregory on without no question, eh?"

"Why, sure! What do you think? What would anyone think that heard the evidence?"

"I think yer right. I think you'd get a conviction on that evidence. An' that just proves what I told you a while back—sometimes there's a big difference between the evidence an' the facts. The *fact* is that Tom Gregory didn't have no more to do with robbin' Douty's cache than you or I did. That's what I come down here to tell you."

The officer's eyes narrowed slightly. "What do you mean?" he asked.

"I mean that Jocko, here, is the one that took the dust out of Douty's cache. But Jack Whitlo is the real robber." Black John turned to the breed. "Go ahead, Jocko—tell Corporal Downey what come off up there on Rat Crick."

Downey listened intently as the man told his story, and after an hour of questioning and cross questioning, he settled back with elbows on the arms of his chair seemingly intent on fitting the fingers of his two hands together. Presently he slanted a glance at the big man. "How did you get in on this case?" he asked.

"You got me in."

"Me!"

"Yeah—sort of indirectly or inadvertently, you might say. You see, nothin' in the world can make Nellie Douty believe that Tom Gregory robbed her pa's cache. It seems that while you was there at Douty's the conversation somehow turned on me, an' you mentioned that I was smart an' likewise kind-hearted, so she took a chanct an' slipped over to Cush's one day, an' told me about the trouble Tom was in, an' how she knew he was innocent, an' how Tom an' her was figurin' on gettin' married an' all—an' wanted to know if I couldn't do somethin' about it. I promised her I'd do what I could, so I slipped over to Rat Crick an' got in touch with Jocko, an' then went up to Whitlo's an' set in his game, that night, an' invited him over to set in our game the next night. Then I got in touch with Jocko the followin' mornin', an' he agreed to come down an' tell you what come off up there.

"Fact is, Downey, I'd doped it out just about as it happened before the girl got through talkin'. I was mighty glad things had worked out as they did—an' you had Tom Gregory safe in jail. It might have be'n a damn sight worse."

"What do you mean?"

"Meanin' that a couple of weeks before the robbery I'd predicted to Cush that we'd prob'ly be hangin' Whitlo fer murder, because it was likely he'd try to force Jocko to knock Gregory off—an' he might succeed. I'd be'n over on Rat Crick, an' kind of keepin' my eyes open to this an' that. I seen that Whitlo hated Gregory's guts on account of Nellie Douty's favorin' Gregory instead of him. I also took note that Whitlo was goin' out of his way to show friendship for Gregory, an' that Whitlo was gettin' Jocko so deep in debt to him, with his crooked card game, that he could never pay out. The whole thing was a build-up—his fake friendship for Gregory would throw off suspicion, an' gettin' Jocko where he could ruin him, if he didn't do just what he told him to. An' that's just what came off, except that it was a robbery instead of a murder, he demanded of Jocko."

Downey's brow drew into a frown. "It sounds reasonable," he admitted, "an' it lines up with what I'd expect from that damned Whitlo. But even with Jocko's testimony agin him, if Whitlo denies the whole thing I doubt if I could ever convict him. Any jury would think twice before they'd convict a white man on the testimony of a breed."

Black John agreed. "You can't expect any more sense than that out of the average jury."

"Besides that, it's goin' to be hard to make a jury believe that, if Whitlo did instigate the robbery, an' try to throw the blame on Gregory, he would have returned Gregory's own dust to his cache, instead of plantin' Douty's dust there. It wouldn't look reasonable to 'em."

"That's right. That's exactly how Whitlo figured it, an' that's why he done it. It looked like a smart play—to a man who's intelligence rates about the same as a jury's. An' that's where I claim the law's a fool—not only it gives a damn crook all the breaks he's got comin'—but it goes out of its way to invent breaks for him. Take a miner's meetin' where we temper the evidence with a liberal dose of common sense, if a man's guilty, we hang him—an' if he ain't, we turn him loose."

Downey grinned a bit wryly. "I wish our procedure was as simple as all that. Of course, if Gregory is innocent, I'd be the last man in the world to try an' convict him. But I've got to have stronger evidence than I've got so far to convict Whitlo."

"Would a confession help any?"

"A confession! Why, shore it would! But Whitlo will never confess. With what little we've got on him, he'd be a fool to."

"Whitlo is a fool," Black John said. "Tell you what you do, Downey—you come on up to Halfaday with me an' I'll undertake to guarantee that Whitlo will confess before witnesses. You can leave both Gregory an' Jocko locked up down here. I've heard you say more'n once, that it's as much the duty of the police to clear an innocent man, as it is to convict a guilty one. If you really mean that—here's your chanct to prove it."

"How would you get a confession out of Whitlo?"

"You just leave that part to me."

"No rough stuff. No threats. No duress. That's one thing I won't stand for."

"Nothing so crude as that, Downey. If you ain't satisfied that the confession is the truth, you don't need to use it. There's just

one thing—Jocko, here. He's never be'n in any trouble before, an' Whitlo had threatened to take every damn thing he owned to satisfy that debt, an' a crooked debt, at that. It was a hell of a choice Whitlo put up to him. I don't claim he done right—but if he turns Crown evidence, an' helps convict the real criminal, it looks like the law could deal lightly with him. He's learnt his lesson."

Downey nodded. "I can't promise that he'll be turned loose. But I can promise that the Crown Prosecutor will go as far as he can in easin' up his sentence. He's got a lot of common sense, an' a good heart in him. I'll recommend leniency. When do you want to start back?"

"Just as soon as you're ready. The quicker we get this thing over with, the quicker you can turn Gregory loose."

IX

SOME ten days later Black John swerved the canoe to the bank at the mouth of Rat Creek, and stepped out. "You shove on up to Cush's, Downey," he said, "an' I'll slip up Rat Crick an' get Jack Whitlo to come over for a game tonight. It'll be a game all right—but not quite the one he'll be lookin' for. We ort to make it acrost to Cush's by the middle of the afternoon. When you see us comin' you slip through into the storeroom an' glue yer eye to the peekhole—you know where it is there under the shelf. That way you can see an' hear everything that comes off. You tell Cush I say to chase everyone else out of there an' keep 'em out. I don't want no one in the saloon but me an' Cush an' Whitlo."

Whitlo greeted the big man cordially as he appeared at his cabin along in the middle of the forenoon. He set out bottle and glasses as the two sat down to the table. "Come over fer a game?" he asked.

"Nope. Come to invite you to go over to Cush's fer one. The boys is primed about right to try an' get their money back. They claim you're afraid to give 'em a break—but I told 'em different. 'I'll prove it,' I says. 'I know good old Jack Whitlo well enough to know, he'll give a man a run fer his money any day in the week. I'll go acorst an' fetch him back this afternoon, so we can get a good start early.' "

"Sure I'll go! Cripes, them boys is entitled to a run fer their money. I win a little better'n four thousan' over there, an' jest to prove I ain't no piker, I'll take ten thousan' over with me." Rising from his chair, he stooped, drew the strong-box from under his bed, lifted it onto the table, and unlocked it. He removed a thick roll of bills and several pokes of dust.

"You seem to be doin' pretty well for yerself," Black John said, indicating the box.

"Oh, sure. What with the dumb stud most folks play, it ain't no trick to win—especially when yer luck holds up like mine does. Drink up, an' have another." When the glasses were refilled, the man continued. "You remember I was speakin' to you, one time, about me an' you kinda hookin' up together. An' you says how you'd sort of like to wait a while—till we got better acquainted. You know me pretty good by now, how about it?"

Black John smiled. "You know, Jack, the same thing was runnin' in my mind. An' I've got a hunch that before this trip is over with we can work out some kind of an arrangement that'll be plumb satisfactory to me."

"Good!" Whitlo said. "You set here while I get the fire goin'. We'll have a bite of dinner, an' then pull out fer Cush's," and he rose and started for the stove.

"Hey—you better stick yer box back! Here you left the key stickin' right in the lock."

"Hell, John, that's right where I'm leavin' it, till I git dinner goin'. What I claim, if a man couldn't trust his pardner who the hell could he trust? The boys on the crick is honest, too. Since that damn Tom Gregory's out of the way, I don't even bother to cache my dust—jest lock it in the box an' shove it under the bunk."

"Gregory had his trial, yet?"

"Naw, but hell—there won't be nothin' to it when I git on the stand an' tell 'em what I know. He'll do plenty time fer that job."

"Y-e-e-a-h, that's what I'm afraid of."

"What do you mean—afraid of?" Whitlo asked, quickly.

"Well, what with the talk that goes around, you must of heard of the gang of outlaws that hangs out on Halfaday Crick?"

"Sure I have. That's what I mean—about kinda workin' in on the racket."

"Yeah, I know—an' I'll find a place for you, all right. You can depend on that—when I find out where you'll fit in best. But right now we're sort of up against it. Some of the boys is handy at this—an' some at that. They're what you might say—specialists. Right now, we're sort of up against it in a couple of lines—we ain't got no one that's handy with the cards, an' we ain't got no downright A Number One cache robber amongst us. I was kind of figurin' that if Gregory could beat that rap, mebbe we might sort of—"

"Gregory! Hell's fire, John, Gregory's no good! Cripes, he bungled that Douty job, didn't he?"

"Yeah—but he's young yet. He seems willin'. He could learn."

WHITLO held a match to the kindlings, closed the stove door, and stepped to the table. "Listen, John," he said. "You kin fergit Gregory. We don't want no damn chechako in our outfit, nohow. If it's only card handlin' an' cache robbin' that's botherin' you, I'm the man you want—an' you don't need to hunt no further."

"You!"

"Yeah, me."

Black John grinned. "I'm afraid you wouldn't fill the bill, Jack. You see, us boys on Halfaday Crick have got a reputation to uphold. We couldn't take a chanct on no bunglin'. Every man in the outfit has got to be good in his line. We couldn't risk takin' someone in just on his onsupported word. We'd have to have better assurance than that—like, well, a demonstration of his ability, or as in the matter of cache robbery, a concrete example of some job he's pulled off successfully. Of course, if we could find a man that would fulfill both them needs, we'd shore be in luck."

"I'm yer man, John," Whitlo insisted, "an' I kin prove it! Wait till I git a deck an' I'll——"

As the man spoke he turned to a shelf and reached for a pack of cards. But Black John stayed him. "Hold on, Jack," he said. "It wouldn't do no good to show me what you can do. It would just be a waste of time. You see me an' Cush run Halfaday Crick in cahoots. Cush bein' what you might call a silent pardner, but his authority is equal to mine in important matters, like takin' on new talent. I couldn't make no decision onless Cush was in on it. If we get started for Halfaday right after dinner, we'll get there in plenty of time for you to demonstrate your ability to both of us before the rest of the boys drift in. An' I'm warnin' you, sech demonstration better be good."

"Okay. I'll fry us up a couple of steaks an' we'll git goin'. I'll show you boys some tricks in the way of card handlin' that'll make yer eyes bung out. An' as fer cache robbin' I'll give you the lowdown on a job that'll show you whether I'm good, or not."

X

IT WAS near the middle of the afternoon when Black John and Whitlo stepped through the doorway of Cush's saloon. Cush was alone in the room, and the two brought up before the bar, he folded a well-thumbed copy of the *Police Gazette,* placed it on the back bar, and set out a bottle and three glasses. "Fill up," he grunted. "This un's on the house."

With the drinks downed, and the glasses refilled, Black John leaned an elbow on the bar and cast a searching glance about the room. "Guess we're alone, all right," he said, "so we'll go ahead before the boys begin driftin' in. You rec'lect, Cush, that me an' you was bemoanin' the fact that we ain't had what you could call a real good A Number One cache robber on the crick in quite a while."

"No, I don't, an'—"

"Hold on now, an' I'll explain. If Jack, here, is anywheres near as good as he claims he is, it looks like our troubles are over. You know I went over to Rat Crick, this mornin', to fetch him back for the game, tonight, an' whilst he was fryin' us up a couple of steaks, I happened to mention that right at present we didn't have a good cache robber on hand, an'—"

"Not sence we hung that damn Zeke Towler."

"I've heard how you hang folks up here," Whitlo said. "It kinda gives a man the creeps."

"Only malefactors, Jack—only malefactors. An' bunglers," Black John explained. "We never hang a friend, 'specially if he's competent. That's what I meant when I told you a man's got to be good. Zeke, he

bungled a job—so we hung him. We can't take no chances on a mediocre cache robber. You can go ahead, now, an' present yer credentials."

The man looked puzzled. "Do what with my which?" he asked.

"I mean you can go ahead an' give us the low-down on some job you've pulled off that was successful—so we'll know you're really a competent craftsman."

"Oh, yeah—well, boys, it's like this here. Cache robbin's jest like anythin' else—if you don't do it good, it ain't worth doin'. Any damn fool could stumble onto a cache an' lift the dust out of it, an' git to hell outa there with it. Then what happens? Why the guy that's cache is robbed puts up a squawk, an' the police steps in, an' like as not they nab him, 'cause chances is, he's left somethin' of his'n layin' around that they kin go on, er else he's made tracks in the mud, er somethin', an' the police keeps on after him till they git him. But you take a smart guy, an' when he robs a cache, he figgers all them things out before he pulls the job. But he don't quit figgerin' there—he figgers how he kin make it look like it was someone else done the job besides him. That way, the police picks up this other guy, an' quits huntin' the one that done it. But if he don't make it look like some other guy done it, they'll keep on huntin' him. Am I right, er wrong?"

"Yer line of reasonin' seems basically sound," Black John agreed. "Sech plan, if successfully followed would constitute the *ne plus ultra* in cache robbery. But me an' Cush is from Missouri, as the sayin' goes. We ain't interested in the abstract theory of cache robbin'. We want a concrete demonstration—like if you have ever personally pulled off a successful cache robbery, we want to hear the details—an' it better be a middlin' fresh robbery, at that. We wouldn't be interested in no stale one, like some robbery you pulled off so far back we couldn't check up on it."

WHITLO grinned, and swept the room with a glance. "Would the Douty cache robbery—the one Downey nabbed Tom Gregory fer pullin' off—would that be fresh enough to suit you?"

"Why, shore it would!" Black John exclaimed. "But you didn't have nothin' to do with that. Hell, accordin' to what I hear, Downey's got Tom Gregory locked up in jail, with an iron-clad case agin him."

"That's right—an' Gregory'll git convicted, too. An' it'll be my own testimony that'll convict him. But jest between us three, it was me robbed Douty's cache. Tom Gregory didn't have no more to do with it than you boys did. But he's the one that'll do time fer it—five er ten years, he'll git, most likely. An' what I claim, that's a damn good joke on Tom."

"Yeah—the case has got a humorous angle," Black John grinned, his glance flashing to the peep-slot concealed beneath the shelf from which the stuffed owl stared glassily. "Even though it may not be apparent to all concerned who the joke is on But go ahead. You ain't through, yet—by a damn sight. Me an' Cush ain't damn fools enough to stand here an' take your onsupported word that it was you robbed Douty's cache—not with the evidence they claim Downey's got agin Tom Gregory, we ain't. We've got to know, step by step, how you worked it."

"It's like this here—Nellie Douty's a damn good lookin' girl an' I wanted she should marry me, but she won't on account she claims she loves Tom Gregory an' aims to marry him, come fall. So I starts in figgerin' how I kin git rid of Gregory so she'll marry me. First off, I figgers on knockin' him off—layin' in the bresh some day when he's moose huntin' an' shootin' him, an' then fixin' him an' his gun to make it look like he done it hisself, accidental. But there's too many angles to a job like that—somethin' might go wrong.

"Then I happened to think of Jocko, an' I figgers to git him to do it. Jocko he plays stud to my place, an' I starts in takin' him until I've got right around sixteen thousan' of his I.O.U.'s which is a damn sight more'n he kin ever pay. I'm about to put the proposition up to him to knock Gregory off, er elst I'll take everything he's got, an' I starts down to his place one evenin' an' I'm a-slippin' through the bresh back of Douty's place, when I seen old Tim kneelin' down at the bottom of the rimwall stickin' a sack of dust in a rock crack. When Tom goes back to the shack, I slips over there an' look in his cache, an' I seen six er seven eighty-ounce sacks of dust in there. First

off, I figgers on h'istin' the dust, when all to onct the idee come into my head that here was my chanct to git red of Tom Gregory an' make a profit of five hundred ounces on the deal, to boot. So I goes on down to Jocko's an' puts the proposition up to him—either he'll rob Douty's cache an' turn the dust over to me, er elst I'll take every damn thing he owns on them I.O.U.'s. Jocko, he don't want to do it—but I make him a good offer. I'll give him back his sixteen thousan' in I.O.U.'s fer them sacks of Douty's dust, which they won't figger more'n eight thousan'. But even then he balks on the proposition till I tells him how he kin slip Douty's dust back in the spring when he sluices out his dump—so he'd only be borrowin' Douty's dust—not stealin' it.

"He falls fer it then, an' that night he fetches the dust up to my place. An' that night I takes Tom Gregory in the stud game fer five hundred ounces. I'd be'n makin' out like I was a friend of Tom's all the while, so when I got ready to git him out of the road, no one would think it was me done it. Tom he gives me an I.O.U. an' the next day he fetches up the five hundred ounces an' takes his I.O.U. an' tears it up an' throws it in the woodbox.

"I'd figgered on stickin' Douty's dust in Tom's cache so it would look like him that robbed Douty. But then I figgers out a scheme that's even better'n that—'cause I figgered that no one would suspect Tom of robbin' Douty—him goin' to marry Nellie—so they might not look in his cache. When I was takin' Douty's dust out of his sacks after Jocko turned 'em over to me, I seen a funny lookin' nugget amongst it—an' I know'd Douty could identify that nugget, so I dumps it all in my strong box, an takes Tom's own dust back an' slips it into his cache—which I'd located it quite a while back—figgerin' on robbin' it, when I got around to it.

"Well, in a few days Corporal Downey happens along an' stops in to Douty's place, an' Douty puts up a squawk about his cache bein' robbed. That damn Downey, he's got it in fer me, on account of me throwin' in with Hooch Albert on some deals an' he figgers I might of knocked off a prospector up on Sixtymile. That here was another slick job I pulled—an' the damn police never did git onto it. So him an' Douty comes up to my place an' I show him my dust, an' jest like I figgered Douty he spots that there funny nugget. Downey he figgers he's got me dead to rights, till I tell him I got that dust off'n Tom Gregory in payment of his I.O.U., which I digs outa the woodbox an' showed him. So we goes down to Gregory's place, an' Gregory claims he paid that I.O.U. with dust outa his own cache, an' it took about all he had. So Downey he wants to look in the cache—an' of course he found Tom's dust where I'd put it back. Tom, he can't explain it—so Downey takes him down to Dawson an' throws him in the jug. He says how me an' Douty will be called fer witnesses when the trial comes off—so you see Tom he ain't got no more chanct than a snowball in hell. How's that fer smart?

"An' now if you'll git me a deck of cards, I'll show you how I took Jocko—how I kin take anyone I want to in a card game."

A SWIFT glance told Black John that Corporal Downey's eyes had disappeared from the peep-slot. He cleared his throat roughly. "Never mind showin' us the card tricks, Whitlo," he said. "It would be a waste of time. Fact is, three or four of us caught onto every damn one of yer tricks that night you played stud over here an' took us fer four thousan'. Despite common gossip, there ain't no gang of outlaws on Halfaday, an' never was. The fact is we're the moralest crick in the Yukon, bar none.

"We're so damn moral up here that even card cheatin' is hangable under our skullduggery law, an' we aimed to hang you when we got around to it. That's why I got you over here today. The work's eased up a bit along the crick, an' the boys figured there's no use puttin' it off any longer. Cache robbin' is also hangable, an' Rat Crick, bein' continguous territory, your robbin' Douty's cache comes under our jurisdiction. Bein' as we've got the detailed facts on that episode, the boys might consider waivin' the skullduggery charge, an' hangin' you fer the robbery. Or they may feel that you should be tried on both charges. You onderstand that we won't hang you but once, even if we should convict you on both counts—we don't want to be too hard on a man, even a low-down, lyin, thievin' schemin' card cheatin', per-

jurin' son like you. So we'll let the two hangin's run concurrently."

"What d'you mean—hangin'?" cried Whitlo, sudden terror gripping him as he glanced into Black John's cold blue eyes.

"It's a term we've got fer haulin' a man up by the neck with a rope an' leavin' him kick around there till he's dead. It don't take but a little while. The boys'll be driftin' in pretty quick an' we'll hold the miner's meetin'.

A voice sounded from the rear of the room, and all three turned to see Corporal Downey standing in the storeroom doorway. "I'm afraid it won't do you any good to call that meetin', John," the officer said. "I'm takin' Whitlo off your hands."

"Downey!" Black John cried. "How long you be'n there?"

"Oh, I slipped in a while back—jest before you an' Whitlo showed up. I've be'n listenin' to every word Whitlo said."

"Well, then Downey, you know the damn cuss needs hangin' if ever anyone did. Why can't you go on about yer business—an' let us go ahead with our meetin'."

Downey appeared to hesitate, as though considering the proposition, when Whitlo made a break from the bar and rushed to his side.

"Not by a damn sight!" he cried, his eyes wide with terror. "I robbed Douty's cache—an' you got to arrest me fer it. I won't try to beat the case. I'll plead guilty. Jail's only a few years—but hangin's fer-ever!"

The officer eyed Black John gravely. "The man is right, John. It's my duty to arrest him—much as he deserves hangin'." He slipped the handcuffs onto the man's wrists. "Come on," he said gruffly, "we'll be pullin' out for Dawson. The quicker I get back there an' turn young Gregory loose, the better I'll like it."

When the two had embarked in the canoe, Cush and Black John returned to the saloon and filled their glasses. "Well," Cush said, glancing across the bar, "you've got another weddin' straightened out. But it's costin' you money, at that."

"What do you mean—money?"

"I mean eight thousan' dollars. Don't you rec'lect you promised to pay all the boys back double fer them four thousan' dollars that crooked guy won off'n us that night he played stud in here?"

"Oh, yeah—I guess I did, at that," Black John agreed. "Well, when the boys come in, pay 'em off out of the safe an' charge it up to me."

"Why can't you pay 'em yerself?"

"I've got a little chore to do. I'm goin' slip acrost to Whitlo's place on Rat Crick an' empty his strong box. It's got about a hundred pounds of dust in it—so you see, when I pay the boys off, the venture will still show some slight profit."

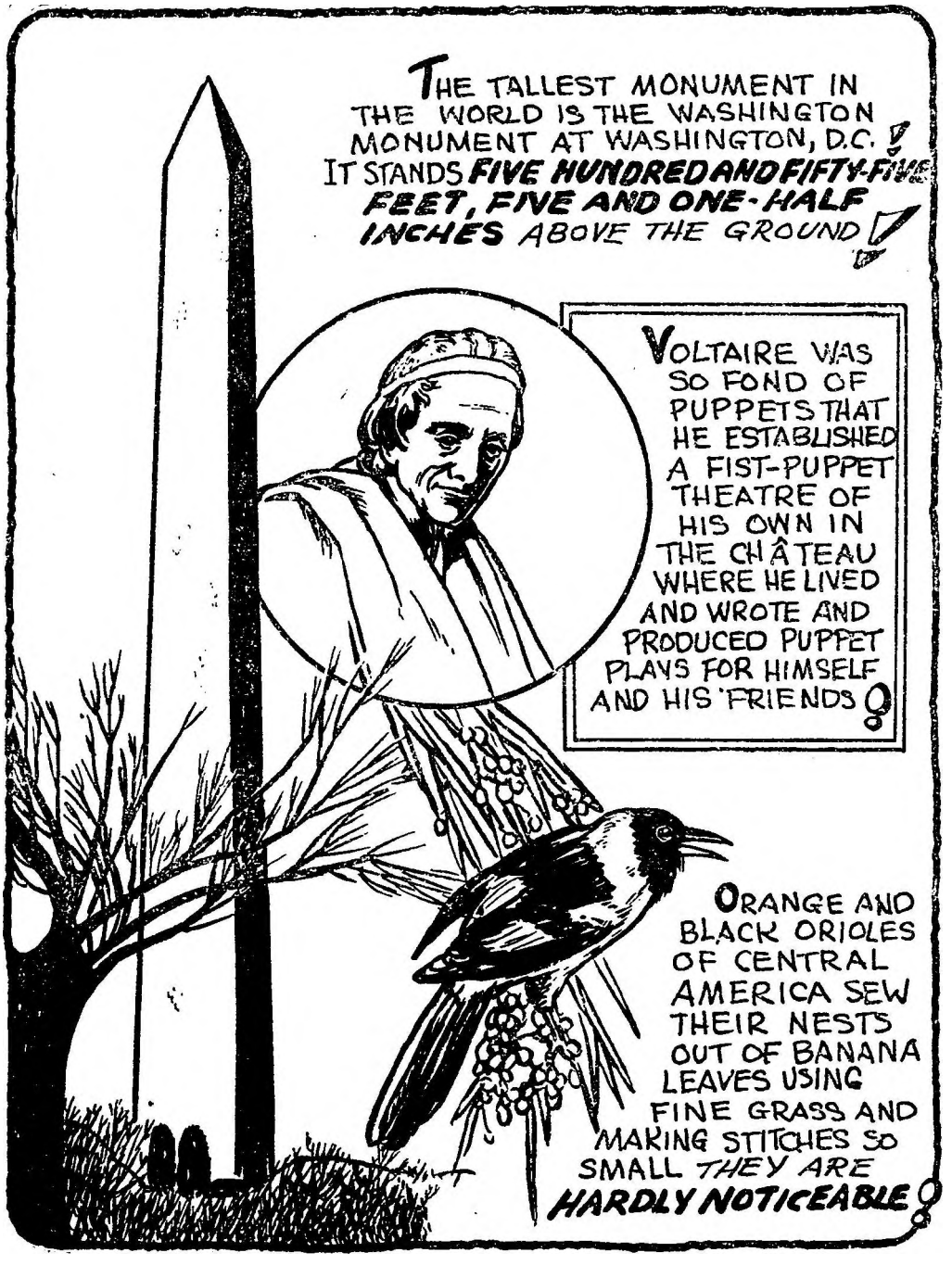
"But hell, John—Whitlo's prob'ly got the key in his pocket an' you kin bet that he'll make Downey shove on up Rat Crick when they come to the mouth of it, to git that dust."

"Yeah, that's why I'm hittin' acrost. I can get there an' back before they get half way up Rat crick in the canoe."

"But Downey'll find that strong box busted into. You'll have to use an ax. An' then hell will be to pay!"

"Nothing so crude as an ax, Cush. I'll use a key. I'm takin' a file with me, an' I have a very fair assortment of blank keys here that I took off of one of them damn crooks we hung, one time—I disremember which one, but it don't make no difference. You see, while Whitlo was fryin' up them steaks I set there by the table where the strong box was. The room was hot, an' the candle settin' there on the table had got sort of soft, an' not havin' anything in particular to do at the moment, I amused myself by takin' an impression of that key in the warm wax." Reaching into his pocket, he unwrapped a piece of paper from the stub of a candle, and showed Cush the perfect impression of a key. "So you see, when they get back there an' find the box empty—an' Whitlo in possession of the key—Downey'll think Whitlo was lyin' about havin dust in that box. Either that, or they'll figure there's another thief on Rat Crick. Whitlo'll know I never took that dust along with me. The last thing he done before we left was to lock that box an' shove it under his bunk. No use lettin' Whitlo get away with that dust—the damn crook—every ounce of it was stole. What I claim, it's every man's duty to prove to these damn crooks that crime don't pay!"

Curioddities By Weill



In Flying—It Is Possible to Know Too Much, and Feel Too Little

CHECK-OUT FLIGHT

By KEITH EDGAR

JOHNNY BLAINE shivered, gripped the control wheel a little tighter and tried to withdraw even more into his smart blue greatcoat, withdraw from the bitter cold seeping into the cockpit. In a way, this cursed job was worse than trucking bombs over Germany, when at least he'd kept reasonably warm in a heated flying suit.

For nearly two hours the old Lodestar had been booming down the Gulf of St. Lawrence from Rimouski, and for nearly two hours there had been nothing below but the sullen menace of ice-floes, blotted out now and then by a stray cottony cloud. Thirty miles off their starboard wingtip, Anticosti Island slid astern. Dead ahead the rocky islands and barren shoreline of eastern Quebec and Labrador rolled slowly over the horizon.

He glanced uneasily across to the left-hand seat. Gus Thibodeau, stocky little captain of this worn-out and overloaded transport, was hunched down into his wolfskin parka, one fur-booted foot propped up against the instrument panel, serenely sucking on a foul Habitant cigar. His ever-restless brown eyes were squinting at the horizon from under the visor of the company cap, this latter being the volcanic French-Canadian's sole concession to the rule that all pilots wear the airline uniform.

Johnny's lips, stiffening from the cold, twisted bitterly. How ironic that this inelegant little bush pilot should be the father of dainty dark-eyed Marie. And how ironic that Marie's father should be the captain assigned to decide his future with the airline.

Probably it was just as well that he hadn't invested in the snug warmth of a parka, for this would undoubtedly be his last trip.

He's sensed that much back in Rimouski, when they were getting ready to pull out. Marie—Marie with the laughing eyes and the dark curls peeking out beneath a saucy red ski-cap—had come down to the airport to wish him luck.

They'd been standing in the shelter of the huge tailplanes, out of the sharp wind, when Gus Thibodeau, bulky in his furs, waddled over to the ship from the dispatcher's office with the clipboard of manifests, an unlighted cigar clamped between his teeth. Marie had flashed Johnny a cozy confident smile and turned to her father.

"Now, *mon cher papa,* you mus' give my

Johnee a nice report. I, your mos' loving daughter, demand it."

Gus had paused, looked at them both enigmatically, grunted, and climbed into the ship. That was all, but Johnny had known. Even when he removed his cap to kiss her goodbye, and Marie had reached up to ruffle his blond hair and whisper, "You will be the ver' best pilot in Quebec, my blue-eyed Johnnee," even that had failed to lift his sinking spirit.

During all of the two miserable weeks that he had spent operating as co-pilot from the base, learning some of the routes, learning the vagaries of the old Lodestar which had been pulled off a mainline run and stripped of her luxurious interior for cargo carrying over the wilderness, Johnny had known he was going to wash out.

But during those two weeks he had also fallen irrevocably in love with the petite Mademoiselle Thibodeau, and Marie had returned his love with all the impetuous passion of her French blood. What would make his failure doubly hard to take was her superb faith in Johnny Blaine's flying ability —a faith that unfortunately must soon be exposed to the shock of disillusion.

JOHNNY sighed, checked the instrument panel with its score of quivering needles. They told their reassuring story, that the two Cyclones were functioning perfectly, that the outside temperature was well down below icing conditions, and that they were dead on course.

Gus suddenly plucked the cigar from his mouth and gestured ahead at a group of islands hugging the mainland. "Mingan, Johnny! Start you h'approach over dat first island!"

Johnny nodded, his eyes searching vainly for the village. This forsaken country! Why did men live in such desolation? Sluggishly the craggy snow-covered island moved underneath them. He reached down to the pedestal and gripped the throttles, watching the tachometers. Under his fingers the strident thunder of the engines died off to a dull mutter, and the deceleration pushed him against his belt. He braced himself on the rudder pedals, shoved the control column forward just enough to hold flying speed while he trimmed the stabilizer for a glide.

Gus seemed to be concentrating on the cigar again, but Johnny knew that his every move was being watched with calculating shrewdness. For upon Captain Thibodeau's report would rest the company's decision as to whether he would be signed on to a permanent berth.

His straining eyes finally spotted the village of Mignan, but where was the airport? Damn. There—a mile from the town, a white square in the green of the forest, and about the size of a handkerchief.

He had too much altitude. Johnny tilted the Lodestar into a sideslip.

Gus jerked erect, grasped his control column and shook it. Johnny instinctively released the controls and bit his lip. Gus straightened the aircraft into a normal glide, then shouted through the cigar, "Take her, Johnny! Make once a turn aroun' de h'airport!"

Johnny reluctantly gripped his wheel again, gunned the throttles a bit. Gus removed the cigar from his mouth, leaned over to him and said, "Don' forget dat cargo behind you, Johnny. Heavy cases will come loose, maybe, den you are sunk—finis!" He gestured with two hands. "When you bank, centrifug' force she holds cargo hokay. But not de sideslip. Best to use full flap on de overshoot like dat."

Johnny swallowed hard. Gus was right, as usual. They were carrying a crated tractor and some other heavy machinery, and if it came adrift—!

He made a cautious gentle turn around the field, then tensely started his approach. The wheel was getting slippery in his hands, like the night they'd lost two engines over Berlin and the fighters were jumping them from all over the clock. There was that familiar tightening in his chest, that familiar cold perspiration on his brow.

He watched the field looming up at them, and turned to tell Gus to take her in. But Gus was ignoring him, busy with the undercarriage controls. He felt the sudden drag when the wheels went down, glanced out the side window, saw that the right wheel was locked in position, and automatically made the thumb-down signal. Gush shoved on the flap lever.

The line of brush marking the perimeter of the field rushed underneath. Johnny held his breath and hauled back on the control

column. The ship hesitated, then dropped onto the packed snow, bounced, bounced again. The far end of the runway sped toward them. Johnny stifled the rising panic in his breast, pressed gently on the brake pedals, then harder.

They weren't going to make it.

He released the right brake and jammed the left. The Lodestar slewed around in a wild skid and shuddered to a standstill, her right wingtip reaching out over the brush markers. He rubbed his palms on his trousers and drew a deep breath, glancing at Gus.

He was looking at Johnny's control wheel. It was wet from the perspiration off his hands. Without a word, Gus took over and taxied the ship across the field to the log building which did combined duty as the company office, depot, and living quarters for the station personnel. He switched off, picked up the clipboard and unfastened his belt, saying casually, "Johnny, you look damn cold to me. Better come in by de stove, eh?"

A ski-equipped Norseman was waiting by the shack, propeller ticking over softly. A couple of men hurried to the Lodestar with a sled to transfer mail to the Norseman. Her pilot, a tall rangy kid in knee-high mukluks and white parka, shouted at Gus when he climbed stiffly out of the ship. "Hey, Frenchie! That last bounce was perfect! It was beautiful! Do it again for us, Frenchie!"

Johnny, dropping to the ground, flinched. But Gus roared, "Ha! Look who makes the big noise! De guy who leaves broken skiis all over Quebec!"

Johnny walked silently into the office, nodded to the dispatcher and opened a door to an inner room where a pot of coffee bubbled on the fat stove. He unbuttoned his greatcoat, found a clean cup, and poured himself some coffee. He was standing by the window, watching the Norseman skim down the runway and lift off with her mail for the hinterland, when Gus stepped into the room. Closing the door tightly, Gus tossed the remains of his cigar into the stove and picked up the coffee pot, looking around for a cup.

"We mus' wait for mail from Eskimo Point, Johnny. Hah! A clean cup—no, by damn, but it will do." He filled his cup, replaced the pot on the stove, sat down on a rickety chair and tilted it against the wall.

"Johnny—what *is* the matter?"

Johnny looked around, at Gus' homely quizzical face, at the sharp brown eyes watching him so narrowly.

Gus took a sip of coffee. "Look, Johnny, I have learn much about you. Me—I have made it my business to inquire why thees Johnny Blaine cannot fly the Lodestar. And by damn, I am stump'—I do not unnerstand. Four year you fly the big bomber over Germany. Medals you got plenty of. Dey say you are beeg hero. Dey say Johnny Blaine is best damn pilot in de Goose Squadron. Dey say Johnny Blaine can fly barn door. But me—what do I see? I see dat Johnny is not ver' hot stuff. I do not unnerstand. Is it that you do not like thees country?" He waved a hand in the direction of the window.

Johnny turned his back to the stove, soaking in the heat. He drank the rest of the coffee and revolved the cup slowly in his hands.

Gus continued slowly. "I am disappoint' —for the sake of Marie. Thees country is not good enough for Johnny Blaine, eh?"

Johnny shook his head. "No, Gus, it isn't that. It's the conditions under which you operate. Look at these skimpy fields! They chop down a few trees, roll the snow flat, and call it an airport. It may be all right for the slower ships, but the Lodestar is different. Every time I start into one of these tiny fields I get scared. There's never enough room. The runway is alway too short. We're always overloaded. An aircraft is a compound mathematical formula, Gus, designed to provide a certain lift at a certain velocity. The mathematical equations are precise scientific laws designed—"

Gus, who had been listening with open mouth, jumped to his feet. *"Dieu!* Me—I have been flying thirty year and I do not know about these mathematic. They give Gus h'airplane and Gus fly her any damn place with any damn load any damn time. The h'airplane, she take off because Gus fly her off, dat's all. I *feel* she is flying. I *feel* she is landing. Johnny, you know too much —and you do not feel enough. Dat's de answer."

Johnny shook his head. "No, that's not the answer, Gus. I have the feel of the

aircraft, all right. Either I've gone stale, or I'm just not up to the job."

Gus dug down inside his parka and produced another cigar. He stripped off the celophane and shrugged. "Johnny, I cannot give you the hokay with the company, you know dat, eh?"

Johnny nodded. "You don't particularly want to, do you? Because of Marie."

Gus crossed the room and stared up into Johnny's bitter face. His eyes were hard, uncompromising. "By damn, Johnny, this has nothing to do wit' Marie. Look you—me, I am honest man. You think maybe I say to the company, 'Johnny Blaine is good pilot'? Maybe I am damn liar, eh?"

"No," snapped Johnny angrily. "I'm not asking you to doublecross your company. There are other jobs. And Marie will go with me."

Gus shoved the cigar in his mouth, pulled it out again and said earnestly, "Johnny—Marie is my leetle girl, and to me she is —mos' everything. Marie, she loves you? Hokay. You love Marie? Hokay."

He jabbed the cigar at Johnny's chest. "But you don' make my leetle Marie happy —you know?"

Johnny stiffened. "Nonsense. Of course I'll make her happy."

GUS shook his head. "You don' get no more flying job. You know dat. Marie, she think Johnny Blaine is hot stuff with h'airplane. But no, Johnny Blaine is wash up. He cannot fly in thees country. Does dat make Marie happy? So maybe she go away with you, away from the Quebec she love, away from the papa she love, because the Johnny Blaine she love is *tout finis*. Does dat make Marie happy? *Non!* By the bones of the Evil One, *non!*" He turned and waddled out into the dispatcher's office, slamming the door.

Johnny cursed softly, and started pacing up and down the small room. Captain Thibodeau had made up his mind that Johnny Blaine had lost his nerve.

Unfortunately, Thibodeau was right.

Johnny heard the shrill yapping of dogs, and halted his restless pacing to look out the window. A team of five huskies was panting across the field toward the Lodestar. Clinging to the back of the sled, a fur-hooded Indian urged them into a last spurt. The mail from Eskimo Point had arrived.

Johnny buttoned his greatcoat, pulled the visor of his cap down and strode out into the cold wind.

Gus was signing a receipt for the mail. Johnny climbed into the ship, wormed his way around the crated cargo up into the cockpit, and started the engines. When Gus climbed aboard and settled down into his seat, Johnny taxied slowly to the end of the runway and swung the ship about. He held her with the brakes while he ran up each engine separately, then idled the Cyclones and nodded to Gus.

Gus waved a hand. "Take her off, Johnny."

Johnny snapped on his seat-belt, settled his feet on the rudder pedals, and looked through the windscreen at the length of the runway. He started to reach for the throttles, then shook his head.

"I couldn't lift her out of here."

Gus rolled his cigar around his mouth, grunted, and grasped the throttles. Johnny slumped back in his seat. The big ship roared down the field and her tail came up. Gus let her have every last yard of the runway before he lifted her off and climbed in a gentle turn eastward. Johnny retracted the undercarriage, retracted the flaps, and took over, throttling the engines back to cruising speed.

Gus lit his cigar.

It was only a short hop to Havre St. Pierre. Johnny started his approach well back, then lifted both hands off the wheel and nodded at Gus. Gus gave him a long, hard look, shrugged, and took her down. The ship slid into the field smoothly, touching the runway light as a feather and coming to a stop in a wide circle that brought them right to the depot. Captain Thibodeau unsnapped his belt, picked up his clipboard and squeezed out of the cockpit without a word.

Johnny reluctantly went back to help unload the machinery and tractor. It was a backbreaking job, and when they had finished there were several tons of baled furs to be loaded aboard and stowed tightly to prevent shifting.

Johnny was just roping the last of the bales to ring bolts in the floor when he heard Gus outside, cursing ruefully. There were sympathetic mutters from several men, and

Gus climbed in through the door, half a dozen hands assisting him.

He met Johnny's eyes and grimaced. "Sprained my h'ankle. *Dieu!* But I am clumsy, me." He hobbled forward to the cockpit, voicing his woe in bilingual vituperation.

Johnny slammed the door shut and followed him. He went through the routine of starting the engines and taxiing to the end of the runway. Then he nodded to Gus.

Gus placed his feet on the rudder pedals, groaned, and reached down to rub his left ankle.

"*Par le bon Dieu,* but she hurt! Me—I cannot press the pedal!" He scowled down at his fur boot, tentatively touched it to the floor, winced, and said plaintively, "*Tabernac',* I am seeck man! By Joe! I am cripple!" He raised himself awkwardly out of his seat. "Me, I got to lie down, by damn!"

Johnny watched him hobble back into the cabin and stretch out on a couple of fur bales, then heaved out his seat and crouched in the cockpit door.

"Say, listen! You've got to fly us out of here!"

Gus groaned and waved a hand vaguely. "Johnny, I am ver' seeck. My h'ankle she hurt like hell. You better radio for 'nudder pilot. Radio for h'ambulance. Go over to de shack and tell h'operator get quick *le docteur.*"

Johnny snorted and wriggled his way between the bales until he stood beside Gus. "You don't need a doctor. I can bind it up for you." He reached down to the fur boot.

Gus let out a howl of agony and knocked his hand away. "Don't touch my h'ankle! I will not have it touch until I take the chloroform. I am suffer like hell. Maybe my foot she will be amputate."

Johnny shook his head in disgust. "Don't be such a sissy! Why, listen, I brought a shot-up bomber back to England, all the way from the Ruhr, and me with two chunks of shrapnel in my carcass!"

Gus raised up on one elbow and sputtered, "Hah! You think maybe I believe dat? *Non!* Don't tell me such story, Johnny Blaine. I have see wit' my own eyes you are beeg coward, dat's what." He dropped back on the bales and groaned, "Get quick *le docteur.*"

Johnny sucked in his breath, trying to hold back a hot flush of anger. "What do you mean—I'm a coward—you half-pint cry baby! I thought you looked up my record. What the hell do you think I got the DFC for—shining my buttons?"

Gus moaned and shouted, "By Joe! I am suffer wit' pain and he argue about he is big hero! Me, I am thirty year best pilot in Quebec and this wash-up Johnny Blaine is going to let me die while he brag he is brave man!"

JOHNNY raised his hand to slap Gus across the mouth, caught himself, reached down and grabbed the throat of the fur parka. "Listen," he said softly, "for two cents I'd bat you unconscious, just to keep you quiet. But that would put you out of your misery—and I think a little suffering might do you a lot of good. So, you want a doctor, huh? Well, you can damn well wait until we return to the base!"

Johnny wormed back into the cockpit, threw himself angrily into the left-hand seat and shoved the throttles open, kicking the rudder hard. The Lodestar lunged forward, slewed around onto the runway and straightened in response to another kick on the rudders, then picked up her skirts and hightailed down the field. Johnny gave her a little flap and gripped the wheel tightly, feeling the ship become more buoyant as the brush markers sped swiftly closer. He held her down until the last possible second, then hauled back on the wheel and they were airborne, clawing upward into the winter sky.

For a few minutes he had his hands full retracting the undercarriage and the flaps, switching over onto the main tanks and synchronizing the engines down to cruising speed. A Lodestar is not a one-man aircraft, but Johnny was so mad he went through the motions like an automaton, forgetting in his fury that he was doing the work of both captain and co-pilot.

When he got a chance to glance back into the cabin, Gus was propped up on his elbows, staring out a window with an expression of stunned unbelief. Johnny laughed nastily and shouted, 'I hope to hell your foot freezes and drops off!" But either Gus couldn't hear over the racket of the engines, or chose to ignore him.

Johnny pulled into a tight bank and headed west for Seven Islands at three thousand feet, following the desolate coastline. His anger seethed up again until it was a living thing that was choking him.

Coward! Faker! Johnny gripped the wheel tightly, gulped, made a superb effort to regain a measure of the calm necessary for efficient piloting. Then he grinned ruefully. After all, he'd been so outraged at being called a coward that he'd forgotten his fear and flown the damned aircraft. His sense of humor was beginning to assert itself and he felt a little better.

Johnny looked back into the cabin. Gus was stretched out on his back, smoking an inevitable cigar. His left foot was cushioned on a mailbag, and the fur boot was distended to twice its normal size. After all, Gus wasn't such a bad guy, and a sprained ankle did hurt like the very devil. Gosh, it seemed to be swelling up awfully fast. Maybe he'd better radio Seven Islands for a doctor to meet them at the airport. Maybe—

Then it hit Johnny like a ton of bricks.

The sprained ankle was a phony—an act! He'd been bluffed into flying! Smart little Captain Thibodeau had been playing the amateur psychologist, and Johnny Blaine, that naïve innocent, had reacted with typical juvenile stupidity. He should have known—a tough old campaigner like Gus would take injuries with cool stoicism.

He glanced over his shoulder again, at the distended boot, and at Captain Thibodeau's bare hands. So, Gus thought to fool him by stuffing his mittens into his boot, eh? Well, he *had* been fooled, that was the embarrassing part of it. Johnny felt himself flushing, and his anger simmered up with new intensity. Heated words, he could forgive—but not the humiliation of being tricked out of his fear.

Johnny pounded one fist on his knee and swore softly and fervently. When they landed at Seven Islands he was going to yank off that boot, expose the fake sprain, then beat the living hell out of Gus.

But wait—that would be admitting that he had been taken in. Why give Gus the satisfaction of knowing? No. The way to handle this was with cynical amusement, tolerant contempt for his childish histrionics. Laugh in his face and tell him to pull the mittens out of his boot and stop the silly clowning, that he wasn't kidding Johnny.

He started his approach well out from Seven Islands, giving himself plenty of room to get the flaps and undercarriage down. Finding he was undershooting a bit, he burped the throttles, and dragged the Lodestar in over the brush markers at zero altitude, touching down in the first dozen yards of runway and easing her to a stop with room to spare. He taxied over to the office, vaguely surprised at this new feeling of confidence in the aircraft—and his own ability to handle it.

He switched off, picked up the manifests and squeezed into the cabin, looking down at Gus, who was peering out the window. Johnny cleared his throat. "I'll see if I can dig you up a doctor."

Gus turned, gave him a wry grin and waved his cigar in a negative gesture. "*Mais non,* Johnny, she is not hurt so bad now, my h'ankle. Me, I will stay with the ship. But, Johnny—dat was good takeoff, and de landing was *beaucoup* hokay. You got de feel of Lodestar now, eh? By Joe, I t'ink I give you hokay with the company. Den my leetle Marie will be ver' happy, yes?"

Johnny blinked. There just didn't seem to be any answer to that one. In fact it made him feel rather sheepish. However, he couldn't let Gus get away with it completely—there was his pride to think about.

With dark-eyed Marie waiting for him, waiting to snuggle into his arms, her dreams fulfilled, the denouement was small potatoes, but nevertheless necessary to his ego.

He cleared his throat again, hesitated, then drawled, "Gus—where are your mittens?"

Captain Thibodeau swung his head around, puzzled, and peered about him.

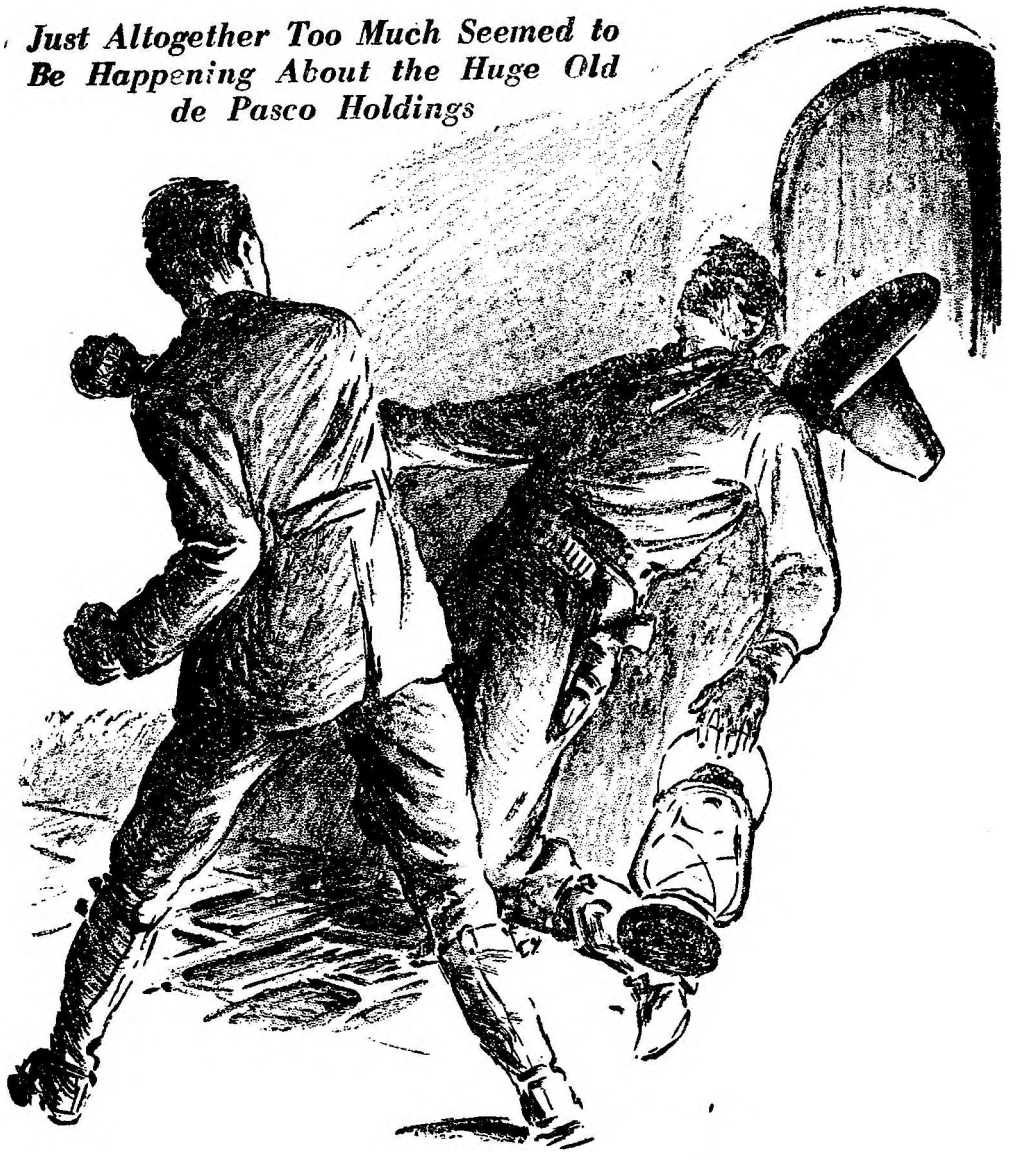
"*Mittens?* Why, Johnny, dey are under my seat."

Johnny looked under the captain's seat, at the pair of fur mittens on the floor—then stared long and hard and thoughtfully at the swollen boot.

He reached up for the first-aid kit on the bulkhead.

"You damn fool," he said affectionately. "You damn fool."

Just Altogether Too Much Seemed to Be Happening About the Huge Old de Pasco Holdings



PATTERNED IN RED

By EDWARD PARRISH WARE

I

THE BEAVER Mountain trail wriggled and twisted, meandering aimlessly as though uncertain of its destination or whether or not it had one. It jogged abruptly to by-pass a mountainous heap of red-sand boulders, and staggered erratically to the crest of a juniper ridge.

On top of the ridge, "Copper Mike" Parker met a man with a blue bandanna.

The blue bandanna was serving the man as a mask.

Parker hardly noticed the man or the mask, his attention being riveted on the muzzle of the revolver which the man gripped in his right fist, butt resting against the buckle on his belt.

"The way you prop the butt of that hog-

leg against the middle of your belly," Parker observed critically, "tells me you're not exactly a greenhorn with a six—"

"Step down!"

The voice was husky, silky—and menacing.

"How do you know," Parker asked conversationally as he palmed the nubbin of his saddle, "that I won't hit the dirt a-buzzin'?"

"Go ahead. I ain't told yuh not to."

"I've decided against it," said Parker, and then was afoot, both hands high.

"Yuh're acting plumb smart—fur a dang dude," came approvingly from beneath the bandanna.

Seeing that Parker's personal rigging consisted of cowhide field-boots, scuffed by long service, work-worn corduroys, faded flannel shirt which once had been blue, a brush-scarred leather coat and a sand-colored Stetson in its fourth year, he felt that the "dang dude" charge was unjust. But he let that pass.

"What do we do now?" he asked, acutely aware of the weight of the forty-five holstered under his left arm-pit and wondering if it might be worth while to go for it. Better to wait and see what else the masked man had in mind, was his conclusion. The wait wasn't long.

"Shuck that coat!"

Parker lowered his arms to comply, but checked his hands halfway to his lapels.

"And don't tetch that gun yuh air toting underneath—saving yuh wanta die!"

The prospect, gloomy to go with, wasn't improving any. Parker shucked his coat, dropped it and stood revealed—shoulder-rigged holster and six-gun in it. By then anger was teasing at him.

"Unhitch that shoulder-rigging with yore left paw, feller," came the command, "and toss it over here. That's the ticket!"

When the heavy weapon thumped the ground at the masked man's feet, Parker felt much as Samson must have done when shorn of his locks. What strength he had had was gone.

"Walk off frum that plug," was the next order, as the masked man bent cautiously and retrieved the gun with his left hand. "I aim to ride him frum here on."

"Set afoot—by God!" Parker grunted as he obeyed.

His anger had ceased merely to tease and was now jabbing him malignantly with suggestions about what he should have done, but none of the suggestions appeared to make sense under the circumstances.

The man in the blue bandanna walked over beside the horse, hung Parker's gun-rigging over the saddle-horn, then swung a leg up. He chuckled.

"Reckon yuh'll be right pleased, feller, when I tell yuh my fust intention was to dry-gulch yuh and save taking chances. But I got a right tender heart in me, so yuh air as fulla luck as a sheep-dawg is of sheep-stink——"

"How far to the de Pasco *hacienda*—my tender-hearted brother?" Parker cut in, hoping to salvage that much anyhow.

"Foller yore nose, feller, and find out!"

That ended it. The rump of Parker's bay, a tough Morgan cross, dropped from sight below the rim of the ridge. Soon the clatter of his hooves on loose rock could no longer be heard.

And Copper Mike Parker, known wherever men follow copper's red trail, slowly and thoughtfully loaded a black-bowled briar with shaved plug-tobacco, lighted up, and started riding Shank's mares along the trail Blue Bandanna had taken.

II

THE ENGINEER'S lean, strong face was set in troubled lines and his smoke-gray eyes were narrowed speculatively as he swung his six-foot frame up the trail. From long practice, he covered much ground without being aware of it, carrying his one-hundred-eighty pounds with an effortless ease possible only to long legs and a rugged body. It was not his present situation, uncomfortable though it was, that claimed his thoughts. It was something much less definable.

It was in Parker's mind, vaguely but persistently, that the misadventure would prove to be only the first of others awaiting him in that all-but-forgotten, unbelievably rugged region known vaguely as the Beaver Mountain Range.

He had detrained the previous night at Marana, on the Southern Pacific, ridden a trail which skirted the southern edge of the Tortolita Mountains, and was then in the

Beavers, rising rugged and barren halfway between the Tortolitas and the northern reaches of the Santa Catalinas.

"This is Arizona!" he exclaimed bitterly. "And we fought to take it away from the Apaches!"

He stopped abruptly. Beside the trail on his right lay a shaggy, sorrel bronc. Sweat sign and matted hair, the hair still damp, indicated that the bronc had recently been stripped of its saddle. The bronc had been afoot not more than a couple of hours before.

It had been shot through the head.

The engineer's experienced eyes soon spotted the reason for the shooting. The animal's left ankle had been broken. The side uppermost showed no brand, so Parker, with considerable effort, turned the body over.

Then the engineer got his second surprise of the day.

On the bronc's hip where a brand had evidently been, there was a circular area of raw flesh. The branded hide had been neatly cut out!

"At a guess," the engineer reflected, the lines bracketing his wide mouth tightening, "some outlaw was lamming for the border, had to shoot his horse, so bushed up and took mine. Well—if that's all there is to it, to hell with it!"

But Parker was too well seasoned a man ever to make the mistake of throwing dust in his own eyes. He felt pretty sure that there was more to the incident than somebody's urgent need for a mount.

"Could have a connection with whatever happened to Joe Carp," he was thinking as his long legs took him on up the trail. "If anything has really happened to him," he added, without too much confidence.

Ten days before, Joe Carp, mining engineer on the payroll of the Parker Engineering Company, had outfitted at Marana, Arizona, and was known to have set out on the same trail which Parker was then following. How far along the trail Carp had got was a mystery. Being a man of about forty years, trail-wise in the nth degree, no ordinary accident was likely to have befallen him.

Yet he had vanished. No report had come from him, and Al Henry, who had engaged Parker to make certain surveys for Antonina de Pasco, girl owner of the big de Pasco grant, had had no explanation to offer.

Alfred Henry, Phoenix lawyer and politician, had said that his client, Miss de Pasco, wanted mineral-surveys made of her holdings. More than that, Henry did not know.

Parker had sent Joe Carp to do the job, and Carp had arrived at a certain known point. After then—what?

That was something Parker meant to find out.

AN HOUR later and about five miles farther along the brush-and-scrub lined trail Parker stopped short and gave eye to a slim, overalled button who had appeared almost magically from a by-trail not two hundred feet ahead. The button was leading a horse by its bridle. A bay horse. A Morgan cross.

"Damned if it ain't my horse!" the engineer ejaculated, and promptly lengthened his stride. "Hell's bells!" he exclaimed a moment later. "Blast me if it ain't a girl!"

So it was. A long-legged girl in Levis, flat-heeled cowhide boots, flannel shirt and a man's flop-brimmed hat. A shapely girl of about seventeen, black hair in a thick rope over one shoulder. Her eyes were brown, her mouth red-lipped and wide, and there were freckles on her cheeks and across her nose. Not an extravagantly pretty girl, Parker thought, but plenty attractive for all that.

"Where did you pick up that horse?" he demanded.

"Up yonder a piece," the girl replied in a husky voice, nodding her head toward where the by-trail took off. "Feller told me to lead him here, and purty soon a feller that owned him would come along. He gimme a dollar, a silver one, for doing it. Yore hoss, mister?"

Parker doubted that story, but there was no point in disputing it. He had noted that his bedroll remained roped back of his saddle and that the saddle-pockets still bulged. Surprisingly enough, his shoulder-rigging was looped over the horn—but the holster was empty.

"There was a gun in that holster," pointing. "What became of it?" he demanded.

"I never touched it!" came in prompt denial. "Honest, mister, I never did. I never

saw no gun in that holster. Never laid eye to it, so help me!"

"She doth protest too much," Parker was thinking. Aloud, "Who was the jasper that sent you hre?"

"Honest, mister, I never laid eye to him afore!" she denied vehemently. "He gimme a dollar, a silver one, and I done like he said. You going to gimme some money for finding yore hoss for you?"

"You've got one dollar," Parker told her, grinning in spite of himself. "Children shouldn't get rich too quick."

"Reckon I'll git along," she said resignedly—then held out a hopeful hand invitingly. "Other feller gimme a dollar, a silver one. You going to gimme one too, mister?"

Parker slid a hand into a pocket, closed his fingers about a silver dollar—and the next instant was leaping from scratch. Catching the girl's slender body in a powerful grip, he swung her around in front of him and backed swiftly to cover in the scrub.

The girl, frail though she had seemed, proved to be a fighting, kicking, clawing hell-cat. Just in time, Parker slapped her reaching hand from her bosom and, ripping away the buttons of her shirt, closed his fingers around the comforting butt of a revolver. He lifted the fury in his left arm, hurled her a dozen feet off into the chaparral, then dropped to hands and knees and began snaking along toward the trail.

A six-gun blasted wickedly in the brush across the trail. It blasted again, and lead zipped close above the prone engineer. Lying flat, he sent his own lead slashing into the brush.

A screech, followed instantly by a gurgled oath, told him that his third shot had made the target. He fired again then lay still. Five minutes passed without another sound breaking the silence.

Parker sprang up and sprinted across the trail into cover. Nothing happened. He searched for the spot where he expected to find a dead man—but found only the spot. No man, dead or living, was there. But what had happened to the dry-gulcher was immediately clear.

On the ground lay a long, walnut-handled, blue-steel revolver. A single-action Colt. A forty-one built on a forty-five frame. A weapon which Parker had seen many times before—or its twin brother. He picked the gun up. One of his slugs had wrecked the cylinder, rendering it of no further use.

"Joe Carp's cutter—as sure as I'm a sinner!" he exclaimed, his eyes bleak.

Joe Carp had followed his profession for many years in the Latin-American countries, especially in the Argentine. Each of his gun's service-smooth butt-plates bore many notches, cut with a file. Some were long and deep, others short and shallow.

"Long ones for Whites," Carp had once explained with a grin. "Short ones for Port-agees and such."

Pocketing Joe Carp's weapon, Parker glanced for the first time at the one he had taken from the girl.

"Well—I'll be damned!" he exclaimed wrathfully.

The forty-five in his hand was his own!

III

THERE was no doubt in Parker's mind that Carp had been waylaid and murdered somewhere on the trail now unreeling behind him.

"And no doubt at all that lying girl had me all set up for a killing," Parker reflected angrily, as he rode at a walk up the sloping side of what appeared to be an unending mountain. Before he could follow up that thought, another struck him.

Blue Bandanna had passed up a fine chance to rub Parker out, back there on the ridge where he set him afoot. He could have done it then. But he had ridden off, leaving Parker unharmed.

Then, five miles farther along the trail, Blue Bandanna had experienced a change of mind. Using the girl and the horse for a decoy to hold Parker's attention, Bandanna had circled through the brush with murder in his mind—and had failed only because a crunched twig had betrayed him.

"Could be," the engineer speculated, "that Blue Bandanna and that bushed up jasper were not the same. Could be—but damned if I believe it!"

The evidence was too clear. Parker's Morgan. Parker's gun in the girl's bosom. The girl's point-blank lies. The would-be killer just had to be the man in the blue bandanna.

But why the change of mind? Why the opposition to Carp's reaching the *hacienda?* To Parker going there?

Oh, hell—there were too many whys!

Abruptly, the trail leveled off, turned right onto a wider bench, and the engineer saw that the peak of the mountain was in fact two peaks, the trail cleaving its way between them.

Suddenly and briefly, along a narrow bench which took off from the trail, Parker caught a flash of color. Red. There was movement. Then nothing.

The engineer hit the ground instantly, tied and, gun drawn, took off along the narrow shelf. He meant to get in his share of the shooting first, granting there should be any.

He had gone perhaps a hundred yards along the narrow shelf when, rounding a granite outcrop, he stopped, stood motionless for an instant, then slowly holstered his forty-five.

Standing on the shelf, patently as much surprised as Parker, was a young woman of nineteen or maybe twenty years. She was tall and slender, her long legs clothed in brown whipcord-britches. They were very attractive legs. She had narrow hips, a slim waist, and her red shirt did more than merely suggest the contours of a well-rounded, girlish bosom. Her chocolate-brown eyes matched her chocolate-brown hair, which lay in ringlets above her broad, white forehead. Cut shoulder-short, the ringleted hair was caught and held by a red ribbon at the nape of her neck.

"My apologies," Parker said, dusting off his hat against his trousers, "for running onto you like this. I'm looking for the de Pasco outfit."

"It doesn't matter," the girl said with dignity. "I'm Antonina de Pasco, and own the—outfit. You had some special reason, no doubt, for looking for the—outfit?"

Parker chuckled. "No offense, Miss de Pasco," he said. "But I'll put it differently. I'm on my way to the *casa* of the de Pascos. My name is Michael Parker," he paused briefly, and added, "sometimes called Copper Mike Parker. Your attorney in Phoenix, Alfred Henry, engaged my firm to make a mineral survey for you."

Antonina de Pasco nodded. "I wrote Mr. Henry to send out an engineer whom he could recommend," she acknowledged. "And he wrote that he had engaged you. But you have been so long in coming, I had given you up. Of course, there is no great hurry. In fact, my cousin, Arthur de Pasco, advised against having an engineer out at all. My father in his time had adverse reports from other engineers—"

"Pardon me, Miss de Pasco," Parker interrupted. "I'm worried about this non-appearance of mine. As a matter of fact, I sent a man from my office, a good man who knows ore as well as any man in the game, and he should have been here ten days ago. His name is Carp. Joe Carp. Apparently, he didn't arrive. So—I'm worried."

There was no question about it, Antonina de Pasco was genuinely surprised. "I don't understand," she said. "Nobody of that name came here. Nobody came at all, in fact. My letter to Mr. Henry carried clear directions for reaching here. Surely—"

Again Harper interrupted. "That trail from Marana shows very little use," he said. "There surely is another and better route to the ranch?"

Miss de Pasco's face flushed, and a look of anger darkened her eyes. "There is a better route," she informed him. "It follows the Carillo Wash southwards to De Pasco, on the S. P. Unfortunately, Juan Enrico, across part of whose ranch the road must go, closed it against me. The matter is in litigation, but in the meantime I am forced to use the Marana route. But that has nothing to do with the failure of this Mr. Carp to reach here. I'm greatly puzzled about that."

"So am I," Parker declared pointedly, thinking of the revolver with the notched plates which he carried. "I know that he reached Marana, bought a horse there and set out over the trail for your place. And that's all I do know. Who besides yourself knew that a man was expected?"

"My cousin, Arthur de Pasco, and Mr. Henry, of course. As I have told you, my cousin didn't like the idea. Just a waste of money, he held, because we already know the difficulties of our location and the leanness of our copper ore. But—" She hesitated for an instant. "As a matter of fact," she went on, "I have had an offer for the entire *hacienda*, twenty thousand acres, most of it rough and worthless, and I wanted the opinion of an expert before making a de-

cision. That explains why I asked Mr. Henry to send a mining engineer."

"And this cousin of yours, Mr. de Pasco —what does he advise about the offer?" Parker asked.

"He thinks it is big enough. But you must be saddle-weary and hungry, Mr. Parker!" she exclaimed, giving him a smile that dazzled. "And here we stand talking! Maybe we'll get at the reason for what is apparently a deep mystery now, when you investigate more fully. You are going to, aren't you?"

Parker couldn't be certain, but he thought he read uneasiness in her voice and something very akin to fear in her eyes. He didn't quite fancy suspecting such a lovely person of anything underhanded. Criminal, to be exact. But he no longer questioned that some very black skullduggery had been afoot—whether this charming girl knew about it or not.

"I'm going to the bottom of the matter," he said briefly. "But you mentioned food, Miss de Pasco," he reminded her with a grin of expectancy. "I could surely do with plenty!"

"Then," she asked smilingly, "will you lead on back to the trail? This shelf is too narrow for two to walk abreast."

"Right," Parker agreed, peering over the edge. "One misstep—and I'd never know you better!"

IV

IT WAS indeed a narrow shelf, thrusting out dizzily over a canyon whose brush- and rock-choked bottom lay two-hundred feet below.

"Down there," the girl offered, pointing over the edge, "are the ruins of the sheep-sheds and corrals for which *La Hacienda de los Pasco* once was famous. The ruins of the cattle-sheds and corrals lie beyond Vega Verde and Lost Lake. Those ruins, too, are quite extensive.

She spoke in mockery, savoring her words as though she liked their bitter taste.

"But you have many trees," Parker pointed out. "And such trees! Oak, ash, poplar, walnut, juniper, pine—all virgin, too, in the bargain. Really, *Hacienda de los Pasco* has marvelous trees.

"They should be marvelous," Miss de Pasco said acidly. "A great many de Pascos devoted their lives to watching them grow from saplings. Supervising the growth of trees, I have been told, was something a de Pasco could do without losing caste. So they were all grand tree supervisors."

"Somewhere about," Parker jeered mildly, "there is evidently a quinine-tree, and somebody I could almost reach out and touch sometimes nibbles its leaves."

"Eats them by the handful!" the girl declared—then laughed with him. "You are an engineer," she went on presently. "Would you undertake to build a railroad, even a tiny little narrow one, into the Beavers to haul the trees out to market?"

"It would bankrupt the U. S. Treasury," Parker responded promptly.

"So the grand trees just decay on their stumps. Why not? Should they live while all the rest of the *hacienda* dies—including its people?"

Parker couldn't think up a good answer off-hand.

"You don't answer. Well, forgive my inconsequential prattle."

"It isn't inconsequential," Parker protested. "As a matter of fact, Miss de Pasco, I was thinking. I was thinking that I'd hate to have you hate me as you seem to hate the trees. Why do you?"

Silence for a moment. Then, "I don't hate the trees. Perhaps you will understand that one may, in time, get to hating obligations imposed by certain things. Like land, and trees, for instance. And," she added as though it were an afterthought, "the Emperor."

Parker chuckled.

"Any special emperor? As a matter of fact—are there any emperors left? At least, any worth your hating?"

"This emperor lived a long, long time ago," the girl explained, a whimsical note in her voice. "In Spain. One of my ancestors went to Mexico with Cortez—and he must have been a really tough mug, believe me.

"He did something very gratifying for the Emperor — probably murdered an unusually larger number of natives, or invented some new and especially excruciating way of torturing them—so the Emperor granted him a large part of what is now Arizona. This part, in fact. And what a

washout that grant has been! You can see that for yourself, can't you?"

Parker laughed in genuine amusement. "You could pull stakes and leave, couldn't you?" he asked.

"I had that thought while I was undergoing education at the convent in Tucson," Antonina told him. "And Mother Raquel demanded to know where, for instance, I would go? When I can find a good answer to that, perhaps I shall pull stakes and go. In the meantime, there's your horse, and supper will be ready soon."

Parker untied, glancing down at the girl's spike-heeled boots as he did so. "Will you ride?" he offered. "Perhaps, though, your horse is somewhere about?"

"I walked. It isn't far. Just a quarter-mile beyond the notch."

BEYOND the notch, describing a direct route between giant walnuts which grew thickly over a wide and weedy mesa, lay what had been a smooth and serviceable road.

It was now rutted by erosion and grown up with brush. Cutting through the mesa like the long, blued steel blade of a giant knife lay a body of water perhaps half a quarter wide. The southern tip or point of the blade ended against what appeared to be a causeway, and across its thirty-foot width lay the road.

"Lost lake," the girl explained, pausing while the engineer looked his fill. "It is beautiful, isn't it?"

"Yes. Oughta be good fishing there, too. How did it get that name. Lost Lake?"

Antonina laughed musically. "Because it got lost from the parent stream," she explained. "Or, at least, that's what is surmised. The lake extends three miles northwards into the high crests, where it is fed by a gigantic spring. Geologists say the spring is really the flow of an underground river which comes to the surface there. Anyhow, it's very beautiful, like all the rest of the *hacienda.* And, also like all the rest of the *hacienda,* of no material value whatsoever."

"Beauty doesn't necessarily have a material value," the engineer reminded her, while his instructed eyes surveyed the causeway. "That thing wasn't man-made," he went on, indicating the causeway. "Nature must have gone on a rampage hereabouts, some while back."

"Probably. An earthquake, along about the time of Noah's flood, may have done it. At any rate, it conferred upon the de Pasco's a fine lake for fishing, and the embankment provided a way to cross it."

"And what lies south of the causeway?" Parker queried.

"*Canyon Del Muerto.*" she answered. "The Carillo Wash is really a continuation of the canyon. "But," whimsically, "while the topographical lesson goes on, our supper waits. Shall we go?"

"You bet!" Parker laughed. "Supper sounds good to me."

Halfway across the causeway, Antonina pointed to what lay in the near foreground like a vast pile of hopeless ruin, and said:

"That tumbled heap of rocks and mud-bricks is the abode of the de Pascos. The central part is still habitable. You may feel free to comment, Mr. Parker."

It was indeed an astonishing ruin. Flanking each side of the central building were great mounds of rock and adobe brick which once had spread the *casa* over two acres of ground, affording the fabulous dons of their day four-score rooms in which to house their retainers and their guests. The weeds and tough grasses of later impoverished generations grew rankly over the astonishing heaps of debris, as if trying to hide from alien eyes all suggestion of the former grandeur of the *estada de los Pasco,* so that none might compare it with that of a sorrier day.

Parker's attention was taken off the ruins and became fixed upon a strange equipage which, having turned into the road from some unseen avenue, came rolling in their direction.

"My cousin, Arthur de Pasco," Antonina said simply. "He will be glad to see you."

Despite his concern over the business of Carp, Parker had been greatly entertained by the girl's recital of her woes and her unusual viewpoint. Except that she had such a wholesome appearance and gracious manner, he'd have had at least a slight suspicion as to her sanity. Now, looking along the avenue towards the *casa,* he threw up his mental hands and acknowledged to himself doubt as to his own cerebral integrity.

V

FOUR goats, all unusually large, were coming very slowly along the road. Hitched tandem style, they were pulling a low four-wheeled vehicle which was only a long box furnished with a seat at the rear. On the seat was a man, and the man was angry.

So angry, that the long whip he held licked out over the four goats so rapidly it appeared to be several whips instead of one. Every time the lash lengthened out it raised a welt on the body of a goat, yet the goats did not increase their speed one step. The black lead-goat walked with stately calm, flinching when the lash reached him, but stepping not one jot the faster. It was as though the black goat paced a funeral procession.

"Damn your hide, Coaly!" shrieked the man with the whip, emphasizing his rage with venomous lashes, "I'll cut you to pieces if you don't move out! I'll make stew-meat out of you, damn you! Move, I tell you! Move!"

The goat-driver's face was congested, his black eyes bulging in their sockets. With all the power in a massive pair of shoulders and long, tough-fibred arms, he flogged the black goat, while the language he used would have put a mule-skinner to shame.

The girl stopped. She was angry too. Her brown eyes smoldered with fire which might, Parker thought, flare into seething flame. Her small hands were tightly clenched.

"Damn you, Coaly—!" the driver began again.

"Arthur! Stop!"

Two words from Antonina—but they were more explosive than the crack of the driver's whip. The goats were then within fifty feet of Parker and the girl, and moving no faster than they had done when first sighted.

"Don't shout at me!" the man in the box railed out, recovering his lash only to send it licking out again. "I'll kill that damned black devil—and you just try to stop me. I might even give you a taste of the whip! Let me alone!"

Antonina shot forward in a flash. One small hand darted into a pocket of her trousers, came out—and there was the glint of light on steel as she neared the box-like contraption. With two swift motions of her right hand she slashed the leather tugs which harnessed the goats to the box—and the black goat scampered away among the trees, dragging the rest of the hitch behind him.

Parker watched with interest the further enactment of this strange comedy—or, perhaps, tragedy? Certainly the two players were reacting to something savage within them.

The man in the box took action. He swung the lash back over a shoulder, maddened eyes starting almost from their sockets, lips grimly tightened. Antonina stood her ground, erect, tense—and her words came in a soft but clearly distinguishable hiss!

"Just you do—and I'll throw it!"

"It" was the long-bladed knife with which she had cut the tugs, and which she now held poised and ready in her hand. Grim tragedy might have ended the tempestuous engagement, had not Parker taken a hand.

He seized the stock of the goat-man's whip, giving it a yank. The stock yielded no more than if it had been set in concrete. He brought pressure to bear, and the goat-man, transferring his blazing regard to Parker, put on plenty of pressure of his own. The whip-stock popped, splintered—and each was left in possession of a jagged section.

Parker held the section to which the whip was thonged. He tossed it into the weeds beside the road and said:

"For goats—if you just must. For girls—no."

Even while Parker was speaking, a change came over the goat-man. His face whitened, and his eyes, no longer distended with rage, sought the face of the girl.

"I'm a beast, Tone!" he cried. "I didn't really know what I was doing! Please, Tone—forgive me?"

Antonina's mood changed just as completely. The tenseness left her in a flash, and her small teeth showed in a quick smile.

"We will send someone to round up the goats, Arthur," she offered. "Please, Mr. Parker," turning in mock-supplication to the engineer, "make allowances for two hot-headed persons who really wouldn't harm each other for worlds!"

"Of course we wouldn't!" Arthur de Pasco declared. "I've got a nasty temper, sir—perhaps because I'm condemned to go about on crutches, else in this present contraption—which," ruefully, "now completely lacks a means of locomotion!"

Parker laughed pleasantly—but reserved judgment about the cripple in the box-wagon. He suggested:

"I'll tie my saddle rope to your contraption, if you like, and haul you home—if that's where you're going?"

"Fine! It's my hip. The right one," de Pasco explained while Parker made his rope fast. "Bronc fell back on me, and it's been crutches for me since then. I rigged up this goat outfit so I could get about over the *hacienda.* You'd be surprised how well it works."

"Seems a good idea," Parker agreed. "Not many trails you can't follow in that thing."

"I go everywhere," he agreed, and gave Antonina a questioning look.

"Sorry!" the girl exclaimed. "I've forgotten to introduce you two!"

Antonina then explained the situation, and the face of the cripple became more and more thoughtful as the explanation progressed. Finally, when the girl had finished, he shook his head bewilderedly, looked at Parker and asked:

"Have you any idea what might have happened to your man? Surely nothing could have happened to him on the trail. Unbelievable. Could he have—well, gone off on a tear, or something like that?"

"Not that sort," Parker answered positively.

"Let's talk it all over after supper," Miss de Pasco suggested. "You take hold of one rope, Mr. Parker, and I'll take the other. Here we go!"

With much laughter, they started hauling the queer equipage toward the *casa.*

VI

THERE was no portico to soften the rugged face of the central structure which alone had survived the ruin which time had wrought on the ancestral *casa* of the de Pascos. Once there had been a *patio* at the front, a loop-holed barricade, but only faint traces of it remained.

Two great doors, studded with enormous nail-heads and hinged with hand-forged iron, looked inhospitably, Parker thought, upon the rutted road which circled before and nearly against them. A barefooted Mexican, in baggy white pants and jacket, appeared seemingly from nowhere, opened one of the great doors, then took Parker's horse and disappeared with it around the heaps of debris which flanked the central edifice on the north.

One was, upon entering, immediately conscious of a sensation of vast and tomb-like space. The huge hall was dimly lighted, and it was evident that it served only as a means of entry to the more habitable part of the *casa.*

"In the lush era of the de Pascos," Antonina said at Parker's elbow, "when the fabulous Don Gonfalez ruled this roost, the noble gentlemen rode their *caballos* right in through the great doorway. That explains its width and height. Away off back yonder," she went on explaining, "where you can't see anything but darkness, they stabled the *caballos,* along with the chickens, the pigs and the goats. I have an idea, Mr. Parker, that this place was quite homey then, and I wish there were horses and chickens and pigs and goats stabled in it now. Perhaps I wouldn't be frightened of it then."

De Pasco, thumping along on a pair of crutches which he had taken from the box-wagon, spoke at Parker's other elbow.

"Don't take my cousin too seriously, Mr. Parker," he warned. "She's a true de Pasco, and very proud of all this departed glory she pretends to scorn."

"You're too late with that bunk, Art," Antonina drawled comically. "Mr. Parker has already found me out."

"You were not, by any chance, hating the trees and the Emperor when he came upon you?" de Pasco queried ruefully.

"I was that!"

"Then you are surely revealed!"

Parker laughed. "I'll bet the imperial corpse rests better in its grave, even under the onus of Miss de Pasco's hate, than ever it did when it sported a crown," he commented.

They passed through a large door at the left, and entered a spacious room well lighted by windows. Brilliantly colored rugs

spotted the age-blackened floor. Tables, comfortable chairs, a lounge and many bookcases gave to the big room a homey appearance, seeming to offer welcome.

A maid, very tidy in black dress, white cap and apron, appeared immediately with a stone jug from which she poured into large mugs a rich, dark-red wine. Parker drank deeply and gratefully, whereupon the maid lifted the jug for a refill.

Parker, smiling his thanks, held his mug out—then his eyes became fixed in a surprised stare. His mind raced back and saw again a long-legged girl in Levis, flat-heeled cowhide boots, flannel shirt and a man's flop-brimmed hat. A girl with black hair, brown eyes, red-lipped mouth and freckles. A girl of whom he had demanded: Where did you pick up that horse?

The maid, becoming conscious of his stare, lifted her eyes to Parker's, then lidded them again with shy modesty. The eyes were brown, right enough, but there was no hint of recognition in them. She poured the wine and left the room.

Could he be mistaken? Could this trim, pretty maid really be that hell-cat of a girl in different attire?

"She either is or I'm going nuts!" Parker assured himself mentally. Definitely disturbed but determined not to give out even a hint of it, he sat down before the enormous fireplace heaped up with blazing cedar logs and, mug in hand, said:

"I may as well tell you at once," sipping the rich, red wine with relish, "that my trip in here has to do solely with tracing Joe Carp. As for a mineral survey of the *hacienda*, several have been made in the past. All have summed things up like this:

"You have traces of gold, some silver and a vast amount of copper. Millions of tons in sight. But it's all lean ore. None will run more than three or four per cent. Your location is impossible, so far as getting your lean ore out is concerned. Mountains, canyons, washes—the surrounding terrain, in short forbids the building of a railroad, or even a passable truck road, to your property. Knowing the mineral history of the *hacienda*," he ended, "I simply can't give you any hope."

"Pop! Just like that, you poke a finger into my rosy bubble!" Antonina exclaimed petulantly.

"Well, copper is where you find it—" Parker began.

"There goes another busted bubble!" the girl interrupted, a tragic vein faintly perceptible in her light humor. "By common report, Copper Mike Parker has only to wave a magic wand over the most barren heap of granite, and lo, it blooms with red, red copper! Can't you leave us with that belief intact, Mr. Parker?"

"Don't need a magic wand," Parker told her, faintly amused. "No trouble at all to find copper. Millions of tons of it. The trouble is that so much of it is, like yours, so lean it can't be recovered at a profit."

"And there you are, Tone!" de Pasco exclaimed, with a strong flavor of I-told-you-so in his voice. "Your dream of getting rich off de Pasco copper—!"

"Hold you goats, Art!" Antonina broke in a trifle heatedly. "Mr. Parker qualified his report, I think, with something like this: 'Considering the almost inaccessible location of the property.' Right, Mr. Parker?"

"Quite right."

"But if there should be an easy, inexpensive way in which to transport our lean rock to a smelter? What then?"

"But, Tone!" de Pasco cried impatiently. "There is no easy way—!"

"I know it!" Antonina interrupted. "Mr. Parker has already said it would bankrupt the U. S. treasury to build a railroad into the Beavers—"

"And since it can't be mined profitably as it is," de Pasco cut in argumentatively, "what the hell good is it?"

Parker looked steadily into the flames in the fireplace, made up his mind, and said:

"I suspect that somebody has figured out a way, or thinks he has. If you wish, Miss de Pasco, I'll look into that phase for you—"

A thunderous pounding of the iron knocker on the outside double-doors sent echoes reverberating through the vast house.

Antonina got up slowly. "We almost never have guests any more," she said hesitantly. "I wonder who it can be?"

"Only guests would come to our front door," de Pasco reminded her. "Have Juanita answer."

Parker stared hard at the trim maid while she passed through on her way into the big hall, became convinced that she was

indeed identical with the girl of the trail, then turned to Antonina and said:

"If you care for my advice, Miss de Pasco, it's this: Don't make any deals with anybody just yet. Above all, don't sign any papers. Maybe I'm wrong, but I have a hunch that we are about to have some—developments."

"My cousin doesn't need advice from you about her business!" de Pasco snapped, dark eyes resentful, before Antonina could answer. "I understand her affairs and her problems—!"

The opening of the door cut de Pasco off.

VII

TWO men entered ahead of the maid. The one who came first was a tall, dark-skinned man in the late twenties. Spike-heeled boots, levis, flannel shirt and neckerchief ticketed him at once as a cattleman. He carried a dusty Mexican-type felt sombrero in hand. Sight of him had a peculiar effect on the girl owner of the *hacienda de los Pasco.*

Antonina got to her feet slowly, and the smile of welcome was replaced by a look of displeasure. She drew her slender figure to its dignified tallest, and asked coldly:

"What are you doing here, Juan Enrico?"

The man addressed seemed not at all disconcerted. His dark eyes sent a glance past Antonina, dwelt briefly upon de Pasco, then he answered.

"Got business here, important business. Besides, Art de Pasco allowed it would be okay fur me to come, no matter if yuh did give orders ag'in me an' my riders settin' foot or hoof on yore ground. So I come along."

Any Spanish blood which Juan Enrico's forebears may have had, had certainly been diluted in later generations by generous infusions of straight Americano, Western flavor. Only the high cheek-bones and the tar-blackness of his eyes hinted at the Spanish in him.

Parker started slightly at first sound of Enrico's voice—and thereafter kept his eyes fixed upon him. There was something familiar about the husky tones that claimed the engineer's prompt attention. His glance dropped to the rancher's right hand. It was concealed by his sombrero. Lifting his glance from the hat, he fixed it upon the man who had entered behind Enrico.

"Just who the hell is cracked, anyhow?" he asked himself in all seriousness. "Is it me, or this queer de Pasco pair, or all three of us—or is that Black Matt Titus, in person, I'm looking at?"

The man claiming the engineer's interest to intently was in his fifties. Probably nearer sixty than fifty. He was short and stubby, with a broad, deeply lined face. His head was much larger than his stubby body would seem to warrant, and it was thatched thickly with coarse black hair, sprinkled lightly with gray. He was, in short, Matthew Titus, copper magnate, politician, sportsman, and, according to Parker's book, a skulldugger of the first water.

"A thirty-second-degree crook!" the engineer was saying to himself as Enrico introduced the copper king to Miss de Pasco. "So—if I wasn't already on my guard, that jasper's presence here would do it. Dirty work at the crossroads—and that's certain."

"I welcome you, sir," Antonina was saying to the stubby man, "but could wish to have had the pleasure under some other sponsorship. As for you, Arthur," whipping angrily around toward her cousin, "why did you take it upon yourself to invite Enrico here, after he had been warned off?"

"Because I don't want you to bite off your nose just to spite your face," de Pasco said imperturbably. "Enrico offered to buy this property, making a good offer, as it seemed to me. You refused—and you needn't have been so insulting about it, need you? At any rate, Juan, angered by you, closed the main road to the railroad against us. You have balled things up plenty, my dear cousin. Suppose you just sit by, for once, and let me handle the business from now on?"

There was an ugly smirk on the cripple's face while speaking, and Parker caught the fine tones of defiance in his voice. He watched the girl, expecting to see her explode in a torrent of wrathful words. Instead, she looked long and searchingly at de Pasco, her face dead-white, then, to Parker's surprise, she turned to him.

"I own the *hacienda de los Pasco*—lock, stock and barrel," she told him quietly but with a certain hard edge to her voice. "I

am free, white and twenty-one. So, Mr. Parker, I shall take advantage of your offer to look into certain things for me—and go even farther than that. Will you accept the appointment as my agent, to act in whatever business brings these men here—?"

"Stop that, Tone!" de Pasco shouted, getting to his feet, face red with rage. "You don't know what you are doing—and, damn it all, I'm not going to sit by and see you go on making a fool of yourself—!"

"Perhaps," Parker interrupted, fixing cold eyes upon the enraged cripple, "you'd best have thrown that knife this afternoon, Miss de Pasco. Or it may be that a helluva good whaling is all little Arthur needs. Pity he's crippled—and takes advantage of it."

"Damn you, Parker, or whatever your name is," de Pasco spluttered, lifting a heavy crutch as though it had been a club.

"Hush, Arthur!" Antonina interrupted, keeping her temper under what was, Parker knew, great provocation. "You have no authority over me or over my property—"

"Oh, yes!" de Pasco shrilled. "Just a poor relation, huh? A helpless cripple, dependent upon your charity! Well, my dear Tone, maybe—and by God!—maybe not."

For the first time the stubby man spoke. "I came here to make a business proposition to Miss de Pasco," he said, edging his way to a chair and depositing his short body in it. "Not to hear rehearsed the ups and downs of a family quarrel. "Enrico," to the rancher, "see if you can get that young man with the crutches to quiet down. Then we'll proceed."

As though he had received a command he could not or preferred not to disobey, de Pasco, with a visible effort, controlled himself and dropped back into his chair. His enraged black eyes, however, continued their baleful stare at Parker. The engineer grinned at him in return.

"I know of no business you could have with me, Mr. Titus," Antonina told the magnate when all was quiet again. "At any rate, it is near the supper hour. Suppose we defer further conversation until after we have eaten?"

Parker was an eager second to that proposal, but he said nothing. His interest in what lay ahead was growing.

Titus turned his massive head, looked sternly at the girl, then spoke rebukingly:

"You should never let anything at all, even food, interfere with business, young woman. I came here—"

"And left your appetite behind, eh, Matt?" Parker interrupted.

Impudence and braggadocio. But Parker knew the man he was dealing with.

"Exactly. But I have no quarrel with you, Parker. I came to buy the *hacienda do los Pasco* property, and whether you do or do not act as agent in the transaction is of no matter to me. My offer," turning to the wide-eyed girl, "is one-quarter-million. Cash, needless to say. A quarter of a million, let me remind you, Miss de Pasco—"

"Isn't peanuts," Parker broke in. He chuckled, then went on: "Which is why I'm wondering why the smart and greedy Black Matt Titus offers it. You know damned well, Matt, that the *hacienda's* rock is lean as ore-bearing rock can be. Moreover, it is absolutely inaccessible. Even if the rock ran to twenty percent, instead of a bare four or five—what the hell good is it, Matt? How do you aim to get it to a shipping point? Why, in short, do you want to buy?"

"Tone!" Arthur de Pasco shouted, no longer able to control himself. "Make that fool shut his mouth! He's knocking this sale all to hell!"

"Suppose you shut up?" calmly from the copper magnate, who seemed not in the least disturbed. "I have the answer to this copper tramp's question ready. It is this: I don't aim to even try to get the *hacienda's* lean rock to a smelter. Not at all. I am going into the cattle business on a large scale. So I am buying Juan Enrico's ranch, and offering to buy this property. As a copper-mining proposition, Parker has the right of it. He has said it is impossible—"

"Beg leave to contradict you, Matt," Parker broke in. "I have not said that. I do say, though, that you have no more intention of going into the cattle business than I have—and I haven't any at all. Miss de Pasco, do you still want me to handle this business for you?"

"Yes," she answered firmly.

"Okay. Then, Matt—the answer is: No dice. So if you'll just trot along back to where you came from, old chap, maybe we

hungry ones will have a chance to put on the feed-bag. Savvy?"

"Wait!" shouted de Pasco, bringing himself erect, crutches under his arm-pits. "Mr. Titus, have you known Mike Parker well enough in the past to positively identify him now?"

"Well—I know of him, more than having a personal acquaintance with him," the magnate answered slowly, giving the engineer a keen survey with his eyes. "I was told that Copper Mike Parker was here, so naturally I supposed—"

"That's it!" de Pasco blazed hotly. "You don't know him, only by reputation. A tramp of the copper trails. Well—I'll tell you now, all of you, that I doubt very much that this man here," aiming a forefinger at Parker, "is Michael Parker, the Phoenix engineer—and I think I can prove not only that he is not, but exactly who he is!"

Enrico spoke then. "What yuh gettin' at, de Pasco?" he demanded in unconcealed surprise. "Yuh wanta go easy, fella."

Antonina's wide eyes were on Parker, and there was a question in them. Parker nodded reassuringly to her, then said quietly to de Pasco:

"You're as lame in the brain as you are in the legs, hombre. And you're heading for more trouble than even your crooked mentality could ever cook up. But go ahead, Crip, and tell the gentlemen who I am, if not Parker? I'd be interested to know."

"Listen, all of you!" de Pasco cried. "Sonora Pete Harris, the murderer and thief, escaped from jail at Prescott two days ago. He was known to be riding a sorrel bronc carrying the BJ brand. One of Juan Enrico's riders saw a man shoot a sorrel bronc on the Marana Trail today. The bronc had broken his leg. After shooting the bronc, the rider went back along the trail—and when Enrico's rider next saw him," here de Pasco hesitated and fixed vengeful eyes on Parker, "he was riding a Morgan cross up the trail toward the *hacienda*. The same Morgan cross the supposed Parker rode here this afternoon. So—I accuse this man," indicating the engineer, "of being Sonora Pete Harris, bandit and killer, and I ask him—what did you do with Parker's body, after you shot him and took his horse?"

For once in his life, Mike Parker was too amazed for words. De Pasco, describing accurately what had happened on the Marana trail that day, with the added lie about Parker being killed, undoubtedly had been a party to the hold-up and what followed. De Pasco had given himself away—but only to Parker. And Parker wouldn't be able to make use of that knowledge, for Parker was just about at the end of his rope—unless he, by his own ingenuity, could make a noose in the rope and toss it over somebody else's head!

"I don't believe you!"

The refutation came from Antonina—but there was fear and uncertainty in her voice. Before Parker could answer, the door opened and a man came in.

At sight of the newcomer Parker gasped in relief.

"Hello there, Al Henry!" he exclaimed, rising to greet the newcomer. "Damned if I'm not mighty glad to see you!"

The newcomer stopped, stared hard at Parker for an instant, shook his head and said:

"I'm Al Henry, right enough. But where did you ever know me? I never saw you before, hombre—and that's certain!"

Parker then did the only thing left for him to do. Framed and knowing it, his right hand darted to the butt of the .45 under his left arm-pit. Somebody screamed. It was Antonina.

"Don't, Arthur—don't!"

Then, struck by the butt of de Pasco's crutch, Parker's light went out.

VIII

PARKER'S return to an awareness of life was first made manifest by a feeling of extreme coldness. He felt numb. There was an insistent throbbing in his head and an aching tiredness in his body. Absolute blackness surrounded him, but he knew, after a moment's consideration, that he lay on damp, slimy, unevenly set stones.

Comprehension came in a rush. He must assuredly be in a cellar deep under the *casa*. The pattern of the stones upon which he lay could not possibly form the floor of a cave.

"And it's unquestionably seagrass rope I'm hog-tied with!" he grunted after brief exertion had convinced him that he had been completely bound.

How much time had elapsed since de

Pasco's crutch crashed on his head, he had no way of determining, but the pangs of hunger which gnawed at his vitals suggested that the night had gone far along Such a blow as de Pasco had given him might well have rendered him unconscious for hours. But there had been as yet no concussion, for the engineer's mind was far too clear and active to admit of that.

HIS mind was, in fact, clear enough to permit him a mental sight of certain things which he had overlooked before.

For one thing, why had those goats of de Pasco's been taking a merciless flogging rather than get up and go? They had been fagged out. Parker realized that now. De Pasco had used the goats hard just prior to his appearance in the mesa road.

Another thing. Had de Pasco's unbelievable rage been aroused solely by the goats? Hadn't something far more agitating than the slowness of a hitch of goats occurred to set him off so insanely?

Parker thought something had. Queer how that lick over the head had cleared up his thinking arrangement!

De Pasco had been at or close to the place where the girl, identical with the tidy little maid, had approached with the horse. So the maid was involved in the devilment too. He was also certain that it had been Juan Enrico back of that blue bandanna. The fellow's build, dress and voice had given him away. And Parker would have bet that Enrico's sombrero had concealed a bandaged right hand. The hand from which he himself had shot Joe Carp's gun.

Unbelievably but no less certainly, Alfred Henry, the Phoenix attorney, was in the plot to the hilt. His denial of Parker had completely proved that point.

And Black Matt Titus?

Well, Black Matt had been guilty of so many crimes in connection with the accumulation of vast copper properties that Parker wouldn't put anything at all past him. However, he might not have been privy to the rubbing out of Joe Carp and the attempt on himself.

"There is, of course, a short cut over the mountains," Parker argued, squirming about to ease his cold, aching body, "from the *casa* to the point where the girl showed up with my horse. De Pasco, informed of the failure of Enrico to commit the murder which de Pasco had probably ordered done, had driven his goats hell-for-leather over the short cut to the *hacienda*—and that was why, fagged out, they had taken a lashing rather than run."

Yes, the pattern was beginning to emerge, pretty much like those copper-red ones with which Parker had been familiar for so long. The various angles were not yet distinct, but the over-all design was plainly to be seen. That design was red too.

To one person only could Parker give a clean bill. Antonina de Pasco was definitely in the clear.

At that point, despite his great discomfort, the desire for sleep began nudging Parker. He fought it off resolutely, then less resolutely. Finally, not at all.

He awoke with a jerk, struggled to sit up, realized then what his situation was, yawned prodigiously—then felt his heart jump.

Something had squeaked, and it was not a rat. It was the sound of a rusted hinge, long unused, being opened. Then came a scarcely perceptible lightening of the surrounding darkness. The hinge protested again, and more light filtered the blackness.

PARKER managed to roll over slightly on his right side and look in the direction from which the squeaking had seemed to come.

Had come, in fact. A lighted candle, seemingly suspended in space about four feet from the floor, was all he saw. Then the candle moved on into the room. The door-hinge squeaked again, and immediately the candle began moving slowly, cautiously, in Parker's direction.

It was not until the bearer of the lighted candle had come close and crouched down beside him that the engineer knew who his visitor was.

The candle-carrier was the tidy little maid!

"Don't speak!" she whispered, the hand holding the candle shaking so badly he feared any moment she might drop it. "I saw you recognize me, mister, but I didn't care about that. Art aimed to 'tend to you anyhow, so you wouldn't never tell. As far as you're concerned, I wouldn't of cared

what all he done—but Miss Tone is different—"

"What has he done with Miss Tone?" Parker broke in to ask.

The girl did not reply at once, but, opening a knife which she took from a pocket of her apron, began cutting the rope which secured the engineer. It was not until she had finished that job and Parker was sitting up and rubbing wrists and ankles that she answered the query.

"He locked Miss Tone in her room. It's up the main stairs at the front on the left. No way she can git out, neither, because it's a far drop from a window to the ground—"

"What was his idea for that?" Parker interrupted sharply.

THE girl shook her head in negation. "I ain't knowing about that. No telling what Art de Pasco will be up to or what he won't."

Parker was thoughtful for a moment, then he glanced keenly at the maid. "You've been de Pasco's girl, haven't you?" he suggested rather than accused. She made no denial, and the engineer went on. "Have a quarrel with him lately?"

"No. He jest told me tonight to pack my duds and take out from here. Didn't want me around no more. I know now that he's all along figgered to marry Miss Tone and git a-holt on the *hacienda.* But," triumphantly, "he won't never remember her marrying up with him. Miss Tone's done found him out, too!"

"So. And that's why you came to set me loose?"

"Partly. But I'm doing it as much because Miss Tone said for me to, seeing I got a chance—"

"Miss Tone!" Parker exclaimed — then was thoughtful again. "Thought you said she was locked in her room?"

"She is. But I taken up her supper. Then's when she said to find you if I could and help you git out."

Parker nodded his understanding. "Now," he asked, without much hope of gaining anything thereby, "what's going on around here? What game is De Pasco, Enrico and Al Henry playing, along with Matt Titus?"

The girl shook her head from side to side in a manner leaving no doubt of her sincerity. "I don't know what them men is up to. Honest, I don't."

"Maybe you can answer this one: Why didn't Juan Enrico shoot me when he stuck me up and took my horse, instead of trying it farther along the trail? With your assistance—remember?"

The girl hung her head for a moment, then answered in a low voice. "He didn't want to take chances on somebody, some prospector or other that uses that trail sometimes, seeing him packing a dead man on a hoss. Art was mad as all git-out when he come and reported it—and ordered him to do the job. Well—he tried, and didn't—"

"But he did get the other fellow. Carp? You know about that?" Parker broke in quickly.

"Don't—don't ask me about nothing like that!" the girl cried in low, frightened tones. "I don't know only what I heard talked—and not much of that. Please don't—!"

"All right. Carp was killed, of course, and knowing the details won't help that. Now—what happened after Miss Tone was locked up?"

"That there Titus, he blowed up complete. Allowed he wasn't having no part in no raw stuff. Finally he quieted down, and him and Mister Henry rode down to Juan Enrico's place. Mister Titus allowed they'd stay there a couple days. If Miss Tone come to time by then he'd buy. But he won't wait no longer."

"Enrico didn't go with them?"

"Art told him to stay here."

"So there's just Art and Enrico here now?"

"Them's all," the girl replied.

Parker got up stiffly. "What are you going to do now? De Pasco told you to beat it—"

"I'm going to saddle me a bronc and git plum to hell and gone away from here, Mister. That's what I'm going to do. I'm afraider of de Pasco than I am of Old Satan hisself. I ain't going to let tomorrow find me here!"

Parker fished a billfold out of his hip-pocket, took a handful of bills from it and thrust them into the girl's not unwilling hand.

"Go to Phoenix and wait there until I get back," he told her. "I'll see you're taken care of. But there's a favor you can do me while you're cinching up that bronc of

yours. Do the same for my Morgan and one other. Leave them in their stalls. Can you manage that?"

"Yes. I'll do that. And now," moving toward the door, "you'd better make yoreself scarce, Mister. Art and Enrico mean you no good—and they won't delay very long. Wait," she stopped, came back and handed Parker her candle. "I can find my way easy in the dark. You'll need it. Just turn right when you git into the passage outside, and foller it till you come to a door. It ain't locked. That opens outdoors. After that—you better not let no grass grow under yore feet!"

The door-hinge complained again—and the girl was gone.

IX

IT WAS not in Parker's mind to let any grass grow under his feet. On the contrary. Knowing just what move to make first would have been greatly to his advantage, but having no knowledge of the lay-out of the *casa,* knowing nothing of where de Pasco and Enrico might be, the only thing he could do was to proceed cautiously—and let coming events set the pace.

Of one thing he was sure. He would not leave the *hacienda* until he could take the girl out of the danger in which he had no longer any doubt she then was. In addition to the fact that she was a helpless woman, Parker knew that, for the first time in his life, he had gone all out in love with a woman. And that woman was Antonina de Pasco, whom until a few hours ago he had never seen and had but barely heard of.

"Beats hell how it comes to a jasper!" he exclaimed, standing in the open doorway, candle shielded back of the planking, listening to the swift footsteps of the girl as she sped through the darkness of the passage. "But I reckon it's true, what they say about once to every man. And darned little good it'll do me—even if I live to get the two of us off this spot!"

When the footsteps of the girl could no longer be heard, Parker stepped out into the long, narrow low-ceilinged passage, turned right and made his way stealthily over the uneven floor which lay straight before him. He passed several doors in the rock walls to right and left and came finally to one at the end of the passage. It was not locked.

Parker swung the big door back on its hinges—and was almost blinded by a vivid flash of lightning. It was then he realized for the first time that a storm, accompanied by deep thunder and broad, crimson and yellow flashes of lightning, was roaring over the mountains. It would be a ring-tail whizzer, too, if the engineer was any judge.

He stepped back inside the passage and closed the door. To go prowling about outside with that lightning flashing every minute or so, illuminating all the land almost like day, would be asking for it. There had to be some other way—and that way must be along the route the maid had gone. Into the house above.

Parker turned about and retraced his way along the passage, past the door behind which he had but a few minutes before been a prisoner, followed on until at length he came to a long reach of stone stairs the head of which was hidden in darkness. Standing at the first step he considered the situation. Then he extinguished the candle.

Given a gun, or even a good hefty club, Parker would have proceeded up those stairs with far more confidence than he had. Nowhere along the passage had he seen anything, even a loose rock, which he could have used as a weapon.

"Naked-heels it'll have to be, then!" he grunted as, poised on the topmost step, he twisted the metal knob of a door and gently eased it open.

Darkness. Then he saw, perhaps thirty feet off, a thin thread of light which lanced feebly beneath a door. He stepped inside what he quickly determined was a narrow passage, followed the passage very carefully in the pitch darkness and stopped with one hand on another metal knob. Then, with a quick intake of breath, he jerked his hand from the knob and plastered himself against the passage wall back of where he hoped the opened door would conceal him.

For the doorknob had been slowly turning beneath his fingers!

Who was about to pass through that doorway? De Pasco? Enrico? Both? Then he thought: "Not de Pasco. I'd have heard the thump-thump of his crutches. No sound at all. Must be—"

A diffusion of yellow light scattered dimly the darkness of the corridor as the door swung open. A man stood just within the

big lounge, hand on knob, evidently listening to somebody farther inside the room.

"Well," came in the jeering voice of de Pasco, "if you hadn't bungled the job badly, Juan, everything would have moved like it was greased—and you wouldn't have the job still to do. Better get at it now. Everything must be cleaned up before daylight—and daylight isn't so far off. You're not," in a slow ironic drawl, "getting squeamish all at once, by any chance?"

"You 'tend to yore part an' leave me to mine," came surlily from Enrico, the man in the doorway. "Yuh air more apt to slip up than me!"

A chuckling laugh greeted that. "My little job will require about half an hour, Juan. Just going to hook up my goats and go make sure that everything is all set at the shanty. You have your part done—"

"There's the damned girl," Enrico cut in gloomily. "Ain't a chance, now, that she'll marry up with yuh, Art—not since that cussed engineer showed up here. He's got her suspicions all worked up — and yuh knows that as well as I do. Whut yuh aim to do about her?"

"She will have a chance to choose," came coldly from the cripple. "If she chooses wrong—then we'll have two to cart off in my little wagon. This is the night I've been waiting for, Enrico. Waiting and scheming for many long years. No snip of a girl can cheat me now. So you go down and do your bit, and leave the rest to me.

With a grunt as reply, Enrico came into the passage and slammed the door behind. All was pitch black again. Parker waited almost without breathing for the next move Enrico would make. Then he heard the big man move along the passage, stop. A door-hinge creaked; a match flared.

Enrico entered a room opening from the passage, to return almost instantly with a lighted barn-lantern in hand. Without a backward look, he went to the door at the end of the passage, opened it and began descending the long flight of stone stairs.

Thump — thump — thump — thump. Through the door-panel, against which the engineer's ear was plastered, came the measured thud of de Pasco's crutches.

Parker cracked the door open a trifle—and was in time to see the cripple stump out of the lounge, enter the vast entry and turn left toward the far end, the sound of his progress fading until there was no longer the faintest echo.

For an instant Parker stood there undecided, then, closing the door gently, he walked swiftly along the passage, opened the door and went down the long stairway on Enrico's heels.

X

ONCE on the floor of the passage, Parker hurried. Hurried as fast as he could in the darkness. Enrico and his lantern had vanished—and there would be not too much time. Estimating the distance to the room in which he had been held, Parker felt for and identified the panels of a door. He took up a position beside the door—and waited.

The wait was not long. The door was yanked back on its hinges, pale light cut the darkness and Juan Enrico stumbled rather than walked into the passage—

Parker let go with his right, swinging his fist from around his knees. He connected. Connected flush on Enrico's chin. The big man gasped, choked and staggered back into the room. Again Parker struck, putting all his weight behind the blow.

The breath wheezed from Enrico's lungs, hissed between his parted, gasping lips, and he crumpled up and sank toward the floor. The lantern smashed against the rock surface, sputtered, went out.

Kneeling in the darkness, Parker laid both hands on Enrico's head, worked it back and forth. It sagged loosely, as if it had been attached to the end of a rope.

"Okay, Carp," he grunted, feeling for the six-gun belted around Enrico's middle. "You're paid for—partly at least!"

Parker moved out of the room, climbed the stone stairs quickly and entered the lounge. Except for the singing of the wind and the creaking of the old *casa's* joints all was quiet. He went to where the open door gave into the vast, dark entry hall—then stopped, listening, just inside the doorway.

From somewhere in the blackness which shrouded the big hall de Pasco was fuming at and cursing his goats.

"Coaly, you black devil—get in line there!" he shouted.

Parker then became conscious that the big hall was very cold and draughty. That must

mean the outer doors were open. Open for de Pasco and his goats. Wherever the cripple was going, he had not gone yet. Half an hour. He had told Enrico that the job he had to do would require that much time. That, Parker reasoned, should give him time enough, too.

Presently the crack of a whip cut through the darkness of the rear entry, and the click of light hooves came immediately thereafter. Almost at once the black goat and his three mates scampered past the door, wheeling de Pasco and his box-wagon behind them.

"Now," Parker grunted as he realized that the equippage had reached the outside, "where in hell is he going, and what is he up to?"

FEELING sure that he would soon get an answer to his speculations, the engineer made his way to the foot of the broad, ancient stairway which led from the entry to the floor above. There was no light on the stairway or in the passage upon which it gave. Parker turned and made his way to the front end of the passage, stopping before the door of the corner room on the left. He grasped the doorknob and rattled it. No sound came from back of the door. Again he rattled the doorknob.

"It's Parker, Miss de Pasco!" he called out, rattling the knob again. "Answer me, if you hear me!"

Almost at once he heard her wrapping on the panel of the door.

"Okay!" he called. "Stand in the clear. There's no key here; I'll have to break in!"

Backing away as far as the narrow passage would allow, the engineer hurled his big, hard body against the door—and felt foolish indeed when the lock gave, the door crashed open and he tumbled to his knees inside the room. He got up—and received another surprise.

Antonina de Pasco had evidently expected to ride some place and that pretty soon, for her slim person was clothed in levis, boots, flannel shirt and leather windbreaker. Her dark eyes were shining with excitement and her cheeks burned with color.

"I hoped you'd make it!" she exclaimed. "See? I am all ready!"

"Fine. Then the less time we lose, the better," Parker said approvingly. "Unless Juanita fell down on the assignment, there will be horses saddled and waiting in the stable. Ready? Let's go."

"Who is down below?" came in a whisper.

"Nobody. Except, that is, Enrico. But," grimly, "he won't be any bother. De Pasco has gone out somewhere in his goat-cart—"

"And what do you propose we shall do?"

"Ride away from here. I don't like the set-up one damned little bit. We'll cross the lake and ride to Marana. After that, and you are safely out of this, I'll come back and reckon up the score with the nefarious Art. And we'd better be at it."

Antonina de Pasco followed Parker along the passage, down the stairway and into the lounge. "What is Art's game, Mr. Parker? Do you know?" she asked as he opened the door of a passage which she indicated.

"I haven't the thing in detail," Parker answered. "But I know it in a general way. And, damn it, no wonder he didn't want a competent engineer prowling the place!"

They had gone halfway along the passage which led to the rear of the *casa* when, abruptly, the passage door swung open. A gust of wind swept in—and Arthur de Pasco, revealed in the light which Antonina bore, stood blocking the way.

"Up with 'em, Parker—and high!"

The deadly menace in de Pasco's voice was backed up by the steady muzzle of a forty-five which the cripple, despite his handicap of crutches, gripped in his right hand.

Parker, being covered and reading the situation exactly right, complied with the order without delay. For an instant the tableau held, then de Pasco, his voice a snarl, spoke again.

"All right. Turn and go back into the lounge. Go slowly—and remember that I'm behind you, ready to blast you if there's the hint of a move I don't like!"

Antonina turned without a word. Obviously, she, too, knew that the life of both hung on a mighty slim chance. Parker, his hands kept well above his head, followed slowly after her.

De Pasco's crutches thumped in the rear.

XI

INSIDE the lounge again, Antonina placed her lighted lamp on a table, turned scornfully to her cousin and said:

"You're not frightening me a bit, Arthur —nor will you get anything out of me because of that gun—"

"The time's past, my lovely cousin, when you've got anything to give that could possibly interest me!" de Pasco smirked, as he stood leaning on his crutches, face flushed, eyes glittering—the revolver steady in his hand. "From now on, my dear Tone, I'm master here—and I take what I want!"

"Get on with it, de Pasco—you lousy heel!" Parker snapped at him. "Don't bother to crow. You've got the whip-hand—"

"Got it—and will use it!" the cripple broke in hotly. "Tone!" he commanded. "Step back of your pal, reach around his middle and unbuckle his gun-belt. Careful! Don't touch the gun—unless you want me to blast both of you down!"

Antonina glanced at Parker, receiving his nod, and did as she had been directed. She stood with the belt and holstered gun dangling from a hand.

"Well, what next?" she asked quietly.

"Toss the works over here by me!" de Pasco ordered.

She obeyed. Parker lowered his arms.

"Suppose you would like to know what's going to happen, eh?" de Pasco gloated, his burning eyes fixed steadily on those of the engineer.

"I wouldn't swear that anything much is going to happen," Parker retorted. "To us, I mean. Your man Enrico tried twice and failed. Need I tell you that he'll never try anything again? Anything at all? Well, he won't. Maybe your luck is out, too, de Pasco—"

"Shut your trap!" the cripple shrieked, hobbling a step or two nearer the engineer. "You're going to be a lot of help to me, Parker, you snooping meddler, in the next half hour. Then I'm going to help you. Help you smack into hell. How do you like the prospect?"

Parker didn't answer. He merely looked at the cripple and shrugged.

The cripple's raucous laughter filled the room. Antonina covered her ears with her hands, and her white teeth bit into her lower lip. She said nothing.

"Haven't got anything to say, eh? No pleas to make? Well, it's better that way. We've got so little time! Pick up that lamp, Tone, and lead the way down into the cellars. Parker," with a chuckle, "you're going to take your kill and load it into my little wagon. You made the kill, didn't you? Of course. So it's right and proper for you to help get rid of it—seeing that I'm such a poor, helpless cripple!"

"Nothing doing, de Pasco," Parker said quietly. "I don't believe you'll have much luck, handicapped as you are, getting rid of Enrico's body—and perhaps, the two others slated to go? That'll be just too bad. And it will probably upset your schemes much. Go ahead, you maniac. Get it over with. For you won't have any help from us!"

De Pasco, at that, went into a violent rage. He swore, he threatened—but Parker and the girl remained unmoved.

"I'll kill you both!" he ended with a blast of profanity.

"You intend to anyhow," Antonina said quietly. "Being my next of kin, I don't see why you didn't make away with me long ago—"

Again de Pasco laughed, this time gleefully. "Next of kin is right—!"

"So sorry," Antonina interrupted with false compassion. "But you wasted your opportunity. Being next of kin won't profit you a thing. There's the little matter of my will, Arthur—"

De Pasco started, his face blanching. "You—you have never made a will!" he snapped.

"Your mistake. I have," Antonina declared.

"Liar!" bleated de Pasco, his eyes wild.

"Aside from a small income set aside for you while you live," the girl went calmly on, "my estate is bequeathed to the Sisters of St. Benedict, the Tucson chapter. So think a while on that!"

"You're lying!" shouted the cripple. "You're trying to run a sandy. But, by God, you won't gain anything—!"

He ceased speaking abruptly, a look of startled wonder driving the evil glare from his eyes.

Parker, heard Antonina gasp, cry out—

Then, high above the noise of the storm came a blast which rendered the deep thunders of the night as soundless as so many falling leaves. The ancient *casa* rocked like a skiff in a hurricane. From all around the house came the crash of falling rock, masonry, timbers. The terrific disturbance

could have lasted no more than seconds, yet it seemed much longer than that.

When the explosion ripped the night apart, deafening the three in the big room, de Pasco reeled on his crutches, turned his amazed face for a brief instant towards the outer wall as though he feared it might come tumbling down—

Parker launched his hard body in a long dive towards de Pasco, his arms gripped the cripple's legs—and de Pasco went down with a thud on his back, crutches thrown from under him and the six-gun crashing against the wall behind.

Fierce oaths poured from de Pasco in a violent stream. The man had terrific strength, despite his useless legs. Once he almost succeeded in regaining an upright position, while his fists beat frenziedly at the face of the man who held him. Almost, but not quite, he twisted out of the engineer's vise-like clutch, only to go down again.

The sound of de Pasco's head striking against the hard floor was sickening. A wailing scream burst from his lips, as his body writhed and tossed. Then he went still.

Parker got up, bent over and turned the cripple's head so that he could see the back of it. He quickly dropped it again. Then he turned and faced Antonina.

The girl was deathly white and shaken. "Is—is he badly hurt?" she whispered.

"De Pasco is dead," Parker told her. "His head first struck the wall, then the floor. He's dead."

"He did it himself—!"

"That doesn't matter. It was his life or ours. Anyhow, it's better that way."

"Do—do you think he was insane?"

"No. He was money-mad. Tell, me, Tone," he went on, "have you known of anybody in these parts doing any construction work lately. Say—a rock-and-earth job. A dam, for instance?"

Antonina nodded vigorously. "Yes. Juan Enrico had just finished a big dam across the lower end of Carillo Wash. To impound the overflow waters from Lost Lake in the spring, he said. To water his stock. Why, Mike, do you ask? And—and what did that terrible explosion mean?"

"Come," Parker bade her and, taking her arm, led her through the entrance hall, through the wide doors and across the mesa to the lake. Day was breaking and the storm had subsided. The girl stood still, amazed eyes surveying the scene below her.

Lost Lake, usually the most placid of waters, seemed to have gone on a rampage. It was boiling along like a swift river in flood. Antonina turned her gaze southward toward the causeway—

"Look!" she cried, pointing. "The lake is running over the causeway—and it isn't springtime—!"

"There is no longer a causeway," Parker interrupted. "De Pasco had it mined. Tonight he went out and set a slow fuse—and he miscalculated. It blew the dam perhaps twenty minutes before he expected it to—and it's our luck that we weren't lying dead on it!"

"Mike," said the girl, "what is it all about?"

Parker gestured towards the Wash which, below the dam, had been dry a short time before. Already it was running water.

"There's the solution to your problem of transportation, Tone," he said quietly. "I saw the possibilities when I crossed the causeway this afternoon. Any engineer worth his salt would. That's why Carp was waylaid and killed. Why I was slated to go. De Pasco couldn't risk a competent engineer nosing round. Barges, my dear. Barges loaded with yore ore and your logs. How far from the railroad town, de Pasco, is that dam?"

"About half a mile."

"Cheapest and easiest transportation ever known—and no wonder Matt Titus wanted it. There was a side deal with de Pasco, of course—"

"Is—is the *hacienda* so very, very valuable now?" Antonina wanted to know.

"About one million for each finger on your two hands—" Parker began.

"Oh, Mike!" Antonina cried out. "I don't know what to do with it. It's too big for me. You—you're not going away, are you?"

Parker looked down at the girl for an instant, then took her gently in his arms. "Not ever away, Tone," he said huskily. "If I have my way about it."

Antonina de Pasco's arms went up around Copper Mike Parker's neck. "Then—then why don't you have your way about it—Mike?" she whispered.

. . . Eyes That Had No More Expression Than a Sheep's and All the Venom of a Snake's

ARBEY HOLDEN AS GUIDE

By JIM KJELGAARD

THOUGH he'd built his shanty pretty deep in them, Arbey Holden still knew quite a few places where he could get still deeper into the woods if he had a mind to go there.

But right where he'd built his was a good place to have a shanty. It was near a river, and any time that wasn't froze Arbey could launch his canoe and go up or down. If the river was froze, he could usually skate where he wanted to go. There was

twenty-three lakes within walkin' or snowshoein' distance. But best of all there wasn't any roads.

A lot of back-landers don't need roads. Arbey, especially didn't need any. Anybody who didn't know the paths, if they wanted to get to Arbey's, had to come by river. And, when they came that way, the crows what hung out along the river in summer, or the blue jays what haunted the place in winter, always told Arbey that he was goin' to have visitors.

That wasn't no small advantage if a man liked to do exactly as he dang pleased, and Arbey did. He could always fade into some place and wait until his visitors went again if he didn't want to be pestered.

This spring day Arbey's settin' on a stump outside his cabin, with one ear cocked towards the river, doin' whatever he usually did when he sat on stumps. Then he begun to think, and what he thought about was how well off he was. He had a nice shanty in the brush, and he could get out of it any time he wanted. But, if somebody wanted to get in, nine chances out of ten they couldn't do it without Arbey knowin' long before they got there. After that Arbey began thinkin' of what kind of fish he'd have for dinner. He could go down to the river and catch some trout. He could go to any of the lakes and catch some bass, wall-eyes, perch, or whatever he wanted. He could—

Arbey was still thinkin' about what kind of fish he'd like to eat when the muzzle of a gun bored into the middle of his back. At the same time a voice said,

"H'ist 'em. And h'ist 'em high."

ARBEY h'isted 'em; the man what can argue with a gun in the middle of his back has yet to be born. But he kept right on thinkin', and what he was thinkin' about now was that he'd heard that voice before. There couldn't be two like it in the world, two men who, when they spoke, sounded like a combination of a buzzin' rattlesnake, blood runnin' out of a cut throat, and a lizard squirmin' through mud. It wasn't a loud voice, or anything like that. But it sounded like all the cold, deadly, creepin' things Arbey had ever heard. Somebody unbuckled his knife sheath, took the knife out, and Arbey bent down like he expected to get it in the back. Then the voice said:

"You can stand up now."

Arbey stood up, and turned around to look at a skinny, short man with an undersized jaw, a thin face, and a .38 in his hand. He wouldn't of amounted to shucks in any company if it hadn't been for his eyes. They was—Arbey tried to place them. But the nearest he could come was that they had no more expression than a sheep's and all the venom of a snake's. The man laughed, a shivery kind of nervous sound.

"Do you remember me?" he says. "Do ya? Do ya?"

"Why yes," says Arbey. "You're Rue Palang."

"That's right," and Rue Palang laughs again. "Now tell me how you remember me."

"Why," says Arbey, who knew murder when he saw it in anybody's eyes, "it seems that I recall— Yes, I do recall. You had a little trouble in here 'bout five years back."

"A little trouble!" says Rue Palang. "He calls it a little trouble! I laid out in this country five months, dodgin' bloodhounds and posses! And all for knifin' that slut of a woman down in Deer Junction! I never evened things up for the houndin' I got. But I'm goin' to. Some day I'm goin' to!"

"Well," says Arbey, who knowed now how it was that Rue Palang knowed the trails into his shanty, "I'm sure it ain't none of my business."

"But it is your business!" Rue Palang says, and his finger tightened ever so little on the trigger. "It is your business! Do you know what I've been doin' since I slipped out of here?"

"No," says Arbey.

"I been in the big time!" says Rue Palang. "Chicago, 'Frisco, New York. The big time! And outside a drug store three weeks ago four people lay dead on the sidewalk. I was trigger man on that job. Can anybody back here tie that record?"

"No," says Arbey, who knowed that if he wasn't marked for dead Rue Palang would never of been tellin' him such things, "I guess they can't."

"You know they can't," says Rue Palang, and he laughs once more. "Now they're houndin' me again! Me—Rue Palang! So I come back here to Black County, and I figgered I'd find me a nice, dumb hermit

like you waitin' beside a river to take me to the Injun cave. That's one thing in this country I never found. You're goin' to take me there, ain't you?"

"Why—" says Arbey.

"Ain't you?" Rue Palang's hand tightened again on the trigger.

"Why yes," says Arbey, "I guess I am."

"Pack all the grub you got in this pigsty of yours," says Rue Palang. "We'll need it."

ARBEY HOLDEN was still thinkin' when he made a pack out of the grub in his shanty, but there was only one thing he could think for sure. If he did take Rue Palang to the cave, he'd be shot for sure. If he didn't, he'd be shot anyhow. So all he could do was shoulder the pack and strike out along the river.

Rue Palang followed right along behind him, and never once was the gun in its holster. Arbey knowed he was itchin' to use it, to see again blood spillin' out of a man he had shot. But it was likely that, unless he got excited, he wouldn't shoot before they came to the Injun cave.

Three miles up the river Arbey left it and swung through a swamp. He climbed out of that, and went along a runty little ridge what tried hard to make a hogback out of itself. Then he wove among some pines what was old before the first white man set foot in that country, and went in another swamp. At the foot of a extra big pine on a little knoll, he finally set the pack down.

"Well?" says Rue Palang.

"There," says Arbey.

"Where?" says Rue Palang.

"At the base of the pine," says Arbey. "Look again."

Rue Palang looked again, and a chuckle what might have come from a raven what has just picked the eyes out of a fawn busted from him. There was a hole under the pine roots. It had been beat by rain, snow, and age into lookin' exactly like the side of the knoll. Only when a man stooped, and looked hard, could he see that the pine was hollow and a cave went back into the knoll. Rue Palang chuckles again, and says:

"I'm goin' back into there and see what's what. One move out of you and I'll shoot!"

Arbey stood still while, with the gun in his hand. Rue Palang backed into the cave. Arbey knowed what was comin'. Rue Palang wanted to look around, and see if maybe he could use Arbey some more. If he couldn't, he'd shoot anyway.

When Arbey heard the first scream he turned and run like a deer. There was a muffled shot, and more screams.

IT WAS six days later, and Arbey Holden was sittin' on a stump outside his shanty wonderin' what kind of fish he'd have for dinner, when the crows downstream warned him that somebody was comin'. Arbey sat tight, and ten minutes later a canoe glided into his landin'. It was Ed Haines, a Black County deppity sheriff.

"Hi, Arbey," says Ed.

"Hi, Ed."

They didn't talk for a minute. Then, "I come to find out somethin'," Ed Haines says. "Yesterday we found a man named Palang, Rue Palang. He hadn't any clothes on, and he was dug up better'n a body could of done it with a knife. He was babblin' like a idjit. Do you know anything about it?"

"Nope," says Arbey, who knowed that what he didn't admit would never get him in trouble.

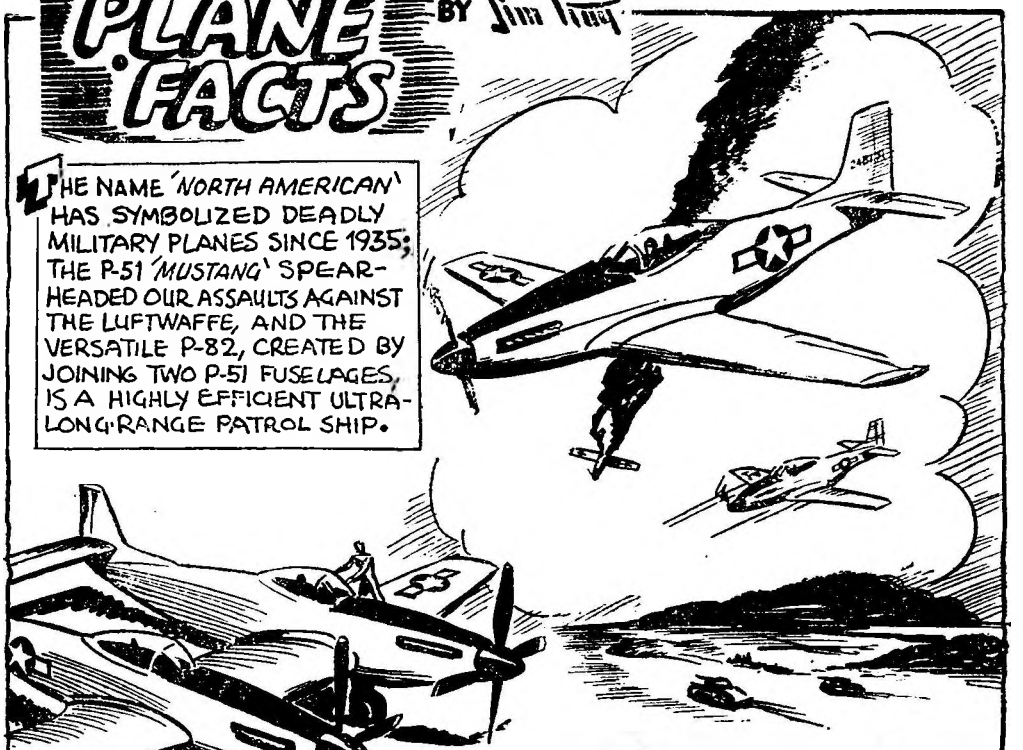
"Now look, Arbey," says Ed Haines, "it ain't nothin' against you if you do. This Palang's wanted for more murders than you could add on a machine, and he'll live to sit in the electric chair. I just want to find out things. He says he came in here to hide, and you took him to a Injun cave. He says he went in, and ten Indians jumped him with knives."

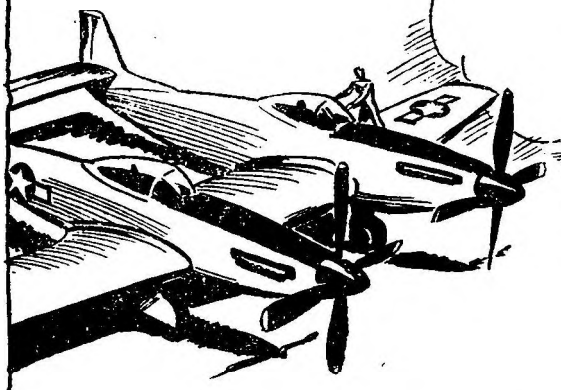
"Cave—?" says Arbey, like he was tryin' hard to remember. "Cave—?" Then he jumps up and slaps his thigh with his hand. "By gosh I believe I got it! I betcha he found that cave on Big Knoll, the one under the pine. That must be it. For the past four years there's a she-lynx had her kittens in there, and five'll get you twenty she was home when this Palang called!"

PLANE FACTS

BY Jim Tuby

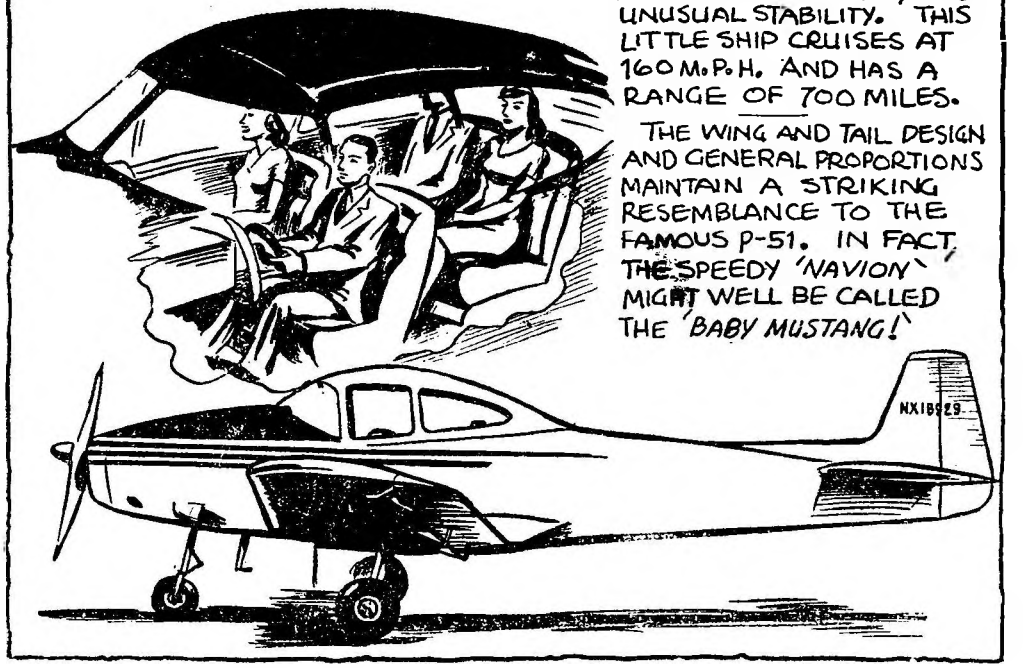
THE NAME 'NORTH AMERICAN' HAS SYMBOLIZED DEADLY MILITARY PLANES SINCE 1935; THE P-51 'MUSTANG' SPEARHEADED OUR ASSAULTS AGAINST THE LUFTWAFFE, AND THE VERSATILE P-82, CREATED BY JOINING TWO P-51 FUSELAGES, IS A HIGHLY EFFICIENT ULTRA-LONG-RANGE PATROL SHIP.





NOW WE HAVE THE 'NAVION', NORTH AMERICAN'S FIRST PERSONAL PLANE, FEATURING ALL-METAL CONSTRUCTION, A FOUR-PLACE CABIN, AND UNUSUAL STABILITY. THIS LITTLE SHIP CRUISES AT 160 M.P.H. AND HAS A RANGE OF 700 MILES.

THE WING AND TAIL DESIGN AND GENERAL PROPORTIONS MAINTAIN A STRIKING RESEMBLANCE TO THE FAMOUS P-51. IN FACT, THE SPEEDY 'NAVION' MIGHT WELL BE CALLED THE 'BABY MUSTANG!'



A Wild Thing Whose Flesh Is Good to Eat Must Be Ever Alert

HARE OF CACTUS HILL

By JIM CHAPMAN

Author of "Heart of the Badlands," etc.

THE PRAIRIE country around Cactus Hill lay under great banks of snow, and even the open flats were buried beneath deep crusted layers. Wild things which depended upon grass and other herbage were forced to search widely for a feeding place, and many perished in the attempt. Late February found the survivors locked in a desperate struggle to live.

The first stars had begun to gleam when Black-Ear, the big prairie hare, stirred from his bed in a dense clump of sage. He edged forward a few inches, taking tiny hops, until his body was through the opening. Here, his long ears lifted. One of them showed part black against the snow—as though nature had been too generous with her paintbrush—while the other ear, like other hares, had only a black tip.

The hare listened, turning first one direction, then another, and his dark eyes took in

every inch of the white expanse about him. Each bush and boulder, sticking through the snow, showed dark in the twilight, but there were no extra ones which might later prove to be lurking coyotes. The hare's brown nose wrinkled as he sifted the air for danger scents, then stopped wiggling while he listened to the boom of a great horned owl in the Red Deer valley to the South.

Black-Ear was the most clever hare in the vicinity of Cactus Hill and he was also the largest, weighing a good ten pounds in comparison to the average of seven. Lesser hares, especially the bucks, kept strictly away from the hilltop, leaving him the undisputed owner. He looked like a huge white pillow as he sat listening.

Fifty yards away a pair of meadow mice quarreled. Their faint squeaks coming from deep under the snow in another patch of sage, were shrill vibrations in the hare's sensitive ears. At last he seemed satisfied that no enemy was near and stretched. Then he hopped a few yards to where a stem of rye grass protruded above the snow. Black-Ear crouched down, fluffed out his soft white fur, and bit it off. Twice he stopped chewing to listen attentively.

Soon he sat up, then hopped eastward over the crusted surface toward the edge of Cactus Hill. Here, where a great snowbank hung on the brow, he stopped and gazed over the rolling prairie to where a light was shining a mile away. There lay his only food, where he went every night to help himself from the oat stacks of the man-thing.

NOW Black-Ear was waiting, for long experience with men had taught him patience. He would not venture near until they were sleeping. To pass the time and take the ache from his empty stomach he nibbled at some silver tips of sage. In the east the moon rose and he became alert, watching the sky, as though afraid of something. His ears moved about, tipping, turning, always searching.

It was then that she came drifting effortlessly over the top of Cactus Hill, silent as a cloud passing across the moon. The great horned owl was also hard pressed for food.

She seemed to fly slowly, but Black-Ear knew of her terrible speed and ruthlessness. The fur on his back was still thin and the flesh was tender where she had ripped him with her great talons only two weeks before. Luckily he had escaped down a nearby badger hole, one of the many emergency dens which he kept open. But each night now the owl returned, searching for him with a persistence that was terrifying. She had become a spectre which stalked his dreams; a fearful thing.

When Black-Ear saw her come into sight he sank down slowly, ears folding, with the black one showing like a gob of ink. His body flattened until he was only a white mound upon the snow. There he crouched, eyes round and frightened while he watched her progress across the sage-dotted hilltop. Against the sky she looked huge and black —like a monster bat.

THE owl floated so silently that the beat of her own wings would not smother out the faint rustle of a mouse in a bush, or the bustle of another as it ran along its snow tunnel. She could hear the slightest sound and strike, guided by her ears alone.

Black-Ear knew this and stopped chewing the sage tip which he had in his mouth. He crouched there, muscles taut and heart pounding, ready to take a headlong leap toward the nearest den if the necessity arose. The old wound on his back seemd to prickle and a black fear clouded his brain. He couldn't help it. The owl struck terror to the very marrow of his bones. He saw her quarter back and forth over the hilltop, getting further and further away, and finally vanish over the distant rim.

Long after the owl had gone, Black-Ear remained where he was, his body blending into the whiteness. It was another hare, traveling along the "run" or beaten path which passed along the northern slope of Cactus Hill, which caused him to sit up. The hare made a steady thumping sound, like a rubber ball bouncing on crusted snow.

Prairie hares always have such "runs" which often lead for miles, usually toward some source of food.

More hares passed by, foolish ones in Black-Ear's eyes. It was another hour before the light went out, and as though at a signal he rose from his haunches and hopped off the sage-scented hilltop. He bounded along the "run" like the other hares had done, but his leaps were longer and the thuds louder.

TWO hares were already feeding when he arrived, and many more were close. The ones outside the feed-yard fence moved respectfully aside to let him pass, but instead Black-Ear suddenly stopped, pointed his ears, and stared. Something was wrong. At the base of the nearest stack were two logs, neither of which had been there the night before.

More hares began to feed and Black-Ear watched them, his stomach gnawing for food, urging him to join in the feast. They reached up, seized several straws in their teeth and pulled them out. Then they nibbled off the heads. Black-Ear knew exactly how those oats tasted and his mouth watered. Soon a dozen were feeding around the base of the nearest stack, like so many giant snowballs in the moonlight.

It looked quite peaceful and safe, but still the big hare from Cactus Hill refused to go near. He was suspicious. Years had taught him wisdom. He knew that these stacks were not meant for them. He knew too that the men were sleeping, and only peaceful animal sounds came from the other buildings, but still Black-Ear was on guard, watching the logs.

At that moment a hare hopped past one of them and there came a loud click. In an instant the silence of the moonlit night was shattered by a nasal scream of terror. The hare near the log had been caught in a steel trap!

Black-Ear leapt away, then stopped to watch the others as they scattered. One fled past the second log and again came a loud click and another terrified scream. Pandemonium broke loose as the survivors fled, the thud of their hairy feet on the crusted snow blending with the screams of the prisoners.

Black-Ears waited no longer. He had seen such sights before, and one warning was enough. The others might return to the stacks some other night, but he would not.

Only later, when his stomach seemed an aching hollow place, did he realize that he faced starvation. He searched the country for something fit to eat, but everywhere he found the snow. It covered the land with a blanket so deep that often the sage was hidden.

Toward morning he was forced to eat some bitter sage tips, and a few dry stems of rye grass which stuck above the snow. But on such a diet he would soon lose his strength and fall prey to his enemies. Deprived of grain as he was he must have bark, grass, and even shriveled berries.

There was only one place to get such food, and that was in the Red Deer valley, over three miles from Cactus Hill. Black-Ear feared such a journey, for it was dangerous, and through a region where hares seldom went in winter.

After the first heavy snows hares gather into colonies close to some food supply. One of these colonies dwelt in the region of Cactus Hill, and another in the Red Deer valley, but there were none in between.

HE SPENT another night searching for food, and failed. By the time darkness fell on still another evening, Black-Ear was desperate. His stomach ached incessantly and because of his hunger he could scarcely force himself to remain hidden during the daylight hours. Worst of all, when he did move about he found himself growing weak and tired.

So in the dusk of evening he stole off Cactus Hill and followed the "run" eastward, then branched off to the south. Soon all tracks disappeared and he was bounding through a rolling wilderness of hills, their contours smoothed by the vast drifts of snow. He crossed a wide flat, the most exposed and dangerous part of his journey, climbed the last range which overlooked the valley, and soon was to the edge of the buck brush and trees. Before the moon was up he had begun to feed.

The night passed without incident, and an hour before dawn, his stomach crammed with rich bark and berries, Black-Ear climbed the high range out of the valley. At the top he paused to search the moonlit sky and to test the breezes. But Black-Ear paid too little attention to the boulder-strewn ridge where he sat. He'd scarcely begun to hop down the slope toward the open flat when a dark object caused him to swerve and take a great bound forward. It was a coyote lying in wait for him.

In an instant the hare's flying feet struck the snow again, his powerful hind legs flinging him forward with gathering speed. But he was too heavy with food to run his best. The coyote leapt and his fangs snapped

shut emptily, missing Black-Ear's heels by an inch. Now the hare was flying through the air, his front feet scarcely touching the surface of the snow as his hind ones drove him on. Then without warning he broke through the crust and almost fell.

The coyote followed, his brown fur rippling in the breeze and round tail streaming out behind. Occasionally he also broke through into the softer snow below, but he stayed close.

Near the base of the range, Black-Ear's weight again broke the crust and this time he fell and slid along the icy surface. Fortunately the coyote stumbled too and before he could reach him Black-Ear had regained his feet and was racing on. But the hare thought that he could feel his pursuer's hot breath and terror constricted his heart. He risked the fact that he might fall again and stretched his bounds, putting every ounce of strength into his running. His breath began to come in little grunt-like gasps, but he gained.

Slowly the dark form began to fade back into the whiteness of the flat. Black-Ear fled on, doubling the distance between them, until far behind he saw the coyote give up the chase and turn back.

But Black-Ear was still starkly afraid, for death had been close, and he raced on wildly.

A mile away he stopped on top of the range, teetered on his hind legs, and gazed back over the flat. Then he bounded on, not toward his home, but through the rolling hills until he came to the beaten "run." Only then, when his tracks blended with many others, did he turn towards Cactus Hill. Black-Ear was too wise to lead the way directly to his home.

FOUR more nights crawled by, during which time he was afraid to venture back to the valley. He spent the hours of darkness vainly searching for food on the slopes of Cactus Hill and in the nearby coulees. Each dawn found him bedded down with only sage and a few stems of grass in his stomach. He grew weaker and the bitter-tasting sage made him sick. From the brow of Cactus Hill he spent the days staring with blank eyes out over the country which he knew so well. Once it had seemed friendly but now it was utterly cruel. It got so that he scarcely took the energy to back out of sight when an eagle circled near.

Although his instincts warned him against it, on the fifth night his desperate hunger drove him back toward the Red Deer valley.

It was a dark night, for the thin disk of a moon wouldn't rise until near morning. Black-Ear travelled warily, watching and listening.

He was out in the open flat when he saw a dim shadow in the starlight sky. For a moment he gazed upward, then spun about and fled back over the snow-covered flat. For the moment terror had seized him, blotting out everything else in a flood that blinded his eyes and poured energy into his flying legs. The great horned owl was diving toward him!

Then after the first wild panic, a trace of sanity returned to Black-Ear's brain. Speed was of no avail against this killer. Desperately he looked about for some kind of shelter, but he could see none.

Already the owl was above him, dropping swiftly toward his back. In a moment the sharp talons would sink deeply into his soft body. He seemed to feel them piercing his flesh and a fierce desire to live rushed through him. He fought against the agony of dying a slow death in the clutches of this killer which hovered above him, horns reared and eyes blazing.

At that moment his desperate eyes saw the stump of a bramble bush protruding above the snow. It was a mere stick three feet long, which was all that remained after the top had been broken off by cattle.

To Black-Ear it was a ray of hope. Frantically he dodged and raced toward it. Twice the owl's talons raked his back, but he managed to slip out of her clutches and at last ducked around the bramble bush stump. The owl followed, tipping around the stump and striking at him, but he kept out of her reach, circling the stump and keeping it between them.

Finally the owl settled, glared at him balefully, and snapped her bill in anger. She kept grumbling deep in her throat and after a few minutes raised her wings, fluffed out her feathers and rushed around the stump toward him. Her horns were high and her yellow eyes seemed to blaze with savagery. For a moment Black-Ear quailed

at the sight. All his old instinctive fear came rushing back and he felt his courage melt away. Then he suddenly regained his wits and dodged behind the trunk again.

The thin moon came up and began its journey across the sky while the merciless struggle went on, the hare fighting for his life and the owl for food. The snow around the stump became packed and hard, and as the hours passed each contestant grew more and more weary.

When the first light of dawn crept over the flat the owl became uneasy. The time of the night hunter was swiftly slipping away and in daylight there were enemies which she feared. She launched a last frenzied attack, which Black-Ear dodged mechanically, then she turned toward the Red Deer valley and flew swiftly away.

Not long afterward Black-Ear left the tiny stump and fled northward. The further he went the faster he ran, and he didn't stop until he reached the slope of Cactus Hill. Here he plunged down one of his burrows, the terror of the night still blinding his brain with fear.

All day he remained below ground, and that night when he came out of the burrow his sides were gaunt and his eyes had a dull glazed look. Never before had he felt so weak or ached so terribly from hunger. For an hour he crouched there on the snow without the energy to move. Careless of danger he let his ears droop limply on his back. The black one twitched fitfully.

He had no heart to return to his endless search for food in the vicinity of Cactus Hill, and he dared not go back to the valley. Black-Ear was caught inescapably in the merciless net of famine which shrouded the land, and he, like lesser hares, would soon perish.

THE DAYS grew longer and the sun, bright and hot at noon, edged northward into the wintry skies. March was well advanced and the spring thaws could not be long delayed. But still winter clung to the land.

The hare grew thinner until his flat and matted coat hung loosely on his frame. His fur lost its fluffy look and his face grew long. He sat without a move for hours at a time, his senses dull and inactive.

One afternoon he was dozing in the mouth of a den, an old badger hole which he often used when the eagles were hunting. Twice, one of the huge birds had passed near him and so he backed further down the hole than usual.

Now, out of the stupor of his brain he heard a series of strange thuds, like a small animal running on the snow. With an effort he raised his ears to listen, and a tremor of fear ran along his spine, making his skin prickle. A weasel was bounding along not far away, perhaps following the tracks he had made on his way to the den!

Ordinarily the hare would have leapt out of the den to safety, but now, weak and listless, he waited too long. Suddenly on the brink of the snow above him there appeared the white sinuous form of a weasel.

FOR an instant Black-Ear shrank back, staring up at his terror with the bullet-like head and beady eyes. He knew that the little killer was preparing to leap, but his own muscles seemed frozen. Only quick action would save him, and yet he could not move. The weasel's mouth parted, revealing sharp white fangs, and forming a kind of savage grin.

Then some slight move on the weasel's part seemed to release the energy which had been building up in Black-Ear. Like a white arrow he launched himself upward, bounding toward the safety of the open prairie. But his attacker leapt also, straight at his neck. He felt the blow of the little body and the killer's teeth nip into his skin. It would be only an instant until the sharp teeth sank deeply, searching for vital nerves and veins. The killer would cling to him like a leach, greedily sucking his blood until he fell from the loss of it.

The hare's first bound took him clear of the burrow opening, and in a flash he flung his body sideways, trying to break the weasel's hold.

The trick worked. Hampered by a mouthful of fur the little killer could not secure a firm grip. His teeth pulled free and with a scream of rage he struck the snow and rolled over and over on its crusted surface. He came to his feet like a cat, blinking the snow from his eyes and churring his savage disappointment while he tried to gather his wits.

Meanwhile Black-Ear raced away in

terror, straight across the top of Cactus Hill. Again death had been terribly close and the fearful shadow of it darkened his brain. He fled without another thought, blindly, and with caution gone.

A wild thing whose flesh is good to eat must be constantly alert, even in moments of misfortune, for it is then that some other hunter often takes advantage of his plight. The big hare was weak, and every ounce of his strength was going to drive his reluctant muscles. In fact, Black-Ear's brain was a blank.

That was why he didn't see the eagle fold its wings a thousand feet above and dive upon him like a feathered rocket.

Black-Ear had no warning until a rushing sound struck his ears. In a moment the hare knew, and understood. He dodged sideways and rolled his eyes upward, then once more raced away over the snow, now fleeing from an even greater danger. Already he had turned his flying feet toward his nearest den, which lay over the brow of Cactus Hill a good two hundred yards away. But never had his speed seemed so slow, for the great dark-feathered bird was already upon him.

The eagle came out of its dive a little to one side, ponderous wings flapping to check its swift descent. Then it swooped toward him, talons thrust forward and head low. It seemed a great armor-plated monster.

A desperate plan had been forming itself in the hare's brain; a trick which he had used on hawks in the summer. Now it had little chance of success but there was no choice, for otherwise his fate was sealed.

Suddenly, when the eagle's talons were only inches away, Black-Ear leapt. It was such a leap as he had never before made. He put every bit of his remaining strength into the effort and his body, only bone and muscle now, shot straight up, far above his attacker. The eagle checked himself, surprised and confused.

It was at that moment that Black-Ear came down from above. His two powerful hind legs lashed out in twin blows, striking the eagle across the shoulders with terrific force. It took the bird completely by surprise and it collapsed, sprawling onto the crusted snow.

Black-Ear raced on toward his den and dived below ground before the enraged eagle had recovered its wits.

Here the hare panted to regain his breath. His lungs ached and his legs felt like rotten sticks. Only by the thinnest thread had his strength carried him through the test, and now the thread broke. Slowly Black-Ear sank down. His head rolled sideways until it struck the wall of the den and lay there limply.

He did not know that the weasel followed his tracks to where the eagle had struck the snow, then with a snarl of baffled rage turned away, believing himself cheated by the bird. In truth only good fortune saved Black-Ear, for he was helpless and much more dead than alive.

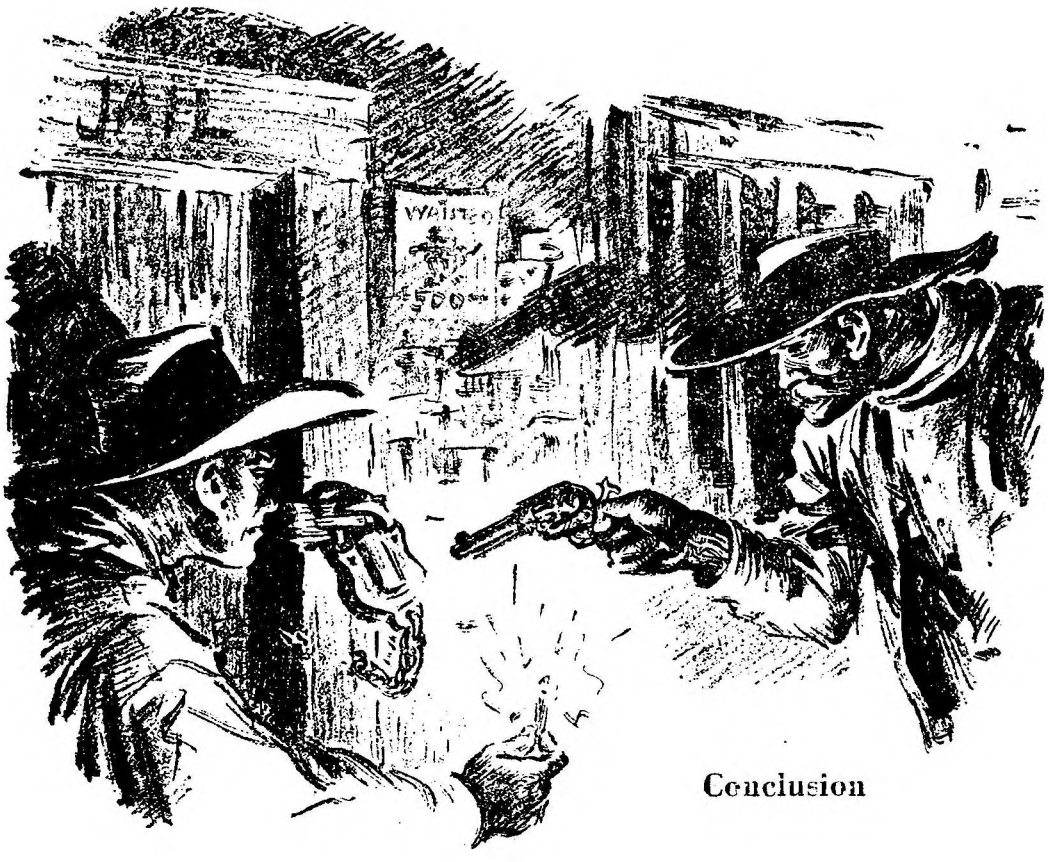
Day after day the sun had blazed down on the southern slope of Cactus Hill, and beneath the snow's icy crust it had been hot. Where the buck brush grew the snow became hollow, only the crusted surface hiding what had taken place. Elsewhere the snow sank lower and the tip of a stunted Juneberry bush came into sight.

It was this Juneberry tip that Black-Ear discovered that evening when he moved along the southern slope. The final drops of energy had reached his heart, woke him from his stupor, and sent him staggering out, fighting death to the end, like a candle flickering before it goes out from a lack of fuel. He ate off the rich bark and buds, then dug downward. By morning he had filled his stomach with nourishing food.

The next night a crust of snow collapsed beneath him and he found himself in the center of some buck brush. Here was food to last him for days!

Black-Ear's eyes lost their dullness, and his coat began to regain its fluffy well-fed look. His energy returned and he became alert and watchful once more. The big hare had won his battle with the snows and his enemies would not again find him napping.

And the Very End Left Red Wondering if He Hadn't Been a Bit Too Smart, After All



Conclusion

RED CLARK'S SHORT CUT

By GORDON RAY YOUNG

XIII

THE Negro, Ben, then groped for the bar and held on, his face twisted up in the kind of pain that looked like he was trying to cry and couldn't, and he mumbled over and over, "She was good to me! Good to me!" as if—whatever sins and faults Lucille Brandon might have—she possessed the redeeming quality of good-heartedness. The bartender filled a glass with whiskey and shoved it at Ben, but his eyes were blinded with tears.

Red had at once turned to John Wallace with, "Will you take charge here?" and indicated Dick Haynes, whose hands were still up with the kind of abjectness that cornered men show when they haven't courage.

John Wallace said, "Sure. Harve here will."

But the sheriff straightened as if taking old kinks out of his back and spoke solemnly. "Till I am removed, I'm sheriff!" He looked pathetic in trying to be stern, and his sternness faded in the half pleading of. "Just let me show you boys! I'll lock him up this time and he'll stay locked up!"

Other people had burst into the saloon. among them the cook Charley, and behind him the raw-boned freckled girl—excited and a little timid at being in a saloon. "I

told you!" Charley shouted at her as if she were a long way off. She looked with shocked and fascinated gaze at the two dead men, and when she was shouldered aside by the wizened old stableman who had come clattering down the sidewalk, the girl rushed to Charley, grabbed him, pulled, begged, "Let's get out of here!"

The sheriff kept talking, looking at first to one Wallace brother, then to the other. Red had no kindly feeling at all toward the sheriff, but the Wallace brothers were old friends; and though Harve Wallace told him severely, "It's too late now for you to try to switch sides!" he showed the regret he felt at having to be stern toward a man he had once liked.

"Damn it!" said John Wallace. "We all voted for you!"

Red clapped a hand on Ben's shoulder. "Come on!"

The old Negro hadn't touched the whiskey and looked too weak to stand, but with a teetering run he followed Red's hurrying stride out of the saloon and across the street.

Red went upstairs three steps at a time, threw open the door and stopped.

The Brandon woman was sitting in the middle of the floor with a hand to her head and a blurred stare in her eyes as she asked dizzily, "What the hell?" A big woman, now frowsy and still a little drunk, with skirts in disarray above her knees. She eyed Red with bleary pondering.

He ignored her and went to Mr. Watson. But Ben, who had thought her dead, was startled and happy, and babbled his rejoicing as he labored to help her to her feet. She got up swearing, and the oaths seemed to clear her head though her legs were staggery; and first of all she called Ben a liar for what he said of Peg and Jack Kellem, but the old Negro pointed to Mr. Watson and answered stubbornly, "That's how he said!"

Mr. Watson lay back in the chair with eyes open and he was covered with blood. A gashed and bleeding spot on his head showed where he had been struck, and the blow made blood come out of his mouth and gush from his nose, but the blood was partly drying now. Red brought a pitcher of water, soused in a towel and washed at Mr. Watson's face. The old eyes remained staringly open. It was a warm night, but he mumbled, "I'm cold, son."

Red went for the nearly empty whiskey bottle, poured a drink and brought it. "Try this!" Mr. Watson put up a shaky hand to the glass and Red helped hold it as Mr. Watson drank.

"Kellem?" Red asked.

Mr. Watson's eyes shut and opened, affirmingly.

"The girl?"

Mr. Watson muttered, "He fed her taffy!"

"She's his kind!" Red answered recklessly, a flood of angered memories swelling up, and among the most angering the remembrance of how pretty she was, and the charm that came out of her and did things to a fellow's commonsense; but also he recalled how—when she had just first met him—she urgingly suggested that he take her away, though it meant killing her father. *And she sure did kill him!* Red assured himself, now vividly recalling the circumstances: the shot from the back, the gun smoke swirling over her head as she stood staringly shocked, watching the huge Renard topple from the bench. *He knew who done it!* And had hated her in dying, Red had tried his determined best to find some ways and means that a Kellem man might have killed Renard, but couldn't. *'Cause she done it!* he now affirmed bitterly.

Other people were coming into the room. The Wallace brothers, old friends to Mr. Watson. They had once liked him admiringly before he turned sot and fool over a woman, and now weren't harboring disrespect.

They lifted and carried him into the next room, put him on Lucille's wide bed, and she staggered in, her mind steadier than her legs, to push men away and take Mr. Watson's chilled hand. "Damn 'im!" she said, meaning Kellem.

Mr. Watson slowly, tiredly, told what had happened and heads bent forward, intently listening. "—told Peg lies about—"

"She's a woman, ain't she? He'd tell 'em to her! Though only a fool like me'd believe 'em!"

When they had heard all Mr. Watson had to tell, Red pulled at Harve Wallace's arm. "How about ridin'?"

"Ridin' where?"

"To wherever Kellem is?"

Harve smiled tiredly. "Be like chasin' a wild goose from horseback! He knows this country like a coyote. When we hear where he's holed-up, then we can close in and—"

Red spun on a heel, pulled at Lucille. Her anger was up and words rattled wickedly, denouncing Kellem.

Red's own temper flared into: "You cuss him out, but that's just talk! Where can he be found?"

"Jack—found?" She said it and seemed startled, studied fuzzily, looked from Red to Harve Wallace, then back at Red; and though she had been cursing Kellem venomously, now she screeched, "I ain't no Judas's daughter!" She hated, she said, the so-and-so and such-and-such, but she'd be damned if she gave him away! She would, she said, fix him her ownself in her own way when she had the chance. And she would have it. "Always he comes sneakin' back to me for help! Always he gets tired of them he makes up to, then—"

Red the same as slapped her hard with, "He won't get tired of Peg. She's pretty and she's young—"

Lucille struck out clutchingly, as if to tear Red to pieces; and after Harve Wallace laid hold on her arms, she writhed and swore, and tried to kick but the long skirts were a kind of hobble.

Her fury was at Red, who added even-voiced, telling some truth that would make her even madder, "And Peg's got the grit to stand by him and fight! Not just take his money to play fine lady in town!"

Then it was all Harve Wallace could do to hold her. She was mad as a captured bobcat, and spit, cursed, snarled, ordering everybody out of her rooms—even yelled they'd have to carry old Tom Watson out of her hotel and dump him in the street for all she cared.

From across the room Ben looked on, frightened and pitying. Now her jealous hatred of Jack Kellem was not big enough to overcome her prideful sense of loyalty and her tormented love of him.

Red looked at her and was unimpressed except in thinking how ugly a woman could look and talk; which, in turn, made him recall Nell Watson; and following that came the wonder of what Peg herself would be like when she got old.

Lucille's hysteria changed. She flopped on a chair and bawled. To Red that seemed disgusting. He led Harve Wallace into the next room and said, "What's been done with that Haynes?"

"The sheriff took him off to jail. Used to be a good man, the sheriff. He wanted to do something right, before—"

Red said, "Haynes'll tell where Kellem is and go along to show the way! He's the kind that will. Let's put him on a horse, tell him to lead the way and go fast, or he'll get swung to the first tree with a limb high enough to keep his toes off the ground!"

"There's something to that!" Harve pulled a plug of tobacco, rubbed it carefully, removing the grit and lint, took a nibble. "We can send somebody out to camp to bring Dave Martin and the boys in."

As Harve made his way back among the people clustered at the inside door, Red looked about and saw Jim Blake coming in from the hall. Blake looked bad-sick. Somebody had brought him the news and he'd got out of bed, put on his pants and boots but not a shirt or coat over his gray underwear, and that made him look skinnier than ever. He needed shaving, but even with the bristles his face had a kind of yellowish pallor. There was a bullet in his back and no doctor to take it out, so he'd fretted and suffered, and ought to have stayed quiet but wouldn't miss the excitement—not if it killed him.

Red eyed him. Blake stared back from sunken shadow-filled eyes; and, walking slow, as if it hurt to walk, he came toward Red and stopped close and said right off in a low voice, "And to think once I had the chance to kill you—and passed it up!"

He sounded like he was keeping his voice down because he couldn't lift it, being sick. Red tried to think of what sense there was in such a statement, and couldn't, so he said, "How you mean?"

Blake looked like maybe he wasn't going to say, or perhaps studied how best to say it the way he wanted. He breathed hard, told Red, "That day in the mountains—we knew two men were in the cabin—the fellows kept you all busy shootin' from one side—them damn loopholes was up high—so I rode up slow on horseback and—and I could

have picked *you,* but I aimed for Renard! Then I got the hell away from there!" Blake nodded. "Wasn't sure he died, not till that girl come to town."

Red stared back at him. All plain now; that's what the whoopin' and shoutin' at the front of the cabin had meant. The fellows there tried to attract and hold the attention of those in the cabin so Blake could ride up unnoticed and shoot in the back. Blake hadn't had the nerve to stand long enough to shoot twice; he'd thrust his gun through the loophole, pulled down on Renard, then loped off. With all that noise going on, Red hadn't heard the horse. He'd never thought of a man on horseback sneaking up.

Now he felt heartsick that he had misjudged the girl. Of course, she wasn't any good, believing Jack Kellem's lies about the mine, and running off with him; but she hadn't been mean enough to shoot her own father.

What Red said now was, "All right, Blake. You can get yourself set to be hung for murder!"

Blake told him bitterly, "I'm so near a dead man I don't give a damn!"

Harve Wallace came back with his brother whose first question was, "Where is the sheriff? He said he'd come right up!"

Red guessed, "Maybe he throwed in with Haynes and rode off, too!"

Both Wallace brothers shook their heads, then looked kind of tolerantly at Jim Blake, though Harve said, "So the game has petered out for you all, Jim?"

Then John's tone was not friendly though he said, "Once you, too, was a good man, Jim! Like a lot of other fellows in this country."

Blake coughed and fumbled in his pants' pockets mumbled, "I'm out of chewin'." Harve Wallace drew his plug wiped it with a palm, held out the tobacco, but his look was stern.

"Where 'bouts, you reckon, Kellem will hole up?"

Blake said, "Hell, he'll skedaddle!" Then he tugged at the plug between his teeth, slipped the bite into the side of his jaw, gave back the tobacco. "You know what? Kellem's mad at me on account of goin' into the mountains where"—he gazed meaningly at Red—"we had bad luck!"

"Lookin' for gold!" John Wallace jeered. "'F we'd found it, Jack Kellem wouldn't have cared what else was done!"

John Wallace asked severely, "At a time like this, are you still goin' to stand up for 'im?"

Black said, "I might help you two, but"—he turned on Red—"I wouldn't do nothin' for this fellow to get what he wants!"

RED was set to tell Blake what all he thought of him, but Harve Wallace jabbed a thumb against Red's ribs, gave his head a sidewise jerk, so Red put a knot in his tongue and turned away, shouldering past men to get to the bed where Tom Watson lay on top of Lucille Brandon's red bedspread, his head low on the pillow and his eyes open.

He tried to smile, mumbled, "It's hell to be old and hurt, son!"

Red looked about. Lucille wasn't there, nor Ben. Red asked where they were, and the old stableman shook his mummy-like head. "They went out. To some other room, I reckon. Crowded in here!"

Red said to the stableman, "Tomorrow, you send somebody down the road toward Watson's to pick up my horse. Leg's sprained. I don't care how much it costs to have him took care of."

Then he told Mr. Watson, "You just hang on and you'll be all right. We'll run Kellem down. He ain't got wings—though later on maybe he'll have some that look like a bat's!"

"That girl of yours, Red—I liked her!"

Red turned back to the stableman, not wanting to talk of Peg. "The sheriff ain't been up here?"

"No, he ain't."

Red went from the side door into the hall, down the stairs, and across to the Horseshoe, open later than usual and doing a land-office business because nearly everybody in town had got up to hear and talk and drink. As soon as he walked in, the barkeep took a quick look and got ready to duck.

Red asked, "The sheriff been around?"

The bartender said no. Others spoke up, saying he hadn't been seen.

Red went outdoors and was about to ask some men there where was the jail, but they all heard a horse coming fast down the

street. Everybody looked that way through the starlight and wondered what news now.

The horse came on and, sweaty and blown, was pulled up. Red recognized the rider as the young chubby puncher who worked for Mr. Watson, Billy Bliss. It was his horse Peg (with the old Negro's help) had made off with here in town, and he had come to Mr. Watson's house with Frank Masters to tell about its being stolen.

Billy piled off like he was a rubber ball and purt' near bounced after he hit the ground. He blurted to Red, "I just met Lucille Brandon outside of town a-hangin' to a saddle with Ben ridin' alongside her. She told me 'f I said I'd seen 'er she'd kill me!" Then, "Where's Mr. Watson?"

Red thought a minute before he said, "She's lit out to warn Kellem!"

Billy went on talking, quick and anxious. He hadn't known, he said, how wrong things were at the ranch, and he didn't want Mr. Watson to think that he had been mixed up with fooling him; so when he heard about Mr. Watson heading for town, Billy struck out to find and tell him so.

Red said, "Come on. I'll take you to him?"

They went across the street and met Harve and John Wallace coming out of the hotel entrance. Red told them, "This boy here just met that Brandon woman and Ben ridin' off from town, and she told him not to tell—which meant she'd lit out to tell Kellem about how things are happening! If we ride fast we can catch her!"

John Wallace said, "Sure!"

Harve scratched a cheek and grinned sourly. "She'd only lie! And a woman—you can't knock the truth out of her. I mean you can't even try. Jim Blake he just said Kellem was most likely to be layin' overnight at the ranch. We'll go have a talk with Haynes. He'll know for sure. We can coax him to talk straight, like we can't a woman!"

Red saw how sensible that was and he told Billy to go on up, that Mr. Watson would sure be glad to see him.

The Wallace brothers' horses were at the stable, so they all set out on foot to tramp up the sidewalk and turn off on a dirt path that led to the calaboose out near the edge of town. It seemed a long walk for hurrying men, and nobody talked much. John Wallace said a man had been sent out to the camp where Dave Martin was camped, awaiting developments in town.

THE calaboose stood in the starlight like a big square lump off by itself, far enough from any house so that the noise of drunken fellows who were usually poked in there to sober up wouldn't bother people. The windows were narrow and had some old wagon tires that the blacksmith had straightened out and put in for bars. The door was shut and fastened with a big padlock.

Harve Wallace pounded on the door, calling, "Haynes!"

John mentioned again, "Funny the sheriff didn't show up back in town."

There wasn't any answer to Harve's pounding. Red guessed, "He's scared to speak! 'Fraid he'll get hung!"

Harve said, "Then we'll go in and drag him out!" and drew his revolver. "One of you light a match so I can see better to shoot the lock."

John took out a lump of sulphur matches, split off three or four together for a good light and scratched them on the seat of his pants. He held them low and away from him until the sulphur was burnt out, because it stunk so. Then the clear flame took hold of the wood and gave a good light.

Harve set the muzzle of his gun to the lock and fired. The concussion put the matches out but the lock was knocked open. As he took it out of the staple and let the hasp fall, he said, "New one will have to come out of my own pocket!"

Then he pulled the door open and spoke loud and clear: "All right, Haynes!"

"Nobody answered and Harve said, "Funny!"

John took out some more matches and struck them, and even as the wickedly bad-smelling flame sizzled they could see that the lump on the dirt floor just beyond the door was a man's body.

Harve said, "Dead?" surprised and questioning.

The match-light sharpened and John stooped, then he muttered, sort of unbelievingly, "The sheriff?"

They all crouched down, peering, each trying to figure what had happened and not speaking until John said, "Damn!" and

flung down the matches and shook his hand, then licked his fingers. Forgetfully, he had let the flame burn too close.

Red spoke up in the darkness. "It's plain how it was. The sheriff didn't watch close and Haynes grabbed his gun and shot him right here by the jail. Then dragged him in and locked the door so people wouldn't find out so quick. Haynes then stole a horse and has gone!"

After that Red pulled matches from his pocket and struck them. "Just you see if he ain't shot in the back."

The Wallace brothers rolled the body over and there was the powder-burned hole in the back of the vest. They laid the sheriff face-up again and looked at him solemnly by the glow of Red's matches.

"Now Haynes will put another notch on his gun!" Red said. He shook out the matches.

Harve Wallace said slow and tonelessly in the darkness, "I wouldn't be surprised if he ain't glad he is dead. I didn't have the heart to tell him right out that me, I have been appointed the new sheriff by the territory's governor. That is why we rode over tonight!"

XIV

AS SOON as it was known that the governor had already removed the dead sheriff and appointed Harve Wallace in his stead, everybody in town was all of a sudden anxious to tell how Kellem's bunch hadn't been liked. From the way storekeepers talked anybody would have thought they hated the outlaws so much they didn't want even to sell them goods; and so many fellows now wanted to show zeal for law and order that new Sheriff Wallace could have had a posse of near a hundred men. But he told Red, "All they want is to make a noise so I can't hear how friendly they've been with Kellem's men."

It was nearly two o'clock in the morning when he said that; and also he said that, since they wouldn't be able to make a start much before daylight Red ought to roll in somewhere and have a little sleep.

But Red didn't get to sleep because Dave Martin, who had pretended to be Pecos Peters, heard what all had happened before he even got to town and he hunted Red out up at the livery stable; and about the first thing he asked was, would Red like to work for the Cattlemen's Association. Red said no, he wouldn't.

Dave Martin looked him up and down and grinned a little. "You seem to be working for us as 'tis, and don't get any pay."

Red grinned back at him. "Your bosses set off in easy chairs and smoke cigars. I like to work for a man that won't send you where he won't go his ownself. Take Mr. Watson, old as he is. Ever'body thought he was through from likker and being stove-up. But when it come to the showdown, he was there!"

After that Red stretched out in a chair to try for some sleep, but pretty soon Dave Martin came hurrying back and said that men were getting so likkered and noisy that Sheriff Wallace had made up his mind to head out with a few fellows he liked and trusted, and other fellows could follow when they got around to feeling eager and brave.

Martin said that nobody thought there was a chance of catching Kellem at the ranch which the Brandon woman claimed she owned, but was a loafing and meeting place for the bunch. For one thing, he wasn't the kind of man to make a stand—not if he could dodge away. But Jim Blake, who had worked for the Wallace brothers before he turned bad, said Kellem would sure head for the ranch before trying to get out of the country. That was where he had good horses and arms.

Martin said, "And Kellem knows men are coming after him. Haynes is loose and will give warning. And Lucille Brandon, too. He won't be there, but it is the nearest to where he will be that we can find."

After that he grinned, "Maybe Nell Watson is still at the ranch. If Kellem took Peg Renard there with him, things ought to be pretty lively — with that Brandon woman showing up, too!"

Red answered back, "Nell Watson is more killer than anybody else in the whole bunch!"

He was remembering the shotgun she leveled down on him, and how now he himself would be in a hole in the ground if it hadn't been for Peg; and thinking of her made him feel bad. If only she hadn't gone off with Jack Kellem.

WHERE the road threw out a fork leading to the ranch there was a sign: "Stranger, don't come this way!" As long as the sheriff had been friends with the Kellem bunch and ranchers hadn't joined up against him, the sign was respected, and Kellem's men and friends had things pretty much as they wanted them.

It was near sun-up when Sheriff Wallace swung his posse of eight men onto the upper road. All of these men, excepting Red, had been brought with him up from South Forks way.

"About five mile yet," said John Wallace to whom Jim Blake had given details. "I don't look for much trouble. They'll have scattered."

After a time Sheriff Wallace reined up and looked his men over. "I think we ought to spread out, sort of surround the place as we move in, cut off everybody that tries to ride out." The statement was interrogative, as if asking for comment and approval.

Some voices murmured, "Whatever you say." Another asked, " 'Bout how many you expect to be there?"

"Not many," he replied. "The Hemlocks are dead. Blake's through. That fellow Berry, with the broken nose, is dead. Dick Haynes is too yaller to stand and fight. Kellem himself has most likely lit out. He ain't ever been known to put his back to the wall. I bet whoever is left in the bunch is scattered."

A man here and there tried to make guesses as to which way Kellem might have gone, if he had gone, to escape from the country. Red listened without comment, thinking of Peg Renard.

The sheriff assigned men to go encirclingly to the right and left, and said he and the men left with him would slow down to give the flankers the chance to make their way clear around.

Dave Martin and Red went off to the right uphill, then moved into chaparral above an oak grove. It was about the same as going blindfolded.

Dave Martin himself said, "I wish we were out of this!" which, in an uncomplaining way, meant he thought the new sheriff had made a mistake. Red kept his mouth shut.

The sun was up and the air was still, and they had to turn and twist, finding their way through, trying to come out on the flank of the ranchhouse.

When guns began going off they sounded dim and far away, and were shooting fast. Dave Martin, in the lead, said, "Come on!" and, putting his head down, spurred through the thicket, recklessly charging ahead.

Red knew then that this Dave Martin was an all right fellow, one to tie to, because he tried to go headlong for where he thought there was trouble. Red, low in the saddle with an elbow before his face to protect himself from the lash of thorny limbs, spurred hard. One branch took Red across the cheek with a gash like cat's claws.

They broke through the thicket within a quarter-mile of the ranchhouse and no one was in sight. Dave Martin's rifle was out one-handedly, and the firing had slacked some, but now its sound was off to the left and behind them. They had misjudged the sound.

They both swirled about, heading downgrade to reach and follow the road that curved in and out among the live oaks; and both silently guessed that Sheriff Wallace had been laid for. The outlaws maybe didn't know that the sheriff's party had been broken up—certainly didn't know that Harve Wallace was the new sheriff.

They rode hard with dust bursting like smoke under the pound of hoofs until Red saw a horse under a tree and other horses close by, which meant men nearby and on foot. He yelled at Dave Martin to pull up and pile off as he swung his horse from the road and jumped, taking the rifle from the scabbard with him.

As he went to the ground he knew that

one of the horses carried a side saddle. That meant, he thought, Nell Watson. And his idea in jumping off was to cut the outlaws from their horses.

Dave Martin hadn't noticed the horses bunched under the shade and so didn't understand. His feeling was that Red had been shot out of the saddle and, going fast, he didn't stop because shooting was right ahead of him.

Red heard the crackle of firing increase after Martin passed from sight around the shaded curve and his guess was, *They'll get him sure!*

RED had stumbled to a full-length sprawl and lay warily waiting. Four horses were here besides the one with the side saddle. That had to mean a woman. Nell Watson? Or it could mean the Brandon woman. Billy Bliss hadn't said whether or not she rode out in a side saddle. Or maybe Kellem had put Peg into a side saddle and set her down to help shoot honest men. An uneasy flush ran through Red at the thought of having Peg shoot at him—which maybe meant he'd have to shoot back. "God!" he said hopelessly, meaning he hoped not. He felt that after all she had done for him, he just couldn't shoot at her—no matter what.

It was quiet under the trees, quiet and hot. He touched the trickle on his cheek and it wasn't sweat. As he lay with a kind of nerveless patience, keeping a lookout and listening close to the shooting down the road, he felt that maybe Dave Martin would think he had failed to stick and go through to where Sheriff Wallace was making a stand. *Maybe I ought've!* But he was still sure that cutting the men off from their horses was a good plan. *Any plan's a good plan if it works!* slid through his thoughts with the uneasy implication that this plan might not work. In which case Red felt he would look like a bungler or even quitter. He hoped that Martin had got through and had a puzzled uneasy wonder as to how these men and the woman could have held up the sheriff's men so long. Looked like for once, at least, Jack Kellem had put his back to the wall.

The shooting seemed far off but he knew it wasn't. Now and then there was the clip-snip of a bullet through the trees and a few leaves sifted down. And he could hear voices vaguely, though he knew they were loud. One thing seemed sure: the outlaws didn't realize that he was behind them, waiting, or he would have had some attention before this.

The new sound that came to him almost imperceptibly was distant hoofbeats, and he figured that the others of the sheriff's men who had been sent to help encircle the ranchhouse had doubled back and were now coming up. The doubling back is what would have taken them so long to arrive. Dave Martin had been the kind of man to crash right straight through, the quickest way he could.

Now for the showdown! Red told himself as the far-off hoofs drummed nearer, clearer, and when they stopped abruptly the firing increased.

Excited voices were louder, seemed nearer; then he heard the trample of heavy feet running through dry leaves. But what Red saw first was on the road where one man, still carrying a rifle, tugged in hurried helplessness to hold up and half-carry another. The hurt man's hat was off and his head dangled on his neck. Red's finger eased off the rifle's trigger. Somehow, it just wasn't in him to shoot a man—even one who ought to be shot—when that man was helping a bad-hurt friend.

Then a running woman flashed out of the shadows at the side of the road and turned toward the two men. She was tall and in long skirts and hadn't a hat on and her hair was loose. She had to hold the long skirts up in one hand as she rushed up, facing the two men. Nell Watson's voice went into a scream:

"You fool! He's dyin' and can't help! Drop him and get to your horse so we can make a stand at the house!"

The fellow who was helping the hurt man answered back hot and mad: "I don't leave my brother, dyin'!" Red couldn't see the man's face as he said it because Nell Watson stood so close, but he heard clear enough; then, quick as a flash, Nell Watson's free hand swung up. It held a revolver. She killed the hurt man then screamed, "Now you come on!"

Right away she turned on the road with skirts hiked high and started on as fast as she could run, and Red purt' near killed her. Somehow, he just couldn't pull the trigger

even if she was more devil than woman. She was wearing skirts.

And the man, instead of coming on like she had said to, looked down at the dead man he'd let drop when she shot. Then he wheeled about, threw his rifle away, thrust up his arms as high as he could and went back on the run to give himself up.

When Nell Watson looked around and saw what he was doing she let fly with the ugliest names she knew, dropped her skirts and used both hands at full arms' length to sight as she leveled the revolver and kept shooting till the hammer clicked in the emptied gun. She didn't shoot good.

The whole incident hadn't taken any time hardly at all, and Red had held his breath like a man who had forgotten where he was and what he ought to do; and he almost got killed himself because the pock-marked Harry, who had run out of the saloon the night before, was standing there on the other side of him with a rifle aimed from the hip, and he looked toward Red as if he couldn't believe his eyes. Then he believed, and fired.

Red's rifle had been aimed out on the road. He didn't even try to swing the barrel around. That would have taken too much time while he was all spraddled out, flat. As soon as he saw this pock-marked man aiming down on him from the hip, Red let go of the rifle and gave himself a flop, reaching for a revolver. Before the pock-marked fellow could fire again, Red got him.

Right after that he saw the squat bristle-faced figure of Dick Haynes ducking under branches to make for a horse. Haynes saw him, too, and stopped with such a quick jerk it was like somebody had a rope around his neck.

Nell Watson screeched, "Kill him, Dick!" And she, again using both hands, had her revolver leveled out toward Red. He purt' near shot her before he remembered that her gun was empty. Red did a lot of wondering afterwards if she had been brave enough to act that way on purpose so as to give Haynes a better chance to shoot. He was to do a lot of wondering about that woman.

DICK HAYNES had his chance to shoot in the split second's time that Red had seen her two-handedly pointing the heavy revolver at him, but Haynes didn't take it. He simply dropped his rifle, jumped and clawed at a saddle, and Nell Watson screamed, "Kill *him!*"

She had let go of the revolver with one hand and was pointing. "Kill him!" she ordered furiously—now commanding Red to shoot Dick Haynes.

Haynes had grabbed only one bridle rein as he made his jump for the saddle, and the other rein dangled; and he wasn't in the saddle good before the horse was turning and plunging under the oak branches, and he tried reachingly to gather up the loose rein, but he was fat-bodied and short-armed and fell off when the horse turned under a low limb.

It was the second time Red had seen him fall from a horse. Haynes hit the ground hard and was so scared his breath was loud as a tired bull's.

That woman, Nell Watson, grabbed up her skirts with one hand and ran at Dick Haynes and Red yelled, "Get away from him!" because he thought she was after Haynes' loaded gun. She didn't pay any attention to Red but dropped to her knees beside Haynes and began to beat him over the head with the barrel of her empty revolver, and cursed him for a coward and liar and everything else she could lay her tongue to, and it was a long tongue.

Dave Martin and Sheriff Wallace and another fellow rode up fast, with guns ready, and they pulled up and stared for a minute, then they piled off and came running to where Red was still half-fighting Nell Watson, trying to get her away from Haynes. She had purt' near killed him and Red didn't care about that, but when he saw her fling down her own blood-smeared gun and start to pull Haynes' revolver, Red ran at her.

She was like a bunch of wildcats sewed up in a petticoat, and even if skinny, was strong as the devil and used worse language than a wagon boss when he talks to himself; and it wasn't until Red slugged her as hard as he could in the face that she quieted down and stood still with a hand to her bruised mouth and looked at the men running up.

They just stood still and stared awkwardly before Sheriff Wallace asked, "Kellem? Where is he?" and looked around, hopeful the body would be on the ground.

Nell Watson was disheveled, daubed with dirt and sweat and blood, but cool, too. So cool that she put out a hand and told Red,

just like he was her friend, "Give me a handkerchief!" Red pulled one from his pocket and she dabbed it to her mouth and looked at the handkerchief. The blood didn't show much because the handkerchief was red. Then she looked right at Red and called him some very bad names though she went on to say, "All I wish is I'd had two—just two men like you to fight on my side!" She probably still believed that it was Red who, by himself, had killed the three men at Watson's.

Red was all sweaty anyhow, and the sweat turned prickly, and his eyes fell away from her hot stare.

Wallace asked again, "Kellem?"

Nell Watson then noticed the new star on his vest and she peered at it. "Sheriff, you?"

Dave Martin spoke up to tell her how it was. Then she pointed down at Haynes and said bitterly, "He rode out to tell us he'd killed—" her finger leveled at Red—"him! Old lyin' fool!" she called Haynes, her eyes like knife-blades, stabbing at him.

She had a kind of scarecrow angularity, but there was strength in her and the eyes blazed. Red and Sheriff Wallace were embarrassed by how she talked; Dave Martin not so much. It wasn't her language, though that was wicked as a man's, but the way she said she'd planned the ambush—not knowing it was against the law's men; not caring, really! And the ambush had nearly succeeded. Two of the sheriff's men had been killed, his brother shot, horses shot. They'd have been wiped out but for help that arrived. They would have been wiped out anyhow, said Nell Watson, if her men had proper grit.

Again she looked at Red, her voice hard and frank. "You've been my Joner!" She dabbed at her bleeding mouth, kept her eyes on him. "You and me and Masters could've run this damn' country!"

RED, embarrassed, gouged a toe in the mold, not liking the compliment. Sheriff Wallace again asked about Kellem.

Nell Watson's laugh was hard and forced, the names she called him not forced; they rippled with contempt and fresh-born hate. "Four-flusher!" was her mildest defamation. He played everything safe and strutted, she said. She had fixed him! Nell Watson looked evil and pleased.

Sheriff Wallace grimly asked, "Where is he?"

Nell Watson almost screamed with a kind of glee, "Hog-tied in a closet with that Peg!" Again her stare went after Red's face, caught his look, held it as she jeered, "He took your girl easy as that!" Her thumb and finger snapped.

RED muttered, trying to say Peg had never been his girl.

"There's no Indian in me but I have made him think so!" said Nell Watson, referring to Kellem. "I was going to roast 'em alive—after we had met this bunch from town and killed them off!" She had no feeling at all about killing people, except the regret of not having killed more; and she didn't seem the least anxious over what might be done to her.

Sheriff Wallace took off his hat and wiped about his neck and face. Red felt chill-tingles up and down his back, and Dave Martin peered at her mutely. There wasn't any fear in her, or mercy. Now when Dick Haynes, whose face and head she had beaten nearly to pulp, groaned and stirred, she looked down contemptuously. "Big brag!" she said. Then demanded of the sheriff, "Why don't you finish him off?"

That made Red shudder. Then he up and asked, pointblank, "Did that Brandon woman show up out here?"

Nell Watson tightened her eyes, took the handkerchief from her mouth and her lips twisted curiously. Yes, Lucille Brandon had shown up with her Black Ben. Both of them were nearly dead from the hard ride. Hard! And not more than twenty miles. Nell Watson sneered. She could stay in a saddle all day and all night. Side saddle! Which seemed to mean that she was too much of a lady to ride astride.*

It was Lucille that had told men were coming out from town. Dick Haynes had already reached the ranch and had said the same, but it was Lucille they believed, though they had made some fuss over Haynes when he told that he had killed Red.

She paused to taunt Red with, "And your girl didn't even cry!"

Red stood quiet and showed nothing

*The women of the '70s to late '90s always rode a side saddle unless at a time of extreme emergency. Even Belle Starr, so-called "Queen of the outlaws," rode a side saddle.

though his nerves were squirming like a fidgety girl's fingers.

Kellem, she said, had talked about how they all ought to scatter, run for it, hide, get the hell out of the country. He could talk as persuasive as a preacher at a wedding.

What he said had made Nell Watson madder than ever because she thought he wanted to get away with that new girl he had brought out. So Nell Watson, before everybody and to his face, told him what she thought. She had a rifle on him as she told it. She repeated now what she had said, or what she claimed she had said:

Just because he wore a tie, a black coat, jack boots and brushed his beard, people thought he was brave and handsome. She jeered that he wore the long coat because he wasn't a good man's size and wanted to look taller! And too, he was yellow as a rotten egg.

She had the rifle on him and Kellem must have been pale under the black beard. Nell Watson's scorn had made the other men who heard her feel that she was more man than Kellem. Lucille Brandon bawled, and got drunk on the whiskey she'd brought out with her—not believing Kellem's story that he had been the friend of Peg's father and wanted to look after her. Probably nobody believed it.

Red wondered how Peg took all that, but of course, wouldn't ask.

Nell Watson then accused Kellem of having a big gold cache from what hadn't been divided honestly among the bunch. She told Kellem she'd kill him if he tried to deny that. It wasn't true, but he didn't deny it.

What she worked up to was that men were coming out from town and would have to be waylaid, killed off or turned back. She herself would lead the attack on the fellows who were coming; then, after the fight was over, she would make Kellem tell where his cache was. Nell Watson promised the men about her that it would be divided equally.

Red knew how easy it was for men to believe almost anything that promised money, and Nell Watson was good at fooling people. Old Tom Watson hadn't even suspected her during the time she kept him drunk and stole his cattle, she seemed that sweet and loving.

What Nell Watson wanted—what she now admitted she wanted—was plenty of time to get even with Jack Kellem and that Peg. So she had explained to the men who were swayed by her lies that they'd have to tie up Kellem and the girl so Kellem could be talked to later on. If the girl wasn't tied up, she would let him go.

Red's skin felt as creepy as if bugs were crawling on him. Only a day or two before Nell Watson and Jack Kellem had played like they were in love—she fooling her two husbands and Kellem fooling Lucille Brandon who, at least, had enough honor not to betray him and had come to give warning.

Now other men had come up on foot. Their horses had been shot. John Wallace, bad hurt, was on a horse, barely able to stay in the saddle; and that, together with the fact that two of his men had been killed, made the sheriff grim.

The fellow who had run from Nell Watson with hands up and surrendered—his name was Abbott—gazed sourly and called her a "hell cat." She didn't mind. He affirmed that it had been like she said; Kellem had caved in under her tongue-lashing—and the rifle. There had been some whiskey to help them believe her charge that Kellem had a cache; not much whiskey but enough. Yes, Abbott said, Kellem had been hogtied and the girl, too, and put in a closet off the kitchen. Abbott had helped. It all seemed reasonable and needful at the time. No, he said to Red, the Peg-girl hadn't fought back—not any more than if she had a broken back. That wasn't easy for Red to believe.

Red climbed his horse. Dave Martin put a rope on Nell Watson's and helped her up on the side saddle, though she could have mounted alone with her drop-stirrup. Her clothes were dirty and askew, her hair in a tangle, there was the smear of blood and dust on her face; she looked ugly and was, inside and out, but she had ease and assurance with an unbending stiffness in her back. Red guessed she was downright proud of how astonished men were at her meanness.

She told Dave Martin, "You don't need any rope on me! I wouldn't run away! I want to see Jack Kellem took and hung more than you do!"

The sheriff had looked closely at Dick

Haynes, thought maybe his skull was cracked and he would die. Wished so.

"Why don't you shoot him like a horse with a broken leg!" said Nell Watson.

The sheriff wouldn't look at her. Red thought about the time she'd shot—or had Ramon shoot—a horse when the leg wasn't broken.

The sheriff decided, "Tie him up and come on!"

Some of the sheriff's men climbed the outlaws' horses and they went up the road at a lope. Nell Watson carried her head high, like she was proud to be among the sheriff's men. Red grudgingly noticed that she sure rode well and thought of how Peg bounced if a horse loped.

XV

IT WAS mid-morning or past; hot and still, and not a sign of anybody, though the Brandon woman was here and her Ben, so Nell Watson had said. She was off her horse as quick as any man and, lifting the long skirts, ran as if wanting to be the first indoors.

Sheriff Wallace told her, "Hold up, you!"

The adobe was old, the buildings run-down. The Brandon woman had called it her ranch. It had been a rundown place when she got the title and became just an idling place for outlaws who hid stolen horses and gathered to drink and gamble and plan devilment.

The front door was half-open. Sheriff Wallace pushed at it and looked in, then walked in. The house was dim as a cellar. Red followed. Nell Watson surged crowdingly ahead of Dave Martin.

The place was silent. Sheriff Wallace called out and no one answered. "Thought you said the Brandon woman and Ben were here?" He turned on Nell Watson.

"They were!"

Dave Martin stepped back from an inner doorway. "They are!" he said, the sound of his voice telling more than the words.

Sheriff Wallace swung about, looked through. Red raised on tiptoes to look over his shoulder. Old Ben was face down on the earthen floor and the dark flow of blood lay about his huddled body. Beyond him lay the big body of Lucille Brandon.

"Dead—both of 'em!" the sheriff guessed.

He guessed wrong, for Lucille raised herself up staringly. Her face had blood on it, almost like a red mask. Then she fell back and moaned.

Red stepped back and bolted through to the kitchen. Unwashed dishes and pans were strewn on the table and stove. The door to the storeroom was open. Rope that had been cut lay on the kitchen floor. Nell Watson followed him into the kitchen. "Gone!" she said. It was a screech of baffle-ment and fury.

"But how?"

"I'll tell you how!" She rested her knuckles on the kitchen table, covered with unwashed dishes, and leaned toward him. Fury was in her like a flame in a lantern. "That fool Lucille turned him loose!" Then she bitterly mimicked what she imagined had been Lucille's tone and words: "Jack, do you love me? You do love me, don't you, Jack? I left my home and husband and baby for you, Jack!—so he tried to kill her!"

Red kept shaking his head. "Not a woman that helped him!"

Nell Watson's bitterness toward Kellem

was vile; and Red said right back at her, "You loved him yourself!"

Nell Watson glared. Her look seemed so murderous that Red thought, *Why the hell ain't you a man—then I could do like I ought!* Her tongue's tip licked her mouth and touched the soreness where his fist had cut her lip. Her laugh was a brittle humor-

less rattle: "Love? Me, *love!* Love any man!"

Red, believing her, felt bewildered. The more bewildered when her angular face put on a cold smile as she said, matter-of-fact, "But that morning when I knew you were going to Watson's, I knew I had to kill you —or my husband would find out!"

"That why you kept him dog-drunk?"

"Watson? Pah! It was Frank!" She was naming her real husband. "He would have killed me. I," she added complacently, "was afraid of him. The only man I ever was afraid of!" That seemed her highest tribute to a man."

"But Kellem?"

"I just fooled with him."

Red said, "Ugh!"

AS OTHER men came trampling into the kitchen he sidled off, his look slantwise on Nell Watson. His feeling didn't get into words, not even among his own thoughts, but his feeling was: *Woman? She's not a woman! She's a—a—* Somehow, even "devil" seemed too mild a name.

Devil or worse, she had guessed right about Kellem's escape.

Lucille Brandon told how it was. Her face was bloated and darkly bruised. A big woman, and though getting over a drunk, there was a kind of dignity in her tenderness toward Ben. He was trying to protect me!" she said hoarsely. There were white circular rings on her fingers, and some knuckles skinned. She hadn't any jewelry on. Kellem had taken all of it off her.

Red brought water in a basin and a cloth for her but she used it on the unconscious Ben's black withered face. What Red wanted was for her to say where she thought Kellem had gone; and he wondered about Peg but wouldn't mention her name.

The Brandon woman acted like she had been struck dumb, but she cried a lot, nearly soundlessly.

Ben had been lifted onto a bunk and she stooped over him, ignoring the stool Red pushed near for her.

There was coming and going in the house. Sheriff Wallace's wounded men were brought in, John Wallace being laid in a bunk across from Ben. A man had been sent off to spread the news and bring a doctor. Red heard that Dick Haynes had died. Bogus badman, dead from a concussion given by a woman. Most suitable death.

Red wondered why the hell Kellem had used a gun barrel on Lucille and Ben. No need to save bullets. Guns and ammunition were plentiful in the house. Maybe Kellem liked hitting people over the head. He had done that to old Mr. Watson.

It was Nell Watson who explained. She was guessing, of course, but Red respected her guesses, listening as she told the sheriff how it had been, just as matter-of-fact as if she had looked on and seen. Jack Kellem, she said, didn't want his new love to know what kind of man he was. Nell Watson's voice hummed with hate: He'd sent her out of the house to the horses, she said. If Peg had heard shooting she would have come back in the house. But Kellem had to knock Lucille out—so he could steal her jewelry!

"It's all gone, and that's how it was. I know, knowing him so well!"

The sheriff fidgetted with a handkerchief after he wiped his face and he wouldn't look at Nell Watson. She didn't act like she was trying to be friends with the sheriff—she acted like he *was* friends with her.

Abbott, who had shown himself enough like a man for Red to feel kindly, had been tied up and set down in a chair and he eyed her like a tied-up man would eye a rattlesnake that was crawling around close to him.

Red stood close beside the sheriff, hearing Nell Watson guess some more—if she were guessing. Kellem, she said rapidly and with spite, would change his clothes and shave that beard. "It's partly why he wore one!" Her voice had a savage hum. "Thinks if he shaves the beard and stains his face nobody'll ever know him! Cowards always think first of escape!"

"Where to look for him?" asked the sheriff, wiping under his collar.

"Under a rotten log!" she hissed.

Red's eyes tightened as she swirled away. He asked the sheriff, "What the hell are you going to do with her?"

Harve Wallace looked steadily at him and droned, "Son, if I wasn't wearin' this thing—" his fingers fiddled with the new star—"I'd hang her in ten minutes! Ruined a good man by pretending to be his wife! In with outlaws! Led the bunch to wipe us out, and John in yonder may die! No," he added grimly, "I ain't being gentle with her

—not 'cause she's a woman! I'm lettin' her act like she's come over to my side so she'll talk freer. Like what she's just said about Kellem's beard. I'd never 've thought of that."

Red told him, "Sheriff, you're also lettin' her wander around where there's guns and butcher knives! She'd rip a man's throat quick as she'd break an egg!"

The sheriff nodded, sighed. "Yes, that's so. Yes. I ought've thought! Get you some rope and come back. We'll tie her up."

Red went out and took a rope from one of the outlaws' saddles. It felt stiff to his fingers, so he gave the coil a fling to straighten out the kinks, then recoiled it. As he was going back in the house Dave Martin caught his arm.

"She wants you!"

"Who?"

"The Brandon woman! Something, she says, she wants you to know."

They went to Lucille who was sitting on the stool with her hands to her face. She dropped the hands, stared like she couldn't see good, then stood up in front of Red. Her swollen face had the kind of pain that wasn't from bruised flesh and her nearly colorless eyes at first seemed like a blind woman's.

"I'm a fool! I'm the biggest fool ever on two legs!" It sounded as if she were talking to herself, but Red kind of helplessly murmured, "Yes'm."

She bent toward him and a hand fastened on the front of his shirt. He felt like backing away, but her puffed eyes cleared staringly. "Oh, God!" she said, the same as if praying, or trying to. Tears began to run down the purple-swollen face. "He told me—and laughed! He's thought he would kill me but —but I can't die—I won't— Look! Look, what he showed me!"

Her hand fumbled in her clothes and she brought up a gold locket, about the same shape and as big as a thick slice through the middle of a hen's egg, and her fingers tried to open it.

"My baby that he took me away from seventeen years ago!" she said in a hurt mumble, then the locket opened and she held it out.

It was the same Peg had shown him in the cabin when she talked of her mother. Red drew in his breath like he'd been hit in the belly and couldn't speak.

"My Margaret!" said Lucille and though the tears ran she didn't make any crying sound. Red felt puzzled because "Margaret" didn't sound like Peg to him, but he saw Dave Martin's head bobbing like he understood. "Renard as a name didn't mean anything to me because he'd changed his name, the same as I changed mine. And to think I had Margaret—my baby!—in my arms and didn't know her!"

Red said, "He's such a liar, how can you be sure?"

"But this is me! She had it! God himself wouldn't hardly know this picture is me—but Jack knew! I looked like that when I run off with him. My Peg had carried it always because—'cause she loved her mother!"

"And where was she when he talked to you so much?"

"Out on a horse! Of course, he didn't want Peg to know! I tried to break by him and go out and call to her, but he hit me with a gun and I wouldn't go down!"

Red's throat was so stopped up it was hard to breath, and Lucille gazed at the picture of herself and tears kept dripping off down the side of her nose, and she shook her head at what she had once looked like.

"Ben—poor old Ben—he tried to fight for me!"

Red asked, "Where do you think they headed for?"

Lucille shook her head. Dave Martin put in, soft-voiced but urgingly, "If we caught up with them, we could maybe bring her back to you."

THE woman stared at him. "Ugly drunk old fool of a woman—her mother? She'd hate me. Oh, God!" she said, again like trying to pray, and not knowing how. Then, wildly to Dave Martin, "Yes, bring her back! I'll love her so much I won't care if she hates me! To think I had my baby in my arms and didn't know her!"

She fumbled the locket back into her bosom, and with an arm before her face dropped down on the stool beside where Ben lay, still unconscious. After that she put her arms and head down on the bunk and bawled.

Dave Martin looked at Red. "Did you ever in your life!"

Red told him solemnly, "I reckon when

God A'mighty wants to hurt folks that need it, He knows how!"

It was now past noon and men who hadn't had breakfast were eating in the kitchen, or sitting on their haunches outside the kitchen with plates in hand and coffee on the ground by their feet.

Red went into the kitchen, the rope in his hand, but he wasn't thinking of Nell Watson so much as of Peg and the woman who said she was Peg's mother. Nell Watson stood at the stove, waiting for the second pot of coffee to boil and the sheriff leaned in the kitchen doorway, holding a big cup that didn't have a handle. He took a sip, sucked at mustache, looked tiredly toward Red, but didn't make any sign.

Abbott's feet were still tied with a hobble's length of rope but his hands were free. He sat glumly at a corner of the kitchen table, eating head-down, like he wasn't paying any attention to the talk and stir about him.

Red stood with his back to the cupboard, not feeling hungry. His stomach was heavy as lead and his mouth dry. Dave Martin asked, "You want to tell the sheriff about her?"

Red said, "You tell it to him." He was thinking of how he had liked Peg—liked her even when he thought she had killed her father. How he knew she hadn't; but he felt he couldn't like her now, or ever again. *Packed herself off with Kellem!*

Abbott's knife dropped to the floor and he bent down to pick it up. Red looked across to where Dave Martin was saying something to the sheriff. A man got up from the table across from Abbott and asked Red for the makin's. He had laid in a good supply in town last night, and now drew papers and tobacco from his vest pocket, gave them over to the man as if hardly noticing what he was doing. He was thinking that Kellem wanted to get out of the country; Peg would know the way back into the mountains. Kellem might also be interested in that gold mine. Red was pondering.

The coffee had boiled and Nell Watson dabbed in a little cold water, took up a dish rag for a holder and lifted the pot off the stove.

"Anybody like a little more coffee?" she asked with a kind of ready cheeriness. Red noticed and wondered how the woman could be like that at a time like this—when she needed hanging!

The sheriff was looking into his cup as Dave Martin talked, and Red's eyes lingered on him until they slid away and were fixed on Nell Watson's back. Somehow, all the women, this one, Peg, and Peg's mother, were jumbled up altogether in his thoughts; but this Nell Watson was the most incredible. He saw her smile as she offered the sheriff more coffee, but he shook his head and gave her a quick glance like maybe he suspected rat poison in the coffee. She stood there by him as if she wanted to listen to Dave Martin's talk, but Dave Martin shut up.

Then she turned around toward the table where Abbott was still at the table with another man.

Red, without giving it any particular thought, saw Abbott stand up. Then the look on Nell Watson's face changed—changed into a scream. Abbott was facing her—and his feet weren't hobbled. She flung the nearly full pot of coffee straight at him, and the lid opened before it struck, and the near-boiling coffee spilt down his neck and breast and was like liquid fire; but that didn't stop him. The kitchen knife was in his hand, and with an overhand drive he sent it down into the side of Nell Watson's scrawny neck.

He left the knife there and stepped back, beating at his neck and breast as if to beat out a smouldering fire. A length of rope was still dragging from his left ankle. He had cut one end loose when he dropped his knife and reached down for it.

Nell Watson dropped like there weren't any bones inside of her. Nobody made a move, not to help her nor to lay hold on Abbott. He backed up to the wall and plucked at his clothes to hold them from his scalded skin, and didn't say anything. The fierceness went away from his eyes and he looked tired and indifferent. Nobody asked why he had done it.

Sheriff Wallace moved closer to Nell Watson and stared. He stared for a long time. It was an ugly red mess on the dirt floor of the kitchen. Men edged about on tiptoes and peered. They didn't know they were on tiptoes or that their voices were whispering. Red was the only one who didn't move. He didn't want to look any

closer at her. He looked at Abbott, and Abbott's eyes moved about absently until they met Red's.

Abbott was in a lot of pain for he had been bad-burnt by the coffee. He gazed steadily at Red, then came slowly, dragging the cut rope on his ankle, and he asked could he have a cigarette?

Red gave him the makin's, silently. Abbott's fingers shook a little and spilled tobacco, but he put the lob-bellied cigarette together and Red struck a match for him. Abbott inhaled as hard as he could, then he said in a slow dull way:

"Mr. Watson was good to my folks and us kids. She got us mixed up with the bad bunch. This mornin' she killed my brother who was dyin'! Now I don't care what's done to me!"

XVI

THAT night after dark Red and Dave Martin reached Matson's place just below the foothills. This was where Red had his run run-in with the older Hemlock. That hadn't been more than a few days ago, but seemed like ages. Red acted a little sullen but Dave Martin understood. He fixed the supper and Red took care of the horses.

The sheriff had his doubts about Red's hunch, was afraid it would be a wild-goose chase to look for Kellem in the mountains, but he offered to have other men go along with Red and Dave Martin.

Red told him, "More men? There's two of us!"

More would mean that much more noise and halloo-ing and getting lost or something, and complaining about how cold the nights got in the mountains, and about not having enough to eat. Dave Martin himself felt that Red would almost rather have gone alone, but he wanted to go, too. He thought Kellem was just tricky enough to dodge away into the mountains with the girl for a guide.

Before sun-up the next morning they pulled into the hills. Take three-to-four days, Red had said. Three, he thought, by pushing hard. They didn't have a packhorse or blankets, and only what food they had picked up at Kellem's hideout and a little more from here at Matson's that was carried in saddle-bags. Also some crushed oats in sacks behind their saddles. Mountain grass and twigs wouldn't be forage enough for horses that they pushed hard.

Red said he didn't know how hard Kellem and the girl would ride, and she probably knew a shorter way than he had come; but he was going back the same way because he knew it. He bet with himself that Jack Kellem thought if it really was a gold mine that he could sell it and be rich. That was one reason Kellem would want to go by there in leaving the country.

The more he traveled with Dave Martin the better Red liked him. Martin didn't talk when Red wasn't in a mood for talk and he didn't complain, and was a good horseman. And though both kept their eyes peeled for signs of other horses that had been over the trail, or crossed it, there was none.

The nights were cold. They would build up a good bed of coals, dry out the saddle blankets, put their feet to the fire and their heads on the saddles with the blankets over them, and roll over or sit up a dozen times a night. They both got gaunt and bristly, pushing hard and not having enough sleep, and always there was the uneasiness that they were off on a wild-goose chase.

About mid-afternoon of the third day out they reached the high meadow from which Peg had disappeared during the night, taking her sack of gold. Now Red, motionless in the saddle, looked at the ashes, glanced toward the boughs he had cut for her bed, eyed the sun. Dave Martin leaned with his hands to the horn and waited.

The wind soughed in the pines and a nearby magpie chattered as if talking scandal. It was downgrade all the way to the river, and across the river was Renard's cabin. They could make it before dark, easily. *And be seen?* That was a chance. If seen, they'd have to lay out behind a stump or a rock, keeping watch. There was food in the cabin and it couldn't be forced, not by two men—not if there was water inside. No telling yet, though, if Kellem and the girl had actually made for the mountains.

Red turned in the saddle. "We can stay here tonight and slip down in the morning, wait in the willows, have a look and see. Or we can push on and make it before dark. If they're there, we can maybe get to their horses and that'll keep 'em on foot. She'll shoot to kill, that girl will. She shoots good!"

Dave Martin answered quietly. "I can't shoot a woman, Red."

Red thought, *Who can?* And said, "I'm just tellin' you, she'll shoot!"

"Maybe they aren't there yet. Or won't come!"

"Only one way to find out!"

THEY left the meadow and went zigzag through the pines down the side of the mountain; and it was so still that the rolling thump of rocks displaced by the horses' sliding feet seemed loud—loud enough to carry warning afar. Sweat was gushing down Dave Martin's tough bristly face. Something more than his own exertion and the day's warmth made him perspire. Red wasn't sweating. He felt chilled. They heard the river mumbling to itself. Not far now.

Red got off to tighten the cinches. He said, "If we go the way the tracks lead from here on, we'll come out right across the river from the cabin, and be easy seen. If there's anybody there to see us. So I'm going to go on downstream and cross over where there's willows, alders or something. That way we'll be close enough to lay low and see whatever there is to see. It's how Hemlock and them sneaked up on us. I reckon they knew as much about sneakin' up as anybody!

"Only," Red added, "I'm warning you, we'll have to back up or lay low till dark. Folks in that cabin got all the advantage, especially against just two of us. I know. I was in the cabin."

They crossed the river, tied the horses and moved into the willows, and had to work their way slowly out to the edge before they could have a glimpse across the clearing. As soon as the thicket became thin, there was tall grass to crawl through and gnats swarmed down on their faces.

Red lay about ten feet from Martin and peered with head lifted. No horse was in sight, no sign of a person—except a thin wisp of smoke that wavered out of the chimney.

"They don't seem scared!" said Martin.

"Could be some miners or anybody stopped in."

From far across the river a horse whinnied loud as a trumpet blast. Red's thought jumped in wonder if Kellem was over there. One of his own horses now answered with a ringing nicker.

Martin said, "Damn!"

Red said, "I bet that first horse is one left here by Hemlock's men—and I wish the cougars had got him!"

"Lay low now, Red. Let's see if anybody comes out for a look!"

The words weren't out of his mouth before Dave Martin's rifle banged, and Red couldn't see who shot back from the cabin corner. Then he began to fire rapidly, "Just to make 'em think there's plenty of us," he explained.

"I saw him!" said Martin, when the firing stopped. "Black hat and high boots and beard! He didn't have his coat on."

"Purt' near two hundred yard off. He don't shoot so good either! Wonder where their horses are? Maybe up to that sort of stable above the cabin."

Martin said, "I wish I'd got him!"

"Sure, but that girl would then have kept his rifle hot—hers, too! Keep down. They'll be lined at the loopholes, watching! I'm going to start wiggling around so as to see the door in the front. Be dark in a couple hours."

Martin said, "I'll watch while you crawl a piece and get set. Then you watch while I do."

There weren't any stumps close by to move behind, but Red went on hands and knees, stirring the grass as he went in such a way as ought to have brought shots, but none came. Dave Martin squirmed up alongside of him. Then Red moved on again.

Late afternoon darkness began to lay heavy in the valley, and would soon deepen into dusk, then night.

They edged along cautiously, not making much progress, and were wary for tricks. "I hear Kellem's fuller of them than a monkey!" said Martin.

It was nearly an hour after they had begun their crawling that a rifle banged rapidly from one of the loopholes. *Bang-bang-bang-bang!* The bullets were at them, but way wide. Red thought, *What the devil anybody shooting like that for?* He recalled how Hemlock's men had banged away noisily just so Jim Blake could pull his trick of riding up close to the cabin. But this was all coming from one gun. Peg didn't waste her shots that way. She stopped to reload when she *bang-banged* just to make a noise.

The firing stopped. Red and Dave Martin

didn't move for about the time it would take to count twenty, slow; then a horse came bounding out of the cabin door with the rider so low in the saddle they could barely catch a glimpse of the face. It wasn't a bearded face, and the bright long Mexican skirts that Peg had worn from Watson's swept like quivering bunting against the horse's side, and the ends of the scarf that bound her black hair whipped out.

As the horse turned the cabin corner and headed for the nearest crossing of the river, Red jumped to his feet, aiming his rifle; but Martin shouted, "She's leavin' him! Let 'er go!"

Red was on his feet, hunched forward, peering. "Like hell I will!" He put the rifle to his shoulder, fired.

"My God, not at a woman!"

Bang! *Too high!* Red thought and fired again. *Didn't lead enough!* Bang-bang! *My God, can't I hit nothin'!*

Horse and rider were bounding against the darkness of the forest of the river bank and Red fired once more.

"Damn your soul!" Dave Martin yelled as the woman rocked backwards out of the saddle, seeming to turn a somersault as she flopped with flurried spread of skirts. He ran at Red, seized the rifle as if to wrench it from him. "I thought you was shooting just to scare her!"

Red held his breath, almost blurted, "You can't scare her!" then, without a word, started forward on the run.

Dave Martin yelled, "You damn' fool! Kellem'll pick you off!"

But Red kept going and Martin took out after him, at first keeping an anxious eye toward the cabin. But no shots came, and that seemed strange. Then Martin forgot his fear and tried to catch up with Red.

They ran with awkward stumbling over the uneven ground for the whole 200 yards, or nearly that. The shadows were heavy with the night's weight behind them when Red reached the sprawled-out body and stooped. Dave Martin came up, his breath loud and fast, then he got down on his knees as Red stooped and snatched off the scarf.

"Kellem?" said Martin. "Can't be!"

"Just fresh shave off his beard—since we come. I bet he killed her to take off her clothes so he could run and not be shot at—so he thought! Look, even split and tied the skirt's edge to his ankles so they wouldn't blow back and show his boots! Tricky, hell, yes! It's an outlaw trick to keep a horse in a house where he may be cornered!"

DAVE MARTIN was humbly apologetic with, "But how could you know?" Red didn't say anything. "That far off, and purt' near dark! I couldn't tell it wasn't a woman!"

Red looked choked up. Then, quietly, "I could — that it wasn't that one, anyhow. She'd never run and leave a fellow she was with—not if a fight was on. But I've seen her ride. She don't set a horse good—not on the lope. It had to be him!"

"But her, now, Red?" Martin asked, tonelessly, like he already had the answer.

Red nodded. "Dead or bad hurt. Else she'd be calling out to us—or shootin' at us!"

Darkness had come down on the valley before they reached the cabin.

It was sheer black inside except for the glow of embers among the fireplace ashes, and there was no answer when Dave Martin sang out.

Red stripped some matches from the block in his pocket, and before he found the lantern, the tiny match-flame showed where Peg lay, nearly stripped of clothing, and her face lay in a pool of blood.

They both bent to her. The blood came from a gash in her head. "Saved himself another bullet!" Red growled, then turned to the lantern.

He tipped up the chimney. When he struck a match his hand shook. He looked at the hand as at something he'd never seen before in his life. It had been a risk to shoot at Kellem when he seemed to be a woman—and that woman! But he rode too well—not like a girl who had learned how by loping back and forth from a Kansas farm to town.

When Dave Martin asked, "Water? Where's some water?" Red brought the lantern close and set it on the ground. Peg's eyes stayed closed as she mumbled.

"Your name!" said Martin.

"Yeah."

Red went for the water bucket and found it partly filled. He searched for a cloth. There wasn't any at hand. He went to where he knew Peg had clothes stored and grabbed something, tore it in two. He gave the cloths to Martin.

Then Red saw Jack Kellem's fresh shaved beard on the floor. Razor—probably Renard's, though he too wore a beard—on the table. Pan of water, still a little warm. *Tricky? But not smart!* Red said to Jack Kellem: *You damn' fool, if you'd played square, she'd stuck to you! Maybe licked me and Martin! Tricky, you! But yalla!*

Red sat on the bench at the table, eyed the razor, not touching it; now and then eyeing the beard, too.

Martin was as eagerly gentle as with a hurt child. He washed Peg's face and talked to her though she didn't talk back. He rubbed her hands and arms, said she would sure be all right; and whether or not she heard, told her, "Red's here!"

Red snapped, "Leave my name out!"

When Martin picked her up and carried her to the bunk and spread a blanket, Red didn't move except to watch. Then he got up and went tramping through the starlight clear down the river and through the thicket to bring in their horses. It was late when he returned to the cabin, and resolution hardened his face.

Martin had built a fire and made coffee. Red sat down, glumly. Martin moved about to find something to eat, and he talked of Peg.

How young she was and pretty, even if bruised. Red didn't say anything.

"She asked for you while you was gone. She's asleep now."

Red's growl didn't make a word-sound.

He heard that she had already told Dave Martin that Jack Kellem made her go with him from Lucille Brandon's room there in town at the point of a gun.

Red made no comment. That wasn't how Mr. Watson had told it. Mr. Watson didn't lie—and he had liked the girl.

And, of course, Peg said Jack Kellem made her act as guide in coming into the mountains. She hadn't wanted to, not at all. Martin retold it as if it sounded reasonable to him.

RED didn't mention that he knew nobody could make that girl do anything she didn't want to do. He thought that she had got all of her lies told, and felt better. Had gone to sleep.

He sat and smoked glumly, dreading the tomorrow when she would lie to him, too. He knew what he was going to do, but it was hard to do. Peg had been dead tired. They had just got in about noon today, she had told Martin. So dead tired, worn out and hurt, yet in no time at all she had told lies that wound Dave Martin around her little finger.

Red stared at Martin, broodingly. *I ain't smarter than him! Not as smart!* Red thought of the supposed gold mine, but it didn't raise a quiver of greediness. Not now. She'd gone with Kellem — just like her mother had gone with him nearly twenty years before.

Red stood up, put out his hand. Martin's was a questioning stare.

Red told him, "I'm pullin' out!"

"But, Red, you can't!"

"I got to. If I stay overnight, I'll never go—that is, not away from her. She'll be all right enough to start back to town with you."

"But, Red—"

"I'm going back up to Tahzo. I know the way. Ridin' in the dark don't bother me. Plenty to eat on the way. Deer, you know. I've done all Mr. Watson asked, so—"

"But, Red—"

"If there's any reward for Kellem, you whack it between us. Give my share to Mr. Watson. He'll send it to me."

"But, Red, she said—said she loved you! When I told her how you'd come, she said—"

"Yeah, sure. That's why I'm goin' while I can. You tell her I've got me a girl up in Tahzo. Tell her I'm twice married a'ready. Tell her anything."

"What's got into you? You've said yourself how brave she is and—"

"Sure. As far's that, Nell Watson was no coward! And that Brandon woman, look how she stuck to Kellem after she knew—things. But I'm not smart enough to be around women. The next best thing to being smart is to get the hell away from 'em. So I'm going—now!"

SOME months later a Tahzo rider loped up to the supper fire by the chuck wagon and reached from the saddle to toss Red a letter. Red sitting on his heels, fingered it open, bent sideways so the light would be on the pages of what Mr. Watson wrote.

The old man said he was feeling fine. Old black Ben was living with him, took good care of him. The Wallace brothers had moved in on his range and were running things, proper. They were pardners now.

It didn't look like there was going to be any reward paid for Jack Kellem. Express companies were reneging on the offers they had made because Kellem hadn't been tried and found guilty. Maybe he'd just been blamed for what other train robbers did. The Cattlemen's Association wouldn't pay its $1,000 because one of its agents had been instrumental in bringing him down. And its agents couldn't what was called "participate" in a reward.

Jim Blake, he had died in bed. Didn't matter much, long as he died with a bullet or two in him.

Lucille Brandon was all broke down and looked it. Kept herself drunk most of the time, so he'd heard. Mr. Watson—with proud underscoring—wrote that he hadn't touched a drop, not since he got up out of bed.

Looked like nobody but Eastern men would make anything out of the mine. Renard never had it recorded, or anything. Lots of prospectors now up in the mountains, poking around because the Renard mine looked pretty good. Eastern men had taken it over.

Peg Martin, she'd run off with a gambler from Tombstone. Her mother, in drunken tearfulness told Mr. Watson the last time he was in town, that Dave Martin had been too good to the girl—that was all that was the trouble. "Same as you with Nell Watson!" the Brandon woman had told him.

Martin had took it pretty hard, but didn't

say much except—wrote Mr. Watson—"he told me he knowed now how smart you was to pull out that night like you done."

Red Clark, wagon boss, pitched the letter into the fire, watched the penciled pages curl, flame up, vanish. He nodded at the fire, sighed. *Sometimes though I can't help wishing a little that I hadn't been so smart. I sure liked that girl!*

The End

The Story Tellers' Circle

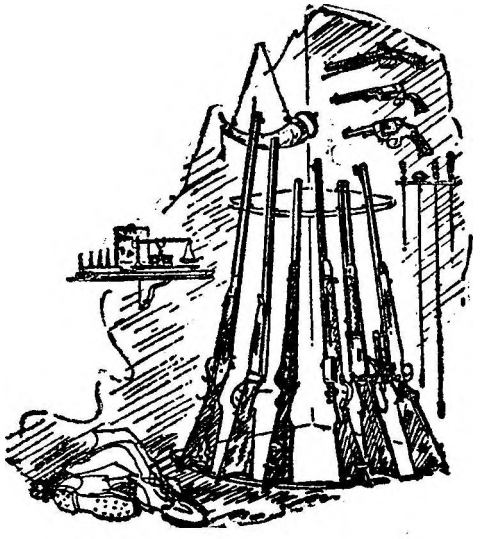
(*Concluded from page 4*)

we are both living the 'literary life' in Pasadena, California.

"I think that head and hands should work together for a balanced life and that the best ideas that can come to a writer are apt to drip off the end of an industrious pick, shovel, or trowel. One of my hobbies is rock and cement work. I have dug and constructed my own swimming pool, built my own rock walls and fireplaces—three of them. And by golly, they seem to work, too! The fireplaces heat and draw perfectly and the swimming pool has a ladder and drain in it. I am prouder of them than of any of my stories . . . well, almost. I know scarcely anyone nowadays who isn't writing something or other, but it takes a lot of gumption and intestinal fortitude for a mere word-slinger to built a perfect fireplace!

"And incidentally, I have one published book, 'Wilderness Ways,' Penn Publishing Company, Philadelphia, Pa."

Paul Annixter.



THE SHOOTER'S CORNER

Conducted by

PETE KUHLHOFF

Love's Labor Lost

IT SEEMED like a smart trick at the time, but we live and learn.

In a recent catalog of one of the big mail order houses, Montgomery Ward, to be exact, I saw a little single shot .22 caliber rifle advertised for six dollars and some odd cents, postpaid. "It might be a lot of fun to get one of 'em and fix it up a bit just to see what kind of accuracy it'd give" sez I to myself.

So, in went my order!

In the meantime, something or other happened and it finally cost me seven dollars and some odd cents, plus express charges. I didn't have the strength to squawk about the express cost, so let it go.

It wasn't such a bad looking little rifle

—the Stevens people made it—I won't say it looked like more than seven dollars worth of merchandise, but it didn't look so bad. It had no butt-plate, and manufacturing operations were certainly worked down to a minimum. The barrel and receiver was machined from a single piece of metal, and the trigger and bolt mechanism is certainly a masterpiece of simplicity.

The fun started when I put it together (it came in two pieces, barrel, receiver, bolt and trigger mechanism being part one, with stock and trigger guard as part two) and got ready to start shooting.

First of all the barrel and receiver wouldn't seat into its proper place in the stock—by half an inch.

My idea was to shoot it as it came, slick it up a bit and see if it would shoot better.

So, I high-tailed it out to the range mit rifle and a supply of Remington Kleanbore and Winchester Leader Long Rifle ammunition.

The durned gun has to be loaded from the right sight, through a narrow slit. It is inconvenient to say the least. A midget might not have much trouble at this chore—but I doubt it.

At this point I discovered it wasn't an automatic cocker. A big knob has to be pulled back by hand. And there is no manual safety. This department is taken care of by a floating firing pin, which is not my idea of a safety.

The bolt can't be operated when the striker is in the cocked position. This is not so hot, for in order to unload the piece, when cocked, the striker has to be let down carefully by releasing the trigger and then the bolt operated. Certainly not the ultimate as far as safety is concerned.

Anyway, the first groups were fired at fifty feet from bench rest using Kleanbore ammo. I eventually discovered that the little rifle liked this brand of cartridges better than any other.

Group Number One (five shots, should be ten, but ammo. is scarce) was the best made before I worked the rifle over, and measured .4 of an inch center to center which is not too bad. Ten groups averaged a little over .8 inch.

At fifty yards the average was almost two and one-half inches using the gun's favorite

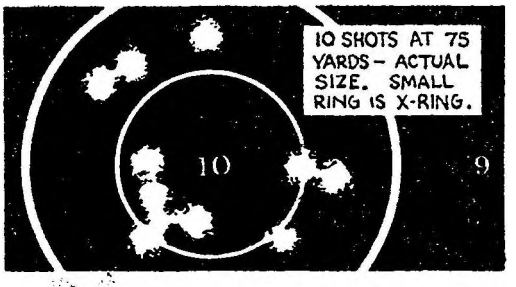
Kleanbore. While this can't by any means be considered excellent accuracy, it is almost good enough for small game shooting at comparatively short distances.

In my workshop I bedded the action and barrel as well as I could, spotting with lampblack and shaving away the wood until I got a pretty good fit.

Next the trigger pull was improved a little by polishing the contact surface at what passes for a sear.

The most important improvement was the mounting of a Lyman receiver sight with ¼ minute click adjustments (a ¼ minute is approximately ¼ inch at 100 yards) and an aperature front sight. It may seem weird to put fifteen dollars worth of sights on a seven-dollar gun, but you can't shoot accurately if you can't aim accurately. And anyway, I wanted to see if I could possibly make this little gun really shoot.

I couldn't figure out any way of converting it to a self-cocker as the bolt is operated,



or of installing a loading platform without a lot of machine work, so I let these details go and scrammed out to the range again.

Shooting at fifty feet from rest, I consistently got groups that I figure would just about score possibles on the fifty-foot small bore target.

Then I put up some 100-yard small bore targets at the 75-yard mark, and shot some ten-shot groups still using Kleanbore ammo.

After adjusting the sights I could easily keep the groups in the ten ring (2 inches) with at least half of the shots in the X ring (1 inch.)

By the time the light started to fail I was just about nuts due to the difficulty of loading . . . my fingers seemed to be about the size of full-grown cucumbers—and I was glad to quit.

After thinking it over it seemed to me

that this little rifle would be all right for a squirrel gun when used by a careful shooter, as the vulnerable part of a squirrel's head is about one inch in diameter.

But as far as I am concerned this gun is *out* as a small boys' rifle due to the lack of safety features.

It certainly seems to me that it is a shame to incorporate a barrel of such excellent potentialities with such a poor receiver, bolt and trigger mechanism.

Also, in my estimation, this rifle is too light weight for practical shooting, but this could be remedied with about three pounds of lead distributed so that it would keep its balance.

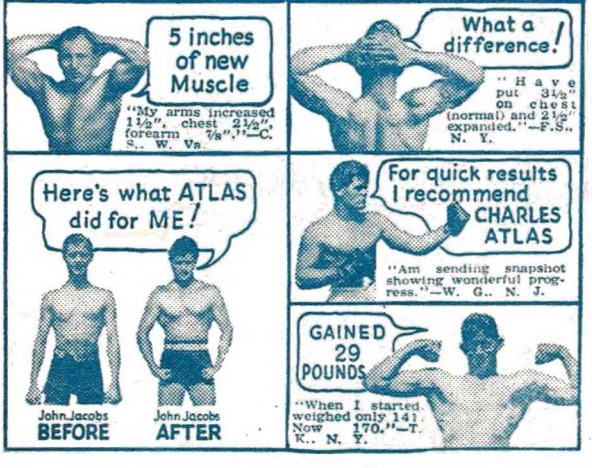
Since the above mentioned shooting I have fired this rifle on several occasions as have a number of friends, and the concensus of opinion seems to be that it isn't worth the effort if a person is going to do much shooting.

It's OK as a hog rifle, or for an occasional shot at a rabbit or woodchuck in the garden —which is giving it a break—but I still feel sorry for that nice little barrel in such bad company.

This seems like a lot of yapping about an inexpensive firearm, but that's the way it happened!

Will You Let Me PROVE I Can Make YOU a New Man?

LET ME START SHOWING YOU RESULTS LIKE THESE



CHARLES ATLAS

Awarded the title of "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man" in international contest—in competition with ALL men who would consent to appear against him.

This is a recent photo of Charles Atlas. It is not a studio picture but an actual untouched snapshot.

Here's What Only 15 Minutes a Day Can Do For You

I DON'T care how old or young you are, or how ashamed of your present physical condition you may be. If you can simply raise your arm and flex it I can add SOLID MUSCLE to your biceps—yes, on each arm—in double-quick time! Only 15 minutes a day—right in your own home—is all the time I ask of you! And there's no cost if I fail.

I can broaden your shoulders, strengthen your back, develop your whole muscular system INSIDE and OUTSIDE! I can add inches to your chest, give you a vise-like grip, make those legs of yours lithe and powerful. I can shoot new strength into your old backbone, exercise those inner organs, help you cram your body so full of pep, vigor and red-blooded vitality that you won't feel there's even "standing room" left for weakness and that lazy feeling! Before I get through I'll have your whole frame "measured" to a new, beautiful suit of muscle!

What's My Secret?

"Dynamic Tension!" That's the ticket! The identical natural method that I myself developed to change my body from the scrawny, skinny-chested weakling I was at 17 to my present super-man physique! Thousands of other fellows are becoming marvelous physical specimens—my way. I give you no gadgets or contraptions to fool with. When you have learned to develop your strength through *"Dynamic Tension,"* you can laugh at artificial muscle-makers. You simply utilize the DORMANT muscle-power in your own God-given body—watch it increase and multiply double-quick into real, LIVE MUSCLE.

My method—*"Dynamic Tension"*—will turn the trick for you. No theory—every exercise is practical. And, man, so easy! Spend only 15 minutes a day in your own home. From the very start you'll be using my method of *"Dynamic Tension"* almost unconsciously every minute of the day—walking, bending over, etc.—to BUILD MUSCLE and VITALITY.

FREE BOOK

"Everlasting Health and Strength"

In it I talk to you in straight-from-the-shoulder language. Packed with inspirational pictures of myself and pupils—fellows who became NEW MEN in strength, my way. Let me show you what I helped THEM do. See what I can do for YOU! For a real thrill, send for this book today. AT ONCE. CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 9K, 115 East 23rd Street, New York 10, N. Y.

CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 9K
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I want the proof that your system of *"Dynamic Tension"* will help make a New Man of me—give me a healthy, husky body and big muscular development. Send me your free book, "Everlasting Health and Strength."

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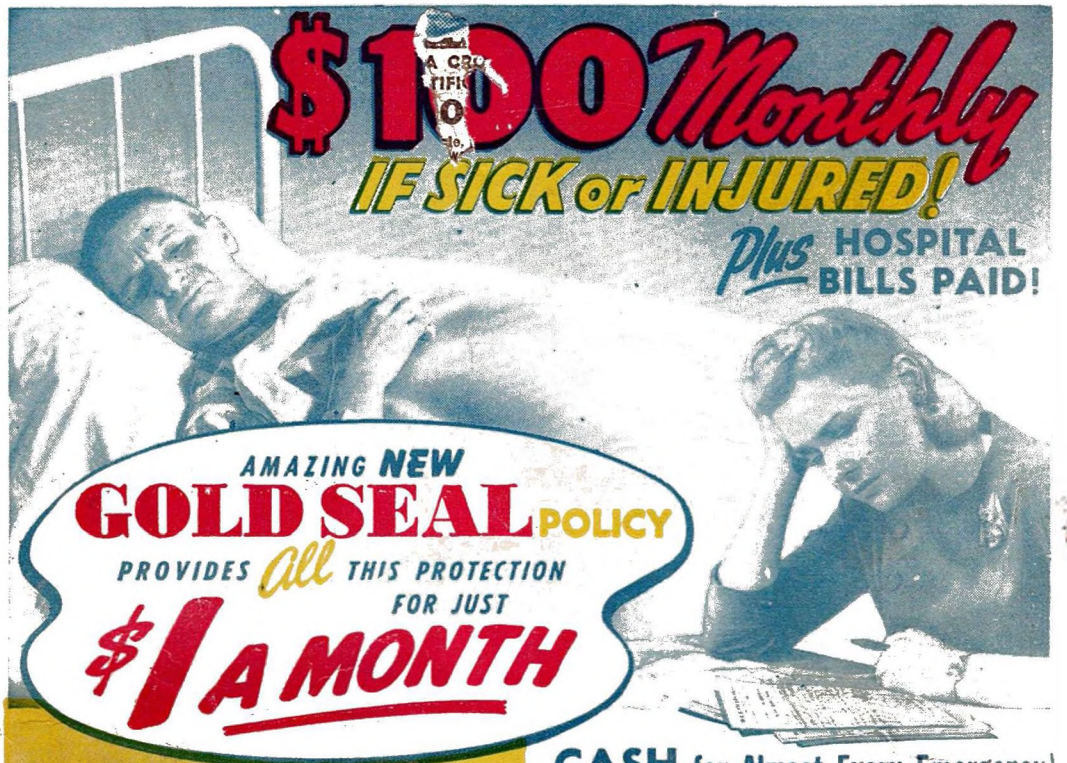

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