
April
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Short Stories
25c
A Complete Novel of
the Major by L. Patrick Greene
THE LAKE OF THE DEAD

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Benjamin Franklin
(A Rosicrucian)

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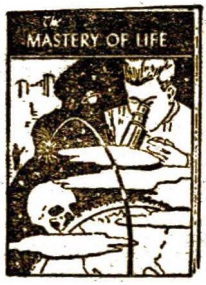

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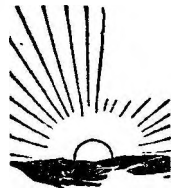

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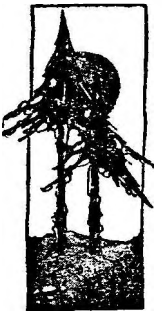

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THE SHOOTER'S CORNER

CONDUCTED BY PETE KUHLHOFF

Gun Engraving

MOST of us have seen or examined guns that have been decorated with engraving—and we no doubt have admired and ohed and ahed the workmanship as a piece of art—just as we do when we look at paintings and pieces of sculpture when we visit an art gallery. However, it is very seldom that we stop to wonder how the mechanics of a gun engraving job were accomplished—just as we very seldom stop to analyze the brush work or physical blending of paint of a portrait or other picture.

Over the years it has been my rare pleasure not only to have examined quite a number of highly and beautifully decorated guns, but to have watched several master gun engravers at their work!

Gun engraving is indeed an art and a very exacting one—even more so than drawing or painting, simply because the medium (chiseling and inlaying of various metals) is so difficult to master. This, of course, besides the necessity of natural artistic talent, plus plenty of academic training.

So, you see that the gun engraver is classed as an artist—and I might mention that it takes a person with inherent artistic talent to really appreciate the great masterpieces that these unsung and generally unknown craftsmen have and are producing.

The gun engraver not only uses various tools to chisel or sculpt designs or figures (or animals) on the steel surfaces of a firearm, but he must be able to use pencil and pen to place his thoughts, perfect in every detail, on paper first. He is an artist combining manual and artistic skill in his execution. I'll try to give you an idea of just how he works.

The design is first drawn on paper or other material and then transferred with the aid of engraver's transfer wax to the steel. By the use of several chisels (called gravers) and an engraver's hammer the design is hand-cut into the metal. The chisel most used by the majority of gun sculptors is the pointed or onglette graver. Others to make a complete set are the flat chisel, flat, round, knife, oval, lozenge, square bevel and metal liner gravers. These chisels are often made by the individual artist to meet his peculiar needs, but it saves valuable time to buy them ready made. They are readily available from certain gunsmiths supply houses. The metal that gravers are made from must be of the finest quality of tool steel and hardened so that it will cut gun steel. The gravers come from the manufacturers without handles so that the artist can make his own to best fulfill the demands of his method of handling them when actually engraving.

The cutting edge of the graver has to be kept very keen and is only stoned from the point. The stones usually employed are fine Washita and Arkansas perfect white, which give a razor sharp cutting edge when correctly used.

THE actual chiseling or cutting of the gun steel is done by holding the tool in one hand, usually the left, and the hammer in the other. The hammer is especially designed, not too heavy and with a handle that has a little spring or whip to it as the blows are struck. The vise-held gun part to be chiseled or engraved is at the correct height for the artist, who most always works in the standing position.

When chiseling straight lines the tool is held steadily in one position, without wrist motion, while the cutting tool is tapped by the hammer.

When carving curved lines, the wrist of the chisel holding hand does most of the work. The wrist takes the same motion of the curve that is being cut. In cutting long

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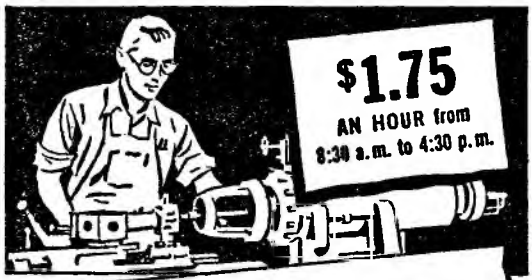

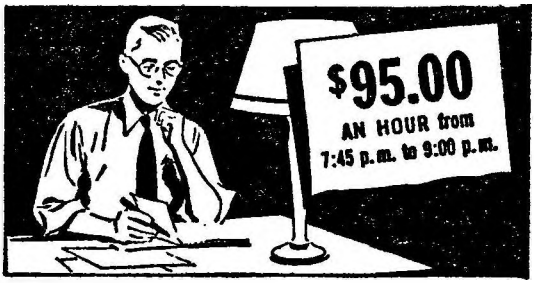

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curves the whole body of the engraver follows through with the wrist motion. The vise is of the swivel type especially made for engraving, and when a spiral is cut it is done in sections, with a turn of the vise between cuts.

Shading, such as may be seen on leaf work, is sometimes done with a lining graver—which, as the name implies, cuts several parallel lines in one operation. Liners are made in a number of widths and number of lines. They are used in the same manner as the chisels, and by tipping the tool a variation of depth in the lines is obtained, giving a neat shading effect. However, the line graver is seldom if ever used by a master-engraver-artist, for he prefers the more pleasing effect obtained by doing one line at a time.

It might be pertinent to mention that I have seen at least two engravers who worked without using the hammer to any great extent, depending on muscle and beef for propelling the chisel.

Sometimes the design is drawn through a thin layer of acid resisting varnish which has been painted on the steel. The part is then dipped or otherwise exposed to acid and the naked tool steel of the design etched as a foundation for the engraving tool to cut into. With the metal etched deeply enough to act as a guide, it is easier and quicker to use the cutting chisel to complete the job. This again is a shortcut that very seldom is resorted to by the real master.

On a straight etching job the ornamentation is in relief with the background eaten away. Here the engraver uses his tools to clean out ragged lines, to cut out fine points, matting the etched background and for shading. This work is done with the various chisels and punches. A good man can produce a beautiful piece of work at less cost than by straight engraving. Incidentally, an etching job may be done with fairly good success by a talented amateur.

Inlaid work with silver, gold or platinum in the gun steel is accomplished by drawing the design, transferring it to the steel and cutting out the portion for the inlay. The edges of the design in the steel are undercut and the precious metal formed to shape and hammered into place, being firmly and

(*Continued on page* 128)

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The Major and Jim Find Too Much Magic

L. PATRICK GREENE

THE LAKE OF THE DEAD

"MAN yearns for what is *tabu*," runs an African proverb, "but when the *tabu* is lifted he turns his back on what was desirable."

And so it was with Aubrey St. John—pronounced, as he often explained, "sinjun"—Major, known throughout South Africa by the purely military nomenclature of "the Major." And so it was with Jim, his Hottentot servant.

The British had, in order to appease the Portuguese whose East African territory the Major had invaded in support of some unjustly treated natives, put a large price on the Major's head and, in order to avoid arrest, the monocled dude had fled to the Congo. There, with the faithful Jim, he had succeeded in avoiding capture, losing himself in that country's dark jungles. For months they had traveled wherever Fate had lured them, risking great dangers in order to uphold justice, exploring territory practically unknown to white men.

Yet all this time, though outwardly content, both men were homesick for the open veld of the south. The dense shadows of the jungle oppressed them; the air stifled them; the luxuriant jungle growth limited their vision and their eyes ached for the rest which the distant vistas of the south would bring to them. They longed to hear the full, belly laughter of the people of the kraals; whole-hearted, natural laughter. Such laughter was unknown to the natives of the jungle. Their laughter was tinged with cruelty and superstitious fear.

There were times when the Major was tempted to return to the south even though it meant his arrest and delivery into the hands of the Portuguese. For Jim's sake, he resisted that temptation; he knew that the Hottentot would not live very long in a Portuguese prison. And Jim never spoke of his nostalgia to the Major, knowing that a word from him would put their feet on the southern trail and his Baas' arrest.

And yet, when the road back to the country they thought of as "home" was thrown open to them, when, because of a service the Major had performed for an important Portuguese savant in the Congo jungle—saving the life of that man's son—the Portuguese notified the British officials that they withdrew their request for the Major's life, neither man showed any desire to take advantage of their regained freedom of movement.

Overnight, it seemed, the jungle had become a place of charm, peopled by friendly, likeable natives. With all the sun-bathed south made free to them, they elected to travel still further into the jungle, looking for new things, hoping for yet greater adventures.

FOR six months they traveled having no definite objective, save a vague thought of making for a port on the West Coast, turning aside to trace to its source any rumor which promised to lead to adventure. They helped to depose a savage king whose vicious rule crimsoned the jungle shadows with the blood of his people. They restored to another king the kingdom which had been stolen from him. They gained wealth—and lost it. They earned the respect of all men with whom they came in contact—and kept it. They made no enemies, save those men whose evil made them all men's enemies.

Occasionally they came to white settlements—mines, trading posts, missions and military garrisons—where they were enabled to replenish their outfit, make new friends and learn something of the surrounding country.

They visited a district where the people were reputed to pay homage to a fetish which wore a necklace of priceless rubies—and found the necklace to be nothing more than a string of glass beads. They were the guests of a poverty stricken "king" and discovered at the back of his hut a rock outcrop indicating the location of a fabulously rich gold reef. Before the Major left that ruler the outcrop was buried under a mound of earth. The Major knew that the king and his people would be happier in their comparative poverty than with the false wealth which would come to them should that reef be found by men who were gold-greedy.

They witnessed great magic—which could only be explained by the supernatural or hypnotism, and the Major was definitely not susceptible to hypnotic suggestion — performed by a dirty, drug-shaken witchman. And the witchman had been overawed by the ticking of the Major's watch!

They shivered with cold under the equatorial sun and saw, in a forest glade silvered by the moonlight, the grotesque dance of giant gorillas.

One day the sun and sky were completely hidden by a swarm of locusts; there seemed to be no air left for them to breathe. For two days after that they trekked through country entirely devoid of foliage.

They traveled along well-defined paths and waded waist deep through snake infested swamps. They cut their way through

well nigh impenetrable jungle where an advance of three miles between sunrise and sunset was no mean achievement. They rode on mules and on donkeys. They were carried by women in litters—this was when the Major and Jim were both lamed as a consequence of falling into a game pit. They were laboriously paddled in clumsy dugouts up streams so thickly overhung with a canopy of laced creepers that the sun's rays never reached the yellow, evil-smelling waters. In other canoes, their paddlers spear-toothed cannibals, they shot the white water rapids of yet other streams.

AND so, in due course, they came to a forgotten corner of the Cameroons, close to the Nigerian border, a tract of swamps and jungle forgotten, at least, by its white overlords.

They came at noon one day to a white man's bungalow, built on a slight rise of land, surrounded by a number of well-built huts. There was an air of efficiency and cleanliness about the place; it was a slice of Europe transported, by the magic of a white man's will to conquer, into the heart of Africa's jungle filth.

A white man, worn and yellow with fever, his beard gray, his face lined, came lethargically from the bungalow and, in thickly accented English, introduced himself to the Major.

"I am Karl Hansen, storekeeper. And you?"

There was contempt and suspicion in his voice as he looked at the Major and at the long column of carriers who were depositing their loads in an orderly manner before the bungalow.

"I," said the Major, fixing his monocle in his eye and assuming an air of inane helplessness, "am Aubrey St. John—Major. But call me 'Major,' dear old sir an' I'll respond."

Hansen ignored the Major's levity.

"And your business in this country?"

"Oh—er—no business at all, really. I mean, I'm not a jolly old trader. Wish I were, sometimes. You chappies must make a deuce of a lot of money from the—er—not so wily aborigine."

"Your business?" Hansen repeated coldly.

The Major looked confused.

"I'm sorry. I'm an awful fool. An' you are not very well. Please do not stand here in the sun. My business? Oh, I just travel here and there. Seein' things, you know. Huntin' a little an' just tootling along."

HANSEN looked at the carriers again. Under the supervision of a squat, ugly, powerfully built Hottentot they had opened some of the packs and were now squatting in silent, contented rows awaiting the outcome of their white man's meeting with the trader.

"Your carriers," Hansen said suddenly, "seem to be well disciplined. Do you beat them?"

The Major laughed.

"Jove, no. I should be afraid to do that, really."

"Then are they soldiers?" Hansen persisted. "Are you the leader of a military expedition—Major?"

"Word of honor, no," the Major said and then added quickly, thinking he saw a look of disappointment creep into the German's eyes. "Why?"

"That perhaps I will answer presently. Do you mind if I speak to your carriers?"

"Not at all, dear sir. Would you like me to interpret for you? They have traveled a great distance with me. I mean, they are not men of this district—"

"So I see," the German interrupted dryly. "No, I do not need you to interpret. I know most of the dialects of this so strange country. I prefer that you are nowhere near when I talk with them. Is it permitted?" The Major bowed and the German continued, "Perhaps it would be best if you sat down on the porch. I regret that I cannot offer you whiskey, but you will find water in the cooler. And that is the best drink for man. Not? Elephants and lions are content with it. Oh yes. And one other thing, I should be obliged if you would tell your Hottentot to keep away from the carriers while I talk with them."

"Very good," the Major said and calling Jim to him the two walked to the bungalow where the Major sat down in a canvas backed chair and Jim squatted on the ground at his feet.

"What do you make of him, Baas?" Jim asked as they watched Hansen walk slowly

down the line of carriers, halting to exchange a few words with this one and that.

"I don't know, Jim. Maybe loneliness has made him a little mad. But I do not think he is evil."

"No, he is not evil, Baas," Jim said confidently. "Mark how the carriers smile after he has passed on. Look! They treat him as if he were a chief."

Presently Hansen returned to the Major, walking very slowly and stroking his beard thoughtfully.

"I am satisfied," he said. "And now I must apologize for my apparent lack of hospitality. Later, when I know you a little better, I will explain. You will be my guest overnight?"

The Major bowed his acceptance.

"Good. And for me to give an order to your Hottentot, is it permitted?"

Again the Major bowed.

"Again good." Hansen then addressed Jim in the Hottentot's own clicking dialect, instructing him to have the Major's personal equipment carried into one of the huts. When that was done he was to lead the carriers with their loads to a native compound, hidden by jungle growth about three hundred yards distant and on the opposite side of the rise to the one by which the Major had come to the store. And Jim was so surprised at the trader's ability to speak his tongue that he hastened to carry out his orders without looking to the Major for confirmation.

"My people will show them every hospitality," the German said when the carriers moved off. "Save that there will be no drinking. I do not allow that. Now, perhaps you would like to bathe and change. In an hour we will eat—after that, perhaps, we will talk." He eyed the Major keenly. "Yes, after that we will talk."

HE CLAPPED his hands and to the white clad native who came from one of the huts he gave a series of orders in the vernacular of the country. Then he bowed to the Major and went slowly into the bungalow.

The Major did not move for a little while but stared thoughtfully before him.

"This is a bally rum show," he murmured presently as he rose and sauntered slowly over to the hut which had been allotted to him. "I wonder what is the particular bee that is buzzing in his—er—bonnet. At least he's clean. That excuses much madness—if he *is* mad. And of course he isn't. Mad people are so devilishly sane!" He laughed. "That's nonsense, of course, but I know what I mean."

He found his bath ready for him in the hut and his uniform unpacked and clean clothes set out for him. The hut was furnished comfortably but with a Spartan-like simplicity.

He shaved—for the second time that day—bathed and dressed himself in a suit of white duck. A gong sounded as he was brushing his hair—its jet blackness was sprinkled with gray, especially at the temples—back in an immaculate pompadour.

He put down the brushes and considered for a moment whether he should, or not, carry a revolver or a small but deadly automatic. Finally deciding against either, he left the hut and went over to the bungalow.

The German opened the door to him and escorted him into a large room which served as lounge, library and dining room. They sat down at a table spread with an almost feminine daintiness and were served by a native with a scientifically balanced meal.

Not that the Major took much account of the food, he was too absorbed in his host's lecture—it amounted to that!—on the country and the life of its people. Karl Hansen, the Major realized, was something more than a trader; his store and trading ventures were only means to an end—and that end was the scientific study of the native races of Africa. His fund of knowledge was colossal; he knew not only the jungle tribes but those of the south also. He told the Major things that man did not know about the customs of the Zulus and Swazi—and the Major was looked upon as an authority on those peoples. But chiefly Hansen talked—and talked entertainingly—of the jungle peoples.

HE SPOKE of a tribe whose fetish was a cat, whose religion approximated that of ancient Egypt; he spoke of lost cities, ruins of some long forgotten civilization, buried in the jungle swamps; he told stories of mystery workers, of magicians who could

run razor sharp swords through the vitals of their eight-year-old girl assistants and afterwards exhibit the girls unharmed. Magic, he said, dark and evil magic, grew rank amongst the superstitious people of the mangrove swamps.

Frequently he spoke of "the Lake of the Dead" and each time he mentioned it he looked covertly at the Major.

At last, this was after they had finished their meal and were sitting on the porch of the bungalow, the Major asked:

"What is this Lake of the Dead?"

Karl Hansen looked at him sharply.

"It means nothing to you?"

"Nothing at all, old chap. Nothing at all, I assure you," the Major answered airily.

Hansen tugged thoughtfully at his long beard.

"You must have wondered," he said slowly, "at the way I received you when you first came here. I was suspicious of you. No, do not interrupt. I say I was suspicious. I said to myself, 'It is impossible that a man should be such a fool as this one appears and live to reach this place.' Therefore, he is not a fool. Therefore I must go slowly. And I saw how well trained your carriers were and knew that my suspicions were correct. Then I talked with your carriers and the things they told me concerning you!" Hansen shrugged his shoulders and laughed. "My friend, in their eyes you are a god."

"Oh, I say!" the Major murmured uncomfortably.

The German placed his hands on his knees and leaned forward.

"Do not play with me any longer, my friend," he said earnestly. "I know you. I have spent a lifetime studying the black man, but I have not lost the ability to estimate a white man. Surface superficialities do not blind me. I look at you and I see a man dressed as one who has no thought above his personal appearance. Your round, smooth shaven face has an inane, guileless expression. You appear to be soft in a mental as well as a physical sense. Your monocle actually gives you an appearance of imbecility. But I look beyond that. I see that this outward appearance is only an actor's grease paint cleverly applied to make you seem something that you are not. You are over six foot—though you appear less because of your stoop. Your flabbiness is only assumed. I should say that you are very strong — mentally and physically. Your monocle does not hide from me the keen intelligence of your eyes. You are master of yourself and of any situation in which you may find yourself. You know the country and the natives—not perhaps as well as I do, but far better than most white men. You are brave, you are just, you are a man of honor.

"All that I see. Then I ask myself, 'If all this is true—why then does he play a part?' You see I am still suspicious. And then I tell myself that you are an incarnation of the spirit of true adventure. But that you are also very clever. You hide your real self until you see which way I am going to jump. Is that not it?

"Now we will talk as men who understand one another."

"But I do not understand you," the Major said quietly. "Why should you be suspicious of me? What do you fear?"

"I fear all men—white and black," the German said quietly—"until I have proved them. I fear the evil I believe to be hatching at the Lake of the Dead."

"Where is this lake?" the Major asked.

"If I knew," Hansen replied irritably, "I should no longer fear it. I should destroy it! I ask—all the time I ask. But they will not tell me. I search—but I cannot find it. It is very big *tabu*." After a thoughtful pause he continued in a quieter voice, "If you could find it, my friend, you would do the white race a great service. I have fears. I speak of my fears to others and they laugh at me. I put the matter before my people. They laugh and say, 'It is only another of old Karl's delusions.' I write to your people, the authorities in Nigeria, and they send me polite chits saying the matter has been referred to someone for action. And—*du lieber Gott!* No action is taken."

"What do you fear?"

KARL HANSEN looked fiercely at the Major.

"You will not laugh?" he questioned earnestly.

"I will not laugh," the Major promised. "Why should I?"

"If I said that tomorrow the world will

come to an end—you would laugh and think me mad. Perhaps, even now, you think me mad. Yes, I think so. But I am not mad. No. And now I tell you something almost as hard to believe. I fear that a rebellion is brewing at the Lake of the Dead. *Ach!* Do not misunderstand me. I do not speak of a local affair involving the death of a few isolated whites. No. I mean a rebellion that will sweep the whole of Africa. And, because I have no proof, no one will listen to me. They only laugh or write me polite letters."

"And you think the trouble is at present localized at the Lake of the Dead?"

"*Ach.* I am sure of it, my friend. Listen. You know Africa, you know the natives. You know they are not fools. Rid them of their superstitions and their minds are as receptive as ours. Their superstitions are their weakness. But suppose a leader came along, a strong personality with a powerful fetish back of him: given that, and I say that there is nothing these people would not attempt. Yes?"

"Yes," the Major agreed.

"So. Listen—this is the black man's country. In this section of it they outnumber the whites by four thousand to one. Everywhere they outnumber us. They do not like our presence here. They accept us because they are not strong enough to send us away. And why are they not strong enough? No. Do not tell me of our superior arms and inventions of war. They can be overcome. Why then are the natives not strong enough to oust us? I will tell you. It is because they have hitherto been divided against themselves."

"That is true," the Major agreed. "And you suspect that there is a leader at the Lake of the Dead who has a fetish strong enough to break down all tribal *tabus* and unite the black peoples of Africa?"

"*Ja!* Exactly that, my friend."

"But even if that were true," the Major objected, "it would be impossible for them to stage a simultaneous rising. They—"

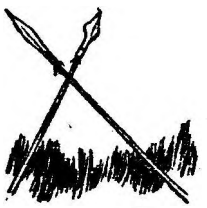
"You say that, my friend," Hansen interrupted quietly, "but you do not believe it. Suppose the word went out that on a certain day—six months, a year hence—at a certain hour, at sun rise, shall we say, was the time appointed. Consider what would happen. Everywhere the native police mutiny, native mine laborers would turn the settlements into a shambles, house servants would hand their employers the morning coffee with one hand and stab them with the other, peaceful kraal natives would become blood lustful devils—

"Ah, but I see I need not continue. You have an imagination."

The Major whistled softly.

"It would be hell. Even if it failed, even if some troops remained loyal. We wouldn't stand an earthly."

"No," the German said grimly. "Our only hope would be a heavenly one. Well, there is my fear. I believe that a leader, supported by a strong fetish, is now preparing for the day. I believe that he lives by the Lake of the Dead. Proof? I have none. None, I tell



you. Nothing but a word caught here, a killing there. And natives from strange tribes have passed through my district. Natives who are the feudal enemies of the people of this district have passed through—unarmed and unharmed. Natives from the north and the south have passed through. In two and threes they came. In two and threes they returned. I have appointed natives I thought I could trust to follow them and report to me their destination. But my trusted men have always returned with word that they have failed to do my bidding. So—I can trust no native. I, myself, have tried to follow these strangers—but I am now too old for the trail. I lost them in the mangrove swamps. I have questioned some of these strangers—and believe me, my friend, I know how to question natives—but they told me nothing. You know how they are?"

THE Major nodded. An African native can conceal the truth as readily as Asiatics are reputed to do. Perhaps more readily, for with them lying is a social virtue.

"Why is the Lake of the Dead chosen

as the headquarters for the leader?" the Major asked.

"The people of this district believe that the lake is the abiding place of their dead. There the spirits live, gaining wisdom, guarded by an enormous spirit snake. Well now, suppose our leader proclaims himself to be a reincarnation of that snake; suppose he claims to possess all the wisdom of all the departed and can perform magic—or conjuring tricks—which justify his claims in the eyes of these superstitious people. What then?"

"I see," the Major said thoughtfully. "He'd be no end of a big pot, wouldn't he? I'd like to look into this. But—" he shrugged his shoulders—"Africa is wide. Have you no clue as to the probable location of the Lake? I suppose it really exists—the Lake, I mean."

"Oh yes. No doubt about its existence. It figures in all their folklore and so on. As to its location, I believe it is in Nigerian territory, just over the border, somewhere near to the native town of Nkami. I will tell you why I think that. Your people had a Resident there. What do I say? They had several residents there, one after another. A sequence of them. And they all died, very suddenly, soon after their arrival. No, my friend, they did not die violently or by poison. Your officials are not fools. They all seem to have an uncanny ability to understand the black man's psychology—even when they can not speak his language. And if these men had died violently, or by poison, your people would have instituted a searching inquiry and would not have rested until they had located the source of trouble. But what are they to do when men just die peacefully in their beds? What did they die of? How should I know? I said not of poison. I should have said, there was no trace of poisoning to be found. But there undoubtedly was a poisoner at work, a dealer in some obscure drug not recognizable by the ordinary man. Yes, I believe such secrets are known to the witch men of this country."

"That is true," the Major agreed. "I have seen—"

"But of course you have seen," the German again interrupted. "But do not talk, please. Listen. What I know I must tell you. Sometimes, lately, I have felt that my every moment is spied upon. I think that death will come to me very quickly. At present they are content to let me suspect, they do not fear me and they do not wish to deal in violence. Violence to a white man is so often followed by a punitive expedition. So they let me live. Besides, I have some friends amongst the natives, even if they will not tell me what I most want to know. Now where was I? Ah, yes. I tell you these residents died and their superiors decided the fever had killed them. So they closed up the Residency. And why not? The people of Nkami and the surrounding district are peaceful. They are content with the white man's rule, they observe his laws! And between your country and mine there is peace and understanding. So. Your people close the Residency and now, save for infrequent visits of a Commissioner, Nkami and its vicinity is left to its own devices. Yes—" Hansen continued anticipating the Major's question— "I have explored that territory with the permission of the Commissioner—he knows my weakness—but I found nothing! Nothing!"

"Doesn't that prove," the Major asked quickly, "that wherever the Lake of the Dead may be, it is not near Nkami?"

THE German shook his head.

"No. You should know better than that, my friend. Listen. I was five years in this place before I knew of the existence of a large native town not ten miles distant. *Ach!* We make pretty maps of this country. We color a big patch and say, 'All this is explored territory!' We make three dots and say here are three towns. We draw lines connecting the dots and say these are the roads which connect those three towns. But I tell you that we know nothing of the country bounded by those lines. We have traveled only the open paths. And so my search for the lake was unsuccessful. But I am no jungle man. I could not cut my way through the mangrove swamps. I was at the mercy of my native servants and could only follow the paths they pointed out to me. I might have passed within twenty yards of the lake, all unknowingly."

"I will find it," the Major said quietly.

"It will be a dangerous search, my

friend," the German warned. "If my fears are well founded, and not the delusions of an old fool, death will dog your footsteps."

"I have spent many years of my life dodging death," the Major replied.

"*Ja!* That I can well believe. I can believe that death has no terrors for you, or for that ugly Hottentot of yours. But I tell you, this time you must fear death. You must run from it. Your death would be no more in this scheme of things than—that!" He slapped his thigh with the flat of his hand, crushing a mosquito which had been feeding there. "I say that in this adventure you must live—for to die, is to fail. You must live, my friend, for the sake of the innocent wives and children of the white men who have made their homes in this country."

More impressed than he cared to admit, the Major said:

"I will remember that—and live." Then he laughed self-consciously. "I feel like a bally musical comedy hero."

"Life is like that," the German replied with grave sententiousness. "It is so often a musical comedy—but now the music is the wailings of the strings of death. When will you start your search, my friend?"

"Tomorrow," the Major replied.

"Good. I think it best that you waste no time. The storm I fear may not break for many years. It may break tomorrow. It may have already broken. Ah, look! How long has that man been sleeping there? If he is asleep." He pointed to a man sprawled on the ground just beyond the bungalow. He shouted angrily and the native sat up, yawning and rubbing his eyes.

"Go to your own place," the German shouted. "You know that I do not trade today."

"I came for medicine, sir," the native replied, rising to his feet. "My wife's first born has a colic."

"And such was the need for haste," Hansen interrupted sarcastically, "that you slept in the sun. O man of lies, I see you! Go!"

"I think he was asleep," the Major said, looking curiously at the German. "And if he was awake—what matter? Even if he heard us and understands English, we said nothing—"

"Nothing," Hansen interrupted, "save that tomorrow you start your search for the Lake of the Dead. I am afraid, I tell you. But come. We will go in and look at the map of the Nkami district together. And I will tell you what I know of the country and its people."

AS THEY entered the bungalow the native walked slowly toward the jungle beyond the settlement clearing it. A few moments later he was racing along a jungle path at top speed. He came presently to a place where the path widened to a little clearing and there, built against the base of a tree, was a crude and hideous figure of a woman modeled from mud. Over it, the skeleton frame-work of a hut had been built from which hung the utensils used by women in their daily tasks.

The man prostrated himself before the image, which was a representation of Nimm, the Ekoi divinity who is, especially, a protector of women.

A voice boomed, seeming to issue from the idol's gaping mouth.

"Let your lips speak of the things your eyes have seen, your ears heard."

"Tomorrow, Great Nimm," the man stammered, "a white man—stranger than any I have before seen—leaves the place of the trader for the place called Nkami. He goes to search for the Lake of the Dead."

"He will not find it. Return. Keep watch. Listen. Remember that I keep an ear to your lips. Should they open to speak of things forbidden, death will enter. Go."

The man crawled backward a few paces on hands and knees then, rising to his feet, turned and hurriedly retraced his steps.

No sooner had he passed out of sight when two women climbed out of the hollow trunk of the tree. One—she was a priestess of Nimm—was old and hideously ugly. The other was a young girl who had scarcely reached her teens. They both laughed softly and mocked the credulity of the man who had brought them the news. The old woman however quickly sobered and turned upon her companion.

"You laugh because he was tricked, daughter, into believing that Nimm, herself, spoke to him," she scolded. "Yet was not my voice Nimm's voice? Now be silent, for I must talk with Nimm. Nor is this trickery."

"And shall I hear Nimm's voice?" the girl asked timidly.

"If your ears are open," the old woman replied dryly. "Now make ready."

THE girl knelt down and smoothed the earth before the idol. That done to the old woman's satisfaction, the girl lifted a woven bag from the hollow trunk, took from it a double handful of powdered white chalk and spread it evenly on the portion of ground she had smoothed. The woman watched her intently.

"That will do," she finally said in a low harsh voice and kneeling down she took a bunch of white feathers and a cartridge case containing a few matches from the bag. In the center of the chalk-strewn space she carefully placed the bunch of feathers, muttering charms as she did so. Then, fumblingly, she lighted a match and applied it to the feathers. The lighting of the match was evidently a great wonder working; the girl was impressed by it as the man had been by the voice of Nimm. Magic working, after all, is only comparative and the marvels of yesterday are the commonplaces of today.

The feathers blazed fiercely, filling the air with acrid fumes. Presently the flames died away and nothing was left but a little pile of ash and slowly disintegrating coils of blue smoke. To the girl's awe-filled eyes it seemed that the smoke assumed a ghostly shape which drifted toward the idol, finally vanishing into its open mouth.

The old woman stared intently at the little heap of ash. She did not move and though her lips moved constantly, no sound came from them. Presently her body stiffened, a film glazed her eyes and she sat like one in a trance. The girl did not move. She scarcely

breathed. A great silence had fallen upon the jungle; even the birds seemed to have ceased their noisy chatter.

At last a heavy sigh burst from the woman's lips and she passed her hand wearily across her eyes.

"Nimm has spoken to me," she said. "Did you hear her voice?" She shivered as if with cold.

The girl shook her head and, in obedience to a sign from the woman, swept away all trace of ash and chalk from the ground.

"It is because I am old, perhaps," the woman moaned. "It may be that I did not hear you aright!"

"What did you hear, Mother?" the girl questioned. "What did Nimm tell you?"

"There is evil threatening. Great evil. Silence. I must think." After a while she said, "Word must be sent to the one who waits."

"The drums?" the girl suggested.

"No, fool! The voice of the drums is too loud. Their speech is understood by the white man at the store. No, I will write a letter. It must be taken to Nimm's house at Nkami. You and the other daughters of Nimm must take it, running very swiftly. Now I write."

From the bag she took a cheap note book and a pencil, once again calling upon the commonplace of civilization to perform what, in the eyes of the girl, was a magic working. She moistened the point of the pencil in her mouth and then, tearing a page from the book, laboriously drew on it pictures which conveyed the following message:

"For the eyes of the head of the Egbo. A white man and a black man have come by the open road to the house of the trader. The trader has discussed our secret with them and tomorrow they leave by the bush paths and after one period of darkness they cross the river and come to Nkami. On the night of the full moon they threaten danger. Kill them."

She signed the communication with an elaborate feather which was her own sign, as sender, then folded the paper and gave it to the girl.

"Speed with this, my daughter," she said. "And see that the word is passed on to the daughters of Nimm who in turn take it upon its journey, that they are carrying Nimm's word and that nothing must slow their feet. Go!"

THE sun was well up the following morning before the Major showed any sign of trekking for the Nigerian border. The German was impatient to see the Major on his way, but that man refused to be hurried.

It seemed that he had stepped out of character or, rather, he had stepped into character—that of a fussy man who was not sure of his own mind. He arranged and rearranged the order in which his carriers were to march. He reapportioned their loads. He found fault with trivial things and, next moment, was commending what he had just blamed. In consequence, his carriers became a disorderly, straggling crowd of shouting, gesticulating natives and Hansen completely lost his temper. More than that, his confidence in the ability of the Major to carry out the search was weakened.

"Is your Baas always like this, Hottentot?" he questioned.

"My Baas is always the same," Jim replied with a chuckle. "But men who do not know him, never see him."

Before Hansen could question him further, Jim ran off to execute some order the Major had shouted in a petulant voice.

Hansen's fever-yellow eyes brightened. *"Ach!"* he told himself. "I am a fool. He is playing a part to deceive those who watch." He looked at the natives who had gathered to witness the departure of the three-eyed white man and his carriers. "And he will deceive them. Even though they listened to the tales the carriers undoubtedly told of him last night as they sat round the cook fires. They will believe what they now see and hear and they will call lies the tales the carriers told. *Ja!*" He nodded his head ponderously. "That is so. For a little while, even I was deceived."

Just then the Major pronounced himself satisfied with the carriers' order of marching and started them off on the trail, Jim at their head.

Slowly, with much excited laughter and exchange of ribald banter with the local natives, the long line of carriers, their loads balanced on their heads, moved away from the place and made their way along one of the jungle paths leading from the clearing.

The Major came up to say his farewell to Karl Hansen.

"Good luck, Major," the German said gravely. "But you must *make* your luck."

The Major nodded.

"I will do my best. But don't be so bally serious, dear old sir. We are the—er—what-do-you-call-it of all eyes. Laugh an' be merry—an' all that."

"It's hard to laugh, Major, in the face of tragedy. And I've been facing tragedy for a long time—alone."

"Oh yes, of course. I sympathize with you. But really! I refuse to accept the role of the noble hero setting forth on a forlorn hope. Nothing like that, give you my word. Don't worry. I'll find what there is to find. Now take care of yourself. You're looking very fagged this morning—"

"Ja! And I feel fagged. I wish I could come with you, Major. You'll need someone to interpret for you. But I can't come. My body would fail me before I'd gone a mile. And I have no natives whom I trust to send with you. You must trust no one. Not even a white man—until you have proved him. Yes. I mean that. I believe this game is so great that renegade white men may be mixed up in it. You'd better go now. Your carriers are out of sight."

The Major looked around.

"By jove, so they are," he gasped. "I must run. Toodle-oo!"

He waved his hand in an airy gesture of farewell and hastened to catch up with the carriers, shouting, "Hi! Wait for me!"

THE local natives tittered derisively; they burst into loud guffaws of laughter when the Major headed for a jungle trail which led in the opposite direction to the one the carriers had taken.

Contemptuous, shouted instructions from Hansen put him on the right trail and he finally vanished from sight down the right path.

The last view the local natives had of him increased their merriment; he had looked the personification of inane bewilderment.

Hansen slowly retired to his bungalow with dragging footsteps. The strength which had supported him seemed to have suddenly vanished. Now that he had put the burden of his fear on another's shoulders, he surrendered to his physical infirmi-

ties. He was old, but Africa had aged him beyond his years.

Once he had caught up with his carriers, the Major walked behind the rearmost one, occupied by his thoughts, arguing with himself, discussing the pros and cons of the venture on which he was now embarked. Typically, he gave audible expression to his thoughts and, in this way, cleared his mind of doubts.

"It is abso-bloomin'-lutely the maddest thing I've ever done. The Lake of the Dead! Pouf! I don't believe it exists. Sounds like the title of a sensational yarn—one of those bally hair-raisers of the jolly old dark Continent written by Johnnies who've read a travel book and think they know the bally country. And if this lake does exist—what of it? There's no sense in old Hansen's theory of a rebellion brewing there. The old chap's as mad as a March hare. No, he isn't, though. He's sane. He's most awfully sane! Then is he playing some dirty game which my presence at his store would upset? Drug selling? Slave running? Nonsense! That's the wildest thought I've had yet. The old boy's one of the best. Quite. Nothing fishy about him. Therefore, there *must* be something back of his theory. By jove, yes! And it's all so bally plausible. I must have a talk with Jim.

"Gad, that's pretty average ghastly!"

At that moment he had come to a widening of the trail where stood an idol of sun-baked mud built to the honor of Nimm. Nearby squatted an old woman who glared malevolently at him.

THE Major took off his helmet and bowed grandiloquently to the old crone. Her expression did not change and, somewhat disturbed in his mind because he could no longer face her basilisk-like stare, the Major hurried on.

"You saw the woman, Kabo?" he asked the man who trekked at the rear of the line of carriers.

"Truly!"

"Why does she sit there? Why did she not give me a greeting?"

"Who knows?" the carrier replied indifferently. "Who looks for sane reason in the behavior of a woman?"

"Perhaps," the Major said tentatively, "the image beside which she sat was that of a Spirit and the woman, its priestess, vowed to silence."

"*Wu!*" Kabo shook his head and laughed. "That was no Spirit image. And what will keep a woman silent. If you know—teach it to us men, master."

The Major laughed and dropped back a few paces. He knew from what Hansen had told him and the books he had read, that the image was that of Nimm and that the woman was a priestess of Nimm. And he knew that the carrier was aware of that. Then why had Kabo made evasive replies about a matter which could be of no importance? Had it been one of the other carriers the Major would have understood, for a native loves to make a mystery out of nothing and to withhold information—of the most casual nature—glorying, thereby, in his own superior knowledge. But Kabo was, after Jim, the Major's most valuable aid and had given many instances of his unquestioning loyalty.

The Major ordered the word to be sent up the line of carriers that he wanted Jim to join him.

"What is it, Baas?" Jim asked a few minutes later.

"I don't know, Jim. Save—that I am a little afraid."

"Of what? Show me what you fear, Baas." The Hottentot unslung his rifle and pumped a cartridge into the breech. Since he had been instructed in the use of firearms and had proved his ability, Jim was apt to think that a rifle bullet could solve all mysteries, and banish all dangers.

The Major laughed softly.

"A breeze blows, Jim. A bullet can not stop it."

"What harm in a breeze, Baas?"

"No harm. But sometimes the breeze becomes a great wind before which trees fall."

"Even if the trees are full grown and well rooted, Baas?"

"Even such," the Major said slowly. "And a bullet will not stop the breeze—or the gale."

"And does this breeze spring from the Lake of the Dead for which we now search?"

"How do you know we search for that?" the Major asked sharply.

JIM laughed ruefully. "Who does not know of it? *Wu!* The carriers were full of it last night. They talked of nothing else. And I—I felt a fool because I knew nothing of the Baas' intentions. And there were some, Baas, who desired to turn back and would have done so but for the laughter of the women who listened to them."

"Why did the women laugh, Jim?"

The Hottentot scratched his head thoughtfully.

"I do not know, Baas," he confessed. "I thought last night that they laughed because the carriers were afraid. But now—" He shook his head.

"They said nothing, Jim?"

"Nothing, Baas. They only laughed."

"And what made you of the old woman who sat beside the idol?"

"*Au-a!* These jungle folks are fools, Baas. They believe in ghosts." Jim himself was ridden by many superstitions, but the Major made no comment. "The idol was in honor of a spirit they call Nimm. The woman was Nimm's priestess."

"What did the carriers do when they passed by, Jim?"

"They looked the other way, Baas, pretending not to see. But they saw! What means it all? What is this Lake of the Dead? Why do we search for it?"

"This is for your ears alone, Jim," the Major said. And he told the Hottentot all that Hansen had told him.

"*Wo-we!*" Jim muttered. "It is possible, Baas. Truly. And I could find some reasons why I should work against you in this. But I can think of ten times ten as many reasons why I should not. I can see this land drenched with the blood of white men. I can hear the *Ghee* of stabbing spears until not a white man is left to tell the tale. And then what? *Au-a!* Then spear would be turned upon spear. You white men have brought much of evil to this land, Baas, but much that is good. And so—unless death first finds us—we will find this lake and stamp on the head of the snake that is its spirit. Even if I knew you not, Baas, I should still say that. What proper man has any love for a snake?"

The path they were traveling had narrowed so that they were no longer able to walk abreast; indeed there was scarcely room for one man to walk without tearing his flesh in the thorns which hedged the path. In places creepers laced themselves into a canopy overhead, blotting out the sun. Underfoot the ground became ankle-deep in mud; they tripped over tough roots. The heat was comparable to the steam room of a Turkish bath and the jungle, on either

side of the path, seemed of a sudden to be filled with mysterious whispering gurgles.

The pace of the carriers slackened and they came at last to a halt, passing the word that the trail ahead was blocked.

"No," Jim said decisively, when the Major ordered him to stay at the base of the line. "I come with you. If the carriers desert, we will have lost nothing but what we can replace. But if I lose you, or you lose me—*Wo-we!* That, I think, would be the end."

"Come then, Jim."

THE two men made their way up the long line of carriers and coming finally to the head questioned the leader regarding the barrier which blocked progress—for none was apparent.

The man—his name was Agbo—pointed to a bunch of white feathers hanging from the branch of a tree directly over the trail and about five feet from the ground.

"Are you a woman, Agbo?" the Major asked contemptuously. "Do you let a woman's *ju-ju* halt your feet? *Wu!*"

Agbo grinned self-consciously. The arrival of the Major had destroyed for the moment his superstitious fear and filled him with courage.

"I am a man, I have no fear," he said proudly. "I only waited that you might see for yourself. Look!"

He caught hold of the bunch of feathers, broke them from the twine which held them and trampled them in the mire at his feet.

He laughed at the gasp of awe which burst from the lips of the carriers.

"Hold fast to your courage, Agbo," the

Major said gravely. Had it been possible he would have stopped the native from treating the *ju-ju* so contemptuously. Not because he had any fear of its supernatural powers but because of the effect the deed would later have on Agbo's mind. With Jim close at his heels, he led the way forward, Agbo, still laughing, followed. And, save that the other carriers took great pains not to tread on the feathers, they came on fearlessly. They knew that a *tabu* had been broken but Agbo was the offender and on him the punishment would fall. They actually joked in anticipation of his discomfiture when a full realization of what he had done would come to him.

THE trekking now became more difficult and the Major was forced to slacken his pace; the trail was guessed rather than seen and, presently, losing it altogether, the Major was forced to take his direction by compass.

They were traveling now through the outskirts of a mangrove forest. The ground was a sea of mud above which was a web of roots on which crawled enormous crabs. Overhead was a roof formed of black, leathery leaves and closely woven stems. From every branch cords dropped to the ground where they had taken root, adding to the chaotic maze which stretched away into the abysmal gloom. The air was heavy with a stench like that of a charnel house.

The place echoed dismally to the wailing of drab colored birds; mud skippers were everywhere—either sliding over the fearful slime or swimming in the narrow streams, which here and there found a precarious way amongst the tangle of roots. Crocodiles sprawled obscenely in the mud, staring in imbecile savagery at the men whose passing disturbed their slumbers. Snakes slithered hissingly away at the approach of the party; bats, horrors of a nightmare, winged their way ceaselessly through the gloom, swift moving shuttles weaving a shroud of death as they feasted on the insects which thickened the air.

The Major and Jim halted beside the grinning skeleton of a man which Jim found half submerged in the ooze. There was nothing to say how the man had died. Nor were they greatly concerned in that. There were so many agents of death in that inferno that it would have been senseless to attempt to seek actual causes. The Major was more interested in the size of the dead man and in the shape of his skull. Jim was interested in the head ring which he found near to the grinning skull and the armlets which still ringed the skeleton's arms.

"He was no man of this country," the Major said, as the laborious trek was resumed. "A Zulu, I think, Jim."

"Truly, Baas," Jim agreed. "And a chief. Did you mark the head ring?"

The Major nodded.

"What was a Zulu doing in this country, Jim?" he asked.

But, if Hansen's theory was correct, he knew the answer. The Zulu had made the tremendous journey from the south, evading the officials of the country through which he passed, in order to satisfy himself as to the strength of the fetish which was brewing rebellion at the Lake of the Dead.

"Wu!" Jim exclaimed. "There must be a great magic at this lake to bring a Zulu out of the sun into this! And why are we permitted to live, Baas? Why, if they know you are searching the place of their secret—and they do know—do they not kill us? In this place a thousand men might perish and no trace be found of them."

"It may be that they are sure we cannot discover their secret. Or perhaps they are being very crafty. Yes, I think that is it. If too many men disappear, soldiers would come looking for the cause of things. So I think we are in no danger until it is evident to them that only by killing can they preserve their secret. Yes. We are in no danger of death—save for that!"

As he spoke the Major drew his revolver and fired at the ugly head of a venomous snake which rose up before them to dispute their passage.

"Wo-we!" Jim murmured as he stepped over the headless, but still squirming, snake. "Shall I ever be as quick and as true with the little gun as that? But I think that what you say is true and if so, the danger is a great one. There is a cunning behind all this greater than the cunning of man. *Au-a!* Consider. We have searched out other secrets —and always death menaced us before the first scent of it had reached our nostrils."

TOWARDS sundown they came out of the mangrove swamp on to firm ground where there was little jungle growth, and that little did not check their progress. The carriers—they had been very silent in the swamps—now broke into laughter and sang cheerfully. All save Agbo. He walked by himself, moodily silent.

They came soon to yam and plantain farms and then, after passing through a grove of bamboos, they came to a good-sized village built on the bank of a wide, sluggishly flowing river.

The chief of the place proved to be a character of a man—if not a man of character. He made exorbitant demands on the Major in return for the hospitality requested of him and when the Major paid him without protest, loudly bewailed his own folly in asking for so little. But he was an engaging rascal and readily answered the Major's questions—the conversation was carried on in the pidgin English which is the lingua franca of the West Coast. He himself escorted the Major around his village and, finally, to the Guest Hut which was scrupulously clean. In the meantime his people looked after the comforts of the carriers.

"I can find nothing wrong here, Jim," the Major said as, having bathed and changed, he sat in the doorway of the guest hut, smoking a cigarette before turning in for the night. "They seem to have nothing to hide—"

"For that reason I fear them," Jim answered swiftly.

But Jim's fears proved to be unfounded and in the morning, though he expressed regret that their stay had been so brief, the chief willingly loaned the Major his canoes—each with a complement of paddlers—to carry the Major's party on the next stage of their journey to the town of Nkami.

Shortly after sunrise, a start was made. Jim and the Major were in the first canoe, their four paddlers heading up stream, setting a fast pace for the others.

FOR a time the banks of the river were lined with mangroves. Then the mangroves gave way to palms and the palms, in turn, to giant arum with their green sheaths and purple-splashed cream flowers. Further back from the river's edge grew mimosa and trees bearing white flowers which shone like pearls amidst their dark leaves. Here and there were beaches of white sand on which—their presence destroyed the beauty of the scene—crocodiles sunned themselves.

At one point an enormous python, holding a still fluttering white plumaged bird in its mouth, swam across the river, passing just in front of the Major's canoe.

Jim leveled his rifle and would have fired, but the Major stopped him for he had noted the attitude of the paddlers; they had ceased paddling and were watching the big snake's progress with a strange mingling of fear and adoration. But when a current eddy brought several white feathers which had fallen from the bird close to them, they dug their paddles into the water in order to avoid them and sang happily when success crowned their efforts. One of the other canoes was not so fortunate. The feathers brushed against its bows and clung there. And in that canoe was Agbo—the man who had defied the tabu.

The men in the other canoes watched silently.

Now Agbo was no river man but he was suddenly seized with a desire to emulate the paddlers. Perhaps he thought that action would dispel his gloomy thoughts. At any rate, he took up a spare paddle and boasting that he was as good as any river man, clumsily aped the gracefully powerful strokes of the paddlers. As his hand neared the surface of the water on the third down stroke, the jaws of a crocodile closed on his wrist and he was dragged overboard and under. The canoe tilted and for a moment it looked as if all its occupants would be tilted into the water. But the paddlers righted it with superhuman efforts.

But of Agbo there was no sign. The suddenness of the drama was uncanny. And it all happened in a hushed silence. There had been no outcry from Agbo. He had not struggled.

There was nothing the Major could do—nothing that anyone could do. It was just another of those tragedies which are a commonplace in Africa.

But the carriers and the river men were positive that they had seen a manifestation of the supernatural. The crocodile had been

sent by Nimm to avenge her on the man who had broken her tabu. The snake, which was doubtless Nimm herself, had used the white feathers to indicate the canoe in which was the man who had broken her tabu. The logic of that conclusion was, to their minds, unanswerable. Even Jim believed that.

"Look, Baas," he said in an awed voice, "the feathers no longer stick to the canoe."

THE Major laughed—not callously, but in order to put heart into the natives. His attempt was a failure and he himself surrendered to the gloom. The superstitions —so horribly justified in the taking of Agbo —for the moment blotted out the sun of reason. The sparkling waters of the river hid death in their depths. The splendor of the flower-decked banks hid yet other deaths, no less cruel. It was all part of an Africa which discounted the laughing hospitality of the village they had just left; an Africa which made possible the uprising feared by Hansen. Nothing was as it appeared to be. Only death was real.

But the Major did not linger very long on such gloomy thoughts. He challenged Jim to a shooting match, and for a time the quiet of the river was broken by the report of firearms. Gradually the magic of the guns overcame the sullen fear of Nimm and of Nimm's vengeance. The carriers forgot the fate which had overtaken Agbo. They shouted, they sang songs, they raced the canoes.

And so they came while the sun was still high in the sky to a wide beach on the opposite side of the river to that on which the village of the paddlers was built. No crocodiles basked on the beach, nor was there any spoor to indicate that they or any other creatures had crossed its smooth whiteness. And there the Major, Jim and the carriers disembarked and unloaded the Major's equipment.

As soon as this was done the paddlers pushed off into deep water and paddled down stream at a frantic speed. They had not waited for the reward the Major had promised them; they shouted no farewells. Speed of departure was the only thing which concerned them.

"Is it a trap, Baas?" Jim asked, looking suspiciously toward the jungle.

"I think not, Jim. Perhaps there is some magic here which forbids men from the other side to land."

"*Wow!* I like not talk of magic. I remember the tabu Agbo broke and the punishment which came to him. Better talk to the carriers, Baas."

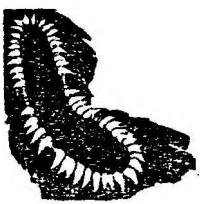
The Major nodded and went to the carriers who were standing stiffly beside the pile of loads. Stark, unreasoning fear was in their eyes.

"Pick up your loads," the Major ordered curtly. "We march."

They would not have listened to reason, but they obeyed the order automatically. They would have obeyed any order just then—even had it been to wade out into the river and into the jaws of waiting crocodiles.

WALKING as if their feet were trapped in quicksand, the carriers followed the Major and Jim up the beach and up the steep bank. And yet, when they reached the top of the bank they became once more a happy, carefree group of men; it was the Major and Jim who looked worn and haggard. But then, they had been fighting the carriers' fear, taking upon themselves the mental strain which had weighted them.

Just back from the river bank was a tumbledown, three-room hut which had been a well preserved Rest House during the time there had been a British official resident at Nkami. Before it stood a high pole which still bore traces of white paint. A symbol of white man's justice had once flown from its peak, but the flag it now flew



was a grotesque fetish and at the base of it was a sacrifice offering to Nimm.

In obedience to a few curt orders from the Major, the carriers fell into an orderly line and the journey was continued, the Major and Jim leading the way along a narrow path which ran through a broad and well-kept road of sand and gravel. Giant

palms and ferns fringed the road and cotton trees towered high above the surrounding bush.

They passed several frail ju-ju huts and stretching across the road from each was a length of twine supporting, in the center, a bunch of white feathers.

At each barrier the carriers begged the Major to turn back; each time he, himself, broke the tabu, taking upon himself the curse and opening the road to the feet of others.

A native came suddenly into view round a bend of the road ahead. He was running swiftly, his head thrown back like a sprinter nearing the tape. He shouted hoarsely and waved his hands. Then he seemed to stumble and pitched forward on his face, plowing up a shower of dust. He rolled over and was very still.

Bidding the carriers put down their loads and stand on guard, facing toward the jungle, the Major and Jim ran to the fallen man. As they did so, shrouded forms darted out of the jungle, stooped over the man and then vanished again.

A few moments later the Major was kneeling beside the stranger. An arrow, its feathers were white, stuck in his naked chest. The wound was not deep and the point had touched no vital organ. But the arrow was tipped with poison. Death had come to the man in one agonizing stab of pain.

The Major rose and looked thoughtfully into the bush at the side of the road.

"What do you make of it, Jim?" he asked.

The Hottentot shrugged his shoulders.

"He is dead, Baas. We know how he died. But why did they kill him? *Wu!* They may have had a hundred reasons. But what good is that to us if we know not one?"

"I am in doubt, Jim," the Major said. "This is a bunch of feathers I cannot destroy. This man was running from something he feared—and the fear caught up with him."

"I think that death kept pace with him in the jungle, Baas," Jim said. "I think they were playing with him. They could have killed him at any time, but they waited until he was in sight of us. Then they killed him—as a warning to us. And now I am a little afraid. They could bring death to us, just as easily. Here, where the trail is wide, evil falls." Jim looked about him apprehensively.

"It is the broad road which leads to destruction," the Major said softly in English. Then, in the vernacular, "This killing may be something that does not touch us. Perhaps—"

"Men come running, Baas," Jim interrupted quietly. "Do we fight?"

"No, Jim—unless fighting is forced on us, we are men of peace. We are searching for—what are we searching for?"

"I know what we will find," Jim retorted gloomily. "Death!"

AS HE spoke six men, armed with spears, raced round the bend in the road. They came to a panting halt beside the body of the dead man and one, the leader, bent over him and then, satisfied he was dead, straightened himself and saluted the Major with every sign of great respect.

"O man, I see you," the Major said, speaking very slowly in a dialect he hoped would be understood. "Why was this man killed?"

The native replied in English that was a little better than the Kroo-boy English of the Coast.

"This man be bad mans, sar," he said. "He lib for work for white man trader, sar. White mans, him bad too. This mans, he try to poison master's chop, he steal, he look bad ways at women of Mbaw—him being chief of Nkami. This man break many tabus. Mbaw he take this mans and put him in hut. By-an'-by he give this mans to Government man. Mbaw keep white man's law. But this mans, he run away, first he killing mans who guard his hut. We mans run after him to catch. But death catch him first. We glad. You kill him?"

The Major shook his head and pointed significantly to the feathered arrow protruding from the dead man's chest.

"Death came to him from the bush," he said.

"*Wu!*" the native exclaimed. "Many deaths live for bush, white man. This mans break many tabus. That I have said. I thinking the makers of the tabus kill him. Mebbeso."

The Major shrugged his shoulders, indicating that he had no further interest in

the matter, and announced his intention of heading without further delay for Nkami.

The natives made no protest. They shouted extravagant praises of the Major and of all white men and, through their spokesman, assured the Major that he would be welcomed like a king by their chief, Mbaw.

The Major shouted an order to his carriers and walked on with Jim along the road.

As they came to the bend Jim looked back over his shoulder.

"*Wo-we!*" he exclaimed. "The carriers follow and the armed men walk with them. *Wu!* The ghost folk have come again from the bush. They are bending over the dead man. They have picked him up. They have vanished with him into the bush again."

ABOUT the middle of the afternoon they came to Nkami, a large town of clean, well-built huts built in the center of a large clearing on a rise of land.

They were greeted by Mbaw, the chief, and many of his people.

Mbaw was a portly man with keen intelligent eyes. He had, he told the Major after the customary exchange of compliments and presents, traveled a great deal in his youth, having been sent to England by a missionary when a boy. Since then:

"I have been all over the world," he said, speaking English with ease. "I have cleaned shoes in New York and sold papers in London. But it was all no good. No place outside this country for a black man. So I came back. I was the son of a chief. Now I am a chief. A big frog in a little puddle. And that is best. Yes."

The Major nodded. He was tired and filled with a sense of the futility of his mission and doubted his wisdom in accepting Hansen's theory. On the surface everything was normal. There was no guile in Mbaw's face. Only kindliness. The people who crowded behind him did not comport themselves like men who were guarding an important secret. And yet—

Henson was not an imaginative fool! The killing of the man by the shrouded figures was to be explained. And yet—

Mbaw, the man who had traveled all over the world, who had rubbed elbows with civilization and who must have known that the magic workings attributed to ju-ju were only tricks, was himself a victim of ju-ju beliefs. He wore charms about his neck, he spoke in hushed whispers of the Egbo House and he was an Elephant Soul!

"Yes," he continued after he had spoken of his experiences in Harlem, "I became sick of all that. So I came back here. The Government said 'no' at first. They were afraid I'd teach my people things it is better they should not know. *Wu!* There is nothing they do not know. But I spoke to the Government people and they let me come back. For a little while they sent a Resident to stay near me, but when they saw that I was their man, they closed the Residency. Yes. They trust me. As they should. I am always working for my people. In the daytime I am Mbaw. In the night time I enter the body of an elephant and go through the bush searching out, and crushing, any evil that may threaten my people."

"You do what?" the Major asked sharply.

"I become an elephant. You understand, surely? I have that power. I am an elephant soul."

He said that in a calm matter-of-fact tone that permitted no doubt. It had a chilling effect upon the Major. The man was not mad. He claimed the ability to send his spirit abroad in an animal's body just as he might have said, "When I am hungry, I eat."

And he expected his statement to be as easily accepted.

"Yes, yes, of course," the Major stammered. "I am a soul too. Can't think what, at the moment. I—er—"

He came to a confused stop. It was evident that Mbaw did not appreciate his levity and the Major was annoyed at his own lack of self-restraint. He looked at the rows of natives who stood listening to the conversation of their Chief with the white man; he looked at the rows of huts, at the magic symbols which were prominently displayed everywhere—specially in front of the Egbo house and the House of Nimm. And it was as if dark shadows had crossed the sun and the Major shivered, chilled by some intangible fear.

A white man reeled into view. He was dressed in a filthy linen suit. His hair was

long and unkempt, his face had not felt the clean touch of a razor for many days.

The Major's eyes hardened; they were filled with a light which steeled their blueness. He had nothing but contempt for a white man who forgot his color and betrayed his race—as it seemed evident this man had done.

"Hi, Mbaw," the newcomer hiccoughed, pushing his way roughly through the watching natives, cursing them and threatening them with his closed fist. "Did that swine of a native of mine escape?"

"No," Mbaw said curtly.

"Then give the beggar to me!" the other shouted. "I'll flay the skin off him." He looked at the Major and laughed derisively. "Oh hell, look at Percy! What are you doin' here?"

With his hand outstretched he walked with an affected gesture to the Major and cursed when that man refused to shake his hand.

"Hi, don't be so high and mighty, mister," he whined. "I may be rough and ready but I'm a good friend to have and a bloody bad enemy. Hell, yes!"

"Pull yourself together, man," the Major said curtly. "You're drunk. Go and sleep it off, and then when you're washed and in a sober state, I'll talk with you."

"You'll talk with me now—or my name ain't Johnson. 'Crack' Johnson, they call me." He paused a moment and leered at the Major as if expecting his name to be recognized. He continued. "You think I'm drunk. Mebbe I am. But I'm sick too. My native tried to poison me. Ain't that right, Mbaw?"

"Yes," the chief assented unwillingly. "But it is best that you do what this man says—"

"Hi," Johnson interrupted truculently, "you talk native talk. Don't try to put your 'I'm as good as you are' stuff with me. You're only a native, see. I don't care where you've been or what you've seen. You're only fit to black a white man's shoes. That's all. Why, you swine—"

HE RAISED his hand threateningly. Then in a milder tone he asked:

"Where's that native of mine?"

"He's dead," Mbaw said.

"Dead?" The news seemed to sober Johnson. "I didn't want him killed. He was a good servant. He knew my little ways. He only poisoned my grub to give me a scare because I thrashed him. He— Who killed him? Your warriors?"

"No, he was dead before they reached him. This white man saw him die."

"Did you kill him?"

"No," the Major said slowly. "He was killed by a poisoned arrow shot by someone hiding in the bush. Masked figures—"

"Hu!" Johnson interrupted with a wild laugh. "That's funny that is, Mbaw. More magic. And you call yourself civilized. You boast you've been all over the world and you can't stop your blasted secret murdering societies from killing a good native."

"You didn't talk like that when you came to me and appealed for protection. Perhaps

I am not civilized nor—if you are—do I want to be. This palaver is finished."

To the Major's surprise Johnson accepted that without further protest and squatting sullenly on his haunches muttered drunkenly to himself. He looked the picture of degradation—a white man who had ceased to be a white man.

The Major looked at Mbaw and detected a look of savage exultation on the native's face; he seemed to be gloating over Johnson. The next moment he was blandly ingratiating.

"I am sorry that you find this white man here," he said to the Major. "He is a trader. He tries to sell gin to my people. He is a liar, a cheat, and a bully. My people want to kill him. But I hold them to the white man's law—which, in things like this is not just—and hold him until the Commissioner visits us again. It is better that Johnson stay here under my protection, where I can offset the evil that he may do, than set him free to rove through the country.

"And now I must leave you. I go to see that your carriers are being well treated. If

there is anything you desire—you have only to ask."

He raised his hand in a farewell salute and walked away, followed by his subjects.

The Major glanced at Johnson and then went into the guest hut where his carriers had put his personal equipment. He came out a few minutes later, carrying a wicker chair which he placed on the porch of the hut, to find that Johnson was still there.

He started to speak to the man, thought better of it and sat down in silence. He planned vaguely to approach Johnson on the morrow, if he were sober, with the view of enlisting his support. He would have to move carefully, he decided. Hansen had warned him to trust no one until he had first tested him. And how test a drunken trader who would make a useful tool in the hands of the smooth Mbaw?

JOHNSON now began to rave in a maudlin voice, cursing Mbaw and the country, bewailing the death of his servant and the sickness which weakened him. The Major was about to tell him to get to his own hut when he thought he detected a sane sequence of statements in the man's ravings.

The Major moved his chair a little nearer the sprawling figure—yet the movement was not an obvious one—lighted a cigarette and was apparently lost in contemplation of the smoke rings which escaped from his parted lips. Actually he was listening to Johnson's ravings.

"I'll show 'em, the swine. They can't pull wool over my eyes. I know what they're up to. They've got a big ju-ju. At the Lake of the Dead. A good name that—Lake of the Dead!"

Curses and inarticulate snifflings accompanied all that he said. Johnson continued:

""Everybody thought old Karl Hansen mad. But I didn't."

The Major flicked the ash off his cigarette.

"Is it necessary for you to act like this?" he asked in a low voice, his lips scarcely moving.

Johnson's reply to that question was interspersed with a burst of drunken song.

"Yes. They've got spies everywhere. They've found me out. I'm through. I know too much. They mustn't suspect you. Dangerous to talk. You think I'm a white kaffir—act up to that!"

As he spoke Johnson lurched to his feet and reeling towards the Major, cursed him viciously.

"Get out of here," the Major exclaimed, and his anger was not all assumed. Johnson's curses got under his skin. "Get out!"

He rose from his chair just as Johnson swung his fist at his jaw. The Major evaded the blow and the two men closed in a furious struggle.

"Fine," Johnson breathed in his ear. "Keep it up. And shout—make a noise. But listen . . . Good . . . Ouch! Pull your blows, man, or I'll be out before it's time. Listen . . . Your personal servant, can you trust him? No matter whether you can or not. Send him to buy some soap from me about sun-down . . . Use what I give him yourself . . . Soap washes away dirt, and this is a filthy mess. Now—knock me out!"

The two men separated as if by mutaul consent. For a moment their eyes met in appraisal and admiration. Then Johnson, bellowing with anger, rushed once again to the attack and ran into a beautifully timed uppercut which sent him sprawling, and out.

As the Major stepped back, rubbing his hands together as if to remove some contamination from them, several natives suddenly appeared from behind an adjacent hut. Amongst them was the man who had led the pursuit of Johnson's native.

"He lib for dead, sah?" he asked, indicating Johnson with a jerk of his head.

"No," the Major replied, speaking very swiftly. "He is only stunned. He will be unconscious for five or ten minutes, perhaps longer. That is all. And he will be sober when he wakes up. Have him carried to his pig sty. He's a filthy brute."

"He is indeed," the native replied. "He is—" He stopped, looked covertly at the Major and continued. "Berry good, sah. We take this mans to him hut. More what you say, I no savvy."

The Major indicated by a wave of his hand that it was of no consequence.

"But he did understand," he murmured to himself as he sat down again in his chair and watched the natives pick up Johnson and carry him away.

JIM then came to the hut at a run.

"What is it, Baas? Men told me that you fought with the evil white man and—"

"It is finished, Jim," the Major said quietly. "And, Jim, we will talk very little, and that softly, of the thing we came here to do. This place has many ears, Jim. And some of them may understand even your clicking speech. Do not forget. We know nothing. We are harmless fools here to see the country and to hunt. That is all. Where have you been?"

"Drinking beer, Baas," Jim admitted, "and talking with the men. It is a heady brew they make here and it opened my lips. *Au-a!* The lies it made me tell." Jim grinned. Then sobering quickly he added, "The carriers drink too. They boast so wildly that no one believes them."

The Major laughed softly.

"Perhaps it is as well," he said.

After that they talked for a while of the incidents of the day's journey, of the tragedy of the carrier who was taken by the crocodile and the killing of the man by the shrouded figures. They spoke too of Mbaw and of the hospitality he had shown them.

It was nearly sundown when the Major said suddenly, and in a loud voice:

"Go to the hut of the trader, Jim, and buy some soap."

"But, Baas!" Jim began, intending to remind the Major that they had a good supply of soap on hand. A warning look in the Major's eye stopped him and he said, "But, Baas, the trader will beat me—because you beat him. He is an evil man and—"

"He will not beat you," the Major said. "And if he does, I will reckon with him."

"Small service that will be to me, Baas," Jim grumbled. "But if you order it, I will go."

He departed grumblingly on his errand, returning about fifteen minutes later with a small cake of scented soap in a gaudy paper wrapper.

"I do not like this place," he said as he gave the soap to his Baas. "Things happen and I do not understand the why of them."

"No, Jim?" the Major questioned casually. He seemed to be concerned with nothing more serious than the juggling trick he was performing with the cake of soap.

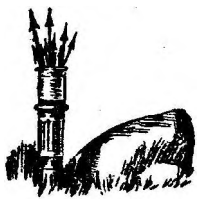
"No, Baas," Jim said. "Listen, Baas.

When I came to the trader's hut, there were many men sitting on the ground nearby. They stopped me from entering the hut and demanded my business. I told them that you had sent me to buy soap and while we were talking the trader came to the door of the hut and bade me enter. He swore at me. He called you by names which made those who listened laugh like the apes they are. I went into the hut and saw other men there—one of them was the man who led the warriors in chase of the man who was killed.

"Again I asked for soap and the trader looked in many places for some to give me—though there was plenty on a shelf just in front of where I stood. When I asked the trader why he did not give me that, he swore at me and said, 'That is a man's soap, Hottentot. I look for soap fitting for the soft fool who is your Baas! Then he gave me the soap I have given you, Baas. But first he held it to the nose of a man who was in the darkness at the back of the hut. I think that man was Mbaw. And that man laughed.

"And then, Baas, as I was returning here, a woman stopped me and said that she had no husband. She spoke my tongue, Baas. I told her I had four wives and had no wish for another. She laughed, but she was angry when I would not listen to her soft promises. Then she snatched the soap from my hand and undid the paper so that she could smell it better. Or so she said. But—*au-a,* the folly of women!—she held the paper this way and that, pretending to read the words that are written on it.

"She laughed, gave me the paper back, called me a fool again and bade me run



before her husbands came and beat me for speaking love words to her. *Wow!"*

Jim looked indignantly at the Major.

"Wow!" he said again. "You have not listened, Baas."

"I listened, Jim," the Major assured him with a laugh. "But now get my bath ready. I will have skoff before it gets dark."

"There will be no darkness," Jim grumbled, "save in my mind. The moon is nearly full, Baas."

Ten minutes later the Major was preparing for his bath in one of the rooms of the guest hut. The room was lighted by two candle lanterns. It was oppressively hot for the room was low-roofed, windowless and the door was firmly closed. Jim stood on guard outside that door, to give the Major warning should anyone come to the hut.

WHEN the Major was undressed he unwrapped the paper enclosing the cake of soap and subjected it to a close examination, turning it this way and that, holding it up to the candle light, glancing swiftly through the printed advertisement. Finding nothing there, he examined the cake of soap then nodded understandingly and split the cake in two with his hunting knife. It parted easily, for it had previously been split and cunningly joined together again. The center of it was hollow and in that hollow was a piece of waterproof paper, folded many times.

The Major smoothed the piece of paper out and read the neat, almost microscopic writing which filled it:

No time for conventional courtesies. Deduce you are here for same reason as myself. Know you come from Karl Hansen. Lake of dead is three miles due north of here, close to Cave of Bats. Three cotton trees mark it. The path is hidden and guarded. Hansen's fear of rebellion brewing is justified. I have been unable to discover what the big fetish is or who is the leader. I suspect Mbaw. He, by the way, is not an African. He comes from the West Indies. Have not been able to discover how he got here or how he usurped the place of the rightful chief. They are diabolically clever. Unless we can discover and destroy the leader and the fetish which gives him his power, nothing can be done to avert the bloodiest rebellion this old world has ever known. I had three loyal natives working here with me. They have all been killed—the last one today. I was sending him out with a message for help. Impossible to leave

myself. They know I know too much. Don't know why they haven't killed me before this.

You are safe as long as you give them no reason to suspect you. Except for this devilish plotting, and the extremes to which they'll go in order to preserve their secret, their conduct is exemplary. Do nothing until you are ready to act—and then, be ruthless. No kid glove methods. They have murdered four Resident Commissioners and God knows how many other white men who have stumbled on the secret—white men and loyal natives. If they succeed—! But they mustn't. If I hadn't taken stock in old Hansen's theory, I'd be enjoying long leave in England now. But I'm not sorry. If you can carry on from where I've left off, it will be the best leave I've ever had. Don't worry about me. And if you see me again—I don't suppose you will—treat me as you would a man I seem to be. You can carry a good punch and your mind works fast. Good luck. This soap does stink, doesn't it? Wish I could use it. I hate to die dirty.

Cheerio

THE Major whistled softly and lighting the paper at a candle flame, dropped the fine ash into the palm of his hand. He ground the ash into a fine dust and scattered it about the hut. Then he got into the bath and soaped himself vigorously, wrinkling his nose in disgust at the strong scent. By the time he was finished the two halves of the soap were very small and so soft that it was a simple matter to stick them together . . .

He was drying himself vigorously when Jim said warningly:

"Men come."

"Good. Open the door, Jim, so that they may see we have nothing to hide."

As Jim did so three natives came to the hut. They peered curiously in through the open door.

"What is it?" the Major demanded.

"Trader mans lib for dead. Mbaw say you come quick."

The Major's expression did not change.

"I no fit to come dis way," he said. Nor until he was fully dressed did he announce that he was ready to accompany them.

The natives led the way at a fast gait to the trader's hut. The Major, with Jim in close attendance, followed at a more leisurely pace. Mbaw met them at the door of the store.

"This is a bad business, sir," he said excitedly. "But I am glad you are here so that you can support my report to the Commissioner."

He led the way into another room, lighted by a stinking oil lamp and there, sprawled lifelessly on the floor, was the body of the trader. A revolver was on the ground close to his right hand. There was a gaping hole in his left temple.

"Who killed him?" the Major asked dully.

"He shot himself," Mbaw replied. "Is that not evident?"

"Yes, of course. Stupid of me," the Major drawled. "But why? Why did he kill himself?"

"He has been drinking for weeks. This—" the chief pointed to the dead man—"is a natural consequence."

"Of course," the Major said again. "Poor devil. Wish I hadn't lost my temper with him this afternoon."

"You must not blame yourself," Mbaw interrupted. "He is best dead. But now advise me, please. Shall I have him buried or—"

"Bury him by all means," the Major said hurriedly. "And now, if you'll excuse me—"

He hastened from the hut as if overcome by the gruesome sight, and with Jim returned to the guest hut.

"And that seems a bally callous way to act," the Major mused as he sat down outside the hut and watched Jim prepare the meal. "But I cannot do the poor chap any good now—and he'll understand. I'm acting under orders—his orders."

THE Major was tired and retired early that night, but he could not sleep. He envied Jim who was snoring loudly in his blankets on the floor just outside the hut.

The Major thought a great deal about Johnson and the manner of his death and then, sleep still escaping him, considered the problem confronting him. But for once he could not marshal his thoughts. The things he knew, the things he had been told and the things he suspected were like so many clues extracted from a detective novel;

lacking the plot outline, they were absolutely incoherent.

He concluded finally:

"No bally good trying to form a plan. I must wait an' play the game just as the cards are dealt to me. An' thanks to Johnson, I have a couple of good aces up my sleeve. I know where the lake is—don't have to waste any time looking for that. An' I know Mbaw isn't what he seems. I rather imagine I shall have to discover a way of dealing with Mbaw—the sooner the better. If I could get him to go for a little walk with me—somewhere in the bush where no one could overhear what we said. Yes. I must try that. Wonder what bait he would fall for? Oh well, no doubt the morning will make things a bit clearer. An' now for a wink of sleep."

But now that he was mentally ready for sleep, sleep was made impossible by the hellish din of tom-toms, wild yelling and singing which suddenly shattered the night's silence.

"And now what?" he muttered. "If I were down in the south I should send Jim to the chief and tell him to keep his people quiet. That is, if I really wanted to sleep. If I didn't, I should probably get up and watch the fun. But here! Gad, that drumming has a beastly rhythm!

"Well now. What to do? I can't send Jim. The closer we stick together the better until this business is finished. Question is, what would I do if I were the kind of man I want them to think I am? Stay here, pretending in the morning I was not disturbed by the row? No, that won't do. They're making noise enough to awaken the dead. Stay here and hope they'll think I was too frightened to go and see what it is all about? No, that won't do either. Though, by Jove, I am afraid!" He sighed. "Well. I suppose I must go and investigate."

As he rose, yawning loudly, Jim came to the door of the hut.

"What do we do, Baas?" he asked indignantly. "They sound like a herd of mad elephants. How can a man sleep?"

"We will go and stop them, Jim, as soon as I am dressed. Mbaw shall feel the weight of my anger."

He was almost dressed when the hellish din ceased as suddenly as it had begun. The silence which followed was almost as nerve shattering as had been the beat of the tom toms.

"Whatever it was, Jim," the Major said loudly, "it is now finished. Just the same—I will talk with Mbaw in the morning."

"A man comes," Jim warned softly and in a loud voice he challenged, "Who comes?"

A high pitched voice called in pidgin English:

"Mbaw, he sends me. He say tell white mans he no lib for fear! Mbaw bery angry long time dis palaver. Tom tom he talk no more. Big noise all lib for dead."

"And that's that," the Major said. "Now we will sleep, Jim."

THE following morning the Major was dressed and had broken his fast before the sun had shot above the horizon. With Jim he then made a tour of inspection of the town, first visiting the huts where the carriers had been quartered. He fancied he detected a slight reserve in their welcome of him, but they were loud in praise of the hospitality which had been shown to them and greeted with joy his announcement that there would be no more trekking for a day or two.

Leaving the carriers the two men wandered about the town. The streets were wide and surprisingly clean. The walls of the well-builts huts were covered with crude black and white frescoes which stood out boldly from their dull yellow background. The houses of the two chief secret societies —the Ekoi and Nimm—were unusually large and adorned with ugly images—some crudely carved from wood, others the work of clever artists. Besides these, each hut had its own ju-jus, before the door and on the roof, to ensure good luck and to avert evil. The whole town, it seemed, was ruled by supernatural fears.

Nevertheless, the peace of the commonplace was upon the town making all suggestion of devilish plotting seem remote and bizarre.

Children played happy games, singing in a pretty lilting way, waving their arms, swaying, bending, in perfect time to their song. Women prepared the morning meal; the men folk were busied with the normal

occupations of the day. And all greeted the Major with a respectful salutation. They were like people who were happy in the knowledge that they had nothing to conceal.

Returning to the guest hut, the Major found Mbaw waiting for him.

"My people are superstitious," the chief said, after apologizing for the night's disturbance. "Sometimes when I am away they revive the foolish customs. Last night they were honoring the moon and frightening away the spirit of the dead trader."

"Ah!" the Major exclaimed. "So you were away last night?"

"Yes," Mbaw said smoothly. "I journeyed through my country. I am—I think I told you—an elephant soul."

"Of course. I had forgotten. And the trader; we should bury him today."

"We cannot," Mbaw said sorrowfully. "It is about that I have come to confess. My people, taking advantage of my absence, took his body to the place where the crocodiles swarm. It is the custom. I was very angry with them when I returned, but you must forgive them. They are foolish about things like that. You white men do not fear a man when he is dead. My people do."

"It is no matter," the Major said.

"And today what do you do?" Mbaw asked.

The Major hesitated a moment, then he said:

"In the little time I have been here it has seemed to me that this place is full of watching eyes and listening ears. Of that I do not complain. A chief should know the business of strangers who come to his country. Still—"

"And what is your business?" Mbaw asked, eyeing the Major furtively.

"As to that," the Major said lightly, "can I speak to you openly, for your ears alone? Or will what I say be carried to the ears of the nearest Commissioner?"

"I am a Government man," Mbaw retorted slowly. "If I hear anything contrary to the laws of the country, I must report it."

"There is no need for you to report what I have in mind."

"It is not concerned with gun-running, or dope selling, or slave trading?" Mbaw questioned.

THE Major shook his head. "I know of nothing else illegal," Mbaw said slowly. "And if it is something I should hear for my people's good—come, let us walk about my fine town. You shall ask about this and that, and I will answer you. And all the time you shall be telling me what you wish me to know."

So they strolled up and down the streets; Mbaw like a proud host displaying his estate to a dutifully interested guest. Jim, bored, wondering what game his Baas was playing, went with them.

And this is the conversation which, like a dark and swift current, ran below the lightness of their surface talk:

The Major: "It is time you knew my name. I am Aubrey St. John Major. Generally called 'the Major.' Does that convey anything to you?"

"Nothing. Should it?"

"It would if you knew the South African diamond mines. Oh, by the way, I am not the fool I look."

"That I have already concluded and wonder why you pretend to be what you are not."

"It is a label, worn to make fools of the diamond mine police. Listen, Mbaw. I am not given to boasting, but I tell you now

that I know more about diamonds than any man in South Africa."

"So, Mr. Major? And what of that?" But despite his assumption of indifference, there was a hint of excitement in Mbaw's voice.

"Can't you guess why I came to this country? Diamonds, man. Diamonds as big as walnuts. Diamonds—bushels of them."

"Softly," Mbaw gasped. "You speak too loudly. How do you know there are diamonds in my country?"

"A year ago I had the luck to save the life of a Zulu chief. In gratitude he gave me a large diamond. I saw that it had not

been mined in South Africa and asked him where it came from. He told me they came from this country of yours but he wouldn't tell me what he was doing up here. As a matter of fact I wasn't interested. Probably some witchcraft business. I was a bit doubtful about his yarn until he showed me twelve more diamonds—all bigger than the one he had given me—which he had brought back with him. And he said there were hundreds more, and no one knew the secret of their whereabouts but himself. Well, I reasoned that he was telling the truth. Under the circumstances, why should he lie? And so I came up here without wasting any time, I can tell you."

Mbaw said sarcastically, "Diamonds are small, my country is wide and the jungle thick. How do you expect to find the diamonds?"

The Major laughed.

"The Zulu made a map of the place for me."

"Then why come to me?"

"Because I'm a stranger in this country, Mbaw, and I'm prepared to pay tribute to its chief. Besides, I don't fancy wandering about the bush on my own. I've already seen one man die of a poisoned arrow shot by one of your people, and I don't want to go out that way myself. No, I want to be under your protection. Will you give it? Gad, Mbaw, think of it! Just us two and Jim to share the stones! Not that Jim will want many. One would make him a big chief in his own country. But you—why, man, if you want to you can go to Europe and live like a millionaire—you'll be one!—on the proceeds from your share."

Mbaw's eyes glistened.

"You have the map showing where the diamonds are?"

The Major shook his head.

"I'm not a fool, Mbaw. I burnt it long ago. I carry the map in my mind. I've a good memory, but—" he added meaningly —"it is not improved by torture. No, if you want to share with me, you must play fair. Otherwise—"

"What is your plan?"

"For the three of us to go today secretly to the place. There's no point in waiting. Besides, the sooner I'm out of this country the better I'll like it. You all seem to be nice, friendly people, Mbaw, but there's something about the place that gives me the creeps. Well—what do you say?"

"How do we share?"

"Equally," the Major replied promptly.

"This is my country," Mbaw objected, ready to bargain. "Twenty-five to you, seventy-five to me."

The Major shrugged his shoulders. "Very well. That satisfies me."

Mbaw considered the matter. "Do your carriers go with us?"

The Major shook his head.

"No, they stay here. Partly to guard my outfit and partly—well, a big secret becomes a small one when too many people know it."

"True. And how far is the place from here?"

"Six or seven miles."

"And in what direction? How will you find the place?"

The Major looked at him searchingly. Mbaw thought he was debating on the wisdom of answering the questions. Actually the Major was recalling to his memory the map of the district Hansen had shown him.

"This I will tell you," he said at last. "It is close to the pool from which flows the River of Good Fortune."

"I will go with you," Mbaw said quietly. "But first I must speak to my people or they will suspect evil and follow us."

"If they do," the Major said dryly, "you will not live to profit from the diamonds. I'm playing for a big stake."

"They will not follow," Mbaw assured him earnestly. "I will make a strong ju-ju which will blind them to our departure. I will go now and see to it. When it is done, we will start."

HALF an hour later the three men left the town and took a roadway leading east through the town's farms. No one showed any interest in their departure, or gave any indication that they were aware of their passing. Mbaw laughed when the Major commented on this.

"I let it be known that I am going with you in the bush to make a big magic," he said. "I let it be known that death would come to any who followed us or watched where we went. So they do not see us."

He laughed. "It is because they believe things like that, that makes my people easy to control." He added. "The *tabu* I have put upon them ceases at sundown."

The Major and Jim were both armed with rifles, the Major also carrying a revolver in his hip holster. Jim carried a pack of food also containing, so the Major said, small digging tools. Mbaw was unarmed.

"I trust you to defend me from wild beasts," he said. "And I have no other fear. Suppose, for instance, that you killed me thinking to escape with all the diamonds. But how could you escape from my country? If we have not returned by sundown, my warriors will come looking for me. And they are clever trackers. They could follow you easily. And even if you had forty-eight hours' start, you would be captured before you were out of my country. Yes, that is sure. The drums would talk and every trail would be watched. So—"

The Major said coldly, " I have no intention of trying to defraud you that way."

THEY had left the farms behind them and were now making their way at a good pace along a forest road, clear of trees, fringed with ferns and carpeted with white and purple flowers. After traveling about a mile along this road they came to a steep, rocky slope leading to a beautiful glen. Through the center of that glen flowed a narrow stream of crystal clear water.

Here they left the road and Mbaw led the way up the dell, following the stream which, he said, was the River of Good Fortune. The traveling now became difficult for Mbaw kept close to the river where the bush growth was thick.

"I am no bush man," he explained, "and if I left the river in order to cut through the bush to its source, I doubt if I should find it again." He laughed softly. "That is the penalty I pay for being taken from the country and becoming civilized."

At last they came to a series of beautiful cascades which laced the dark background of olive green foliage with silvery spray. And at the top of the cliff from which the water fell was a large pool, overhung with trees, fed by numerous springs.

It was the source of the River of Good Fortune.

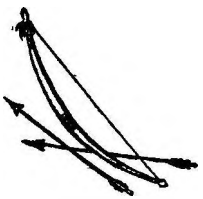
"Now, Mr. Major," Mbaw said, dancing about excitedly, "where do we look for the diamonds?"

The Major sat down on a rock and mopped his forehead with his handkerchief. Then he put his handkerchief away and it seemed to Mbaw—true, he had not been observing intently—that the handkerchief was magically changed to a revolver.

"Oh!" he exclaimed. Then added with a sheepish smile, "That is a clever trick. But the diamonds!"

"There are no diamonds, Mbaw," the Major said quietly.

Mbaw commenced an angry tirade which ceased suddenly when he saw that the Major's revolver was aimed at his middle and that Jim, hunting knife in hand, was standing close beside him.



"What does this mean?" he stammered. "Why have you brought me here?"

"Don't you know?" the Major countered.

"If it's about Johnson's death—"

"No, not that," the Major interrupted. "I fancy I know all about that. You killed him—or, at least, you gave the order for him to be killed."

"You are mad," Mbaw said sullenly. "He killed himself."

"The wound was in his left temple," the Major said icily. "The revolver was close to his right hand. It is not impossible for a man to hold a revolver in his right hand and shoot himself in the left temple. Not impossible—but very difficult. No. Johnson did not kill himself."

"You're right," Mbaw said with an assumption of candor. "I said that in order to protect the man who killed him. One of my warriors killed Johnson because the swine had been interfering with the women."

The Major shook his head.

"That won't do either, Mbaw. I know why Johnson was killed. I know why he was at your town, pretending to be a

drunken trader. I know why the other man —Johnson's servant, his messenger—was killed. I know all about the Lake of the Dead. Johnson told me."

"You lie!" Mbaw shouted hoarsely. "He scarcely spoke to you. He—"

"It would have been more accurate," the Major interrupted again, "had I said that he sent me a message—in a cake of scented soap, Mbaw!"

"Well?" Mbaw was eyeing the Major narrowly.

"Well—suppose that you talk, Mbaw. I want to know everything. Better begin with a bit about your life in the West Indies. I'd like to know your real name and what strange twist of fortune brought you to this country. I'd like to know how you became a chief of a large district. But I'm chiefly interested in what is going on at the Lake of the Dead."

"I'll tell you nothing," Mbaw said stubbornly, "I neither affirm or deny." He laughed confidently. "You are a fool after all. When the message came to us from the Woman of Nimm who watches near the store of the German, Hansen, we prepared for you, expecting we would have to deal with a dangerous man. Then you arrived and we saw that the Woman of Nimm had rated you too highly. But we were still cautious. Then this morning I decided that you were not a fool but greedy for wealth and, therefore, not to be feared. Now—" he laughed again—"I see that you are a fool. Yes, you think you have been very clever, luring me here with a talk of diamonds. But what can you do? By sunset my warriors will be on your trail. They will have captured you before tomorrow's sunset. And then, while the torture is being prepared for you I will, perhaps, tell you everything."

The Major shook his head.

"You won't, Mbaw. You will not live to see me tortured."

"You do not frighten me, Mr. Major," Mbaw sneered. "And you cannot harm me. I am an eloquent soul and protected by big charms from evil at the hands of white men."

The Major laughed softly.

"So you do believe in charms! I thought that talk of being an elephant soul was just a pose. But I see the country's superstitions have got hold of you. But of course they would. Despite your upbringing—and I imagine you went to an English college, yes? —you are only a generation or so removed from these people. The road back was very easy. So you are protected from white men by charms! That must be a very comforting thought. But what will protect you from, say, the Hottentot who stands beside you? He does not like you. He would like nothing better than permission to kill you."

MBAW said nothing, but thinking that both men had relaxed their watch he made a dive for the cover of the bush. He was felled by a blow from Jim's fist which landed on the nape of his neck and knocked him sprawling to the ground. Before he could recover he was bound securely; his hands stretched over his head and tied to one tree, his feet tied to another.

Mbaw gulped as Jim—there was a sinister expression on the Hottentot's face—whetted his knife on the sole of his naked foot. Mbaw was badly frightened, but he said:

"I tell you nothing,"

"Before this game is finished," the Major said grimly, "you will curse the fate that showed you visions of greatness and led you from the security of your birthplace—to this!"

"I will not talk."

"Will money, a free pardon and passage to your home open your mouth?"

"No."

The Major sighed.

"Are you brave—or merely foolish? I wonder. Look—suppose I now test the strength of your charm? My revolver is now aimed at your head, my finger is on the trigger. If I squeeze, ever so slightly, there would be no more a living Mbaw."

"Even if you killed me," Mbaw gasped, "the Plan would still go on. The Word that must not be Spoken until the time is ripe is well guarded. And when the Word is spoken—that day will see the end of the white man in this country. That day my people will come into their own." Mbaw's eyes blazed with a fanatical light.

"I can sympathize with your object—but not your method. But yes, you are brave —and foolish! You are ruled by foolish

superstitions. You put your trust in a magic which—you must know—is only trickery.

"And I am curious. Why, if a promise of reward does not tempt you to give evidence to the Government, were you so eager to come with me searching for diamonds? I'll swear that you had visions of swaggering about the world, living like a duke."

"Yes," Mbaw confessed shamefacedly. "When you first spoke to me about the diamonds I was tempted to take the wealth for myself and leave the country with you in order that I might gain wealth for the Cause."

"I think, too," the Major observed sarcastically, "that you realized that you would not be permitted to leave the country. You know too much, Mbaw. I imagine," he added thoughtfully, "that they are not over tender in dealing with a traitor. But if you are so sure I cannot escape from the country, why not tell me everything?"

MBAW shook his head. "This is life, Mr. Major," he taunted. "We are not living a fiction story wherein a plot is ruined by the boasting of one of the characters."

The Major sighed and was silent for a little while.

Then he said to Mbaw, "I already know enough to bring the plot of rebellion to failure. Whether you talk or not is no great matter. I am going now to take the news to the British. In less than two weeks a strong force will be camped at your town. The country will be overrun by white men. They will make a mud heap of your sacred lake and destroy all your ju-jus. There will be hangings and the taking of many prisoners in irons to the big prison by the sea. They—"

"What matter?" Mbaw interrupted. "Even if you escaped—and that you will not—and an army of white men came up here, they could do nothing. They cannot put a Word in chains, or hang it. And if you know enough—why question me?"

"Because," the Major said slowly, "if I have one fault, it is that I am too tender hearted. I cannot torture and kill—as you can. So I give you one last chance. Will you speak?"

"No!" Mbaw said.

"Very well. Then you shall not talk. Gag him, Jim. And bind his eyes so that

he cannot see the death we prepare for him."

While the Hottentot carried out his Baas' instructions the Major tied bunches of white feathers, which he took from Jim's pack, to the branches of bushes surrounding Mbaw.

That done he talked with Jim for a little while of nameless tortures, then they both moved silently away from the place. Once they were sure that they were beyond earshot, they broke into a run, crashing through the bush, leaving a wide trail.

They came at last to a narrow, scum covered river, flowing between steep banks and almost completely roofed over by boughs and interlacing creepers. They entered the river—the water scarcely reached their knees—and headed up stream, moving fast.

It was the River of Ill Fortune, but the men were not oppressed by its ominous name, or by the stench of the mud churned up by their hurrying feet. Their eyes shone at the prospect of action ahead.

IT WAS long past noon when they came to a place where further progress up the bed of the river was rendered impossible by the bush growth which hung low over its surface. They climbed up the right hand bank and sat down under a large flowering bush.

"It goes well, Baas," Jim said as he took a packet of sandwiches from his pack and handed it to the Major.

"The hardest part is ahead of us, Jim," the Major said as he divided the food between them. "This is a mad business. We know so little."

"We would have known more had you permitted me to deal with Mbaw," Jim retorted.

"I think not, Jim. Fear closed his mouth. His fear of magic was greater than his fear of death. No, he served his purpose. He made it possible for us to leave the town without being followed. I wonder what he will say to the warriors when they find him?"

"*If* they find him," Jim laughed.

"They will. They will be able to follow our spoor with ease to the beginnings of the River of Good Fortune—it was bad fortune for Mbaw—and the ju-jus I put on the bushes will keep them back for a little while. But they will find him. And then Mbaw will have a lot of explaining to do. And then they will hunt for us, Jim. But I do not think they will find us. No. They will search for us in the South. *Wo-we!*"

"*Wo-we!*" Jim echoed with a laugh. "They will not find us. Crocodiles do not look for their food at the very doors of their larders."

There was silence for a little while, then Jim asked:

"What will you do when we reach this Lake of the Dead, Baas?"

"I do not know, Jim. But something that will put an end to the folly of rebellion."

"We are only two men—they will be many. And besides, they have strong magic to help them."

"Our guns will prove a stronger magic, Jim," the Major said slowly. "It may be that we can only do what we have set out to do by killing the leader and, in some way, proving that the magic is only a child's trick."

"And this time you will kill, Baas."

"If necessary—yes. The death of the few who may fall before our guns is as nothing compared to the thousands who will die if we fail. Yes—this time I will kill."

"Even women, Baas?"

The Major looked quizzically at the Hottentot.

"You are trying to trap me, Jim. You know something."

"I know nothing, Baas. That is why I ask a question: will you kill women?"

"But there will be no need, Jim," the Major protested. "This is a man's *indaba.*"

"So you say, Baas. So you say. But think of the old woman, the priestess of Nimm, we saw by the way soon after leaving the place of the German. Think of the ju-jus which frightened the carriers and caused one of them to be taken by the crocodile. Think of the man who was killed before our eyes on the road to Nkami. *Wu!* And it was *Nimm* behind it all; Nimm, the protector of women. And have you marked this: Nkami is a big kraal, but how many young women did you see there? Two or three—not more. Old women, yes, and young maidens—"

"By jove," the Major said softly, "I be-

lieve the old heathen has hit the bally nail on the head. Quiet for a moment, Jim. I want to think."

He cast his mind back to the conversation he had had with Karl Hansen, trying to remember something the trader had told him about the secret societies of the Ekoi. At last he remembered. The German had said:

"No man is permitted to share in the mysteries of Nimm but occasionally a woman is chosen as the head of a powerful ju-ju to which men and women may belong. Such a ju-ju is very strong in witchcraft and nothing—fearful torture or the fear of death—will induce its members to betray its secrets."

The Major whistled softly.

"I think you have it, Jim," he said excitedly. "But now—if you have satisfied your hunger—we will sleep. We trek again before the sun sets and there will be no sleep for us tonight. So sleep well, Jim. It may be your last sleep. I have led you into many dangers, but this is the greatest of all."

"All the more reason why we should live to talk about it, Baas," Jim replied cheerfully.

BEFORE sundown they were on the move again. Jim, in the lead, finding a passage through bush that seemed impenetrable. They traveled swiftly, but silently.

Shortly after the sun disappeared below the horizon and the western sky was still blazing crimson, they saw three cotton trees towering above the bush just ahead of them. They traveled now very cautiously, parting the bush before them at every step, crawling on their bellies through the thick undergrowth.

Presently the bush growth thinned and a few minutes later they came within sight of their objective—a small lake, in the shape of an oval cup, ringed with high trees which reached down to the water's edge. There was no encircling belt of reed or fern, and between the bush where they crouched in hiding and the lake there was practically no undergrowth. The surface of the lake was unruffled, the water was black and oily. No birds were in evidence and a great silence seemed to hover above the place, shutting out all sound from the world beyond.

At the far end of the lake, to the Major's right, a large hut was built on the white sandy beach. Before it stood an enormous idol. Directly opposite them, across the lake, a black gaping hole appeared in the ground, and in the center of the lake itself was a small mound, scarcely breaking the surface of the water. At first they thought it was a crocodile, but after a longer scrutiny they decided that it was probably a narrow sand bank or a reef of rocks.

"Wu!" Jim whispered. "There is nothing here to fear, Baas. It is only a puddle of water! Shall we go now to the hut and deal with the people who dwell there?"

The Major shook his head.

"No," he said thoughtfully. "I do not want to act until I am sure. If we failed at our first attempt—we would not be permitted to live for a second. No, we wait. We will go to that place over there. It is, I think, the Cave of Bats."

As he spoke a number of fantastically garbed figures came out of the hut. Some carried small tom-toms which they beat slowly as they danced and postured before the idol.

"Come, Jim!" The Major spoke sharply for the Hottentot seemed to be entranced by the beat of the tom toms.

He led the way back a little from the lake and then struck a circular course which took them round the end of the lake, at the opposite end to the hut.

SO THEY came to a bush path which led down a cup-like depression, at the bottom of which was the opening to a cave. Bats winged ceaselessly back and forth, filling the air with their squeakings. And from the dark depths of the cave came a dull booming noise.

"What is it, Baas?" Jim asked in an awed whisper. "The voice of the spirits of the lake?"

The Major shook his head.

"No, not that. But what it is, I do not know yet. At least the cave is a good place for us to hide. Let us go in and see what is to be seen."

"Not I, Baas. It is the place of the dead and, alive, I will not enter it." Then he added shamefacedly, "If you order it, I will

come with you. But—it is best, I think, that I keep watch."

The Major nodded.

"You are right, Jim. Stay here and watch. I will go in a little way."

He waited until Jim had hidden himself in the bush over the mouth of the cave before he entered. The ground underfoot was firm and smooth, but the air was foul with the odor of the bats. He proceeded cautiously and when he had gone so far into the darkness that the opening behind him looked no more than a pin point of light, he lighted a match and saw that he was in a vast underground hall, from which vaulted tunnels branched off in all directions. From the roof, looking like clusters of evil fruit, hung myriads of bats. Still, here the air was comparatively fresh, showing the presence of many openings.

The booming sound here was almost deafening, but through it the Major was able to distinguish the sound of cascading water.

"So much for the voice of the Spirits," he said. "Jim will say, 'Yah, Baas! I knew!' when I tell him!"

He retraced his steps and was presently aware that the pin point of light which marked the opening, had disappeared. He thought for a moment that someone had entered the cave, blocking out the light. He stood still and listened intently. No sound came to him. Telling himself that Jim would have given him warning had anyone come to the cave, he lighted a match and found that he was in a narrow tunnel and knew that, somewhere, he had unwittingly taken a wrong turn.

As far as he could judge this tunnel led straight ahead, running out under the lake. Water dripped from its low ceiling and there were indications that it had been made by man; or at least, that man had enlarged it. He went along it, lighting matches frequently, putting them in his pocket when they had burnt out. When he came to a point where the floor of the tunnel sloped upward, he stopped, considered a moment and decided that he had explored far enough. He kept his hand on the left wall of the tunnel and when that suddenly ceased he lit a match and by its flare saw where he had gone wrong. The tunnel and the way by which he had entered the cave met at this point in a V.

With his eyes fixed on the light which showed the cave's opening—he did not want to go wrong again—he hurried out of the cave and climbed up to Jim's hiding place just as the sunset's afterglow was fading from the sky.

"Wow!" Jim exclaimed in relieved tones. "I thought the spirits had taken you, Baas. Their voices sounded very angry."

"Here are no spirits, Jim. And the voices are the noise of an underground river you hear."

Jim chuckled softly.

"I know it, Baas. I only played a game with you."

They were silent for a little while, listening to the beat of tom-toms, watching the dancing and wondering what it all portended.

A ring of gossamer mist suddenly appeared in the center of the lake, surrounding the ledge of rock. It spread gradually until it had covered the whole surface of the water which now looked like a gigantic cauldron from which steam was rising.

Then absolute darkness blotted out everything.

The beat of the tom-toms increased in volume and the voices of the singers, wailing through the darkness, ringed the lake with a dirge-like chant.

SWIFTLY the Major told Jim of the tunnel he had discovered in the cave.

"It leads, I think to the middle of the lake, to that reef of rock, Jim," he said. "Therefore I think that it is the key to the magic working which is performed here. How I do not know. We must wait."

The minutes passed very slowly, for both men were too keyed up to exhibit the calm which was always second nature to them when their own lives—and only their own lives—were in danger.

At last they heard the soft murmur of women's voices and the heavy mutterings of men. They heard the crunch of sand under naked feet.

The voices ceased, but the footsteps came nearer and at last halted at the mouth of the cave. Then some passed inside, the others remaining just inside the entrance—Jim

and the Major could hear the sound of their breathing. But how many had entered and how many remained on guard, neither man could guess. Neither did they know if those who waited were men or women.

And now the drumming and the singing ceased; the silence which followed was almost unbearable. It was broken by the scream of a leopard at its kill. As if that were a signal the drumming recommenced, softly at first but gradually increasing in volume and tempo. Localized at first at the hut, it spread rapidly.

The sky lightened as if the pulsating rhythm were driving away the black aftermath of sunset; as if it were conjuring up the moon from the dark depths of yesterday.

The moon rose higher, silvering the tops of the trees on the opposite side of the river. It rose higher. Its rays lighted the beach of the lake opposite and the Major saw that the shore was lined four or five deep with natives.

Eager to get a better view of the hooded figures who were still posturing in front of the idol, the Major leaned forward, forgetting those who remained at the entrance to the cave. A twig snapped under him.

"*Wu!* Best see what that was!"

Jim bared his knife, ready to kill if the man below carried out his threat.

But another voice said laughingly:

"It was only a lizard. Come back into the cave or the fools on the other side may see."

"How can they see, fool," the first man grunted. "We are in the shadows here."

THE Major and Jim relaxed as the two warriors went back into the cave and looking again toward the ju-ju hut, they saw a party of warriors march up to the shrouded figures who stood in a semi-circle, facing the lake. They dragged a prisoner with them and having brought him to a point midway between the shrouded forms and the lake, there left him.

He stood with head bent, motionless.

"I think," the Major whispered softly, "that it is Mbaw."

Jim nodded and then clutched the Major's arm as a clear, resonant voice, the voice of a woman, sounded over the lake, coming from the rock in the center. The language it spoke was Swahili—a language understood by more native races than any other one language in Africa. It said:

"Before I, Nimm, can show myself to you, a servant who betrayed my trust must be punished. Listen then—you people of the Ekoi and you strangers, you chiefs who have come from great distances to witness the magic working. Listen all you who have come here to hear the word that will make you all one people; that will bind together the many twigs so that they may not be broken, but strong enough to drive the white men from this land.

"See there, standing before my house, one who was nothing. He swore service to me and I made him a chief. But because his heart was weak, or evil, he betrayed the trust I put in him. Listen. A white man and his Hottentot servant came to Nkami. Through the mouth of my servant who watches the road, I warned Mbaw that the white man was a spy. But Mbaw was a fool —or evil—and the white man and his black dog are now seeking to escape with news that will make a mock of you and bring my plans to bitterness. *Hau!* Even now I minded to go to my own place."

The voice paused and from the people about the lake a shuddering sigh arose.

The voice spoke again:

"But do not grieve. The white man and his servant will be captured and brought here for punishment.

"And now I deal with Mbaw. He has broken his oath. Therefore he dies. See to it, my earthly daughters."

As the voice ceased the shrouded forms closed about Mbaw. Knives flashed. For a little while Mbaw struggled. Then the shrouded figures stooped over their victim. There was a wild scream and when the forms straightened again, and parted, Mbaw was no more than a dark, motionless shadow on the white beach.

The Major touched Jim on the shoulder and the two slung their rifles over their shoulders; the Major drew his revolver, Jim his knife. Then Jim rustled the bush just above his head.

The two men on guard came out of the shadows and looked up to see the cause of the disturbance. As they did so, death fell upon them. They had no chance to

struggle or, even to utter a cry of warning. The Major's revolver thudded into the skull of one; Jim's knife tapped the other's life stream.

The Hottentot stooped over the Major's man and plunged his knife into his heart. Nor did the white man make any move to stop him. Tonight he was playing for very high stakes. He could not afford to be squeamish. They dragged the bodies to one side, under a bush, and then entered the cave. They had not gone far when they heard the sound of running feet and decided that other guards, further in the cave, had heard the noise of the falling bodies and were hastening to investigate.

The Major and Jim flattened themselves against the right hand wall of the cave. A moment later they leaped to the attack—at a sound, rather than at visible forms. Once again the surprise of their attack defeated the natives on guard. Once again the Major's revolver cracked a man's skull. Once again Jim's knife slicked through naked flesh to sheath itself in a man's heart.

They waited a little while, listening, then they hurried on, the Major keeping touch with the right hand wall. At last they reached the point of the V, rounded it and entered the tunnel which, if the Major's deductions were right, led under the lake.

AHEAD of them the tunnel was faintly illuminated by smoking flares stuck into niches in the wall. And they heard a voice—that same voice which had come from the rock—say:

"Listen again, you peoples—" the voice echoed eerily down the tunnel—"the traitor has been punished. Now approaches the time when I show myself to you. Look well, you strangers, that you may take back the word to the people you rule. Look well, for I also show to you the man I have chosen to lead you when the time comes. Watch."

Just then the Major and Jim rounded a projection and saw, no more than a spear's throw ahead, a man and a number of women grouped together in the center of a small, dimly lighted chamber. The man was a gigantic Zulu, dressed as the leader on an *impi* of the Black Chaka was wont to dress. He carried a shield of ox-hide, a short stabbing spear and several knobbed throwing sticks. He wore a head-dress of ostrich feathers; a leopard skin covered his massive chest. His carriage was almost regal.

The group parted a little and one woman —she was taller than average, her face was keen and intelligent, climbed slowly up a crude ladder passing through a hole in the roof of the tunnel. She was naked save for a ceremonial head-dress and a girdle of beads.

The other women laughed at the shouts of awe which came from the people as the woman passed into view through the hole in the roof; she must have appeared to the people as if she were rising out of the lake. They must have thought she was a materialization of Nimm.

The Zulu at that moment chanced to turn round and saw the Major and Jim. For a fraction of a second he looked like a trapped and beaten animal. Then, with a hoarse shout of rage, he leaped forward to the attack, flinging his assegai with a quick, under-arm jerk. The point of the assegai missed its mark, but the haft of it struck the Major on the temple and he went down, partially stunned.

And Jim went berserk. He levelled his rifle and fired. The Zulu pitched forward and fell almost at Jim's feet. Jim fired again and again into the thick of the women who, screaming like furies, were eager to get to close quarters. Two women fell. The rest came on and Jim, using his rifle as a club, went forward to meet them.

The Major, his head singing, rose and came to Jim's support. And presently, their bodies bruised and bleeding, they succeeded in driving the few women who still kept to their feet back to the chamber where, penning them in a corner, they succeeded in binding and gagging them.

"We win!" Jim shouted exultantly. "What next?"

"Nimm next!" They turned to see the woman who had impersonated Nimm reappear down the ladder.

Her eyes blazed fiercely as she cursed them. And still more frightful punishments in the world of spirits.

"Have done," the Major said, speaking Swahili. "This is the end."

The light went from her eyes, her head drooped. She looked mutely for help—to

the bound and gagged women and to the dead on the floor of the tunnel.

"My guards—" she began.

"They too are dead," the Major interrupted calmly. "*Wu!* This is an evil thing you have done. You have tried to hatch a snake which would have first destroyed all white men and then fed itself upon the people who nurtured it. But that snake will not be hatched. This is the end."

"I see you, white man," she said in a low voice and in those words indicated her abject surrender. "I put my trust in a weak man—he betrayed that trust. He should have killed you. He disobeyed and because of that, you white men will for a little while longer be our overlords. *Wu!* But the plan I made was good. Men from the north, the south, the east and west came here and paid homage to me. They returned to their own lands, full of the wonder of Nimm. When the time came for me to give the word they would have risen—"

"With a man to lead them," the Major said, looking toward the dead Zulu.

Her eyes softened for a moment.

"He would have been but the echo of my voice, that is all. I should have ruled. My sisters would have been my chief advisors. He—at least was a man. I doubt not that he died as a man should. It is finished! Kill me also!"

The Major shook his head.

"No. You must live to undo the evil you have done. Go back. Appear once again to the people. Tell them that you will not show yourself to them again. Tell them that —because of Mbaw, if you will—the thing you planned for is finished. Tell them that a man will appear to them whom they must obey in all things."

"And if I will not?"

"Then I will kill you. But first I will make a mock of you before all the people. I will show them how you, and their wives and daughters and mothers, tricked them, made fools of them. *Wu!* There will be such a truth telling that men will laugh whenever the name of Nimm is spoken."

SHE hesitated a moment, then she said: "I will do it, white man. Yes, it is best so. Without me—for I am the twine which would have bound the stick together —the thing I planned will fail. And so:"

She again climbed up the ladder and they heard her say:

"For the last time I show myself to you. Obassi, the Great Spirit who even I must obey, calls me back to my own place. Because you are not yet worthy, the white men will be your overlords for a little while longer. Hear that, you strangers? Go back and tell your people the words of Nimm. I have finished. Now comes a man you will obey in all things."

They could hear the awed wondering buzz of excited questioning as the woman climbed down into the tunnel.

"That was well done," the Major commended. He handed his revolver to Jim. "Guard her, Jim," he said and climbed up the ladder.

A few moments later he was standing erect on that ledge of rock, in full view of the wondering people. A mighty shout of welcome greeted him for, despite the words of Nimm, the people thought that they were looking at the man who would lead them to victory over the white race.

He raised his hand for silence and, speaking Swahili, said:

"Are you deaf, or fools? Did not Nimm tell you that the time is not yet ripe? Do you think Nimm lies? I tell you no. For a hundred years, or more—who knows—you will pay your white overlords the loyalty you pay to your own chiefs. That is an order. Do that, and when the time is ripe, you shall come into your own without bloodshed. That I promise you. But it will not be in your time or that of your children."

His upraised hand silenced their murmuring.

"Now pay heed to my commands. By sunrise tomorrow all you who are strangers will depart to your own countries. Remain, and evil will follow. And you will spread the word as you go that Nimm has gone to her own place. You will let it be known, also, that the word to rebel will not be spoken. As to that, and to you strangers, I speak no more.

"To you people who live in this country; go to your huts and remember all that you have heard tonight.

"To you people of Nkami, this: when I have gone from you—and that will be in a

very little while, you will go to your huts at Nkami, nor will any of you stir from that place except such as I now order; at sunrise you will send a fast runner to the mouth of the Cave of Bats. He will be given a talking paper to take with great speed to the Commissioner. And you will sound the big signal drums, giving orders to all throughout the country to speed my messenger. And every morning, also, until the Commissioner comes, you will cause food and drink—of good quality and sufficient for ten people—to be placed at the mouth of the Cave of Bats. Save for that, this Lake of the Dead and all the country surrounding it is tabu to you. I have spoken. See to it that you do not disobey."

He waited a moment, listening to their wailing, then jumped down to the floor of the tunnel, disappearing suddenly from their view.

Jim turned to him, and the woman, seizing her chance, ran to where the Zulu sprawled. Before they could stop her, she had retrieved his assegai.

She held it above her head, both hands gripping its haft, close to the keen blade.

"It is finished, white man," she cried hoarsely. "I die—but Nimm lives."

And she drove the blade into her body, forcing it down into her heart.

"*Au-a!*" Jim muttered. "The fault is mine. But she died like a warrior, Baas."

THE Major nodded.

"It was her best way out, I think, Jim. Listen!"

They could hear a confused shout welling up from the people who were gathered on the shores of the lake. There were some, apparently, not willing to accept the Major's orders.

"Fire through the hole in the roof, Jim," the Major said and commenced firing himself.

Grinning, Jim followed his example.

After firing a score of shots in rapid succession, they listened. No sound came to them and they both climbed onto the ledge of rock. The hut and the idol at the end of the lake were in flames and of all that vast crowd which had gathered to see Nimm and hear her word—not one remained.

Two weeks later the Major was once again a guest of the German, Karl Hansen.

"You did well, my friend," Hansen said—this was when the two men were sitting on the stoep after the evening meal and the Major had recounted his adventures at the town of Nkami and the Lake of the Dead.

"Most credit is to you," the Major replied. "Not a little to Johnson. I only carried on where you and he left off. And without Jim I should have been helpless."

"*Ach!* He is a good man, that Hottentot. I have a reward for him."

"I think he's rewarding himself," the Major said dryly. "He has discovered that the people at a nearby village are drinking beer tonight and I have given him permission to go. He'll have a very heavy head tomorrow and swear to drink no more. I know Jim."

Both men laughed.

"And you had no trouble with the women you kept in the cave?" Hansen asked curiously.

"Oh, a little," the Major said lightly, not thinking it worthwhile to mention the fact that on two occasions a woman had succeeded in getting free and making a murderous attack upon himself and Jim. "They tried to escape, of course, and made such a hellish din most of the time that I was often tempted to let them go. But I held out. They were priestesses of Nimm, you know, and I was afraid that knowing the secret of the cave and tunnel they might be tempted to lead some of the men against us. So we all stayed in the cave—not exactly a happy family—until the Commissioner arrived with a strong detachment of native troops."

"I'd like to know what you said to the Commissioner to make him act so promptly," Hansen said. "Just what was in that message you sent to him, my friend? I am convinced it had nothing to do with the Lake of the Dead and rebellion."

"No," the Major admitted slowly. "As a matter of fact I forged Johnson's name and reported that your people were massing native troops on the border."

"Ah!" Hansen said sadly. "So he responded to such a child's fear. *Ja,* he would. I understand. And I tell you that that mistrust between your people and mine is the thing which will make the rebellion you

have but now averted, possible. But he came. That is all that matters now. And then?"

"Oh—" the Major shrugged his shoulders. "That is all there was to it. As soon as I knew of his arrival at Nkami I went with Jim, and my women prisoners, to meet him and told him the whole business. He understood and, after a little persuading, believed that I was telling the truth.

"He made a lot of arrests, hung a few of the leaders, blew up the tunnel and the entrance to the Cave of Bats with dynamite and after putting the fear of the bally old British lion into the hearts of the rest, returned to his headquarters with a few dozen prisoners. Oh yes; and he appointed a new chief.

"He did it all in a perfectly calm and matter-of-fact manner. I think that even the Johnnies he hanged felt that he was doing them an honor. As a matter of fact, I think the men-folk are jolly pleased it's all over. On their own initiative, they tore down the ju-ju house of Nimm and broke up all the Nimm images they could lay their hands on. The women, I fancy, had been getting somewhat high-necked about this Nimm business. They'll tread softly now for awhile."

"And that is good," Hansen said.

As he spoke a native passed into view. He was well past middle-age but sturdy of build. He walked with the air of a master. And behind him, walking in single file, were his wives—each carrying a heavy load on her head. At the end of the line was an old, age-wrinkled and bent woman, stooping under the load she bore.

She was that same woman who had kept watch at the idol of Nimm, close to the hollow tree; the woman who had sent the warning to Mbaw, at the town of Nkami.

"Yes," the Major said, almost sadly as he indicated the old woman with a jerk of his thumb, "the priestess has become the serf. Nimm is dead."

"Not dead, my friend," Hansen said prophetically. "Only sleeping!"

When You've Saved a Man's Life, You Feel Sort of Proprietory, He's Your Responsibility

THE GOOD TURN

By RICHARD HOWELLS WATKINS

AT THIS time it was not in the power of any man to do Christie Royd a good turn without being paid back. Christie knew it was his duty as an exceptional person to keep better than even with the rest of mankind.

A stumbling lot, people. They had no notion of what was good for them.

At a rigidly legal rate of speed Christie drove his black, dignified coupe and rumbling house trailer past coco palms and Australian pines toward the bridge. A brisk wind from off the ocean spread changing patterns of sand across the narrow, blacktopped road before him. It was blowing twenty-five, at least, Christie estimated. He nodded approval of its vigor.

That wind was a part of life here on the Florida East Coast. Christie had been studying it shrewdly for weeks. These club-headed builders looked at the thermometer before they designed houses, aye. But did it occur to them that the wind off the Gulf Stream might blow you out of your patio or even out of your bed? Not they!

He caught a glimpse of a black sedan some distance away on the curving road on the other side of the waterway, but the sight did not interrupt the condemnation proceedings.

Idiots! The same everywhere, these builders and the bulk of the architects, too. It took Christie Royd himself to build a house for people to live in *and* around. A house *and* its sheltered terraces, patios, screens and walls for outside living. Another thing these mudheads had not

grasped; the nearer the equator the greater the percentage of money that must be spent on the lot. Ten per cent, hey? The cheapest lot in the neighborhood? Mudheads? They had no heads at all.

It took a man of logic. For four years now, from Vancouver to Key West, Christie Royd had roved in diagonal disapproval. Here and there he had paused to study climate, to buy a lot and to build the appropriate house. All sold—and at good profits, too. Headless!

And thinking of the headless, this car across the water was approaching too fast. Christie speeded up. The thing to do was to get his trailer across the lift bridge before that fellow reached it.

Christie sailed up the rise of the bridge and over onto the down slope. His two-wheeled trailer hit the joining of the bridge leaves with a pronounced bump.

One of the big tires blew. The other, on taking the full force of the laden trailer's lurch, exploded almost simultaneously.

His car, swerving, leaped down the grade. Like a skilled trailer man Christie grabbed at the hand lever operating the trailer brakes. He felt no drag. The trailer had already broken free. Before he could jam his foot down on the car's foot brake his front end went crashing through the wooden rail.

Christie's senses stayed with him as the coupe, flipping over sideways, splashed into the water. He took the jolt with arms braced on the wheel. Then—under! He felt the car settling down on the mud. Water poured down upon him from the window above; it welled up from the window below. The coupe filled fast.

Christie made one instinctive thrust of head and shoulders up through the divided window. The chromium bar restrained him. He groped in the water for the door handle. The handle turned but the door would not open. He shoved upward mightily. The door held against him, solid as the side of the car. He tried again, feet braced, lungs on fire. No use.

The water above darkened. There was splashing and confused movement. A man was struggling above. Christie found himself writhing, kicking and fighting like a hysterical person. He rebuked himself fleetingly but his arms and legs had ideas of their own.

TIME passed; his lungs tortured him. He was still vaguely conscious when he was dragged out, lifted into life-giving air and supported by a hoarsely breathing man. He was towed to shallow water and dragged up the bank. His rescuer collapsed beside him; then rallied to turn Christie over onto his face to let the water drain out of him.

Christie was dazedly aware of activity and some low talk. Across the waterway the bridgetender's radio was blaring out of his shack. These two men above him did not call for help. It seemed a good time to sleep.

Stretched on the bunk in his trailer, Christie came back to proper command of himself. He pulled his unwilling body up on an elbow.

A young fellow, sandy-haired, big boned, with a bare massive chest still pumping visibly, grinned feebly down at him. The boy's right arm showed a shallow cut stretching from shoulder to wrist and his blunt face had something gone from it, as happens when a man is completely spent.

Christie was aware of deep humiliation. Sternly he suppressed this feeling. Gratitude to this young fellow, not humiliation, was the correct reaction.

"This boy must be paid," he told himself.

"How?" he asked himself.

With a great effort Christie sat up. His wet clothes had been replaced by a wrapping of blanket.

Another face came into his sight, that of a narrow-faced little man with two yellow teeth protruding above a red lip. About Christie's own age he looked to be, in the late thirties, but not in Christie's condition. He sat in a sort of crouch on Christie's folding canvas chair beside the trailer window.

The second man's face recalled these two to Christie Royd. For several days he had had glimpses of them driving around this sparsely inhabited section of the beach. He had suspected them of no good. This was May, past time for tourists to be heading north.

Christie's eyes, glancing out the window, located the present position of the trailer.

They knew about him, then. They had pulled the disabled vehicle off the bridge and dragged it north a couple of hundred yards to the canal front lot he had bought as a site for his next house. The trailer had stood here off and on for two weeks.

"Tell him he's got boarders, Pete," the older, narrow-faced man said.

"How you feeling now?" Pete asked Christie gently. When you've saved a man, Christie reflected, none too happily, you want him to live; you feel proprietorial; he is a responsibility.

CHRISTIE reached into his wardrobe for a pair of pants and offered them silently. The young fellow, grinning at their size, shook his head. Christie put them on slowly.

"You found the door open?" he asked.

Pete nodded. "It was a little stubborn, like," he said. "But it got persuaded."

"Yeah," said the little man sourly. "The hero rescued you. Near killed himself under water and wasted time." He scowled intimidatingly at Christie Royd. "You owe us something, Royd."

Christie jerked up his head. Must he be reminded of his obligations? "Him," he corrected tartly.

Pete laughed uneasily. "Well, Jack Linden and I are together."

"The more fool you," Christie thought but he did not say it. This was a young fellow who must be rewarded somehow, and well. He studied Pete. The boy had picked up one of Christie's saws from the rack and was squinting along it in critical examination of the set of the teeth.

At the window Jack Linden snapped up onto his small feet, tense as a rat in a corner.

"Again?" Pete said, dropping the saw. "That guy?"

"Now look, Royd!" Linden said rapidly. "If the sheriff stops here you go to the door. Tell him you're alone here. You haven't seen anybody. If he should ask about that black sedan behind the trailer, it's yours; you traded in your coupe for it."

He made a gesture, a quick, unfriendly gesture, hidden from young Pete, toward his left armpit, beneath his coat.

The sound of a fast driven car came to Christie's ears.

"Have you been picking pockets?" he asked with disdain.

Drops of sweat rolled down Pete's face. "I hope your idea works," he said to Linden.

"What could we do but hide after all the time you wasted on this guy?" Jack Linden said through his projecting teeth. "By now he's got the roads blocked sure."

Pete faced Christie Royd. "Give us a break, will you?" he said. "We took some money and stuff out of that pink house on the beach but we didn't hurt anybody. We waited till they'd gone down the beach; we knew their servants had walked out on—"

He stopped talking; the car on the road had seemed to slow.

Next moment it swept by. Christie listened. It ran south, not across the bridge.

Christie knew a bit about the sheriff of this county. That was part of the information he collected before favoring a community with a house. The sheriff hadn't been on the plus side. A fat man more at home shaking hands on a street corner than running down thieves. If he had taken personal charge his mind was on votes, not crooks. These two were more fortunate than they realized.

Christie turned his attention to the young man Pete and he compressed his lips angrily. Brought up in a completely unsuitable and warping house, no doubt. But he must not let that sway him now. He studied Pete as intently as if he were the first rough sketch of a dwelling, a sketch that needed much improving.

Pete sat down on the bed. He wiped the sweat off his face with a sweep of his bare arm. His fingers were trembling. Out of a wrinkled, paper-white face Jack Linden looked on Pete's fear with a queer, unseemly relish.

CHRISTIE was silent. He held that silence while Pete and Jack Linden discussed their chances; when they could move. From their talk two men emerged, a vicious older fellow, no more than a venomous rat, and a reckless kid, strangely sore at the world. Jack Linden was wise in the ways of evil. Even as an upright man he would be

a curse to the earth; he was that sort. Pete had the habit of amiability; the quick speech of candor. But what was he? A thief who boasted that no one had been hurt. Also a boy who risked his freedom and the last breath in his lungs for a stranger.

Christie was puzzled by the boy. What should he do for him? He continued to ponder and to listen to Linden and Pete. This was their first job together. Jack Linden was the planner. Shrewdly Christie concluded that Linden needed the boldness in action of Pete, of some more courageous accomplice, to do a job. He had his hooks deep in Pete because he needed Pete. And Pete thought he needed Jack Linden.

Was the boy a complete fool? Christie found it hard, somehow, to believe that, though proof was lavish. Could some revealing element be missing here?

Christie grimly made up his mind. Continued association with Linden would mean Pete's finish. Alive or dead, he'd be through. It could not be permitted.

With some intensity Christie eyed the area around the left armpit of Jack Linden's lightweight coat. He considered the way Linden's left arm hung. It would be a small gun in a smaller holster that would make so slight a bulge. The chances were good, Christie decided, that his gesture was a bluff. No gun. Odd, but likely.

He waited until the distant throb of a car showed in both men's eyes. Then he edged forward on the bed, decisively.

"I'm no crook, myself," he said curtly. "It's my duty to give you up. That is what I'll do!"

"Slug him, Pete!" Linden snarled. But Pete, on his feet, was confused, wavering, reproachful.

Christie reached under the bed. His hand closed surely on the twin barrels of a shotgun. He jerked it out and in an instant had the muzzle bearing upon Pete.

Jack Linden was a fast little man on his feet. Before the gun muzzle was up he had flung his body against the door and leaped out.

Only his voice was left behind: "Grab it, Pete!"

Christie, motionless, faced the angry boy with no belligerence to spark him into desperate action. He waited out the quick rattle of a car door handle, the wheedling of a starter and a motor spinning into life. Linden went humming away.

With some misgivings Christie grounded the barrel of the gun. He laughed. Even in his own ears the laugh was unconvincing.

"Sit down, boy!" he said. "We're well rid of him."

"But—" Pete listened, following Linden's car away; then the other car as it approached and passed.

"They'll get him," Christie said.

"He headed across the bridge," Pete muttered. "That would ha' been the place for a road block but the car didn't stop."

Christie sat down on the bed, feeling safer now he had the boy talking. "He'd have led you to the electric chair within a year, that fellow, and likely have bypassed it himself," he said. "Did you hear him? 'Slug him, Pete!' he said."

Pete glanced sullenly at the shotgun.

"Yes, I have it handy to my hand," Christie said. "Thievery can upset a decent fellow. It can make him do worse."

In a temper Pete grabbed the back of the canvas chair and slammed the legs down on the trailer's linoleum floor. He dropped into it, watchful and suspicious.

"You saved my life," Christie said. "After that d'you think I could leave you in double harness with a rat? Where're your brains, man?"

HE WENT to work on Pete, building up the electric chair toward which Jack Linden was ushering him. Pete took it with an effort at blank-facing him, but Christie saw hopeful signs. The boy had some sense. Christie ploughed on. Here was the moment to turn straight, he argued; in saving a man's life Pete had already made a fine start. Let him square himself with the law—

"What? Give myself up?" Pete started to his feet.

"How else?" said Christie inflexibly.

"If I'd just left you drown in the coupe I needn't hand myself to the sheriff, huh?" Pete demanded.

With iron patience Christie went to work again.

"This would make me a two time loser," Pete said.

Christie nodded. "I'm worried about that," he admitted.

"*You're* worried!"

"I have said so," said Christie.

Pete grunted. "There's this angle," he said shrewdly. "Say I give myself up. They jump you as my partner in the job. I won't clear you by givin' them Jack Linden. I won't squeal."

Christie sighed. "I shan't question your loyalties," he said. "I must take my chances."

Pete stared at him, impressed. "You good guys are always ready to sell some poor mutt a bill of goods he'll pay for plenty all by himself," he said. "It's your book of rules but the hell is his only. You ain't like that?"

"I am not," Christie said. "I do not ask you to squeal."

Pete grabbed the back of his neck with his big hand.

"Jack Linden's not worrying about you. He won't be back."

Pete massaged his neck and chewed with his muscular jaws.

"I'll go this far with you," Christie said. "I'll sneak you through road blocks. You'll walk into the sheriff's office in the courthouse to surrender. Then he can't claim he caught you or that you gave up because you saw you couldn't escape."

"So I'm not all black and the sheriff all white?"

"You're both men."

"We're all men but you," Pete said. "You're special, huh?"

"I am unusual," Christie said. "I am an independent man."

"Let me try this on you for size," Pete said. "The truth is I already done enough time to pay for breaking into that pink house. Down in Dade County there was this cop off duty. He was drunk and throwing his weight around. All I done was cool him off with my fist and me cold sober. It was a rough fight, sure, and he got hurt. But I was only a carpenter and my mistake was not knowing he was a cop. Is that a crime? They made it one. Don't that time square this?"

Christie considered this argument earnestly. It explained Pete somewhat. An oblique way of avenging himself on cops, this robbery. That had been Jack Linden's argument. But in cold fact it was a robbery. On occasions when Pete was hard up he might consider the time had come to avenge himself again. No. It would not do.

Sadly he shook his head.

Pete growled. He studied Christie Royd's inflexible face.

"It must be swell, knowin' all the answers and doing everything right. Swell, but is it human?"

Christie shifted his weight a trifle on the bed. He pushed the shotgun under it. At least they were past guns, he and this confused young man. But he was conscious that he had been thrown on the defensive concerning himself, which was ridiculous.

The door of the trailer swung wide open. A large automatic pistol came through the opening and behind it glided Jack Linden. His black eyes had specks of fire burning in them. He pointed the gun at Christie's stomach and Christie's stomach went hollow inside him.

Pete stared at the pistol. "I didn't know you had a gun, Jack," he said.

"In the car," said Jack Linden. "I didn't want you to be nervous, kid, but I'm nervous myself about not having one."

"You see," said Christie stoutly to Pete. "The electric appliance we were discussing was always nearer than you thought. It is near now."

Pete was sweating again. He squatted low on the chair, forearms butted on widespread legs. "You said Jack wouldn't be back for me," he said.

It was a point that puzzled Christie.

With his pistol bearing steadily upon Christie the rat-like little man drifted across to the sink. He reached down into the garbage can beside it and pulled out a pillowslip a quarter full.

"Slid the stuff in there, Pete, so we could give 'em an argument about who done the job if they jumped us here," Jack Linden said with pride for this strategy.

"So he came back for you, Pete," Christie said. His voice was heavily ironic.

Jack Linden twisted his neck. He said:

"Car's across the bridge. There's no road block; they figger we already got away."

Pete stood up. "No sale," he said to Christie. "Jack, how about this guy?"

The black eyes gleamed in Jack Linden's narrow head.

"Tie him and tape him till he can move as easy as a ham in a cellophane bag." Linden's red lips moved with relish. "Then tuck him away in the palmetto scrub. If nobody finds him for a month that's his hard luck."

Pete hit Linden a back-handed swipe. The man went crashing over the canvas chair. He landed, shattered, on the linoleum.

The force behind the blow explained the Miami cop's misfortune. Pete bent without haste and picked the big automatic out of Linden's relaxed fingers. He opened the door and threw it half way across the inland waterway. He removed the pillowslip from beneath Jack Linden and tossed it on the bed. Then he lifted Linden, who was feebly resisting, and dumped him outside the trailer.

"You better trot, Jack," he said without emotion.

He closed the door. "Well, what you rewarding me with for saving your life this time?" he asked Christie Royd bitterly. "Thirty years inside for assault?"

Christie sat still. In spite of his vigorous efforts life refused to be logical. He felt it would be going too far to admit that he was confused but he wanted a little time to plan. It would take planning, now, to convince this young man anew that jail was his only salvation.

Pete, savagely roving the narrow confines of the trailer, slanted his head toward the bridge.

"Jack won't do any jobs alone," he said. "He needs somebody to take his orders and put starch in his backbone."

He stared at Christie Royd. "He's on the other end of the fence from you," he said. "You don't need nobody, do you?"

"I? Of course not!"

"You know all the answers. You make all the mistakes, personal."

"Mistakes? Ridiculous!"

"Like kicking that trailer in the pants on the bridge because you didn't figger me for sense enough to slow down. And like sticking that handy shotgun back under the bed too soon."

Christie listened, appalled. Mistakes? He, Christie Royd?

Pete shoved his hands deep into his pants pockets. "Happy about yourself," he said. "Mistakes don't count when you make 'em. But me? Jail!"

Mistakes? It was true. He had made mistakes. He forced himself to look from afar at Christie Royd. Happy about himself . . . Christie Royd!

He lowered his face into his hands to think better; if possible to think this young man out of looming but deserved jail. He glanced out the window, at his desirable site and it blew a bugle at him. He forced himself back to his problem. Mistakes—but still right was rigid right.

"It was in stir that I met Jack Linden," Pete said.

Christie stood up. Violently he grasped the pillowslip. His heart was ballooning happily in his chest. He had been defeated in logic. But how he welcomed that defeat!

When the bridgetender opened up to hear how Christie Royd's car had run off the bridge he would find this bag of loot on the road almost at his door. Let the sheriff wrestle with that mystery while Christie built his house.

Pete was waiting glumly, unaware that nine words at the right moment had opened his cell door.

Christie sighed and glanced around his monastic trailer. Something of himself, that solitary and satisfied perfectionist, was blowing down the Florida wind and he was far, far too intelligent a man not to know it. But again his heart lightened. Now he could pay back that good turn in a way that wouldn't tear apart a man. No, two men.

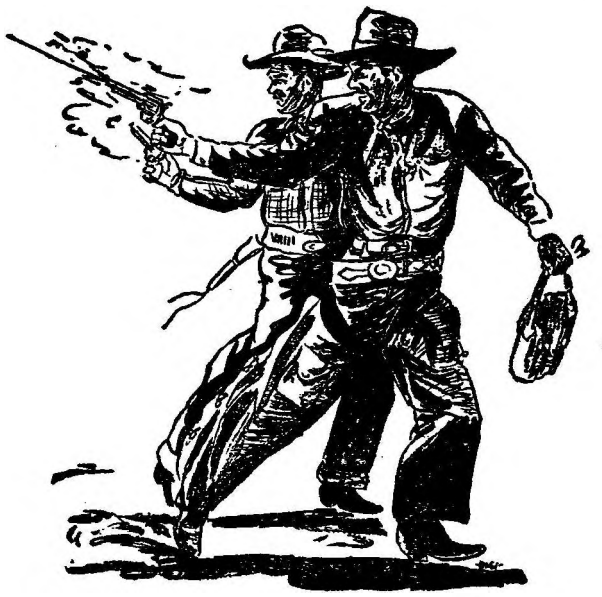
"I made mistakes outside my field, Pete," he conceded, though with an effort. "Perhaps that disqualifies me for judging your case, save in one particular."

"Huh?" Without reason a hint of hope edged Pete's voice.

"I'll judge whether you're a carpenter, as you claim," Christie said with judicial calm.

He squared his shoulders. "That allegation will take proving—to Christie Royd," he warned. "Perhaps many years of proof. Now what's wrong with the set of that saw there?"

Santa Rosa Had the Reputation of Sucking a Man Dry Before Spewing Him Back Upon the Desert



SMOKE TALK

By ERNEST HAYCOX

I

IT WAS at a time of day when shadows ran well behind any sun-bound traveler that the man with the soldierly carriage and drill-straight eyes rode into the ill-famed town of Santa Rosa and put up at the stable. He had come far, this much the alert citizens of the town immediately saw. Desert dust lay like gray gunpowder on his clothes and the horse was badly jaded, as well it might be after crossing the interminable reaches of treeless, waterless land that sweltered under a copper sky. When the stranger dismounted there was a perceptible stiffness to his step.

Yet other than that, the man showed no fatigue. He lifted the saddlebags, removed the gear and led the animal out to a sparing drink. To the hostler he issued a request in a level, softly courteous voice.

"Be pleased to have you water him to his belly's full in another half hour, and give him an extra half measure of oats."

Picking up the saddlebags, he walked along the sultry street to the hotel, with a full dozen pairs of eyes watching him from odd coverts of the town. If he was aware of the scrutiny, and if he was aware of Santa Rosa's reputation for sucking a man dry before sprewing him back upon the desert, he gave no sign. He walked with a straight spine and square shoulders, his gait neither hurried nor slow, a certain quiet confidence and dignity about him. He was distinctly a man at ease in a man's world. A broad, pearl colored Stetson sat down upon a fine head; ruddy and weather-swept features were fixed to the front, seemingly interested in nothing to either side.

Yet as he turned through the hotel door, the street with its flimsy and parched buildings and its narrow alleys was indelibly printed in his mind. Crossing a gaunt lobby, he dropped his saddlebags on the counter and confronted Santa Rosa's official host—the fleshless, laconic Lafayette Lane.

Lafayette Lane had seen them come and go for twenty years. He knew men, as hotel keepers have a way of knowing men, and out of his knowledge he had built up a rough and ready classification. If his guests were dignitaries, great ranch owners, grave elders with vanity, or men he wished to flatter, he bestowed upon them the title of "Colonel." Those of lesser degree, Easterners or gentlemen upon whom he liked to press his hospitality, became under his roof "majors." But when a traveler arrested Lafayette Lane's attention and instant respect, which was not often, he drew forth the prefix of "captain." To Lane a captain meant a man of action, of tough hide and sound nerves, and above all of courage.

He weighed this new stranger with a casual glance, noting the fine suit of black,

the white shirt and tie, the heavy watch chain; noting also the even pressure of the stranger's lips and the peculiar light blue of the eyes which, he guessed, might easily hold threats under the pressure of emotion. Having caught these things in the space of a finger's snap, he swung the register and offered the pen.

"Pleased to have you under my roof, Captain."

The stranger bowed slightly and wrote "William Yount" in steady, bold strokes. Lane blotted the signature and left the counter, Yount following with his saddlebags.

Up a flight of squealing stairs and down the length of a shaded hall, the hotel man threw open a door and stepped aside, murmuring, "You'll find it the coolest room in my establishm'nt, Captain Yount. Supper's in the dinin' room at six— Trust you will refresh yo'self!"

"Obliged," said Yount and dropped his saddlebags on the bed. Lafayette Lane retreated to the lobby, each step marked by the faint protest of warping boards. Closing the door half way, Yount took off his coat, shook out the dust and hung it carefully on the back of a chair. The action exposed a shoulder harness and gun, which he removed and also hung on the chair. Then he proceeded to pour himself a bowl of water and to wash with all the relish of a travel-stained man. At the same time, he kept one ear cocked on the hall; and when presently he caught the echo of footfalls in the lobby below he stood up, sharply attentive. Somebody spoke a quick, insistent phrase that was not answered, but save for an uneasy scuffing of boots and the scrape of a chair, there was nothing else. Yount toweled himself, replaced the shoulder holster, and slid into his coat. Lighting a stogie, he unstrapped the saddlebags and spilled a part of their contents out upon the bed. Among the articles was a letter that he took to a chair, and after settling comfortably down, began to read. He knew the message by heart, but being a man of infinite patience with details, he studied it again:

> Will: Try to get a thousand head of twos, threes and some knotty fours on the trail by the end of the month. We got to stock up this range or let good grass wither. Make certain you come close to the Colorado line for Kansas is talkin' quarantine pritty strong and the damn nesters are stringing bob wire hell for breakfast.
>
> Now legal beef is plumb good beef, Will, but rustled beef is considerable cheaper—especially such as comes wet acrost the Rio Grande. I ain't askin' you to go over personal and steel Mexican cattle, which would be downright dishonest. But in case you run into any local talent which has experience thataway and could deliver you wet stock on the hoof, no questions asked—just use your judgment. You recollect the Lord says he will take care of them as shuffles for themselves.
>
> Ned Burd.

William Yount's level eyes glimmered with a trace of humor; he chuckled as he folded the letter back into its envelope. But the chuckle and the humor alike vanished when he drew from one pocket a smaller piece of paper with the following penciled notation:

"About six feet, hundred and seventy-five pounds. Black as a greaser and palavers that language good as English. Thin face, bad knife slash along left side of neck. Treacherous, scary and can't be drawn into a trap. Said to be quickest draw on the Border. Has a known record of eleven notches. Santa Rosa is the town where he hangs out. Called the Lizard. None other known."

The cigar had ceased to draw. Lighting the second notice, he used it as a torch to get him smoke drawing well, and watched the paper slowly char. For perhaps twenty minutes he sat thus and smoked, staring at the blank wall with a remote, speculative absorption in the blue eyes. One of his hands closed with a curious gesture of finality, and he rose and crossed to the bed, replacing the letter inside a saddlebag.

THEN he did a curious thing. With a pencil he made extremely light marks on the bedspread, where the corners of the saddlebags rested, arranged the straps on the buckles carefully and stepped back to study the effect. It seemed to satisfy him,

for he put on his hat and went downstairs, crossing the lobby without appearing to see the wasp-like figure of a man sitting very still in a far corner of the room.

But he was no sooner beyond the hotel porch before this man sprang out of his chair and started for the stairs. Upon his shrunken face, which was marked and pocked with the full stamp of evil, was a nervous half-grin that drew up the corners of his pale lips and put a beady malevolence in his yellow eyes. Poised on the bottom step, he turned to sweep the door by way of reassurance and then threw an impudent grunt at the silent Lafayette Lane.

"You watch fer him," he said. Then he was out of sight.

Lafayette Lane sat on a stool behind the counter, with his hands folded across his stomach, and scowled into space. If he disliked this sort of prying into the affairs of his guests he kept his peace.

The barren lobby droned with the clustered flies and already the patch of harsh sunlight coming through the door had begun to shorten and slide away. The little man who had gone upstairs worked swiftly, and in five minutes hurried down.

"Clean socks, clean shirt, razor, a Bible and some extra cattridges. Some other junk —and a letter." The thin and weasel-faced snooper pursed his lips in a way that gave him an air of shrewdness. "Either he's cute, or he's simple to leave it layin' around. It tells on him. He's a cattle buyer. Or so it makes out."

Lafayette Lane broke his taciturn silence. "Some day, Wink, yo're a-goin' to get that ferret-face burned offen you."

"Yeah? Don't you like it? A-cause if yuh don't"—and he sized the hotel man up and down belligerently—"go tell Jake about it and see what fur!" He hitched up his pants and swaggered across the lobby; yet his nerves were not of the steadiest, and behind him the silence of Lafayette seemed threatening.

Wink's pace accelerated. He jumped across the door sill, stared swiftly behind, and hurried off the porch.

Lafayette relapsed to a gloomy perusal of the register. "Yes, sir," he soliloquized, "Wink'll get the hell burnt outa him someday. And I dunno's I'd send any flowers, either—Yount that's a good name. Plumb too good for Santa Rosa!"

Yount passed casually along the street, with the westering sun burning against his face. Santa Rosa had not yet stirred from its afternoon siesta, but Yount knew that the emptiness of the walks and the dull, lethargic silence was only a mask—like the sleepy countenance of a poker player. Crossing the mouth of this alley and that door, he felt the glances of hidden men; from a dozen dark angles they were watching him. Being a bone-and-blood Westerner, he knew the habit of cattle towns. Most of them were reserved and suspicious of strangers. But there was more than reserve in this sweltering row of buildings; more than average hostility, too.

When he turned in at the door of a huddled brick structure labeled "Santa Rosa State Bank" he had the feeling that this inspection stalked him to the very threshold and then dropped reluctantly away as he stepped inside. Bullet marks high on the wall of the bank's single room arrested his attention. Below them and behind a stretch of grille work stood a lean old fellow in a seersucker suit who lifted a taut, measuring glance that somehow seemed to contain the anxious expectancy of disaster and the hope that it might not come. Pity swept Yount as he reached into his pocket.

"Good day," said the banker, quickly.

"Good day," was Yount's courteously soft reply. "I have here a draft for ten thousand dollars on Austin. I suppose to do some business in this section, if conditions are favorable, and I'd duly appreciate your establishin' my account."

The banker accepted the draft and scanned it line by line, letter by letter. Presently he murmured, "Agreeable."

"Thank you kindly. How long will it take for the account to be open?"

"Three days."

Yount nodded, turned and thought of something else. "I suggest that you ask for considerable gold. It's my habit to pay in specie."

His attention shifted to the small table in the center of the room, upon which sat a small iron savings bank fashioned to resemble a donkey. Thrift in the shape of a child's toy.

Something loosened inside Yount; he chuckled and hefted the donkey. "I reckon," he called back, "a dollar would get one of these things?"

"That's what they're for," agreed the banker in a tired voice. "But when folks get a dollar around here, which is seldom, they bury it under the kitchen floor!"

Yount chuckled again and sauntered out. "Teachin' youngsters thrift is a sound idea," he mused. Then the blue of his remarkably level eyes was filled with a sober pensiveness. "But who is to teach the thrift of time to an old fool like me? Days come and go, and I ride on alone, siftin' into this town and out of that one. When I die, out on the desert with a bullet in my back, or maybe peacefully in a hotel bed, who will be the sadder for it? The lone trail was never meant for man. Even the animals know better."

HE LOOKED at his watch, finding the time to be past four o'clock. Habit made him turn abruptly into the saloon for his before supper drink, and when he pushed the doors aside and faced the stale, semi-darkness of the place he at last saw the brand of men who were responsible for Santa Rosa's far flung reputation of evil. The little fellow with the weasel face sat teetering in a chair over by the wall, his eyes averted, and he seemed to be trying to hunch himself out of sight, like a rabbit. There were perhaps a dozen men scattered through the long room, lounging idly in the corners or seated at the tables, and upon the cheeks of every last one of them was a covert expression, as though they were waiting for some event to happen. Three of four Mexicans lay full length on the floor, their skins glistening even in this unrelieved atmosphere. Only one man, an oafish creature with a derby hat and a hang-dog air, ventured a direct glance at Yount. His vacant giggle sounded queerly through the silence. At a table a well-dressed man with slim fingers kept piling and unpiling a stack of chips. All this Yount observed as he swung to the bar, then his quick gaze was suddenly diverted by the individual who stood behind it. An apron shielded a great paunch, chubby fists lay awkwardly on the mahogany bar top, and a grotesque, beer-red visage hovered behind a screen of heavy cigar smoke. A pair of little red eyes, pale-centered and completely lacking in any appearance of kindness, dropped upon Yount and remained there.

"Kentucky—straight," said Yount.

The bottle and glass came to him. He poured, drank and paid, feeling about him this uneasy, hostile silence. The bartender's paw swept in the piece of silver, and with a gesture that might have been habit or deliberate purpose, sent it ringing against the wood. Then he pushed it back. "On the house," said he in an abrupt, husky voice. "On Jack Wallen—which is me. You will find Santa Rosa a peculiar town, friend."

"So I've been informed," replied Yount, quietly. "But I never judge a town on its published reputation."

"Got to see fer yo'self, uh?" muttered Jake Wallen.

"A habit of mine that I learned long ago."

"And whut," grunted the bartender in the same asthmatic rumble, "do you expect to find here?"

Yount turned his cigar thoughtfully. The gambler had ceased clacking his chips, the half-wit no longer giggled. Absolute silence held the place as the crowd waited for an answer. Yount's glance, as direct as a bullet, struck Jake Wallen with a cold, impersonal levelness. "Some towns are worse than their reputations, but not often. Usually I find that no town is able to be as black as it is painted."

"Depends some, I'd judge, on whether a man minded his own business or not," stated Wallen, pushing the words out beside the clenched cigar.

"I make it a habit of minding mine," drawled William Yount, and wheeled from the place. On the street he added an unspoken phrase, "I mind my own business, not statin' what that business might be."

Then he swung into a barber shop and settled down to the luxury of a "boughten" shave.

HE LEFT behind him a suddenly roused saloon. Talk, swift, suppressed and calculating—crossed the smoky gloom. Wink, the snooper, had sprung out of his chair and hung his elbows over the bar.

"What you think, Jake?" he whispered.

Jake Wallen looked down on the small man with an unmoved silence, but Wink did not mind. He was too long accustomed to being bullied, kicked aside and cursed at. He muttered on. "The letter showed him as a cattle buyer."

"Mebbe—mebbe not."

Another man slid into the saloon and came straight for the counter. "He left a ten-thousand-dollar draft on Austin at the bank. Means to open an account here. What fer if not to buy beef?"

"Mebbe," grunted Jake Wallen, and his doubt seemed to soften.

"Where's he kerry his gun?" Wink wanted to know. "In his hip pocket?"

The gambler's fingers ceased playing with the chips and he broke in quickly. "Left shoulder."

"What fer a shoulder holster?" insisted Wink. "It don't sound straight."

Wallen's finger beckoned. A pair of loungers rose immediately and walked forward. "You," said the saloon keeper, pointing to one, "never leave yore eyes offen him while he's here. Get the room next to him in the hotel. They's a nail hole run through the center of a flower in the wall paper. See what he does tonight. If he writes anything, I want to know what it is. If he talks to himself I want to know that. See if he oils his gun and spins the cylinder like he might have need of it. Git out now—And you," swinging on the other, "hustle over to the stable and look at his hawss and gear. I want to know where that saddle was made."

"Want me to ride to the Lizard?" queried Wink.

"That can wait," was Wallen's grunted answer. "Mebbe he buys beef—mebbe."

THE barber was a small man, stooped of chest and in need of one of his own haircuts. He wore glasses and peered over the top of them, giving out the air of having to stand on his toes to do so. He was mild, talkative, professionally agreeable; but Yount, always a hand to study people, occasionally caught him looking out of the window with a look of infinite weariness.

"A mite of hot weather," suggested the barber, pulling the chair upright. "Come fur?"

"A distance," assented Yount.

"Fambly man, mebbe?"

"The privilege has not been mine so far, I regret to say," answered the man in the chair.

"We-ell," reflected the barber, "some say marriage is a state o' blessedness, and some hold that it's Adam's affliction. It's all accordin' to how a feller looks at it. A married man loses some things and he gains some. But, shucks, that's the way it is with anything he does, he loses and he gains."

He put away his razor, and struck with the felicity of his own phrase, repeated it again. "Yep, he loses and he gains—which is the way o' the world."

"A man must expect his losses," gravely mused Yount. "If he gains anything at all, he should consider himself lucky."

"A downright cute way o' puttin' it," said the barber. "My first wife died young. My second was considerable high sperrited and left fer greener grass. I hold nothin' agin her, and I hope she found what she was lookin' fer. My present wife—" the barber cleared his throat and went gruffly on "—has stood a lot o' tough luck with me. That picture on the shelf—mebbe you have noticed it?"

Yount eyed the tintype and nodded.

"Well," went on the barber, "you won't mebbe believe it, lookin' at a cuss like me, but that's my boy!" The phrase rolled out, round and robust and for a short interval the man's mild countenance glowed with unsuspected strength. "He's two years old. Say, the things he can spiel off with his chatterin' tongue—and the grip he's got with his hands! He's a-goin' to be a moose, not no runt like his dad. I shore waited a long time for that younker, but he's worth it!"

"Yo're proud of him I guess," applauded Yount.

"Me?" exclaimed the barber, and sighed vastly. "Why, say—"

Yount stood up and put on his coat. "That boy's your gain, my friend, and nothin' in the world can take it away from you."

He paid the man, strolled out, and started for the hotel. An impulse stopped him, turned him, and sent him quickly back to the bank, with a gleam of open pleasure in the direct eyes.

"That donkey is mine," said he to the banker, sliding a dollar under the grille work. "Open an account for the barber's tike."

Taking the toy bank from the table he went back to the barber shop, chuckling softly.

"My compliments to your son," said Yount, and slipped the donkey into the barber's unsuspecting palm. "And tell him a lone-travelin' old codger hopes he'll like this toy and hopes that someday he'll stand head and shoulders above a crooked, sorrowful old world."

Something happened to the barber's face. "Why—now—" he stammered. But Yount was out of the door and striding toward the hotel, the light of pleasure already subsiding from his face.

"A long trail and a lonely one," he muttered. "And nobody the sadder when I come to the end of it."

The barber was still holding the toy, all trace of weariness gone from his cheeks, when one of Jake Wallen's henchmen walked suddenly through the door. The barber started and gripped the donkey with both hands. Fear sprang into his eyes.

"Whut'd he have to say?" growled the henchman.

"Him?" Nothin' much. Said he'd come a passable distance, was a single man, and liked kids. Mighty close-mouthed, that fellow. But mighty fine—mighty fine."

"What you got there?" challenged the henchman. "Let me see that thing."

"Now hold on," protested the barber. "He give it to me for the kid. Jest a toy bank."

"Lemme see it! That gent don't make no moves around here without Jake Wallen wantin' to know why. Pass it over."

"I tell yuh, it's for the kid!" said the barber sharply, knuckles turning white as they pressed harder around the toy. He shifted abruptly to pleading. "Now you wouldn't want to take away that little fun from my tike, would yuh? Hell, he ain't had nothin' like this—"

The henchman's arm swept around, knocked the barber back and seized the bank. "No talk outen you! Shut up! If they's anything atween you two buzzards—"

"You got no right to take that!" shouted the barber desperately. "By God, yuh ain't! Gimme it back!" But the other man, grinning sourly, had departed for the saloon.

For a time the barber's clenched fists struck spasmodically against space, and rebellion flared in his faded, ordinary features. Then it died away, leaving him sagged and weary and beaten. He passed a hand across his eyes and looked out over the housetops to the free sky.

"The boy shore would of liked that trinket," he muttered dully. "First store toy he ever woulda had. He'll never git it now though. They'll bust it up and throw it away."

Which was exactly what happened. Wallen smashed the donkey with one blow from a bungstarter, and found nothing inside. Turning the pieces over and over in his hands he shook his head at the assembled group. "Don't figger he meant anything by that. Soft hearted, I reckon. To hear that dam' barber brag yuh might think he had the only kid in the world." The wreck of the toy donkey went sailing across the room and scattered in the sawdust. "What did yuh find about the hawss?"

"Cheyenne saddle," reported the messenger who had been despatched to the stable. "Cheyenne marker's name tooled in the skirt."

Jake Wallen's swollen cheeks twitched. "Looks like he might be a cattle buyer, all right. Money in the bank, good clothes, northern rig, and a letter indicatin' he's after beef. Looks straight enough."

"How old you figger he is?" asked one of the loiterers.

"Not a day over thirty," put in the gambler whose dead eyes had studied a thousand men. "He looks older, but he isn't. Also, my judgment is that he's fast. Got to be to carry that shoulder outfit."

"Want I should ride to the Lizard?" Wink asked the saloon keeper.

"I'll tell yuh when I want yuh to ride! Now shut up!" snapped Wallen brutally. "Mebbe he's a cattle buyer. It looks reasonable. And by God, he'd better be! If I find anything to prove he ain't, I'll riddle him right here in the street. Did Flash put up that reward notice on the hotel wall like I told him?"

"Ahuh."

"Good enough. I want to know if Yount reads it, and how he looks at it."

WILLIAM YOUNT was at that particular moment reading the notice. Coming up the hotel porch he had observed it tacked right beside the door. It hadn't been there a half hour previously! So much he was certain of, and as he tarried before it he was also certain that it had some hidden meaning for him—a meaning in some manner linked up with the slouching citizen who at this moment walked slowly down the far side of the street with an aimlessness that was only too apparent. Yount's mind raced swiftly along the situation. To read the notice meant to display interest; not to read it might display a deliberate and unnatural lack of interest. So he came closer and scanned the flaring type:

$1000 REWARD
(Paid by the Cattlemen's Association)

For the capture alive or the witnessed proof of the killing of "The Lizard," known rustler, leader of an organized and desperate ring of thieves and cutthroats, and also indicted by five coroners' juries as a killer.

About six feet tall, and a hundred and seventy-five pounds. Black as a greaser and talks Mex fluently. Thin, face, bad scar on neck. Treacherous, fast on draw.

WARNING: This reward is not meant to induce inexperienced men to go on his tail. All parties are notified that he will kill on suspicion, offering no quarter, and that he seldom allows a fair draw. He is heavily protected in the Santo Rosa district by powerful influences. Take care.

Yount's features were gravely noncommittal. The ambling pedestrian had crossed the street and now stood on a corner of the porch, deliberately watching Yount.

A girl in a crisp gingham apron stepped out and struck a triangle vigorously, the clanging echoes beating flat and definite into the oven-like heat. Yount turned to find her black head and her frank, clear face turned toward him with open curiosity. She was an alert, vital girl who pounded on that triangle as if she took a perverse pleasure in rousing the somnolent citizenry. Her red lips were pursed with energy as she struck a last time, but she smiled on Yount in a manner that brought the dimples to each corner of her mouth.

"Supper's ready and I hope you're hungry," she said briskly.

Yount smiled in return, attracted by this first vigorous and honest impulse he had seen in the town. But the girl's attention had shifted away toward a rider just reining in by the porch—dusty, brick-red young chap with a lean body and a fighter's face.

"H'lo Bill," said the girl, and tipped her chin. "Hurry and scrub up, and I'll have your meal waitin'." Then she retreated across the lobby and into the dining room, Yount following behind.

He took a seat midway down a long table, and helped himself from the filled platters and dishes strung along its length. Apparently this Bill had something special in the line of supper, for the girl brought out an extra dish as he hauled his long body across the room and sat down a few places away from Yount.

"They're fresh," said the girl, nodding at the plate, "and I knew you'd like them."

"Thinkin' about me now and then?" drawled the young fellow and looked up. That flashing exchange of glances told Yount all he needed to know about them. Man and woman—the old story of primitive hunger working its way with these two.

"How do you like riding for Crosskeys?"

"As good as any," muttered Bill, "and as poor as most." He said something else to her, half under his breath, and there was a short parrying of phrases that heightened the color of her face.

"Well," said she with a quick intake of breath, "at least it's honest work."

"Yeah— And what's honesty worth around these parts, Helena? Thirty dollars a month."

"Still, it's honest," she repeated. "What else matters? We can wait."

"While others drag their loops and live high," he answered with a rising bitterness. Both of them seemed oblivious of Yount's

being in the room. "It hurts," went on Bill, "it hurts like the devil. You and me—waitin'. A long time we been waitin'. At thirty a month, it looks like we'll wait forever. It ain't right. When I stop to figger how some of these ranch owners got their start—"

"You're tired and discouraged," said she, and her arm fell with a gentle grace on his shoulder. "The day's been hot. You don't mean that."

"How about you, swelterin' in that kitchen all day long?" retorted Bill. "Don't you suppose I think of that and—" Once again their voices dropped to a murmuring.

"You don't mean it," said she more vigorously. "Don't say that, Bill. You're not that kind. You're honest."

"I wish I was sure of it," he grunted and shook his head.

SHE started to say something more, but checked herself and turned away. Jake Wallen came swinging into the dining room, with six or seven others trailing behind. The saloon keeper's wary eyes flitted across Yount and passed on. He stood beside Bill and dropped a heavy arm about the boy, speaking with a heavy friendliness.

"Long time no see, Bill. Where yuh been the last few days?" he questioned.

"A man's got to labor to make money, Jake," replied Bill.

"Mebbe—mebbe not," said the saloon man, and settled cautiously into a chair. He tucked a napkin into his collar so that it draped the broad chest like an apron, then he reached stolidly for food. "How yuh like workin' for Crosskeys?"

"Plenty to do."

"I judge," grunted Wallen. "Plenty to do, plenty of sweat, plenty of dust. Never cared much for that m'self."

Then he fell to eating with a silent voraciousness. The great jaws bulged and a greater flush spread over the beef-red cheeks. Other men dropped in, saying nothing, reaching for the platters without ceremony; a meal was something to be attacked and gotten over with quickly in Santa Rosa. Five minutes sufficed for some, ten minutes was as long as any of them took. Yount, dallying soberly with his food, watched them come and go until the room was almost empty. Wallen washed the coffee around his cup and downed it like a slug of whiskey, stripped the napkin away and rose.

Once again that immense paw fell on Bill's shoulder. "Come around and pay my place a visit. Man's got to have a mite o' pleasure in this world." And he passed out, not appearing to notice Yount.

Yount had finished. Lighting a cigar he left the table as the girl came in from the kitchen, and he heard her talking to Bill with a strange tenseness in her voice.

"Not that, Bill. Nothing's worth it. Once you get in with Wallen and—" The rest of it was indistinct to Yount as he passed out to the lobby, but he caught the name of the Lizard, whispered with perceptible dread.

LAFAYETTE LANE was sitting on the porch, solemnly watching beyond the housetops, and Yount took the adjoining chair. The sun was down now, marked by a long, burning flare on the western horizon. Faint shadows flowed down Santa Rosa's street; a breath of air came off the desert.

"A long day and a warm one," mused Yount. "There ain't many pleasures to be had in this world, but one of the best is to sit and watch the cool of the evenin' come."

"I've passed most of my life watchin' said evenin's come," was Lafayette Lane's laconic response. "Come and go. Soon gone—and another day jest like all the rest."

"Just so," agreed Yount, and lapsed into complete silence. Twilight arrived, deepened. A light broke through the foggy panes of the saloon windows, soon followed by others. But for the most part, Santa Rosa's street lay obscure and mysterious in the thickening pools of night. Water guttered softly somewhere, and soft speech rose from doorways. A guitar's pleasant chords announced the beginning of the evening's pleasure at Jake Wallen's.

"The boys seem to be driftin' yonder for a little fun," observed Yount casually.

"They'll pay for it," muttered Lane, hardly above his breath; and then, as if regretting the remark, he rose and went inside.

As he did so Bill came out, turned uncertainly on the porch and walked toward the saloon. Yount had a moment's view of the young fellow's face, tight and bitter and puzzled. He had just disappeared inside

of Wallen's when the girl hurried across the lobby, almost running, and stared toward the saloon after him. Her white hands moved up toward her throat and a sharp catch of breath, almost like a cry, escaped her. Yount thought for a moment that she meant to follow the man; but instead she went back, walking very slowly.

Yount inspected the glowing tip of his cigar, his mouth pressed tight. This Bill was a fine chap, born straight, and a fighter. But he was being pinched between the jaws of fortune as many another good man had been pinched.

"Ordinarily," reflected Yount to himself, "he'd stick to his convictions and play an honest hand. But there's his girl. He wants to marry her, wants to take her away from that kitchen. It hurts him to see her there. Bein' crooked looks like an easy way of fixin' everything up— And there's Wallen, dangling bait right in front of the lad's nose. Easy money, no harm done except to a few rich ranchers or to the Mexicans who don't count—that's what Wallen's tellin' him."

He rose on impulse and went for the saloon, feeling himself flanked on the far side of a watcher.

"It's simple business to be honest when there ain't any reason to be otherwise," he added, grimly, "but the boy's got a hard problem. He's hurt, he's desperate; and Wallen's bait looks good. Damn that man!"

The saloon was filling, the poker games were in full tilt, and over by a roulette table a man called out a number. Bill was standing there, watching the racing ball and Yount closed idly in. Perhaps it was impulse again, perhaps not, that caused Yount to buy a stack of chips; but he had seen a faint glance of wistfulness on the face of the hard-pressed youth, and as Yount placed a nibbling bet here and there on the board, he debated over an idea that came into his head.

"I sure feel in the humor to bust that contraption tonight," drawled Bill to the group in general. "I got a hunch it's my meat."

"Try it," boomed Wallen, who had come up from the bar.

"No," said Bill with sudden stubbornness. "I need my money for other things."

Yount had lost three bets in a row. Suddenly he shoved the whole of his stack in front of Bill. "I can't catch that ball tonight," he said affably, "but I believe in backin' a man with a hunch. Here's your grubstake. Play it."

Young Bill turned a straight and sober glance toward Yount. "That's kindly," he observed, "but I may be talkin' through my hat and lose your pile."

When I gamble I always expect to lose," replied Yount grinning. "You got the fever, so hop to."

"Here goes," grunted Bill and took the stack. Yount rolled his cigar around and turned to the bar for a drink.

Jake Wallen was beside him, the pale-centered eyes boring in. "Santy Claus, ain't you?" he said.

"I do things that please me," observed Yount and drank his slug. "Any objections to that?"

"None—so far." Wallen lifted a finger to the bar man. A box of cigars came across. "Fill yore pockets," he invited Yount. "On the house—on Jake Wallen, which is me."

"Thanks, kindly."

"Santa Rosa," opined Wallen, "is a peculiar town, friend. Santa Rosa likes to stew in its own juice. Santa Rosa tends to its own affairs and tolerates no outside interference. Mebbe," and the saloon man's gross cheeks stiffened, "it will interest yuh to know there ain't ever been a law officer inside Santa Rosa for five years."

"I would say," mused Yount, "the law officers was discreet."

"Some have tried to get in," drowned Wallen. "Them fellows never repeated the same fatal mistake. Santa Rosa takes care of itself."

"Santa Rosa—which is Jake Wallen," said Yount.

"I see you are a man o' judgment. Have another drink."

Yount bowed and tossed down the liquor. Very gravely he wiped his lips and turned for the door. "Believe I'll turn in." And then, as an apparent and casual afterthought, he added, "I expect to ride out and see the country tomorrow."

He went back to his room and settled down in a chair. From his pocket he drew a pair of steel-rimmed glasses; out of the saddlebags he took a Bible scarred with

travel and usage. And for a half hour this quiet man with the carriage of a cavalry officer bowed his head over the fine print. Then he went to bed.

Five minutes later, Wallen's henchman left the adjoining room and hurried back to the saloon to make his report. "He didn't talk to himself, didn't write and didn't make but one funny play," said the man to Wallen.

"What was that?"

"He read a Bible fer half an hour."

Wallen chewed at the end of his cigar a long while. "He's a mite soft that-away. He staked Bill at roulette an' he give the barber a toy donkey fer his kid. I reckon he buys beef. Tomorrow he aims to ride out and have a look. He give me notice, which means he's nobody's fool, and that he knows dam' well who can put him in touch with said beef— Wink!"

The snooper hurried over.

"Ride over to the Lizard," grunted Wallen. "Say a man'll be along the road tomorra."

II

IT WAS after breakfast, and Yount was in the stable saddling when young Bill walked through the wide driveway with a small cheerful grin on his lean cheeks. He punched back the brim of his hat and brought a roll of bills from his pocket.

"I was lookin' for you," he drawled. "I busted that outfit last night. Won a hundred dollars. Here's your stake and the extra fifty. I'm han'somely obliged, and if there's anything I can ever do for you, Bill Bent's my name; and I'll be around Santa Rosa durin' the next few days."

Yount accepted the money. "Bein' flush, you figger Crosskeys don't need your services any more, uh?"

"No-o," reflected Bill, "I guess I'll tag along with the outfit for a spell. Leastwise, until I find a place where money grows on bushes."

Yount swung to the saddle. "There may be more profit left for you in that roulette rig," he suggested.

"Not for me," stated Bill bluntly. "I ain't foolish and I'm hangin' on to every doggone nickel. Say, I'd cut a man's throat for a dollar!— But I'm under obligation to you, friend."

"None whatsoever," said Yount. "I always like to back a good man." And with that he rode out of Santa Rosa, eastward into the fresh glare of the morning's sun.

The town was dead, and excepting young Bill, who strolled toward the hotel, nobody appeared on the street. But Yount knew that his departure was observed and he also knew, before he had gone far, that Wallen still kept him covered. Yonder to the left a mile or more, a horseman cut out of an arroyo and jogged parallel to the trail. In time this individual veered away, and presently he dipped from sight. Yount's blue eyes narrowed.

"Crookedness," he murmured. "Deception, evil, lust and violence. Wallen's been teachin' 'em that for ten years. Warpin' everybody to his own uses. Them that don't warp either die or depart. And now, needin' fresh hands, he works on this Bill Bent, caterin' to him, danglin' bait, lettin' him win a hundred dollars from a crooked rig just to make the lad feel good. It's like a plague on the land."

Off to the southwest lay a puff of dust against the horizon, low and travelling. Yount studied it for a half hour and nodded slowly.

"Two can dangle bait. I dangled mine in front of Wallen and over there comes an answer. My bet is that it's the Lizard. Another cat's-paw. Maybe this Lizard thinks he's the big noise around Santa Rosa, maybe he thinks he runs the district. But he don't. Wallen does. It's Wallen we've got to buck before the sun goes down this night."

Momentarily, the rider off to the left popped up to view, cantered a few hundred yards and again vanished. Yount rode straight along the trail, waiting for his patient plans to mature. Santa Rosa was a dim outline behind, huddling miserably beneath the fury of a brazen, pitiless sun. Ahead of him many miles stretched a barrier of low hills, promising a shelter that didn't exist in their barren slopes; and to the right the dust ball gathered and grew. It passed rapidly from south to east and then was directly to Yount's front, completely subsiding. Three men, standing across the trail and waiting for him. In time he was near

enough to see that the center figure rose considerably above the others and over the narrowing interval he had his first sight of the Lizard.

HE KNEW the man immediately from the broadcast description. A floppy hat, held by a chin strap, shaded features that were almost olive; and the first detail Yount picked up was the jagged angry scar that cut a half circle around the base of the man's throat. He was an impatient creature, this Lizard, moving continually in the saddle, and the horse fiddling beneath him. There was a cruel cast to lip and flaring nostril, and when Yount reined in a few yards distant he saw dull and muddy eyes lowering at him. The Lizard was a purely animal type, without imagination and without the capacity to feel remorse. Undoubtedly a terror, a vicious, unbridled killer. But only that.

The Lizard possessed but a fragment of Jake Wallen's brain.

"Good day," said Yount, forgetting the two others after one glance.

"I hear you got business in the country," grunted the Lizard, too impatient to dally.

"Some," admitted Yount.

"Beef's what you want?" pressed the Lizard.

"That's my business."

"No questions asked. Beef on the hoof. Delivered any place within twenty miles o' Santa Rosa. Cash paid over Wallen's bar, right after yore riders take the stuff."

"No questions asked," assented Yount, "providin' it's beef from across the river. Any animal from the American side has got to have a vent brand and a bill of sale. I'm not takin' rustled Texas cattle. Don't want any trouble from the authorities. Square deal. Immaterial to me how you get it. If it's rustled from Mexico, all right. If it comes from this side it's got to be legal."

"I'll take care o' that," was the Lizard's surly retort. "What price?"

"Depends on the stuff you bring me. When I see it, I'll dicker."

"Fair enough. Three nights from now, three miles north of this exact spot."

"Four nights," qualified Yount. "I've got to collect a trail crew. And not around here. I'll take over your stuff twenty miles north of the point where this trail hits the base of those mountains yonder."

"By God, you're particular!" exclaimed the Lizard.

"You bet I am. This mess of cattle goes on a long drive, and I don't propose to start too close to the border line. Mexicans have a habit of strikin' back, you know."

"I agree to it," said the Lizard, and seemed to consider the interview finished. His grip on the reins tightened, and he was about to swing off, when Yount suddenly stopped him.

"Wait a minute, friend. I don't know you."

"The hell yuh don't!" growled the Lizard. "Yuh know exactly who I am. Everybody knows who I am!"

"Oh, I've heard about you, and I've read a general description of you; but I don't propose to go off half cocked on this deal. There's tricks to all trades. You may be only the livin' image of the Lizard for all I know. Maybe framin' me for a fine trap."

"So? Now what you want, my birth certificate? I'd flash that for yuh if I knowed where I was born an' who my paw was—which I don't. I'm gettin' some aggravated with this palaver."

"Nevertheless," Yount insisted, I'm a cautious man. I know Wallen, but I don't know you. Wallen's word is ample with me. If he says you're the man I'm lookin' for, well and good."

HE FELT the flare and impact of the outlaw's eyes. This moment held danger. Suspicion raced across the man's face, and his thin lips pressed to a mere line. The animal was cropping out in him, the predatory instinct to draw away and strike without asking further questions. Yount held himself absolutely still, hands folded across the pommel, meeting the Lizard's half-lidded stare evenly. Of a sudden, the outlaw shrugged his shoulders.

"All right. I'll tend to that. Be in Santa Rosa sometime this afternoon." And grunting at the other two, he whirled and galloped back to the southeast.

Yount reined around and walked his pony homeward, drawing a great sigh.

"So far, so good. Cards are fallin' right. All a man can do in a case like this is use

the best of his judgment. Right up to the showdown. An when the showdown comes and the time for judgment is done with, there's nothing left but luck and the help of God. Which I will need before shadows fall tonight!"

Between his position and the distant Santa Rosa, there was the abrupt appearance of a moving object. Yount looked at his watch, fine lines of thought springing up at the corners of his eyes.

"That's the eleven o'clock stage, which I figured on," he said to himself. "It'll be in Irique at one—just time enough. And now, if things fall right—"

He threw away the half smoked portion of his cigar and took another. When the stage had become visible he pulled from his pocket an inch-long section of white chalk and adjusted it between thumb and forefinger of his right hand. A flash of excitement crossed the steady cheeks.

"If there's passengers, this is going to be difficult—" Then he drew slightly off the road, waited until the rapidly travelling team was well down upon him, and lifted an arm in signal. The driver, sitting alone on the seat, hauled back and stepped on the brake block, and the light carry-all skewed across the shifting sand.

"What the hell?" challenged the driver, reaching for his plug tobacco.

"Never like to stop a stage," apologized Yount affably. He drew beside the outfit and rested his right hand against the seat panel, in the manner of a man wishing to ease his weight. "A gent's motives might get misjudged and start the lead a-flyin'. But I ain't got a match to my name, and it's a long ride without a smoke."

"Uhuh," grunted the driver and searched himself. "Yeah, here's a couple. Hardly need a match on a day sech as this be. Could scorch asbestos up here where I'm a-sittin'."

Yount accepted the matches politely, and started to say something else; but the driver had gathered up the ribbons and kicked off the brake. "Got no time to palaver," said he. "I'm due at Irique in one hour and thirty minutes."

The stage careened away, bearing upon one seat panel the lightly written "Y" that Yount had inscribed while his hand rested there. He tossed the chalk behind a clump of sage and proceeded at the same idle gait.

"That's done, and there ain't much left now but to wait—which is the hardest of all."

DINNER was over when he reached Santa Rosa and put up his horse. The hotel man, breaking a rule, offered to put something on the table for him, but Yount declined.

"A man's got to work to eat, and I'm a little too heated for provender. What I need is somethin' cold out of a bottle."

"Ridin' in the full o' the sun would natcherily incline a man to heat," murmured Lafayette Lane. "Folks around here most usually do their ridin' at night."

"Might be a wise idea," drawled Yount.

"That's accordin'," was the hotel man's cryptic answer, and then he busied himself at the key rack, once more giving the impression that he thought he had spoken too freely.

Yount went up to wash, and then headed for the saloon. There, Jake Wallen, playing solitaire at a table, rose and circled the bar.

"Inclined to be warm," he suggested.

"May turn out that way."

"Have a drink on the house—on old Jake Wallen." And the saloon man's meaty face bent forward while Yount took his portion and downed it.

"For a mature man," reflected Wallen, "you drink like a sparrow. Have another."

"Thanks no. Fatal for a Northern fellow to drink heavy down here in the South."

All at once Wallen was aflame with renewed suspicion. "Northern, huh? Since when has Northern folks took to drawlin' their words like you do?"

"The North," said Yount calmly, "was settled by gentlemen from the South. I was born in Louisiana, myself. But when we fellers from the South winter five-six seasons up there, we call ourselves Northerners.

I'm proud to know my drawl remains. I'd hate to lose it."

Wallen poured himself a jot and grimly drank. "By God, man, you had me ready to call the dogs jest then! I'm a man that believes nothin'. Not even if it's so. I mistrust you, and I have ever since yuh set foot in this town. And I'll continue to do same after yo're gone. But I'll play yore game—until I change my mind."

"I don't blame you," reflected Yount, lighting another cigar. The blue eyes fixed themselves critically on the fingers holding the match, as if watching for a sign of unsteadiness. "Not at all. I'm a hard fellow to satisfy myself. For instance—I met a gentleman on the trail this mornin'."

"Thought you might," rumbled Wallen. "It was wise of yuh to mention yore little pasear to me."

"I know who runs this district," agreed Yount.

"You bet. Me—old Jake Wallen. But that fella you was speaking of?"

"He asked some questions concernin' beef," drawled Yount. "Seemed interested. But maybe he's a gent known as the Lizard, and maybe he ain't. I am taking no chances."

"What about it?" demanded Wallen, openly puzzled.

"We made a dicker, as far as beef's concerned," proceeded Yount idly. "But I'm not dealin' with him until you point him out to me and personally name him. It's not my habit to throw money on strangers. I have cut my eye teeth on skin games."

"Meanin' I got to introduce you to the Lizard?"

"Just so," approved Yount. "And I believe I will go seat myself somewhere and wait for a breath of air."

HE TURNED, deliberately presenting his back to the saloon man, and strolled over the room. Passing through the doors, he had a moment's side glance of Wallen's face set toward him, still a little puzzled; for all the creature's fleshiness he was strangely cat-like, forever waiting and ready to spring.

In the street, Yount found sweat beading up on his forehead, not from heat but from the highly keyed situation he had just passed through. On the hotel porch he took to a chair, tilting it against the wall and sighing vastly.

"And that's done," he told himself. "Had to stir his suspicions again, which was bad but couldn't be helped. Let him try to think it out. He can't find a flimsy point where he might poke his pryin' finger through and nail me. He wants the money I can throw him for that beef, and it'll sway his ordinary judgment which would be to stop debatin' and let the hounds loose. He'll play my game, the Lord willin', until sundown. After that—"

Sundown. To this calm, grave man who sat so quietly on the porch it seemed an eternity removed. Waiting was always the hardest. The heat streamed through Santa Rosa in thickening waves; there was a shimmering cushion of it along the tops of the buildings, and occasionally some board or joint of the hotel cracked like a whip. One hour, and then another, the bakeoven temperature intensifying as the porous earth was at last saturated with the bombarding rays of sun and began sending them back. Two o'clock. Three; and then four. After that time seemed to halt, and all things were held in a droning suspense. It appeared to Yount that even the town's sullen vigilance had been smothered. Nobody moved in the open.

He rose and went in to draw himself a drink of flat and tepid water from the lobby jar. Lafayette Lane was stretched full length on a bench, in a comatose state that was neither sleeping nor waking. Going on back into the dining room, he found the girl sitting at the long table, head pillowed forward on her arms. She lifted it swiftly and Yount saw that she had been recently crying, a fact that both embarrassed and saddened him.

"I wonder, ma'am, if you can get me a lemon so I can strip it into that water out front?"

"I'll make you a lemonade in the kitchen. Sit down."

"Now don't bother about that—"

"No bother," said she cheerfully, and disappeared.

Yount took a seat. If anything, it was a degree cooler in here, and for that he was grateful.

But it's hard work for her," he told himself. "All day long, workin' like a beaver. Can't blame this Bill for bein' upset. It's

easy to talk about honesty—sometimes it's hard to practice it."

The girl returned with his lemonade and watched him drink.

"Bill told me about your grubstaking him last night," said she, presently. "I want to thank you—for being kind. People around here are not always kind."

"Hope he uses the money profitably."

"He—he gave it to me to save," she murmured.

"Level head on him, that boy," applauded Yount.

"Yes." There was a sharp intake of breath. "When they leave him alone!"

She said something else, but suddenly Yount's ears were turned to a sound on the street. He sat as still as carved marble, hearing men pass into town. That would be the Lizard and his followers arriving. Very carefully, he deposited the glass on the table.

"I wish we were in any other town in the world but this one!" she was saying. "I know what—what they are trying to get Bill to do. He wouldn't listen to them if it wasn't for thinking of me."

"Folks have got to fight it out," mused Yount, and a grave, fatherly tone came into his words. "The world is full of fightin' and sorrow. We can't help that. But don't you worry. This will wash out. What's right is right and will prevail, though it takes a thousand years. Don't you worry."

"A thousand years won't help Bill, Mr. Yount!"

He had risen and turned to the lobby. "Maybe sooner," was his soft murmur.

Instead of going to the porch, he sat in the lobby, a dry cigar clenched between his teeth. Through a side window he saw three horses nosed against the saloon hitching rack, and three men at that moment going into the place. A perceptible line of worry creased Yount's brow.

"Where's the rest of his bunch?" he asked himself. "Waitin' outside o' town, or left behind?"

If the others were waiting somewhere beyond the end of the straggling street, he knew his chances were desperately slim. In any event, the showdown was not far off; and at the thought of it the pressure of his jaws settled more harshly against the cigar and there was a flare of deeper blue in the drill-straight eyes. Showdown, and the swirling smash and violence of guns aflame!

He saw Wink, the snooper, pop out of the saloon and come rapidly toward the hotel. Presently the man stood in the doorway and puckered his face significantly.

"Yuh will find somethin' o' interest at Wallen's," he muttered and veered away. Lafayette Lane rose up from the bench.

"What the hell was that?" he grunted.

"Messenger from the powers that be," drawled Yount.

Lane walked to the water jar, drank, and went behind the counter. When Yount finally rose and aimed for the street, Lane's curiously metallic reply followed him.

"Don't take no wooden money!"

III

WHEN Yount arrived at the saloon, a sort of sluggish liveliness animated the stale atmosphere. Wallen was behind the bar, draped against it. The Lizard and his two followers were drinking as though possessed with an unquenchable thirst. The same slack and sullen characters sat at the tables, doing nothing, saying nothing. It was as though they had never moved from their places since Yount had ridden into town. He walked forward.

"This the man?" asked Wallen, stabbing a thumb at the Lizard.

"That's him."

"Then he's the fellow you want," stated Wallen heavily.

"Damnation," growled the Lizard. "Here I makes the blisterin' trip acrost country jest for this piece of foolishness. Who in the hell did you think I was?—I'm the Lizard!"

"Then it's settled," drawled Yount. "My mind's satisfied. Sorry for the extra trip, but there's considerable money in it for all of us."

"Make your arrangements now," ordered Wallen.

"Already made," broke in the Lizard. "The boys are headed south this minute. I sent 'em ahead, and I'll catch up in the cool of the evenin'."

"Better get on the trail," said Wallen, scowling.

"I'm eatin' a hotel meal tonight. I'm tired of beans and canned tomatoes. It ain't you, Wallen, that has to go out and eat dust. Let me do this my own way. I—"

There was a sudden clatter out in the street.

"What's that?" snapped Wallen, and threw his big body around the end of the

bar with an astonishing speed. His move roused the whole place to an electric tensity. Men followed him through the doors, Yount idling after, as grave as a priest at prayer. A flat bed wagon with a platform built upon it, came rattling through the street, two men in it. The driver was young and sad-faced, and worthy of no particular notice. But the other, draped head and foot in a flowing linen dust coat, made a striking figure. He wore a thirty dollar hat edged with snake skin, and diamonds flashed on his fingers. Beneath the shade of the hat were features thin and haughty, a Buffalo Bill goatee, and raking, glittering eyes. The stamp of his profession was all over him, and if it had not been, the lettering along the wagon box would have soon established it:

YELLOWSTONE JACK — WORLD'S GREATEST NATURAL HEALER AND BANJO ARTIST. ORIGINAL DISCOVERER OF THE INDIAN SAGA HERB, RESTORER OF THE HUMAN RACE, BOON TO SUFFERING MANKIND, INFALLIBLE CURE FOR EVERY ORGANIC AILMENT KNOWN. HERE TONIGHT—TONIGHT—TONIGHT! ! !

The wagon veered in until it stood before the saloon; the driver halted with a slash of his whip, looking neither to right nor left. Yellowstone Jack rose in his seat and bowed with a wide sweep of his hat.

"Gentlemen, I bid you good day," he said in a loud voice. "I have come to entertain your town, to heal it and to leave it rejoicing. Tonight, the gallant little city of Santa Rosa shall be given a full and continuous program, educational entertaining, diverting and valuable. Tonight—at seven, at seven, at seven!"

Then, having finished his lecture, he turned to the driver. "Get those horses into the stable and be careful about watering them. Don't sit there and dream."

The driver obeyed meekly. Yellowstone Jack dropped from the seat, and went around to the back end of the wagon where two doors, padlocked, led into the compartment between wagon bed and platform top. Evidently it was the medicine man's supply chest and catch-all, for after unlocking it he drew out a banjo, a valise, a torch stand and a box of cigars. Snapping the padlock again, he laid all these things down upon the platform and turned to the group.

"By gad, I never toured this circuit in such hot weather before! Gentlemen, join me in a drink."

Wallen had not moved an inch from his position against the outer saloon wall. His pale, probing eyes kept striking at Yellowstone Jack, at the driver, at the wagon and its details; and he had his head canted as if better to catch some betrayinig sound in the medicine man's extravagant speech. Yount, apparently interested in the new arrival, saw how the saloon man's great body stiffened and his repulsive jaws ground together. Yount felt that morosely suspicious inspection turned on him and as he felt it, he chuckled and spoke to the Lizard.

"It's been some time since I last saw the old low pitch game. Guess it is one way of makin' a living, but this sun's pretty hot to be standin' under. Believe I'll hunt shade."

Yellowstone Jack entered the saloon, drawing the crowd with him. Wallen ducked

his head at Wink, saying, "You git behind the bar and serve up. I'm goin' out for a shave."

Yount's ever tightening nerves relaxed a trifle as he saw the saloon man swing into the barber shop. The game was being played out, the cards falling in due turn. It would only be a few minutes now, but the weight of the world seemed to press down upon them. He strolled toward the hotel again, catching sight of Wallen sinking into the barber's chair as he passed by. On the porch he hesitated, seeming to debate with himself. The sun had tipped well to the west, and according to his watch it was five-thirty.

Lafayette Lane appeared on the porch to look at the medicine man's wagon, and he suddenly grew rigid at sight of Yount's expression. The grave stranger was staring at him, jowls like iron and a deep blue flame burning out of his eyes. The hotel man had seen that expression before in his long life and he knew what it meant. It was the mark and signal of death—it warned of an instinct to kill, rising up like a storm, beating back every doubt, every cautious hope for life, every weakness. Whatever Lafayette Lane's original ideas had been concerning his guest, he comprehended the truth now. It could not be mistaken; and so, being wise, he let his hands stay beside him and half in a whisper declared himself.

"I'm out o' this, Captain. Neither fer yuh nor against yuh. Consider this door empty and consider that nobody will shoot yuh from this direction. God be with yuh, but I'm afraid yo're lost!"

Yount nodded and slowly pivoted on his heels, all muscles like woven wire and a cold stream pouring down his spine, blocking his nerves. The street stretched in front of him. Alley mouth, door and window all met his questing eyes. Santa Rosa was before him and nothing but the hotel and the open desert behind. That way he was safe, unless some unsuspected henchman of Wallen's lay hidden in the vacant house across the street. But he was as safe as he ever would be, as safe as any man could be who in another swing of the pendulum would be looking at death. All action would be along the narrow strip bounded by the stores, the stable, the saloon, the bank.

A man on a horse turned around the bank at the far end of the street, for an instant upsetting all Yount's fixed ideas. Young Bill Bent's lean face looked down the interval, then horse and man cut diagonally across to the stable and disappeared inside.

"Keep out of this, you young fool!" thought Yount, and then took two steps forward on the porch.

THE driver of the medicine wagon came from the stable and stopped to roll a cigarette. Yount's arm rose a trifle and the palm of his hand made a slight pushing gesture. The driver casually turned until he had his back to the stable wall and commanded the distant angle of the street. He licked his cigarette thoughtfully, head bobbing.

The hotel keeper, still posted in the doorway, breathed with difficulty.

Light steps tapped across the lobby, and the girl's voice rose, to be cut gruffly short by Lane's muttered, "Stay back!—Hell's goin' to open up!"

Then Yount had gone down the porch steps and was standing there; the Lizard was coming from the saloon alone, coming in the direction of the hotel.

Yellowstone Jack stepped out directly after and strode to his wagon. He paused by the rear of the vehicle, removing the linen duster and rolling it into a bundle. The goatee lifted, and in that single instant he stared directly at Yount. Something passed between. Yellowstone Jack unlocked the doors of the wagon compartment and held them half open, still dallying.

He seemed to be waiting patiently for something; and the driver by the stable tossed away his cigarette with a short, nervous gesture.

The Lizard had paused to look into the barber shop, and Lafayette Lane gripped the sill of the hotel door and groaned, "Good God!" Yount wheeled deliberately, like a soldier on the parade ground, and left the board walk, placing himself nearer the center of the dusty thoroughfare. The Lizard started on, and then, seeing Yount in the full of the sun, stopped again with a sudden jerk of his black cheeks.

At that moment Yount's level tones cut

across the arid drone of Santa Rosa; laconic, without emotion.

"In the name of Texas, I want you!"

In the long hours of reflection by trail fire and lamp light, Yount had pictured this scene as it now came to pass. There was no doubt in his mind as to what answer either Santa Rosa or the Lizard would make to him. Compromise or surrender—never. Yet even now, with no hope of peace, he was poised motionless, both palms gripping the coat lapels and pulling them away from his chest. By the saloon front Yellowstone Jack flung open the little doors of the wagon's end and whirled aside, sweeping a gun from his pocket at the very moment a pair of men slid from the wagon compartment, ranged beside him, and lifted their weapons against the entrance to Wallen's place.

THE Lizard felt, rather than saw, what happened behind. His swart face shifted grotesquely, the mark of the beast was upon him; he swayed, cursed with all the pent up and accumulated savagery of an unbridled career, and he sent his arm streaking for the gun at his hip. Yount, standing like a statue in the shifting sand, slid his palm across his chest and down to his left armpit. The blast of bullets shuddered through Santa Rosa; the Lizard rocked on his boot-heels, his muddy orbs opening wide in that devastating fright which comes to a man who suddenly realizes that his life is pulsing away. He looked down at the gun, desperately trying to lift the sagging muzzle, trying to force the numbing finger to move again; and thus for an interval he remained stupidly quiescent. The high scream of a women came knife-like out of the hotel; and in instant response, it seemed, young Bill Bent threw himself from the mouth of the stable, to be stopped in his tracks by the sad-eyed driver of the medicine wagon. Then the Lizard, trembling at every joint, fell to the sidewalk.

He turned his head to obey a last primitive instinct; and so, staring at Yount, he died there in the sullen heat.

The saloon was a-riot with trampling men. Yellowstone Jack and his partners opened up, the triple roar rocketing madly into the oppressive afternoon, slugs crackling through the tinder dry boards, shattering the windows, ripping along the saloon floor. Inside the saloon a man shrilled his agony; doors slammed at the back, and Yount, watching and listening for every shift of this mad tide, pivoted again and faced an alley at exactly the moment when a Wallen partisan came into it, headlong and awkward. The fellow saw Yount, clawed at his waist, and stumbled to a stop, never even lifting his revolver. Yount's bullet sent him down squirming. Others behind him flinched away from the alley; one man crossed its rear mouth in a single hurdle and gained the protection of the hotel.

Immediately, Yount retreated to protect his back, at the same time sending a sharp command over to the sad-eyed driver by the stable.

"Dewey, never mind that boy! He's all right! Watch the far end of the street—by the bank! They're comin' around." Swinging, he waited for the fellow who had gone behind the hotel. A question kept drumming on his mind: what was going on in the barber shop just now? Wallen was the heart and brains and soul of this evil town, a shifty enemy, a man of unexpected action. Yount threw himself forward and raked the corner of the hotel, ran on and came upon Wink, the snooper, whose frame sagged against the side wall of the building, blood filling one sleeve.

"Done—done," gasped Wink. "I done shot my bolt. Lemme alone!"

Yount seized the fellow's gun and galloped back to the center of the street.

"What's happened to Wallen?" he muttered. But he checked the impulse to close in and find out. This was his proper place for a few more heavy moments—his point of observation. The outlaw crew was splitting into fragments, and he dared not leave this flank unprotected while his three partners blocked the saloon.

Dewey, the sad-eyed driver, sprang into rapid action, shaving the bank corners with a fast fire. Just behind and above him a second story window pane shattered and a rifle barrel bore down.

Yount cried, "Watch out!" and lifted his revolver, but at this juncture young Bill Bent ran behind Dewey and poured the window full of lead. The rifle fell on through the sash and struck the ground. Bill

Bent emitted a high rebel yell and ran straight for the bank, Dewey breaking into a pumping stride and following. The focus of this hot battle had abruptly shifted to the far end of town.

Yount, feeling the encounter slacken, jumped forward and motioned to Yellowstone Jack.

"Come with me!" he yelled. "You two boys stay planted."

HE THREW his body into the saloon's riddled doors, spending the last shot out of his original revolver as he did so. But Wallen's was the tenement of only two people now, one silent figure under a poker table and a cowering Mexican whose arms stretched above him. Yellowstone Jack ran over to search the Mexican, while Yount bent down and retrieved a fallen gun. He snapped the cylinder open, found four cartridges left in it, and hurried straight on to an open back door. Yellowstone Jack warned him crisply.

"Watch out there, Bill! Yo're takin' too damn many chances! Wait for me!"

Yount made a broad jump through the door. To the left was nothing. To right—in the direction of the bank—a group huddled against a wall and fired spasmodically through an alley, replying to the fire of young Bill Bent and Dewey the ex-driver. Evidently these henchmen of Wallen's had figured to cut around the bank and enfilade the street, but the raking lead from beyond had halted their advance.

"Now we've got them!" said Yount very softly. "I'll offer them a chance." And he lifted a sharp, chilling command. "Pitch up—hands high! You're boxed! Flatten out right where you stand, or we'll riddle you! Pitch up!"

Bill Bent's rebel yell sailed over the bank exultantly. The Santa Rosa adherents started to swing back, but there was confusion among them. The will to fight had been pinched out by the swiftness and competence of Yount's attack.

Hands rose tentatively, and then the cool, tuneless voice of Wallen's gambler, carried down to Yount:

"You win, friend. We're layin' down our cards."

"Drop all guns where you stand," ordered Yount, together with Yellowstone Jack, closing in upon them. "Good enough. Crooked face, don't get married to that weapon—drop it!— Now file through the alley to the street and meet those boys that want to see you so bad. Dewey—hold your shots, they're comin'!"

He pushed the party into the street, and swung them on until they reached the front of the saloon. There, under the survey of all Yount's men, Wallen's motley band stood morosely.

"There's more of you some place," challenged Yount. "I don't propose to go look for 'em, and I don't propose to be potted from any windows. I want a roundup. You there, card player, sing out and call 'em in! Where's Wallen?"

The barber's voice issued thinly from his shop. "Come here and git him! I'm about to cut his dam' throat."

Yount ran over ducked into the place, to find a scene such as Santa Rosa had never before witnessed and probably never would again. Wallen was stretched full length in the barber's chair, his face half lathered and half shaven. His eyes were closed, and the meaty cheeks drained of ordinary color. The barber stood over him, the edge of his razor resting like a feather against Wallen's throat.

"Take him offen me," whispered Wallen, not daring to move a muscle.

THE barber's nerves were about ready to jangle on him. He had made his great effort, had summoned all the doubtful courage in him to do this one chore. And now, shaking like a leaf, he pulled the razor away and let Yount marshal Wallen out of the chair.

The barber tried to close the razor but he came so near cutting himself with it that he dropped it to the floor and steadied his body against the chair.

"When I heard you challenge the Lizard," he murmured weakly, "I knowed then what was up. I figgered yuh didn't have a Chinaman's chance, and I said to myself, 'He's a dead man unless he gets help.' So I just dropped the edge o' my blade on Wallen's neck and kept him out of the play."

"I draw the line on steel," said Wallen, rubbing his Adam's apple. "Yuh dam' near

sliced my head off. This is one bad day for you! I'll hunt you down like a rabbit!"

"I had oughta done it," said the barber as though talking to himself. "I had oughta cut him, after he took that toy bank away from me. That was fer my kid."

Yount mentioned for Wallen to turn. He slipped the saloon keeper's gun free and threw it on the floor.

"Go out and join the prayer circle," he ordered. In the street again, he found the crowd increased. Lining them all against the saloon front, he called for young Bill Bent to help him. "I am taking Wallen and all men associated with Wallen back to Irique with me. There's warrants for most of 'em waiting there. You pick the sheep from the goats—and if there's anybody that ought to be here that you don't see, tell me and I'll rip this town apart with a crowbar."

"You're leavin' it to me to pass judgment?" asked young Bill doubtfully.

"I am. You took a hand, now play it."

"All right," agreed Bill and pointed his fingers along the line. "You—and you—get back to your chores. You—"

Yount went down to the bank. The gentleman of the seersucker suit stood behind his grille with a sawed-off shotgun pointed on the door and a haggard look on his gray face.

"Put it aside," said Yount, and saw the sweep of relief come over the man's countenance. "About that ten thousand dollar draft on Austin. Forget it. It was a part of my plan to convince Wallen that I was a cattle buyer."

"You forged that draft?" challenged the banker.

"No," drawled Yount. "The Cattlemen's Association furnished that money to the Austin bank for my purpose; but the draft, now that the shootin's over, won't be honored. So forget it. And here's another dollar. I want a new toy bank— Here's a twenty-dollar bill, too. Give me four five-dollar gold pieces."

The banker consummated the transactions and watched Yount slip the gold pieces one by one into the iron donkey. "Must think a lot of the barber's kid," he remarked.

"The barber's younker," mused Yount, "made a man out of the barber."

"Well, you sure put the skids under Santa Rosa."

"Better to say," reflected Yount, "that I removed some of the skids which were sendin' Santa Rosa down the greased chute to hell. I will bid you good-by!"

HE WENT back to the crowd. The sun was dipping over the western rim, and a kind of desolate solitude invaded Santa Rosa. Bill Bent had cut out the members of the wild bunch and herded them apart where they huddled, jaded and somber, around the massive figure of Jake Wallen.

"Get your horses," said Yount. "We ride." And then he walked over to where the barber stood. "This may or may not be a safe place for you from now on, my friend. You have done me a service, and I won't leave you behind if it's in your mind to pull stakes. Tell me what you want to do."

"I'm stayin'," muttered the barber. "I ain't afraid of anything that comes along—now. But there is one favor I would like to ask."

"Name it."

The barber shifted, a little embarrassed. "I'd like to have Wallen's gun to hang up in my shop. You see, when my kid grows up, I sorta want him to know that his dad

did somethin' he could be proud of. My kid's goin' to be a great man."

Yount's blue eyes gleamed with strange emotion. "Take it and God bless you!" he murmured. "And here's a present for that boy of yours. Here's another bank. And when I get to Irique I shall take all my men and walk into the saloon there and lift a glass—to your boy. May he stand head and shoulders to this crooked weary world, my friend!"

He pivoted sharply, not wishing to see the barber's face just then. The horses were out and men swinging up. Yellowstone Jack was tying the reins of the prisoners and running a lariat through each stirrup.

"When that stage got to Irique I had my eyes peeled," he said to Yount. "For a minute I couldn't tell whether that chalk mark was a Y or an N, but I judged it to mean 'yes' and so I started. The boys in that compartment dam' near died o' suffocation. And I'll be mighty pleased to shave off these whiskers and have my hair trimmed after four months. My wife don't like whiskers. Well, we're ready. How about the dead ones?"

"Santa Rosa," replied Yount, repeating an old, grim phrase, "buries its own dead. We'll let it stand like that. Well, catch up, and lead off. It's a long way to go."

THE column moved sluggishly eastward down the street. But Yount tarried a moment longer, lost in his own thoughts. Young Bill Bent was by the hotel porch with the girl, and she had one white hand gripped around his arm and was looking up with a hungry pride. He led his horse over and stopped.

"Shooting's done, Bill, and the job's over. But what made you horn in when you didn't have to?"

"We-ell, I was sorta under an obligation to you," muttered Bill.

"Not that much of an obligation."

"Maybe not." Young Bill drew a great breath. "I had to take some sort of a stand, didn't I? When the shootin' started I couldn't stay on the sidelines. It was one side or another. Maybe I have been a blamed fool, but somethin' sort of snapped when the bullets began to plow your way. Maybe I'm crazy, but I just pitched in. Didn't exactly make any decision—just started shootin'."

"Good boy," mused Yount. "If a man is straight, he can't go crooked. Now what?"

"We're going to get married and go out to the Crosskey," said the girl. "There's an extra house we can use."

Suddenly she ran off the walk and came up to Yount. Her sturdy little arms swept around his neck and she kissed him, the hint of a sob in her throat.

"Thank you—thank you! There will never be a day when we won't think of you!" she whispered.

Yount turned his head and stared long at the golden blaze on the western line. When he looked back, the blue of his eyes had deepened and there were lines around his mouth.

"Right will prevail, though it takes a thousand years," he muttered. "You are a pair of lucky kids. Remember that. Remember as well, that for many of us the trail is long and lonely. But I've got my reward. I can travel in peace now, knowin' you have won through. God bless you!"

Mounting then, he rode off.

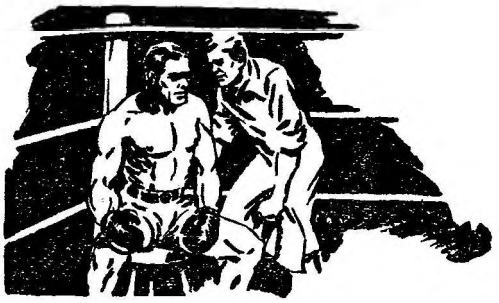
The hotel man, still posted in the lobby door, lifted a broad palm and said, "So long, Captain! You have ruined my business; but come again!— Come again and the place is yours."

Yount nodded.

Santa Rosa watched him go, a straight soldierly figure whose fine features and quiet, grave eyes were fixed ahead of him along the desert trail. Not once did he look back.

PALOOKA

By FRANK J. LEAHY



CHUCK CONLEY, sitting on the long table in the dressing-room, under the white, bare light, listened, with a grim set to his jaw, to the record-breaking crowd outside booing and razzing the first of the preliminary fights. He was in his trunks and bathrobe, one of his hands was taped, and Jack O'Toole, a handler, was trying to bandage the fighter's other hand with a thin strip of medicated gauze. Joe Dunn, Chuck's manager, sat teetering on a chair, chewing a black, unlighted cigar, and there was a worried crease between his brows.

"It's no use," said O'Toole suddenly, glancing around at the manager. "Bandage this mitt and we'll never get a glove on it."

Joe Dunn stood up, stretched himself.

"Then don't bandage it."

O'Toole frowned.

"But there's a busted knuckle—"

"You're telling me?"

O'Toole looked hostilely at the manager for a moment. Chuck Conley said nothing, just sat feeling testily of his swollen hand, which had an ugly, purplish hue to it.

"We need the money," said Joe Dunn.

On a sudden Mike Forhan, promoter, burst in, his hard face red, a threatening look in his eyes. As he advanced to confront Chuck Conley, tapped a stubby forefinger against the fighter's shoulder, Chuck cautiously slipped his injured hand behind him.

"Chuck," said Forhan, "that screwy mob out there wants a fight. They're yammering for the main go, and I'm here to tell you it better be a good one. The fight game's on shaky legs, here and elsewhere, and if this title go turns out to be as rotten as this first preliminary—which ain't impossible—we might as well all go join the church or something. See?"

Chuck nodded.

"I get you."

The promoter turned away, looked at Joe Dunn, glanced briefly at the handler, suddenly took a longer look.

"What's your name?"

"O'Toole."

FORHAN stared at the man curiously. But the handler's face was a strong-jawed, inscrutable mask, beaten into fighter's shape by many a boxing-glove.

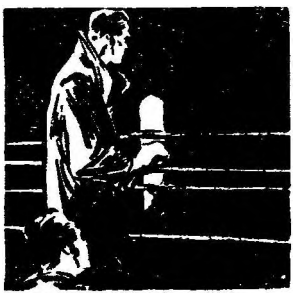
"Seems to me I've seen you before, O'Toole."

"Maybe. I been around."

"How long you been with Chuck Conley here?"

"Since today."

Joe Dunn spoke up:



Gunboat Selby Just Had to Get a Tussle That Night—or Else!

"Nicky got sick, so I hired this guy."

Forhan stared intently at O'Toole.

"Ever been in the ring?" he asked.

"In trainin' camps."

"That all?"

"That's enough."

A moment longer Forhan stared, then he shrugged and went out.

"What the hell?" O'Toole grumbled.

"Skip it," said Chuck Conley. "He ain't a bad guy."

An increased uproar sounded without—the yells and screams of savages demanding blood; that or the scratching of the fight game from the list of their big town's rackets. The din rose to a shrill pitch, died to a rumbling mutter.

Joe Dunn crossed to the peep-slot in the door.

"Another redskin bit the dust," he remarked, turning back. "Looks like the Filipino's takin' a nap."

He looked at his watch, sat down again to teeter, chew his cigar and brood. His glance evaded Chuck Conley's. O'Toole thought it should—sending a guy into a title match with a busted mitt.

"You must need the dough pretty bad," he commented, almost in the manner of soliloquy.

"I do," said Chuck. "Joe too. But my kid wife's got the bug an' has to go to Arizona."

"How about the doc? D'you hide this mitt on him?"

"No. He just let it pass."

"Some doctor!"

"That won't help you much when you're in the ring with the champ. 'Gunboat' Selby's a mauler, you know that."

"I can take it," said Chuck. "Just so I get the dough."

"But you can't hit him with that busted duke."

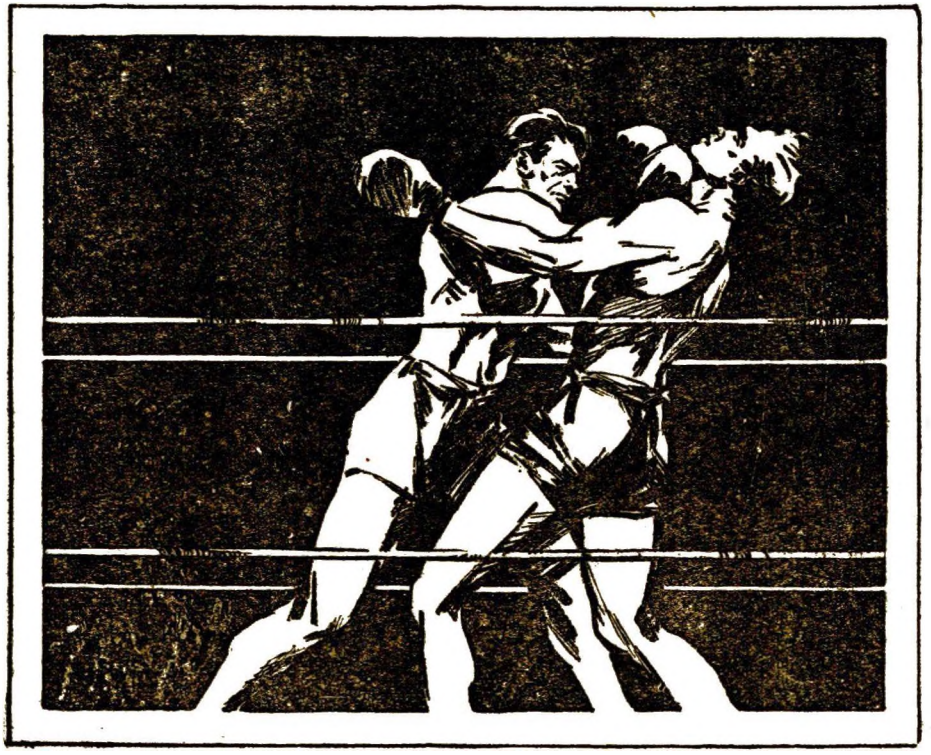
"I won't try—'less I get a real chance at his jaw. Anyhow, it's shot full o' cocaine."

O'Toole glanced at brooding Joe Dunn.

"Maybe if you'd go have a little talk with Gunboat, he might agree to go easy on Chuck."

Joe Dunn shifted his cigar across his mouth.

"Why don't you run up a rope?" he



growled. "I've already talked to Gunboat."

"What'd he say?"

"Never mind what he said."

"He laughed at Joe," Chuck spoke up. "He thinks Joe was tryin' to spring a gag on him."

"You should go show him that mitt of yours, then."

"No, I got to keep this mitt hid. Can't let Forhan get wise. I need the dough too bad."

Outside the first bell for the second preliminary sounded.

"You'll be in Chuck's corner, O'Toole," said Joe Dunn. "You better go out and see how it's done."

AT FIRST the handler didn't seem inclined to accept the suggestion. Then, as though the idea suddenly struck him as being a good one, he started for the door. At that moment Willie Slate, Chuck's trainer, burst in.

"Well, I had a talk with Gunboat, myself," he announced. "And what d'ye think? He threw me out."

Joe Dunn gave a short laugh. Willie took instant offense.

"It ain't funny, Joe," he said. "I can't see it. Gunboat says he's gonna give Chuck a beatin' for tryin' to pull the old sympathy gag on him."

"And then what'd he say?" replied Joe sarcastically.

Willie bared his teeth for an instant, then turned to Chuck. There was appeal in his eyes, love in the grip of his fingers on the fighter's arm.

"Give it up, Chuck, will ya? The champ'll on'y crucify ya. You'll get another shot at him sometime—what the hell!"

Chuck shook his head stubbornly.

"I can't wait. I need the dough now."

O'Toole went out. A couple of lightweights were mixing it now, to the tune of lusty cheers from the forty-odd thousand fans packed in the shallow, circular bowl around the brilliantly lighted ring. This fight was good. The favorite already had a bloody face; yet, in spite of the unset dope, this go meant little outside of temporary entertainment. It was the main event that was restlessly awaited. Gunboat Selby wasn't a popular champ; the crowd hoped for nothing more than to see Chuck Conley knock him into the seventh heaven of dreams. And Chuck with a busted mitt!

"I'd like a shot at that title," O'Toole muttered.

The lightweights slowed down in the third, started clinching. The cheers turned quickly to jeers. O'Toole's mouth tightened. This was the bloodthirstiest mob he'd ever seen. Tonight would finish Chuck Conley; far worse than the beating Gunboat would give him would be the scorn of the multitude.

When he returned to the dressing-room O'Toole found Chuck was alone, pacing, nursing his broken hand painfully.

"Where's everybody?"

"Willie went to get the doc. Joe—I dunno."

"What kind of a guy is Joe?" asked O'Toole.

"He's okay. Don't pay no attention to him. He's just sore at me 'cause I busted my hand. Says if I don't lick the champ, anyhow, he's gonna trade me off."

O'Toole snorted. Chuck seated himself on the corner of the table, looked at him keenly.

"Mike Forhan came back," he said. "Went out just before you came in. He was telling me about a guy, name of Terry Donahue."

O'Toole's lids narrowed quickly. He looked sharply at the fighter, almost with hostility.

CHUCK'S eyes, however, drifted away, and he began talking like one for whom forgetfulness of pain and worry is possible only by indulging in thought foreign to the present. He fixed his eyes on the door, either to be alert for the return of Willie and Joe Dunn, or because just then the crowd's uproar rose at the sound of a bell.

"I've fought all over the country, O'Toole. You know that. Canada, England an' Australia, too. I've met most o' the good ones at my weight, an' a lot of 'em that ain't so good. This guy, Terry Donahue, though, I never met. But I seen him fight once."

"Yeah?" O'Toole's voice was a degree harder than normal.

Chuck glanced at him briefly, went on.

"I was fightin' Young Polaski in the main event, in Frisco. On the semi-windup was this Donahue-guy. I wouldn't have taken no notice of him, I guess, but somebody says to me, 'You're gonna have to fight that Donahue one o' these days, Chuck. He's good.' So I took a peek at the guy. An' he was good. Fast on his feet, an' had a punch. Good lookin', too. About your build an' weight, but better lookin'. Didn't have a cauliflower ear an' broken nose like you got. He was just a kid then, though, maybe twenty. About five years ago. Ever see him?"

O'Toole shook his head.

"Maybe you just don't remember," said Chuck. "I got a bad memory too. But Mike Forhan prodded it a minute ago."

"What's Forhan know about anything?"

"What don't he know about everything? Hell, he don't even have to read the newspapers. Anyhow, he told me Terry Donahue did a fadeout 'cause he killed a guy."

O'Toole shot open the peep-slot, peered out. Chuck ran on, as though determined to say what he had to say whether his topic was of interest or not.

He spoke deliberately:

"Funny thing the way he killed this guy. Maybe funny ain't the word, but—this was in Seattle, an' Terry had gone ten heats with a guy name of Battling Flint, an' outpointed him in every one. But the referee raised Flint's hand. Right away the crowd burned an' started tearin' things up. You know how they do. Somebody heaved a pop bottle at the referee, but missed an' hit Terry's trainer an' split his head open. Terry happened to see who threw the bottle an' he sprang over the ropes an' went for him—an' got him. That is, he took a swing at him, an' the guy went down, an' he died of concussions on the way to the hospital."

SLOWLY O'Toole turned away from the the peep-slot, sat on the table with Chuck, swinging his feet, staring at them glumly.

"Terry got a bum decision from the referee," Chuck added. "It was his unlucky day, kind of, an'—"

"And he figured he'd get a bum decision from a jury," O'Toole cut in. "Is that it?"

"That musta been it. He took it on the lam, anyhow."

"And they're still lookin' for him?"

"I s'pose. Course I'm just tellin' you what Forhan told me, understand?" Chuck slipped off the table and began to pace again, holding his broken hand carefully. "I've never even wondered what became o' Terry Donahue. He never meant nothin' in my life, an' I've had my own troubles. But I'm in sympathy with him. I'd do the same as he did if ever anybody cracked Willie Slate's head with a bottle. An' I know what else I'd do from then on—I'd stay away from fights an' fighters, for fear the cops'd pick me up." He looked O'Toole straight in the eyes as he passed him. "That's what I'd do."

There was a moment of silence. Then O'Toole said:

"Well, Chuck, I hope you never have to do it. It must be a hell of a life, hidin' out. And you got a wife."

Chuck stopped short, set his jaws grimly.

"An' I gotta fight t'night an' make some dough."

Willie Slate came in; and Joe Dunn.

"Doc'll be here in a minute," said Willie.

Joe poked a fresh cigar into his mouth, started to sit down—but didn't. Mike Forhan suddenly burst into the door. His hard face was of an apoplectic red, his eyes blazed with anger as he divided his glance between Chuck and the manager. He slammed the door and blurted out:

"What's this I hear about a broken hand?"

Joe Dunn chewed his cigar rapidly. He started to reply, seemed to decide quickly that it was no use, just shrugged his shoulders. Willie looked scared. O'Toole faced away. Forhan confronted Chuck with a fierce glare.

"Let's see your other hand."

Slowly Chuck brought his broken right around from behind him. Forhan groaned, took the hand in his own, peered at it closely, roughly pushed it away from him.

"My Gawd!" he exploded. "Of all the—"

"Oh, hell, I'll fight," Chuck snarled. "Just like nothin' was wrong. Cut the beef."

The promoter's jaw came out pugnaciously.

"Fight, will you? That's kind of you. Fight! What kind of a fight can you put up with one hand? Who d'you think you are,

anyway? Gunboat's the champ, you lug! He'll kill you at the first bell—and it'll serve you right."

He suddenly banged at his own chest.

"But how about me? After all the ballyhoo I've given this fight—well, I'll be ruined, that's all. That mob out there won't stand for any one-armed set-ups."

THE din of boos and cheers just then being spent upon two evidently unsatisfactory welterweights bore out his direful prediction. Gunboat Selby had better get a tussle tonight—or else.

"Gunboat knows how he stands with that mob," Forhan went on, "and he's in bad humor. He says he's gonna end it quick, whether you got only one hand or six." He broke off, wheeled to glower at Joe Dunn.

"How'd it happen—when?"

"Punchin' a sand-bag," sullenly. "This morning."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"We need the money."

"My wife's gotta go to Arizona," Chuck spoke up. "She's sick, an' I ain't got a thin dime."

"Damn it!" snarled Forhan. "Don't try t'make me cry. I'm a business man."

"An' I'm a fighter," countered Chuck.

"Yeh, you look it—with a mitt that looks like a rotten tomato. My Gawd!"

He turned suddenly toward the door. Chuck sprang off the table and grabbed him.

"Where to, Mike?"

The promoter wrenched himself free.

"I'm gonna call the main event off, of course. That means refunding forty-odd thousand gate admissions."

"Don't do it."

"No? Well, I've always been on the level in this racket, and I'm stayin' that way, see?"

At that moment the door opened. A bald-headed, cadaverous man started in, saw Forhan, made as if to leave again.

"Come right on in, Doc," boomed the promoter.

The doctor closed the door. Forhan caught his arm, pulled him across the room, pushed him into a chair.

"You examined Chuck Conley here?" harshly.

The doctor nodded, sat slumped in the chair, his eyes furtive.

"Well, well!' snarled Forhan. "Speak up."

"He has a broken knuckle. I didn't want to pass him, but he said he needed the money."

"So you passed him—for a consideration. How much?"

The doctor didn't even answer that.

"I'll have your job for this, you crooked—"

The promoter was interrupted at that moment by a sharp knock on the door. He stumped across the room, opened the peep-slot.

"We're newspapermen," said one of a group of four who tried to peer into the dressing-room. "We hear Chuck Conley has a broken hand. Is there any truth in it?"

"Tell 'em sure," Chuck sang out, and laughed. "Broken hand—ha, that's a laugh!"

Forhan blinked, looked hard at the reporters.

"Who told you that?" he demanded.

"We heard it on good authority."

"How good?"

"Gunboat Selby."

Again Chuck spoke up:

"Well, that mug!" He scowled over the promoter's shoulder. "Ask him where he gets that stuff, you guys."

"Then there's no truth in it?"

"Would I be goin' out to fight with a busted mitt?"

"I guess not, Chuck. You'd be crazy if you did."

The reporters started to leave. As a final shot, one asked:

"Could we see your hands, Chuck?"

"Sure."

"Never mind," Joe Dunn growled. "You don't have to show them birds nothin'. C'mon. You better be puttin' on your gloves."

"Guess the champ's trying to play around with us," said one of the group outside. "Forhan would tell us if anything was wrong. Wouldn't you, Mike?"

"Thanks for the bouquet," replied the promoter grimly.

"We're only thinking of past performance, Mike." The group moved away. "Sorry we bothered you."

IT WAS a long moment before Forhan closed the slot, faced about. He did not speak, stood there, with his eyes unfocused and his body oddly rigid, like a man groping for the best possible way out of a perplexing predicament. To call off the title match or to let Chuck take a beating—whichever equally undesirable alternative should he choose. His words, when they came, were hoarse, his tone tragic.

"There went my chance to speak up. So, Chuck, you'll have to fight."

"That suits me."

"But I'll be damned if it's playing the game straight."

Chuck shrugged his thick shoulders.

"I need the dough, an' I don't care how I get it."

The doctor shot some more cocaine into Chuck's hand, went out. Joe Dunn began teetering again.

Frowning ruefully, Willie started to put on the fighter's gloves.

It was O'Toole who spoke suddenly out of the little silence:

"Listen, Mike. Will you let me help you out?"

The promoter looked at the handler without seeing him.

"A lot you could do," he said dully.

"You might be surprised. Will you listen?"

"No." The word was sharp, the promoter's eyes were keen now upon O'Toole. "I've heard enough already."

"All right then—if I'm a Chinaman or something."

Forhan's glance softened a little.

"What is it?"

"Let me substitute for Chuck."

The promoter made a facial gesture of disgust.

"Don't be funny."

"Think I'm funny. You just don't get me. I can fight."

"No, you can't."

O'Toole's eyes flashed angrily. He jammed his arms akimbo.

"What's the idea of bein' a heel?" he snarled.

"The idea is—keep your mouth shut!" Forhan turned, opened the door. With startling agility O'Toole sprang across the room, grabbed the promoter with one hand, slammed the door with the other.

"You're gonna listen to me," he said fiercely, "if I gotta sit on you. I'm tryin' to save your reputation and Chuck's. I'm a fighter, I tell you. I've been sparrin' pardner for six weeks for Hack Thomson. Before that, I was in Al Boler's trainin' camp. That's as good as bein' in trainin' myself. I could substitute for Chuck and give Gunboat a battle that'd satisfy the mob. You could arrange it with the commissioner and the champ's manager, make an announcement that Chuck had a little accident, and I'd do the rest."

Chuck, Willie and Joe Dunn looked dumbfounded.

"And what cut on the purse would you want?" asked Joe.

"Not a dime."

"Then what's the idea?"

O'Toole reached and pinched the manager's cheek.

" 'Cause I like you so much, Joe," sneeringly.

"Don't you let him do it, Mike," said Chuck. "I'll fight my own fights. Anyhow, you know what you was tellin' me a while ago?"

"I know." The promoter looked O'Toole straight in the eyes. "You see, O'Toole, I'm a friend of a man who once managed a guy by the name of Terry Donahue—and I know he'd consider it a special favor if I'd do my part toward keepin' that guy in the background, where he belongs. Get it?"

O'Toole nodded.

"But I'd only be a palooka, Mike."

THE promoter shook his head with positiveness.

"Not if you stepped in that ring with the champ. Think it over."

"I have thought it over."

Thinking was one of the best things he'd done for five years. That and skulk along the shadows of life, under an assumed name. Never a day that he had not thought of that impulsive leap down into ringside to avenge little honey Mercer's cracked head. He had put all he had behind that right to the bottle-thrower's jaw—and the man had had his own head cracked in hitting the cement floor. Tony had lived, but the man

had died; and the coroner had named it manslaughter.

He had wanted to give himself up, but friends had argued against it. The bottle-thrower was the son of an influential citizen. Surrender was bound to result only in another bum decision—five to ten in Walla Walla, they said. He'd better beat it. Someone had worked him into the crew of a tramp freighter, as a coalpasser. Returning to the States, after a couple of years, he had drifted back into the fight game, not as the promising Terry Donahue, but as Jack O'Toole—a human punching-bag for middle, light-heavy and heavyweights; more or less openly defying the police to pick him up. But the police seemed to have forgotten about him; or, perhaps, his boxing-glove rearrangement of features had made him unrecognizable.

But, as Mike Forhan pointed out, what would be the inevitable result of climbing into the glare of lights, in that humanity-packed bowl, to fight Gunboat Selby? Well, perhaps it would all depend on what kind of a battle he put up against the champ. If he let himself be mauled, and the beating ended in his k. o., he'd be comparatively safe in his self-condemned rôle of "palooka." But if he fought—as, with having sparred with the best of them, he knew he could fight—he'd be Terry Donahue, and the enthusiasts would soon prove it.

"I'll risk it," he said grimly.

"But why?" Forhan's scowl questioned the man's sanity.

"I like Chuck Conley. He's a clean fighter, and he'll ruin himself if he tries to bluff the champ with a bum mitt. And you're a square guy, with a clean record. You're both in a pinch, and if I can help you out I figure I'll have done my good deed for the shaky-legged fight game. See?"

MIKE FORHAN saw, but he wouldn't admit it. O'Toole quickly got in his closing thrust:

"If you wanta see the customers go home satisfied, take a promoter's chance on me."

The promoter glanced fleetly at Chuck, at Joe Dunn, at Willie Slate. Their dumb expressions helped him not a bit. He made his own decision with grim suddenness. He gripped O'Toole's arm, nodded curtly.

"I'll do it."

He hurried out. He went at once to Gunboat Selby's dressing-room. The bullet-headed, low-browed champ, in his monogrammed silk robe, was pacing in the midst of his handlers, trainer and Phil Webber, his manager. Forhan came straight to the point, in a manner defying argument.

"Listen, you guys, Chuck's hand is a plum, all right, big as a melon, and full of dope—but we're gonna stage the main event anyhow. We can't let the mob down, understand? Gunboat, Phil, will you both play ball with me?"

"Sure," said the manager.

"Maybe," said the champ.

"No maybe about it, Gunboat. I've lined up a guy that's ready to substitute for Chuck. One of Chuck's handlers."

"A set-up?" queried the champ.

"Sure. Just a palooka. But he's got two good mitts."

"What's his name?"

"Jack O'Toole."

"Never heard of him."

"You can read about him in the papers tomorrow. You can get some good publicity out of fightin' him so the show wouldn't fold. But if you fight Chuck—sentiment bein' what it is—the sports writers'll accuse you of pickin' on a cripple. So, how about this substitute?"

"Okay, I'll fight the palooka. I'll even give him a shot at the title."

"That's the old spirit, Champ."

"I'll make a bum out of him."

"Bet you can't." The promoter wheeled. "Well, I'll get the commissioner and the papers and pull all the strings."

He had just closed the door when a reporter, two, three, and a half dozen of them, confronted him, defied him to pass.

"Is Chuck Conley going to fight tonight?" one of them put it to him.

"No," replied Forhan evenly. "He has a broken hand."

"That's what we thought. Then there'll be no title fight?"

"Absolutely. O'Toole's substituting for Conley."

"Who?"

"Jack O'Toole."

"What did he ever do?"

"It's not what he ever did," the pro-

moter shot back. "It's what he's going to do."

BROAD of shoulder, narrow of hip, clean of limb, Jack O'Toole, in Chuck Conley's black silk trunks, was dancing around, limbering up his bronzed muscles, shadow-boxing, when the caller poked his head into the dressing-room door, summoned him.

"Okay."

Willie threw a bathrobe about him. Chuck, in street clothes, gripped his hand.

"Good luck, Jack."

"I'll need it."

They filed out, Joe Dunn leading off; passed along the crowded aisle. A thousand, quickly forty thousand eyes found them, stared. Who was this guy O'Toole they'd been told by the announcer would fight in Chuck Conley's place? They'd murmured against the substitution. They hadn't paid their money to have any palooka shoved off on them. Mike Forhan had taken the megaphone to explain, offered to refund the price of admission to all who, after seeing O'Toole in action, were dissatisfied. That was fair enough, and the murmuring had ceased. All bets, however, would, necessarily, have to be called off.

O'Toole climbed into the ring, as did Chuck, Joe and Willie; stood there in the glare—on display. Terry Donahue—if the cops only knew it—on display.

Then the champion arrived and all attention was given over to him. Much as the crowd despised Gunboat, for his lack of sportsmanship and often brutal tactics, it respected his title. He was a fighter, no question there. And this go tonight was going to be murder. How could it be otherwise? If Jack O'Toole was any good he'd have come to light before.

"Hey, O'Toole!" yelled one of the smarties. "Where you been all our lives?"

And then at last the announcer's megaphoned voice:

"Ladies-s and gentlemen-n! Presenting-g the wor'rld's champeen—Gunbo-oat Selby!"

Cheers, intermixed with boos. Then:

"And in this corner-r—Ja-ack O'Toole!"

Cheers again. Not a jeer.

A moment and the referee called the fighters to the center for instructions. They nodded, returned to their corners, waited.

THEY came out fighting at the bell. A buzz of approval rose from the crowd. At least, O'Toole appeared to have nice footwork. He was a boxer, too. Gunboat feinted, O'Toole sprang back, sparred for a while, let go a straight left to the heart. The champ winced. The crowd applauded. More sparring. The champ threw a wide hook from the crouch. O'Toole blocked it, countered with a hard right to Gunboat's jaw, and the champ looked groggy as the round ended.

The crowd cheered. The palooka wasn't bad!

The second round opened with the champ on the defensive, scowling fiercely. O'Toole feinted again and again, landed a series of harmless blows, suddenly found a groove. As did Gunboat; and they both went to their knees together. They were up again instantly. Gunboat placed a right, O'Toole a left, and they both went down again, this time the champ pulling the other down with him. O'Toole was the first to regain his feet. The bell.

Down at ringside Mike Forhan looked worried, Chuck Conley amazed, Gunboat's manager furious. At a microphone the man broadcasting to the radio audience commented: "This O'Toole's certainly a discovery, folks." Telegraph keys clicked. Reporters spoke excitedly over the telephones. All over the packed bowl voices talked it over. This was a different kind of a squared-circle brawl. But who was this O'Toole-guy? He was making a chump out of the champ. What, then, was his background?

Third round. Gunboat came out with a rush. O'Toole sidestepped, planted an uppercut. The champ shook his head, furiously backed O'Toole into the ropes, flailed his ribs with ponderous shots. The crowd held its breath, breathed again as O'Toole fought his way out, hooked a steaming right on the champ's chin. Again the champ went down, again he came up. But he was still staggering when the bell ended the round.

Applause.

"It doesn't look like it'll last fifteen rounds, folks," chattered the broadcaster. "The champ looks hurt, and no wonder. This O'Toole hits hard, makes every blow effective. Cool as the well-known cucumber. He's grinning now as his handlers rub him

down. It's a hard grin, though. A fighter's grin. No malice in it. He just seems to be happy to be in there with the champ. What palooka wouldn't be? Although he's certainly not—but there's the bell—"

THE fourth round dragged. Nothing happened, except that the crowd became restless.

"C'mon, O'Toole, don't weaken—mix it up!"

"Sink the Gunboat!"

"You got a chance at the title, O'Toole—grab it!"

In the fifth O'Toole sparred for an opening, found it, crashed the floodgates of the champ's nose. The audience liked that. Gunboat snorted like an enraged bull, smeared at his nose, went into a clinch. The referee separated them. Then O'Toole stepped in with a javelin-like right, rocked the champ's head, followed with a left hook, drove Gunboat against the ropes, had him helpless when the bell clanged.

The champ was still shaky when he came out for the sixth. His left eye was swollen, his nose was still bleeding. The crowd demanded a knockout. O'Toole tried for it, feinted, aimed an uppercut, landed. Gunboat tottered, went down, came up, was knocked down again. And again he came up. O'Toole gave him a right, a left, a right, a left. The champ's knees caved, he took the count of nine, came up for more. The bell saved him. He staggered to the wrong corner. O'Toole guided him across the ring.

The crowd cheered wildly.

Someone shouted at Mike Forhan:

"You won't have to refund any money on this fight."

"It won't be long now, folks," the broadcaster rattled into his microphone. "Gunboat's unquestionably in a bad way over there in his corner. His handlers are massaging him and mopping his face with wet towels, his trainer's talking frantically to him, but the champ doesn't seem to care now. I'm afraid he's through. Tough, in a way, too. But—ah, well, that's the way it goes. Here today and somewhere else tomorrow. O'Toole, though—there's a man for you! And will he be able to write his own ticket after this fight! If he wins—"

The bell for the seventh brought O'Toole out warily in the face of the champ's desperate rush with a straight left. Deliberately, he took the blow to the face. Under it he lifted a terrific uppercut, landed it flush on Gunboat's chin. The champ sagged. He fell, lay still in the resin, out cold. The crowd roared as the referee completed the count of ten, held O'Toole's hand up in the air and yelled, "The new world's champion!"

THE din of hearty acclaim was terrific. A new champion! Jack—what was his name?—O'Toole. But who was Jack O'Toole? Not just a palooka. No man could give Gunboat Selby a beating like that, knock him out clean and cold, and be just a palooka. So what?

"Just a minute, folks," yelled the broadcaster to his audience. "Maybe he'll say a few words. Jack! O'Toole! Jack, will you—ah, thank you, Jack. Folks, the new champion!"

"Hello, everybody! Come up and see me sometime."

And to himself bitterly:

"At Walla Walla."

Flashlights exploded, cameras clicked. The crowd milled. Gunboat Selby, revived, sullenly shook hands with O'Toole and was hurried away. Then the new champ, surrounded by Joe Dunn and Willie Slate and his handlers, picked a difficult passage back to the dressing room.

Mike Forhan and Chuck Conley were there awaiting him. Several reporters tried to force their way in for an interview, but the promoter closed the door against them, opened the peep-slot.

"Give him a chance to catch his breath, boys," he pleaded. "Will you do that?"

"We'll do it for you, Mike. But give us a break, will you. Where'd he come from, who's—"

"Just keep calm and collected and he'll tell you all that himself," said the promoter, and closed the slot.

O'Toole stripped down, went into the showers. The promoter and Chuck went in with him, closed the door, and the three of them were alone. It was Forhan who spoke quietly above the hiss and splash of water:

"Well, you're a big shot now. I don't know how you did it, but it was some fight."

"Terry Donahue taught me how," said the man known as O'Toole. "He killed a guy."

"I know all about it."

"I'm Terry Donahue."

"Sh-h! Never mind bragging about it."

"Why not? It's bound to come out. I'm washed up."

"Well, I won't say anything," Forhan promised.

"Nor me," said Chuck.

"How about Joe Dunn?"

"I've warned him," said Forhan. "I hold an axe over his head, so he knows better'n to get out of step."

"And Willie Slate?"

"He's a pal," said Chuck warmly.

"Then there's only the reporters and the mob that saw the fight and a few million others to worry about."

"I know," said Forhan. "I guess they'll look you up, all right. But it's your own fault," he added.

"I could hop another tramp steamer."

Forhan sad nothing for a moment. Then suddenly:

"I know what! I've a friend who has a place out in the sticks. Lives there for his health. Used to be a bookie. I'll get in touch with him and tell him you're coming. They'll never find you there."

The new champ shook his head.

"You'll get yourself in trouble," he said.

"Trouble? After what you've done for me? T'hell with it! Listen. I'm gonna fight to clear your name. I have a lawyer, and he's plenty smart. He'll find a loophole. He'll prove that that pop bottle was a whiskey bottle, and things like that. It'll cost me a bunch of money sure, but I'll get it all back—when you defend your title, see?"

"Okay," said Terry Donahue. "But there's still them damn' newshawks."

The promoter opened the door.

"Never mind about them. Get dressed."

Forhan despatched the two handlers on an errand, then went into a huddle with Joe Dunn and the trainer. Terry Donahue dressed hurriedly. In a moment Willie moved the dressing-room table, lifted a strip of linoleum. There was a trap-door in the floor.

"This is a private passage to a side street," the promoter explained. "Willie'll go with you and see that you get to that place in the sticks. You ready?"

"Uh-huh."

Willie lifted the door, descended into the darkness. Terry Donahue followed, paused, reached up and shook hands with Forhan, Joe Dunn and Chuck.

"S'long," he said.

"Listen," said Chuck, "I'll want the first shot at that title o' yours, when this mitt o' mine gets well."

The champ grinned up at him.

"I'll start trainin' out in the sticks," he replied.

"A hell of a way for the champ to be makin' an exit."

"Y-y-yeh! S'long."

Joe Dunn closed the trap, pulled the linoleum over it, replaced the table. Then Forhan opened the door.

The reporters came in, looked around.

"Where is he?"

"Who?"

"Jack O'Toole."

"Oh, he went home, I guess."

"What! Why, we've been standing outside all the time."

"Well, he ain't here. You can see that."

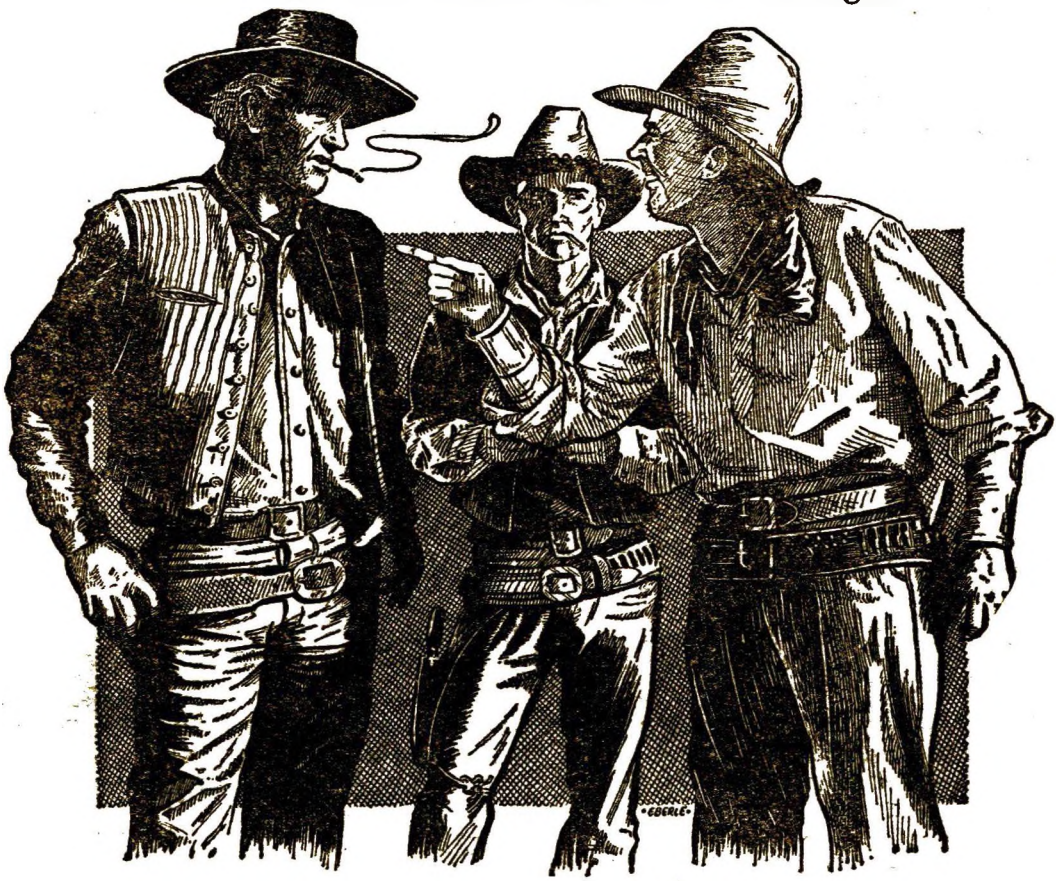
"Well, I'll kiss your—"

"Oh, you'll see him around sometime," said Forhan.

"That's consolation. We wanted to see him tonight—ask him if there's any truth in the rumor that he's one Terry Donahue, wanted for killing a guy."

"Don't be a bunch of heels," the promoter snarled. "The man was just a palooka. Was, I said. He made a name for himself—why don't you let him keep it?"

Eavesdropping, Old Jed Ewalt of the JE Learns That His Own Cowhands Think He's Too Old to Fight



THE OLD MAN

By BENNETT FOSTER

JED EWALT sat on his front porch and felt old. The rocker squeaked plaintively as he stirred, and the smoke from his thin brown paper cigarette trailed away toward the south, following the vagaries of the little spring wind. From the blackjack motte south of the house a whip-poor-will called mournfully and Jed Ewalt shuddered. He could not stand that whip-poor-will. It seemed to him, as he rose from the rocker, that every joint in his decrepit old body complained. His new boots squeaked as he moved sedately toward the porch steps. The whip-poor-will keened again like an Irishwoman softly weeping at a baby's wake, and again Jed's shoulders shook convulsively. Bob Lasco was lying down there in the blackjack motte, lying under six feet of fresh turned earth. Jed had seen the coffin lowered that afternoon. He wondered if Bob were any place now where he could hear the whip-poor-will.

Jed went down the porch steps and turned the corner of the big house, walking slowly and quietly in the direction of the bunkhouse. The new boots made no sound on the spring softened earth. There would

be companionship in the bunkhouse. Quiet men who had ridden with Bob Lasco. Jed craved that companionship. He wanted to see Shorty Conway's eyes crinkling at the corners, and solemn-faced Wade Blair, and little spritely Ben Wilson, but most of all he wanted to watch the kid, Dan Gray. The men called Dan Gray, "Babe." Jed wanted to renew his youth at Babe's fount. Funerals always made Jed feel old.

At the side of the bunkhouse door Jed stopped short. His three riders were talking inside and the first words that struck Jed Ewalt's ears arrested his attention, halted him in his tracks.

"Damn Tobe Fletcher!" It was Babe speaking, and his voice was that of a mature man. "Him an' Brisbane an' Thomas an' the whole crowd! It's time we cleaned out Trenton."

Jed Ewalt listened unashamed. These men were discussing something that he did not know, something that he felt strongly he should know.

Another voice, lower and indistinct, answered Babe, and Babe flared out again. "I tell you I dressed Bob an' helped lay him out. To hell with this stallin'. It's time we cleaned Trenton!"

Wade Blair's deep voice boomed now, softer than Babe's shrill tones. "Babe's right," said Wade. "Trenton is rotten. There was a time when I'd of gone with him an' done a job on them sons, but the Old Man—"

"What would the Old Man say if he knowed that Fletcher shot Bob?" Babe shrilled the words. "You think he'd stand for it? Do you think he'd let that lousy bunch get away with murder? I tell you fello's—"

Shorty Conway interrupted the young rider's tirade. Shorty always spoke with a sort of chirrup. There was no mistaking his voice. "Jed is old, though," Shorty told them. "He's old an' he craves peace. Remember when we tol" him about them calves? He let that go. We cain't act like this was a kid outfit an' we was a bunch of babies."

Jed Ewalt waited. He knew that they were talking about him. He also knew, and this was a shock, that Bob Lasco had been shot and killed by the accidental discharge of his gun, riding out from Trenton. They had lied. If he listened—

BEN WILSON spoke now, little, lively Ben. Ben Wilson who had come up from south Texas with Jed Ewalt when the J E brand was a figment of the imagination, who had known Jed Ewalt all his life.

"There was a time when I'd have gone to the Old Man with this," said Ben. "Ten years ago, or even five, I'd of told him an' we'd of rode down Trenton's street and wiped it clean. No more, though. Jed is old —old."

But Babe would not be downed. The fire of youth was Babe's and the heritage of fighting ancestors was his. Babe spoke again and because Babe was a born leader the others listened.

"Bob Lasco was my friend," said Babe. Jed thrilled to the timbre in the lad's voice. "Tobe Fletcher murdered Bob. You know it an' I know it. I don't figure to let this go. Brisbane has rustled our calves an' we laid off because the Old Man wanted peace. That's all right. This is different. I'm goin' to Trenton in the mornin'. To hell with peace—Bob Lasco was my friend!"

"You'll ride to Trenton an' get yore fool self killed," Wade Blair boomed softly. "If you don't get killed what good will you do? You can't bring Bob back. You'll be a rider from the J E an' the whole ranch will suffer for what you do. Think of that, will yuh?"

"I'll quit the J E," Babe's voice was sullen. "I'll be on my own. I know I cain't bring Bob back but by God I can send his killer after him! I'm goin'!"

"Now wait." Again it was Ben speaking, little, loyal Ben. "Babe's right in a way. You boys know that the Trenton bunch has been aimin' at the J E for the last two years. Jed cain't see it but we can. It's come to a showdown now. We got to do somethin'. I'm goin with Babe."

"If you go I go, Ben," Shorty Conway cast his lot.

"We'll all go!" Wade agreed with the others.

"No, we won't all go!" Ben Wilson was foreman of the J E and he spoke with command. "Somebody's got to stay here with the Old Man. That'll be you, Wade. Tomorro' me an' Babe an' Shorty will quit.

We'll get our time an' ride away from here. We'll wind up in Trenton. Then no matter what happens there won't be no blame on Jed."

Jed Ewalt waited to hear no more. He turned slowly and retraced his steps toward the house. Cautiously he mounted the porch steps. Carefully he seated himself in the rocking chair. Slowly he brought out papers and tobacco and rolled a cigarette with his thin, big-veined hands. He had heard enough.

For a long time he sat there in the rocker, the unlit twist of tobacco and paper between his fingers. Old, they had said down there in the bunkhouse, old and desiring peace. They were right. He was old and he did want peace. How badly did he want it?

Tomorrow Ben Wilson and Dan Gray and Shorty Conway would ride their ponies up to the porch and with averted eyes tell him that they were leaving: Ben Wilson who had been with the J E for thirty years and Babe Gray who had ridden for the J E for six months, Shorty Conway who had followed J E cattle since he was a kid. They would ask for their checks and receiving them, would ride on, no longer in the employ of Jed Ewalt but on a mission for the J E. He could see them going out of the little valley riding stiff and straight toward Trenton.

Toward Trenton? No, toward death, rather. Did those boys, those kids back at the bunkhouse, think that killers like Tobe Fletcher and Clyde Brisbane and Bart Thomas, would let them ride into town and unlimber their guns? Fools! The way to do would be to go in when least expected. To find Fletcher and Brisbane and the others, and then suddenly, like lighted tinder, flare into action. That was the way to do. Jed Ewalt could tell them. He'd—

Jed Ewalt closed his fingers on the cigarette, crushing it. He could see Trenton's single, dusty street with the Home Ranch Saloon and the O K Barber Shop, and Tallon's General Store and the ramshackle, weathered sides of the Trenton House with the lopsided sign that said "Home cooking. Meals at all hours." Would Babe, young, lusty Babe, be seeing those things this time tomorrow or would he be lying in a limp huddle, his hat in the dirt and his arm flung out before him while blood formed a pool in the dust? The Old Man winced at the picture.

They would ride away, Ben and Babe and Shorty, ride away tomorrow. Wade would stay around the place. He'd fool around the corral and the sheds and after awhile the pressure would be too much and Wade would come in and blurt out that he was going to town, then he would ride away too. Jed Ewalt threw the cigarette over the porch railing. The rocker creaked when he got up, but the sound went unnoticed. His bootheels struck firm on the porch floor as he went toward the door of the house. At the door he paused. There was still a light in the bunkhouse. They were still talking down there.

IN THE littered room that served him for an office, Jed lit a match. The match flared briefly and then the steady yellow glow of a kerosene lamp supplanted its flame. Jed sat down in the old swivel chair before his old desk. Feet shuffled in the corridor and Jed looked back over his shoulder to see Arturo standing in the door. Arturo was wrinkled and gray. He looked at Jed.

"You want me, Señor?" he asked.

Jed shook his head. "Put some coffee on the stove, Arturo," he said. "Have it made. I'll want it early. Then you can go to bed."

The old cook nodded and shuffled away and Jed turned again to the desk.

He pulled the bottom drawer open. The drawer stuck from long disuse. Jed forced it. There was a litter of papers in the drawer. Jed lifted them out and put them on the desk.

A long manila envelope claimed his attention. On it, scrawled in his own writing, were the words, "Last Will and Testament." Jed slid from the envelope the paper it contained.

For awhile he studied the written page, then returned it to its covering. The will was in order. Bob Lasco's name was still there along with that of Ben Wilson and Wade Blair, Shorty Conway and Dan Gray. It would make no difference about Bob's name. It all went to the others and they would take care of the division. Ben and Wade and Shorty and Babe could be trusted

to do the right thing by each other and by the J E. Jed laid the envelope aside.

He picked up another paper and unfolded it. It was his marriage certificate. There was his name and Molly's name and the name of the minister who had married them, as well as those of the witnesses. Molly had been gone a long time now, too long a time. They'd been happy together although there had been no children. Molly had liked peace too, but she had been willing to fight for it. Jed looked at the date on the certificate. It was fifty years ago. With a shock he realized that he was seventy years old. He had been twenty the week he and Molly were married. Well— He put the marriage certificate aside.

Now another paper caught his eyes. He lifted it, unfolding the stiff official parchment along the yellowing creases. For a moment he studied the writing. There, blazoned bold, was a commission for Jedthro E. Ewalt as a special member of the State Rangers. The commission was signed by a governor, long since dead. Smiling faintly, Jed Ewalt refolded the commission and thrust it into his inner coat pocket. Probably that commission was outlawed long ago, but it had never been revoked. At least it would add some semblance of law to what he was about to do.

And now once more Jed Ewalt reached into the bottom drawer of his desk. From it he brought two guns. Both were old, as old as Jed. They were cap and ball Colts of thirty-six caliber. Each was in a holster dried and stiff with old oil and the leather cracked in places. Jed lifted the guns from their coverings and examined them. They were dusty. Age lay heavily upon them. He produced a handkerchief from his pocket and

began to clean the weapons. Under his skillful manipulation the metal came clean. The bores were silver bright when he ran a torn piece from the handkerchief through them.

WHEN the guns were clean he brought a leather bag from the drawer. There was powder, dull lead balls, and dark copper caps in the bag. Jed frowned at the caps. They were old. Perhaps—Still they would have to do. The old things *must* do tomorrow. He loaded the weapons, measuring the powder carefully, seating each dull lead ball with exactitude. There was a thrill of pride in him. He had not forgotten. When the guns were loaded he capped each nipple and turned the cylinders slowly. The tarnished copper of the caps fell in line under the hammers. The guns were ready.

And now Jed began upon the holsters. His hands were steady and firm as he worked oil into the leather. For a long time he worked. All the pliability was not gone with the years. The leather responded to treatment. Gradually the holsters softened and finally Jed stood up beside the desk and buckled the belt around his waist. The tongue of the buckle fitted into the well worn hole and Jed smiled again faintly. At least age had not made him fat. Now he put the old guns in their accustomed places. For a moment they felt strange and then, as he moved, they seemed to settle into place, to nestle down snugly as though they had never been away. Jed stepped over and blew out the lamp. He was ready.

He tiptoed through the hall and out the front door. There was still a light in the bunkhouse. Jed sat down on the steps. Age, he reflected grimly, brought one blessing. An old man did not need much sleep.

For a long time he sat on the steps. The light in the bunkhouse went out. Still Jed waited. He could be patient. Age had taught him that, too. In the blackjack motte the whip-poor-will called again and then again. Jed heard the bird, listening to its liquid trill. "Whip—poor—will—whip—poor—will." He rose from the steps and walked down through the blackjacks. Beside Bob Lasco's new grave he paused and then went on to an older, grass covered mound. He sat beside it for a time. The whip-poor-will was silent but Jed felt that he was not alone.

After a while Jed rose, went to the house and through its silent hall to the kitchen. The coffee that Arturo had made was still on the warm stove. Jed in the darkness drank two cups of coffee, then putting his cup aside, he went out the kitchen door.

WITH the familiarity of a man moving in his own house he went to the saddle shed. He found his own narrow forked, old fashioned saddle and his heavy bitted bridle, and carried them to the barn. Kit, his own brown horse, was in his stall in the barn. Jed liked to keep Kit up at night. The horse was old and a box stall and grain were none too good for him. Kit nickered when Jed came near and Jed said, "Shut up, you old fool," softly, and rubbed Kit's velvet nose.

In the dark barn he saddled by sense of touch. He had saddled so on a thousand mornings.

With Kit saddled and the bridle in place he led the horse out, over the dirt floor of the barn. At the corral he stopped, climbed the fence stiffly and opened the gate into the horse pasture. The horses in the corral circled away. They would find the open gate and leave. Jed wished it so.

With the gate down he went back to Kit. The boys would wrangle horses afoot in the morning. Jed grinned as he thought of what Ben would say to Babe. It was Babe's business to close the corral gate and to wrangle horses. Ben would be apoplectic and Babe would be raging. Jed led Kit well away from the corral, mounted and rode off at a hand's pace. It was twenty miles to Trenton. Over in the east the first faint salmon streaks of morning were showing. It would, Jed thought, be a fine spring day.

TRENTON'S street was just as Jed had pictured it. He rode slowly down its length, announcing his presence. He had not hurried in from the ranch. He had taken a full four hours for that twenty mile ride. Now he knew he must hurry. The boys from the ranch would be riding now. It would not take them long to wrangle the horses, even afoot, and he knew that his absence would stop them only temporarily. At the end of the street he turned and rode

back to the Home Ranch Saloon. This was the site he had picked, the field of operation. He dismounted, tied Kit, and went into the saloon.

Nodding to the bartender he walked straight back through the room, pulled a chair from beside a table and carried it to the rear wall. He sat down in the chair, facing the light. As he sat there he smiled. Kids! What did they know about things like this? Facing the light, at ease, he waited. Again patience played its part. They would come, Fletcher and Brisbane and Thomas. Curiosity, if nothing else, would bring them.

They did come. Not together, they were too cunning for that, but singly, one at a time. They glanced at the old man sitting stiffly in his best suit against the rear wall. They went to the bar, appearing to meet casually, and ordered their drinks. They talked low-voiced while the bartender served them, and Tobe Fletcher, squat and evil, glanced at the figure against the wall. Still Jed Ewalt waited. One of those three at the bar kept him constantly under surveillance. They could not figure this out. This old wornout has-been, sitting there alone. It worried them. Jed let the worry do its work. He was listening, waiting.

There was a sound of horses passing the Home Ranch Saloon. Through the window Jed Ewalt caught a glimpse of Babe Gray's gaudy calfskin vest. The time had come. Jed Ewalt got up from his chair.

"You," he said, low-voiced, "Tobe Fletcher! You killed one of my boys day before yesterday. I've come to settle!"

Tobe Fletcher's mouth was wide open. He had turned when he heard the horses. He had filled his eyes with light and the pupils were wide. It took a moment for those pupils to narrow again and during that moment Tobe Fletcher drew and shot. He was fast, faster than old Jed Ewalt, but the light played him false. The first of the dull copper caps on the .36 caliber Colt exploded and a little round lead ball caught Fletcher squarely in the open mouth.

Thomas had wheeled and was shooting. Brisbane, too, crouching against the bar, making himself as small a target as possible, was fingering the trigger of his gun. The bartender had dived down behind the bar. Jed Ewalt felt a burning shock in his left leg and staggered. The gun in his hand was empty. He dropped it and pulled the other gun, moving it across his body and taking it in his right hand. Old time guns these. No hasty reloading. A man must have two to have twelve shots.

Thomas had stopped his fire and was clinging to the bar, wavering like an aspen leaf in the wind. Brisbane was still crouched. The most dangerous of the three, Brisbane, and Jed had thought him the least dangerous. The fresh gun in Jed's hand came back sharply into the smoke blackened fork between thumb and fingers. Brisbane sprawled out of his crouch. Thomas could no longer cling to the bar. He had released his hold on the rail and fallen. Acrid smoke of black powder stung Jed Ewalt's nostrils. Blood was running into his boot. He limped cautiously through the smoke. The bartender's bald head came up like a rising moon over the bar top. The bartender's eyes were wide. Jed Ewalt limped past the bodies on the floor. For perhaps ten seconds he had been rejuvenated, youth incarnate. Now he was old again, old and creaking. The Old Man. He looked down at the bodies as he passed. Tobe Fletcher's mouth was still wide open and his eyes staring up, asked an age old question. Jed turned his head.

At the front door he paused. There were horses at the rack, good J E saddle stock. The boys should have ridden their own personal horses when they came to town. That was a rule on the J E. In front of the rack were Babe and Shorty and Wade and Little Ben Wilson. They were staring at the door.

Men were running toward the Home Ranch Saloon. From the corner of his eye Jed saw them. He looked straight at the little group of four by the hitch rack. The powder smoke still stung his nostrils and his left leg threatened momentarily to give way.

Jed Ewalt spoke to the men by the hitch rack, to grizzled Ben Wilson and red faced Shorty Conway, to big, slow moving Wade Blair, and to young and wondering Babe Gray.

"You kids," said Jed Ewalt wearily, "you kids can take the old man home now."

A Lonely Island, a Girl, Gold from the Hinterlands—What Better Bait to Lure the Scourings of the Eastern Seas?

THE GHASTLY GOLD OF CELEBES

By H. BEDFORD-JONES

THEY picked him up at sea, a man in a boat.

It was one of the Dutch inter-island steamers, plying from Surabaya, at the end of Java, among the scattered islets of the Dutch possessions. They were a rough crowd aboard her; Dutch officers, and men from everywhere.

The man was gaunt, about fifty years of age, well-dressed. There was nothing to tell who he was, the boat bore no mark, he had nothing in his pockets; he was suffering from thirst and starvation. Also, he had been hit a terrific blow over the head. He did not recover consciousness at all, and was in a coma when they landed him at the island port of Balik Api and took him up to the white hospital on the hill.

In the port was the *Vesper* schooner. And in the white hospital lay Malacca Brent, recovering from an appendectomy—a strange thing to happen to this hard-eyed, merciless man! And aboard the *Vesper*, watching the idle tides rise and fall, was Brent's newly engaged mate, Rawdon.

The Dutch steamer sailed away. Up in the hospital lay the unknown man, in the

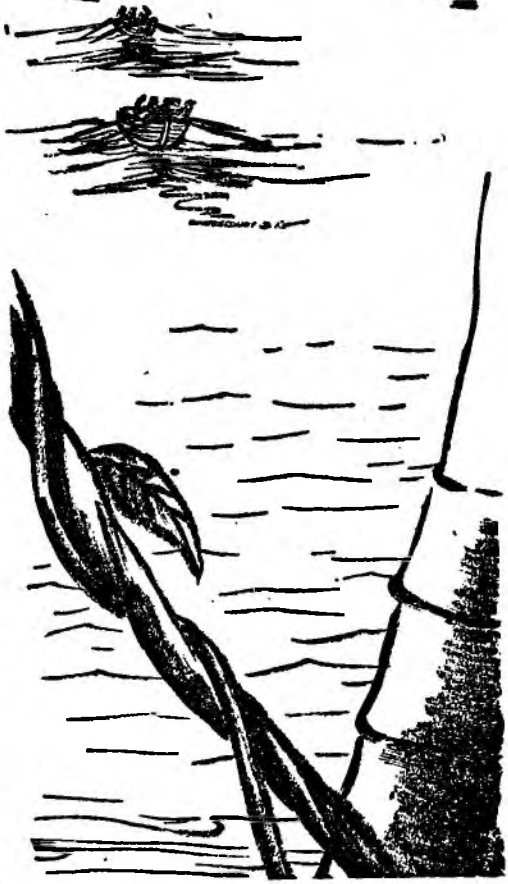
bed next to that which Brent occupied. Brent watched them undress him — no screens there, because of the heat. Brent saw them take off the soft leather money-belt that had sunk into his flesh, beneath his clothes. Brent saw them examine it, heard their excited talk, saw them take it away; and Brent's hard eyes glittered.

Three days later, the unknown man spoke for the first time. Brent heard him. He came to himself and asked for his belt, excitedly. The doctors came, bringing it; they were honest fellows, those Dutchmen. The money was entirely intact, and the pale yellow dust that filled the pouches. But the man only clutched it to his breast and stared at them fiercely. He was out of his head again, at once.

"He will die tonight," said the head doctor to the nurse. "Let him have it, let him play with it, poor devil! If he regains consciousness, call me."

They went away.

All that afternoon the man played with his gold. He paid no attention to his paper money. He lay trickling the yellow dust through his fingers, muttering to himself. Malacca Brent knew a good deal about gold, and the sight of this dust startled him. He



tried to hear what the man said, but could make no sense of the mutterings; nor, apparently, could the nurse who came at intervals.

GOLD differs, to the experienced eye. Placer dust, quartz dust, pocket dust—all is gold, and all varies. Some is rich ruddy dust, other sorts run in paler shades. This dust was pale, with a peculiar sheen. Brent even doubted whether it was gold, until he heard the nurse ask a doctor about it, and found that it had been tested. Yes; queer gold, but gold!

Brent watched. The doctor had removed his drainage tube that day. Two or three days more they said and with care he might be moved to his schooner. Little they knew Malacca Brent!

He watched and listened. His coarse red hair had been cut close to his skull. His long features were hard-lined, battered; his heavy jaw and thin, masterful lips were obscured by a reddish mustache. His huge arms and powerful hands lay naked on the covers—red-haired, tattooed, hard as iron. His pale blue eyes missed nothing.

Malacca Brent knew the island seas, and they knew him to their cost. Hard things were said of him, worse things were whispered about him; and all of them were true.

With evening, the man on the adjoining cot fell asleep. Brent dozed, but suddenly came full awake. This was the ward for whites; they two were alone here. Brent turned over and saw that the man was addressing him.

"You! You! Wake up—listen to me!"

"Go ahead," growled Brent, suddenly thrilled. Sanity lay in that voice.

"I'm passing out," said the man, his voice failing. "Quick! You've got to help her—somebody has! That's why I came away. They robbed me—they jumped me one night—looted the schooner and left me for dead. They fired her. I got away in the boat. You must go to Pulpit Island. She is there, and most of the gold is still there. Sam will take good care of her. She would not leave because—because—for God's sake get there—"

That was all. Malacca Brent had seen death at close quarters too often not to recognize it. The man was dead, his thin fingers still clutching the belt.

And no one else had heard his words.

Brent gave no alarm; he lay thinking hard, then he sat up and swung his feet to the floor and rang for the nurse.

"I'm going aboard, and I'm going now," he said. "Get a stretcher ready to take me down the hill and aboard. Hurry up and get my clothes and my bill!"

The doctor came from his bungalow. In the middle of the argument it was found that the man in the adjoining cot was dead. What with one thing and another, Malacca Brent won the argument, signed a paper releasing the doctors from all responsibility, paid his bill, and was carried away.

RAWDON'S first intimation of all this came with Brent's voice from the boat alongside. They brought Brent aboard, took him down into his cabin, and his pale eyes glared up at Rawdon.

"Crew aboard? And the serang? Then get out while we got the tide. Papers all cleared? Good. Take her out, set a course to the nor'west, then come down here with the pilot guide."

Rawdon obeyed. The serang and five Malays were forward, another Malay acting as cook and steward; they were all fanatical Moslems, but excellent seamen. The wind was only a breeze, but it was steady. When the *Vesper,* close-hauled, was out of the harbor and heading toward the open sea, Rawdon went below again. He found Brent chewing at a long cheroot.

"All set," he said curtly. "Here's the pilot guide. What's up?"

Brent took the Admiralty volume, ruffled through the index, and hurled it into a corner. Then he looked up at Rawdon. The latter, quiet, poised, sleepy-eyed, met the savage look imperturbably. Rawdon was younger than the master, cleaner of line, better poised.

"I like you," Brent said abruptly. "You're straight; anyone can see it. That's why I took you on. And you've got guts. I'll wager you ain't a mite scared of me."

"No reason to be," Rawdon said, and lit a cigarette.

"Some would think otherwise. Now, listen close."

Brent told what the unknown man had said, word for word. Rawdon frowned. Pulpit Island! He had heard the name somewhere. Two years he had knocked around these seas; one hears all sorts of outlandish names.

"Now," went on Malacca Brent, "who did the chap mean by this 'she' he mentioned? I dunno; but there's more gold where that came from, and I want it. Suit you?"

Rawdon nodded. "I suppose; but gold never comes cheap, Cap'n. Besides, somebody else knows. Who knocked this man on the head and fired his schooner? Impossible to say. He set off to get help for some reason; she, possibly his wife, stayed behind. Why?"

"He tried to say and couldn't. Now where's this place? Ain't mentioned in the guide. That gold looked damned queer, let me tell you! Sort of greenish sheen to it. I'd say at a guess it was native gold—Dyak, or up in Sumatra maybe—"

"Hold on!" exclaimed Rawdon. "I've got it now! Pulpit Island is somewhere over around the Celebes Coast. I remember hearing someone talking about it last year when I was in that B. P. boat."

Brent's eyes glinted. "Believe you're right! Dyak gold—that's what I said. Look in the chart locker, mister. You'll find a blueprint chart there—one I had made for me. It's got stuff on it that the Admiralty never heard of. Let's have a look!"

Rawdon obeyed, and eyed the chart with appreciation. It showed all the Celebes coasts in the greatest detail and on a large scale. He was not surprised to see it; Malacca Brent had a lot of queer things aboard, and some queer hiding places besides.

"Here we are—well up to the nor'west of Makassar," exclaimed Brent, pointing with his heavy thumb. He sank back on the pillows. "Go ahead and lay the course, mister. You take charge. I'll be on deck at eight bells in the morning; I'm fit as a fiddle now."

Rawdon did not doubt it. Brent was tough as a wild bull. Where another man would need a fortnight or more to recover, Brent would be all hunkydory again in a few days. He had the vitality of a gorilla.

RAWDON, pricking out a course with care, drank in all the information afforded. Pulpit Island bore no sign of occupation. It was an island close to the coast, near a river-mouth that formed a series of lagoons. Low, unhealthy land bordered with mangrove swamps, no doubt. The island was small. It bore a mark, however, that denoted fresh water and a sheltered anchorage on the inner, landward side. Even on this large-scale chart, it was tiny.

"Our unknown friend," mused Rawdon, "has probably been lying hidden there with a lugger of some kind, trading upriver with the natives. Probably against the law. Hm! All kinds of probabilities, in fact. Let's see, now; with this monsoon, we ought to get there in seven or eight days. Never can tell, however."

In this case the prediction was correct. The seventh day saw the blue peaks of the Celebes coast lifting above the horizon.

Meantime, petty incidents had taken place. Malacca Brent was back on the job, apparently as well as ever—though Rawdon had fixed up a pad to fit in place under his belt, against his tender scar. And one day the two men fell out suddenly, over some trifle that led into an argument.

Without warning, Brent snapped in a blow that lifted Rawdon off his feet, and leaped in to follow it with a finishing kick. Taken completely by surprise as he was, Rawdon barely evaded the deadly boot, then grasped it and flung Brent off balance. The two men were on the deck together, but Rawdon was up first, and as Malacca Brent rose, he took a swipe under the jaw that laid him flat. Then Rawdon stood over him.

"Listen to me, Brent! You're in no shape to fight; I could lick you at your best, but any dock-walloper could trim you right now. Come and get more of it if you like—but better use your head—"

To Rawdon's surprise, the big skipper rolled over and came up grinning, and stuck out a huge paw.

"Forgive me, Rawdon," said Brent frankly. "I'm a cursed fool to fight you—lost my temper, that's all. Lord, what a kick you have! No hard feelin's?"

"None," said Rawdon gravely, but with mental reservations. No hard feelings, indeed; there was a breach between them,

none the less. He knew now how deadly was this man, whose reputation was distinctly bad. He had seen murder in Brent's eyes. Never again would he be caught off guard, he grimly assured himself.

THE blue Celebes peaks became green. The land came closer, and sunset found them hauling off the low coast. They ran on north during the night, and at eight bells next morning Brent picked up a remarkable peak for landmark and ran in by the chart. Noon found them off Pulpit Island, which seemed a solid part of the mainland.

As they ran down for the channel shown on the chart, the reason for the name became obvious. The island was four miles long, two across. At the southern tip rose naked rock something in the shape of a pulpit or rounded spire, thirty feet in height.

"Well, mister, we got it!" exclaimed Malacca Brent, his binoculars sweeping the water and shore. "There's a channel, sure enough; and a lagoon up beyond—see the river-mouth yonder? Not a sign of any living soul."

"What if your hospital mate sent you on a wild goose chase?" queried Rawdon.

Brent shrugged. "Fortune of war, mister. But, by gravy, if there's any of that queer-looking gold here, I'm going to get my hands on it!"

"Even if it belongs to someone else?"

Brent gave him a sideways look, and grinned.

II

EVERYTHING stowed shipshape, Brent ordered the boat over and took Rawdon below. He passed the mate a pistol and belt.

"Wht for?" Rawdon asked. The skipper made no response but led the way on deck again, then paused. He pointed to the island.

"Look there, mister. Deserted, ain't it? Well, maybe! But anything can happen in these parts, and you'd better believe it—anything! If there's a woman here needing help, and some man with her, why ain't they down to meet us? Come along."

Rawdon followed down into the boat, after a nod of assent.

As the Malays rowed them ashore, Rawdon could well understand the skipper's uneasiness. The shores of the islet were low; they, like the lagoon shores a quarter-mile across the water, showed a tangled mass of mangrove roots. These, in one spot, had been cut away to afford a landing, and the trees beyond had been cleared to some extent, showing that the island ran up to higher ground. But no one was in sight.

As they came in to the cleared spot, the Malays exchanged a word and peered over their shoulders. Fright showed in their faces, and this was a strange thing. Impassive little men, pleasant-tempered ordinarily, active as the monkeys they resembled, these lascars were not subject to panic.

"What is it?" demanded Brent, who spoke their tongue fluently.

"Allah knows, tuan, not we!" answered one of them. "But there is a smell of death."

"Bosh," said Malacca Brent impatiently. "Set us ashore, return to the ship, and be on the lookout if I hail."

Rawdon said nothing; but he noted that Brent was tensed, alert, wary, as the boat came in and scraped, stern foremost. He leaped ashore after Brent, and the brown men laid on their oars instantly, sending the boat shooting out toward the schooner.

"Well used," said Brent. "Regular pathway! Come on."

A path, indeed, and well used, opened ahead of them. The trees cloaked everything. Of a sudden, Rawdon halted. He stooped and picked up an object.

The two men regarded it in silence, then their eyes met, in tacit comprehension of what it implied. It was an ordinary sour-dough biscuit, from which a single bite had been taken; but it was fresh. Further, among these trees that teemed with bird and insect life, it could have lain untouched for only a few moments—nor had any ants attacked it.

"Somebody watching us, and dropped this in a hurry," Malacca Brent observed. "Can't make out any footprints in this place. Let's push on. Good eye, Rawdon!"

They went on.

"A native would have gulped down that biscuit whole rather than lose it," Rawdon said after a moment. "We know there's someone named Sam her, and a woman. It was the woman."

Brent merely nodded. Then he lifted a hand and stood at point, his head flung forward. The trees opened ahead to show the end of the path. A house of poles, Dyak style—bilian or ironwood poles holding it up from the earth, the flooring of poles, the sides and roof well thatched. There was even a veranda with a rail, also of bilian wood.

"Hello the house!" sang out Brent. His stentorian voice lifted and was lost upon the trees and the sky. "We're friends—he sent us! Where's Sam? You, Sam?"

A queer sound came to them; a sound like a catch of the breath, like a startled cry stifled abruptly. Then Rawdon touched Brent's arm, and pointed ahead.

"Your lascars were right. A place of death. Look there—"

He himself felt a shiver as he spoke. Just before the clearing in which the house stood, was a patch of brush, growing about two enormous casuarina trees. "Talking trees," as the Malays call them, because of the perpetual whispering of their leaves. From this patch of brush protruded the naked white feet of a man.

BRENT stepped forward, drew aside the fronds of brush, then straightened up.

"White man," he commented. "Shot. Not a great while ago, either. Tattooed back, looks like a seaman. What the hell! Anybody home, there?"

Rawdon stepped out, joined the skipper, and a mass of flies disintegrated suddenly from under his feet. He looked down, drew Brent's attention. Blood had been spilt here—not the blood of that dead man either, apparently. Not unless the man had been dragged away.

"Don't shoot!" called out Rawdon abruptly. He realized all of a sudden that someone must have shot from the house—that he and Brent were in the open, at the edge of the path, liable to the same greeting of hot lead.

"Don't shoot! We're friends—we've come from him. Understand? We're alone."

"Then put down your weapons," came a voice. It startled them, so unexpected was it. The English words rang clear and cool. A woman's voice. "One of you come forward to the veranda, the other stay where you are. Drop your pistols, both of you!"

Malacca Brent grimaced, then nodded to Rawdon.

"My job," he said, and passed over his pistol and belt. "Put 'em down. Watch the trees. I'll take the chance."

Rawdon put the two pistols on the ground. Then he lit a cigarette and waited, while Brent strode forward to the house.

"Cap'n Brent, ma'am, schooner *Vespex*," he lifted his voice. Presently he mounted the four steps to the veranda. There he was halted.

Rawdon could not hear what was said. He could see no sign of the woman who spoke. She might be anywhere back of the thatch, back of the long straight iron-wood poles. Watching Brent, he saw the skipper draw up a stool and light a cheroot, heard the rumble of his voice, but distinguished no words.

It was very still here on the islet. The chattering of parakeets, the occasional angry scolding of monkeys, sounded afar. As he waited, Rawdon of a sudden recalled that the unknown man in the hospital at Balik Api had spoken English to Brent. This woman spoke English also. Not Dutch, but English.

He stepped forward, parted the brush, and looked at the dead man, who lay face down. His brawny shoulders were tattooed gloriously with a full-rigged ship under sail. In one hand he gripped a large, ugly native knife. The long blade was black with blood; over his hand and wrist, too, had run blood—apparently from the knife, or from some victim. On the wrist was tattooed the name "Bill." English, then? At least, no Dutchman. The man had been shot through the head.

"Ahoy, Rawdon!" The voice of Brent wakened him from his abstraction. "Come along, mister, and bring them pistols. It's all right."

Rawdon gathered up the belts and weapons. He advanced toward the house. Still no sign of the woman; Brent was leaning back against the rail, entirely at his ease, and as Rawdon mounted the steps, turned to tip him a significant wink.

"I've told her all about it," he said, but his wink and look belied the words. "How Cap'n Wilcox sent us, how he died, and so

forth. She took it hard, I expect. Said she'd let us in—ready for a siege, looks like."

From within the house came sounds of a barricade being unscrambled. As Rawdon came closer, Brent spoke under his breath.

"Mind your step, now; play it safe. Wilcox was a trader. From New Zealand. Settled down here illegally—been here a few months. This is his girl. She's alone." Then, louder, "Seems like a boat with four men put in here this morning. Where it come from, she don't know; most likely, upriver, or in among the lagoons somewhere. They caught sight of her, killed the black man Sam who was here, and she stood 'em off. Dropped that chap yonder. The others cleared out. Don't look so good, Rawdon. Must be a ship around here."

The last of the barricade was pulled aside, and the house door was jerked back. In the opening stood a young woman holding a rifle in the crook of her arm. If she were young, she was also resolute, calm of eye, steadily poised. Dark eyes and hair, neatly coiled about her head; a trim, khaki-clad figure of slender lines; a wiry, firm strength that Rawdon liked.

"I'm Mary Wilcox," she said. "So my father's dead? I knew it; he's been gone so long, I was certain of it. Just the same, it's—it's a blow."

She motioned them to enter, as her voice failed. Brent introduced Rawdon, and the girl nodded. Her eyes swept him appraisingly through their mist of tears.

"Come in," she said. "If those other men come back—"

"My lascars will set the fog-horn booming," said Brent with assurance. "We'll know if they sight anything."

Rawdon followed him inside. The two men seated themselves in a bare little room, sparsely furnished. As the girl said, very simply, she had nothing to offer them; the provisions left by her father had been used up. She and the blackamoor, Sam, had been forced to live by their weapons. The natives had ceased coming down from the hills before her father left.

RAWDON listened, said little. Brent put in a few questions, and drew out the story. She had been in school at Adelaide. Wilcox took her with him on this cruise to the north, on the scent of gold. He had found the gold, right enough; the Dyaks had brought it down from the upper country and he had this place to himself. It was fine while it lasted—but he could not trust his men.

He hid the gold, or most of it, and set off. Mary was down with fever. Wilcox had hurt his back and was afraid of his men. He dared not take her aboard with him, but set out for Makassar, promising to be back in a week. Two months ago, this was.

"We managed all right," she said quietly. "That is, while the grub lasted. So father sent you?"

Brent nodded. Rawdon watched him curiously, noting the man's avid eyes and changed demeanor. Brent was almost polite.

"Sorry, miss, but I had to tell you about him," he answered. "He said that most of the gold was here, and begged me to give you a hand. He passed out while he was talking about it. We had a time finding this place, too."

The girl bit her lip, resolutely winked the tears from her eyes, and nodded.

"I see. And all this—all this for gold dust!" she said slowly, bitterly. "His life was worth more."

"Yes," said Rawdon. "More to everyone concerned, no doubt. For that reason it shouldn't be wasted. What he wanted us to do, we'll do?"

Brent flashed Rawdon a glance, a peculiar glance, from his pale blue eyes.

"Us?" he repeated.

"Certainly," said Rawdon. "Wilcox sent us, didn't he?"

"Hm!" Brent cleared his throat. "Well, miss, about those other chaps who were here! Could they have been the ones who mutinied? Or perhaps they'd heard of this place from some of those men on your father's lugger?"

She shook her head. "No. They seemed astonished at everything here. It was all strange to them. They had only knives for weapons—one of them murdered poor Sam—"

"And by the looks of things out there," Rawdon said, "you got the murderer."

"And wounded another, yes," she said quietly, simply, not shirking the fact. "Yes.

They ran off and put away in their boat. I buried poor Sam—had just finished when I saw your lugger putting in. I watched—I was afraid it was their ship, you see."

Rawdon smiled suddenly. "And you dropped your biscuit, eh?"

She met his eyes, smiled a little, and the smile transfigured her grave, lovely face.

"Well, well," Brent put in, "what's to be done now? Best get you and the gold aboard right away, miss. There's just the two of us, and my lascars. I'd hate to meet up with some piratical island trader."

"The gold is hidden," she returned. "It's in little bags, and the bags are in chests. There are three, and they're frightfully heavy, I'm afraid. Father kept the gold that way so it couldn't be stolen very well. It's hard to steal a heavy chest."

"And hard to get it aboard," said Brent, with a grimace. "We might shift it, miss, into sacks. I have sacks aboard."

She nodded. "You will take me up to Saigon?" she asked. "Father planned to go there, because we coud dispose of the gold more easily in French territory. The Dutch would seize it, he said."

"Right," and Malacca Brent grinned. "We'll take you and the gold, too."

She rose, and left her rifle as she turned to the edoorway.

"I'll go and pack the few things I want to take," she said. "Then I can show you where the gold is and we'll get off."

She disappeared into the house. Brent motioned Rawdon to follow him, and leaving his stool, walked down the steps to the ground. A few paces from the house, he halted and faced Rawdon, exultation gleaming in his hard-seamed features.

"All right, mister; we win," he said. "She's all right, but she ain't been broken. I've seen many a one like her. After breaking in, she'll be a proper one, she will!"

Rawdon said nothing. His silence seemed to irritate the skipper.

"Well, ain't you a mite excited over it?" he went on sharply. "Gold, and a lot of it! Not to mention her. Don't it get under your skin?"

"Are you serious?" Rawdon demanded.

"Serious?" Brent grinned. His pale eyes held a light as of infernal fires. "No, I'm joking, mister! This is the richest thing I ever struck, strike me pink if it ain't! Here," and from his pocket he took two keys on a twist of cord, and handed them to Rawdon.

"Open up the chart locker, mister. In the back of it you'll see pasted the rules for French ports. It's pasted by the corners. Break it off and you'll see a keyhole. One o' these fits. It opens up the rifle-locker. Serve out a rifle and ammunition all around. Then stand by and signal the minute any other craft shows up."

Rawdon took the keys, thoughtfully.

"We're going aboard, then?"

"You're going aboard, aye," and Brent winked significantly. "I'll stay here to take care of her and see to that gold."

Rawdon stood motionless. It came to him suddenly that the destiny of all three of them hung balanced upon this one moment. Up to this moment everything had been leading, from his first meeting with Malacca Brent. If he obeyed orders, he could guess what it meant.

"You wouldn't go through with it, Brent?" he said in a low voice.

The pale eyes flashed. Brent's shaggy red brows drew down suddenly.

"None o' that, now! Aboard with you, mister. Mind the ship."

Rawdon regarded him curiously. The hard, seamed features were ribbed with greed and passion; eagerness, avid eagerness, flamed in the pale blue eyes. It was the moment of fate, of destiny.

"No," said Rawdon calmly.

III

JUST the one word. Their eyes met and held.

"By the lord!" breathed Malacca Brent. "Want a showdown, do you? Are you going to turn on me now?"

"I'm not going to turn on myself," Rawdon said. "What you doing about it?"

He was ready for anything. Malacca Brent saw it, and checked himself, warily. At this moment came a faint, raucous blast of sound lifting across the islet. Brent started.

"The fog-horn!" burst from him. Instantly, everything else was forgotten. "Gimme them keys! Can't let 'em grab the lugger—my lord, we would be up against it! Stay

here. Find out where the gold is. I'll send the boat for you and her, when you send a hail aboard."

He snatched the keys from Rawdon's hand, darted to the veranda, caught up gun-belt and gun, and then was gone for the path on the run. As he crashed out of sight among the trees, the figure of the girl appeared in the doorway.

"What is it?" she called sharply. "Was that the signal?"

"Yes." Rawdon swung up to the veranda. "Can I give you a hand? We'll have to be off in no time—I can get your duffel down to the landing."

She regarded him steadily, coolly. "No need to get panicky about it," she said. "I have an extra rifle here. Now that you're on deck, I'm not afraid any longer."

Rawdon nodded, smiling. "Right. Is your stuff ready?"

"Yes. Two bags. But what about the gold? You and I alone can't manage it—and it's all I have left, you know."

"Where is it hidden? In the house?"

"Yes. The chests are all in my room—there's no place to hide them, really."

"Eh?" Rawdon frowned. "But you said the gold was hidden!"

A smile lightened her eyes. "That was before I got acquainted with you. And I was afraid of him—of Captain Brent. But it isn't hidden, really."

"Hm!" said Rawdon. "You're not afraid of Brent now?"

"Not now that you're here," she said, looking at him seriously. "I watched you talking out there; I could guess at a thing or two. What are we to do now?"

"Get your stuff down to the landing. I hate to leave that gold lying open—but come along. Are these your bags? I'll take 'em. You carry the rifles."

TWO large portmanteaux were ready. Rawdon carried them outside. She followed, two rifles in her hands. Rawdon plunged at the path, anxiety now driving him hard. He knew little about those lascars aboard the lugger; whether or not they would fight, was a question in his mind. The first-comers to the house, unluckily, would get the gold.

The inlet opened up at last. The boat had come ashore for Brent, and was now just drawing alongside the lugger with him. Off to the left, toward the river-mouth, was a schooner under bare poles, moving along with auxiliary power, standing directly for the *Vesper*. Rawdon put down the suitcases.

"Well, there's the enemy!" he said. "Can't tell much about her."

"Pearler," said the girl, and sniffed the light air. "Catch that scent? You couldn't mistake it. What's she doing here, though? Looks suspicious. A hard crowd, if she's a pearler and up here on some illegal business."

Brent was aboard now, and had vanished below. Presently he came into sight again. Rawdon saw the Malays take the rifles he brought up, and scatter along the bulwarks. After a moment the oncoming schooner changed her course and ran in closer to the north end of the islet, then lost way.

"They've got binoculars on Brent, saw the rifles, and are taking no chances. Rawdon laughed cheerfully. "Well, our problem is to get the gold aboard—we can't do that and hold the lugger too, for lack of men!"

"Look!" exclaimed Mary Wilcox. "A boat!"

True. A boat was putting out from the strange schooner, four men at the oars. Rawdon turned again to the *Vesper*. Four of the lascars were going down to the boat again, and Brent was slinging something over the side to them. The boat put off almost at once and headed for the landing. The men were rowing hard.

They drew in while the strange boat was still half-way to the lugger. One of the four lascars was the serang. He grinned amiably as the boat came in, and stood up.

"Tuan," he said to Rawdon, "the tuan kapitan sends you these," and he tossed ashore a number of sacks. "He says to get things ready and he will come ashore again in an hour. Or do you go aboard with us?"

Rawdon looked at the girl, inquiringly.

"It's up to you," he said. "Shall we sack the gold and get it down here, or go aboard?"

"Get the gold ready," she said quietly. Rawdon turned to the serang.

"Good. We remain."

The boat pushed off, the men bent on their oars, and she sped out again toward

the lugger. Rawdon lit a cigarette and extended the pack to the girl, as an afterthought. She took one and he held a match.

"Brent's no fool," he observed. "He'll gain time while we work. Will you take those sacks up to the house and start in? Put no more of a load in each sack than one of us can drag along down here. I'll wait and see what happens."

She hesitated, then assented. Taking up the sacks and her own rifle, she turned back along the path.

Rawdon took up the other rifle, a repeater, found it loaded, and leaned it against a tree. He watched the two boats. That with the lascars got aboard the *Vesper* hurriedly, the stranger came on in more leisurely fashion, and paused a cable's length from the lugger.

What passed, Rawdon could not hear. Presently he saw Brent, at the rail, shaking his fist at the boat. She sheered off, circled, then headed in for the landing. Rawdon caught up his rifle and stood waiting, in plain sight.

As she drew closer, details stood out. The four oarsmen were whites, stripped to the waist. The man in the stern was a heavy, black-bearded man, cap pulled over his eye. He, too, was naked to the belt; his chest and arms were thick with black hair. When the boat came within thirty feet, Rawdon lifted his voice.

"Way enough, there! What do you want?"

"Good day, my friend," said the bearded man. "I am Cap'n Elias. One of my men was killed here this morning. I want to talk with you—"

"Stay where you are and talk," said Rawdon. "What do you want?"

" I want his body, for one thing."

"You don't get it."

Captain Elias made a gesture to his men, and spoke softly. But his voice carried.

"He won't shoot," Rawdon heard. "Go ahead. Pull."

The men dipped their oars. Rawdon threw up his rifle, saw Elias grin confidently—and pressed the trigger. To the explosion, the men ceased abruptly, twisting to look at him. Elias ducked hastily—the bullet had gone close to his head.

"You'll get the next bullet, Elias," Rawdon said calmly. "What do you want?"

Captain Elias wanted to swear, and did swear, most heartily. Then he calmed his rage.

"You dare to shoot at me?" he cried. "You and that rascal Brent—in cahoots, are you? Might have known Malacca Brent would have his nose in any dirty rascality going on! All right, just wait!"

The boat fell away, heading back for the schooner of Elias. Rawdon, laughing, turned to find Mary Wilcox behind him, her cheeks flushed, her eyes eager.

"What happened? Why did you shoot?" she broke out, panting.

"Just scaring 'em off. They had no arms, luckily," said Rawdon. "Looks like a bad egg, that chap does. Captain Elias, he called himself."

"Elias!" Startled alarm flashed in her face. "I've heard of him. Father knew of him. Cap'n Elias! A pearl poacher, they say; a murderer, a pirate, no less!"

"Well, let's get up to the house and sack the gold," Rawdon said lightly. "Elias knows about it; the natives told him, he said.

He took me for your father. He didn't get any joy out of his talk with Brent, apparently. We'll get this gold attended to, and Brent will be ashore before we finish. Once aboard with it, we can laugh at Elias and anyone else."

She gave him a sudden glance.

"Yes? Come, be honest, Mr. Rawdon! I'm no child, you know. You expect trouble with our Captain Brent?"

Rawdon met her eyes, self-possessed, level, coolly inquiring, and nodded.

"Of course. Gold and a woman; the combination brings out the worst in a certain type of man. But don't worry! I'll handle Cap'n Brent."

"I'm not worrying," she said, and swung into the path. Rawdon followed, rifle over arm.

He was rather amused by the thought of Malacca Brent thus left aboard. Of course, Brent would be along in no time, leaving the armed lascars to watch the Elias craft. Brent would want to get his hands on that gold.

Upon reaching the house Rawdon, who was wearing the pistol-belt now, left his rifle at the door, as did the girl. He followed inside, and she led him through the first room into another, equally bare, holding only a bed and a few things obviously from her father's schooner. Along one wall were three chests, crudely made things of ironwood, fastened by padlocks. At sight of them, Rawdon whistled.

"Those chests alone would weigh about as much as the gold! Well, let's see."

One of the chests was open, the pile of sacks on the floor beside it. The floor was of bare ironwood poles, uncovered; between them one could see the ground below. Natives had built the house for them, Mary Wilcox said.

Rawdon stooped above the chest. It was filled with cloth pouches, filled to the brim. The cloth was speckled with pale golden points. One of them had burst and there was a sheen of greenish gold over those below.

"It was a ghastly look, this gold of yours," Rawdon observed. "A queer color! One thinks of gold as ruddy yellow."

"I know; father often mentioned it," she replied. He passed her the pouches, and she loaded them into a sack. "It all came from one place up in the hills, the Dyaks said. I think we got all there was of it. Aren't you excited over seeing so much of it?"

"Nope." Rawdon laughed gaily. "Afraid I don't get excited easily."

"I'm glad. Here—is this enough?"

Rawdon took the sack and tested it. He was amazed by its weight.

"Sure is. Start in on another, now. We'll have Brent along pretty soon, I expect."

THE chest was emptied into three sacks, and they set to work on the second chest. Mary Wilcox asked if they could take any of the native weapons. Rawdon glanced up at the walls and assented. A few shields of the octagon-shaped Dyak pattern, two or three soft iron knives, numbers of arrows and tiny quivers of darts for a sumpitan or blow-gun.

"My best sumpitan is up at the pulpit—that's the high rock," and the girl nodded toward the rear. "One of the natives taught me how to use it. The darts are poisoned, you know; anything pricked by one falls over dead."

"Huh?" Rawdon looked up quickly. "Even a man?"

"Especialy a man," and she laughed. "These natives are warriors, head-hunters. They dry heads of their enemies. Those little darts are no more than slivers—ugh! If we have time, I'll take you up to the pulpit. That's my own special place on the island. Sam put me up a little bower there, so I could keep watch. For father, you know. I was a long time in realizing that—that he would not return."

They went on with the work.

Rawdon was unworried by any fear of Elias. Did he give any indication of hostile action, Malacca Brent would most assuredly signal; that fog-horn could be heard for miles. And if Brent himself were on the way ashore, the lascars would not fail in the warning.

They came to the end of the third chest, the final sack—barely enough to suit the purpose. Even so, it would be man's work to drag them to the landing; for one man, a lift was impossible. At thought of what this weight of gold must be worth, Rawdon whistled to himself. He was stowing the last sack, Mary Wilcox having disappeared into the rearmost room to brew a cup of tea; she had a stone fireplace there for cooking.

"Well, it's done," and Rawdon straightened up, looking at the pile of sacks. "Tea ready, Miss Wilcox?"

She made no response. Rawdon, thinking she had stepped outside, lit a cigarette and then started for the rear room doorway, over which hung a curtain of native weave. As he did so, the flooring poles creaked to a heavy tread. He turned, thinking Brent had arrived.

But it was not Brent. The huge figure that stood there, in the doorway behind him, was that of Captain Elias, white teeth flash-

ing through his beard in a grin, a pistol covering Rawdon.

"Stick 'em up, you!" commanded Elias jovially. "We got her and you both, and a good job it is."

IV

RAWDON lifted his hands.

"Hello! Plain robbery, Elias?" he inquired. The other strode forward, plucked Rawdon's pistol away, and pocketed it. Despite his grin, the blood-shot eyes spelled murder.

"Plain and fancy mixed, I expect," he replied, and stepped back. "In there, you! Fetch her along. All hands!"

The curtain was flung aside. There was a sudden scuffle, a cry, a snarling oath.

"Hey!" cried a voice. "She's scattered the fire—look out, blast it!"

Four figures struggled into the room—four men. Two of them held Mary Wilcox between them. She ceased her panting exertions at sight of Elias there. Anger flamed in her eyes.

"You scoundrel!" she cried out sharply.

Elias broke into a laugh, a roaring laugh. "Hello, here's a pretty bird!" he cried out, then turned. "Two of you lads get down to the water. Leave Brent walk into the trap, savvy? Bring back word when he's coming. Rush!"

Two of them departed hurriedly. The other two held on to the girl. Elias walked up to her, eyed her, and chucked her jovially under the chin.

"Ah! You have spirit, my lass, spirit!" He exclaimed. "Come, where's old Wilcox, eh? I thought this chap was him, but I was mistaken. Too young, I see. Won't talk, eh?" Elias turned and looked at Rawdon. "Out with it! Where is he?"

"Not here," said Rawdon calmly. "I'm Brent's mate."

"Oh! Brent's mate! That's lovely." Elias roared again with laughter. "And I sneaked around the island in a boat, and Malacca Brent sitting out there never saw me! That's a good 'un. Wait till he comes!"

"Enough of this nonsense, Elias," said Rawdon, his voice cold. "You've no business here. You can't go up against the law—"

"Oh, can't I?" burst in Elias. "Can't I, though! When Wilcox has busted all the laws, and here's you and Malacca Brent nosing in, and my men murdered—and you talk law! Well, let me tell you, mister, I'm the law right here. And what's here is mine, savvy?"

His eyes swept the closed chests, the pile of sacks. He stepped to one chest, kicked it open, and cursed as the ironwood hurt his booted foot. That the sacks held gold, never came into his mind, obviously. He turned to the girl.

"Come, miss, where is it? We want the gold; tell us, like a good 'un, and we'll let you go."

"Maybe it's in them sacks," spoke up one of the men. "More like grub, though."

"The gold—the gold's under the veranda," said the girl, deadly pale but composed. "In front. A hole under the right side. Will you let me go now?"

"Oh, aye! Come along and show us the spot," and Elias chuckled, as he turned. His pistol jerked at Rawdon. "You, mister! Sea-lawyer, huh? March! Out of here!"

RAWDON obeyed without protest. Incredible as it seemed, Elias never suspected that the pile of partially filled sacks under his very nose could hold the gold he sought. Whatever the girl's purpose in leading him a false scent, at least it appealed to him; to Elias, it was quite obvious that the gold would be hidden out of sight.

As he started for the veranda, Rawdon was fully aware of his own desperate plight. This pearl poacher would assuredly murder him, on the old principle that dead men tell no tales. The bullet might come at any instant, on the least provocation. Elias held all the winning cards, and would get Brent to boot. In such case, there was no escape, no help! Brent must be warned at all costs, as a matter of mere selfish interest.

With the pistol of Elias at his back, Rawdon emerged on the veranda. The two rifles stood there at one side; Elias kicked them so that they clattered across the bilian poles of the floor. Mary Wilcox and her two guards came out. She had become entirely docile now, and the two seamen held her but lightly. She gave Rawdon a peculiar look charged with meaning, but its import escaped him. Elias turned to her.

"Well, miss? Where's the spot?"

She pointed down, to the ground at the right corner of the veranda.

"There, behind that post. You'll have to dig for it. There are tools around at the other side of the house, in a locker. You'll need shovels."

Elias grinned delightedly, and motioned to one of the two men.

"Go get 'em. You, Jem, keep an eye on her." One of the two seamen departed. Elias swung on Rawdon, with a sudden scowl. "Who was it shot poor Billy, who's laying out there? Your lugger wasn't here—"

"I shot him," spoke out the girl. Rawdon caught one swift, desperate glance of appeal from her—what was in her mind? Then she faced Elias defiantly. "You and your gang of murderers, I'd like to shoot the lot of you!"

"Oh, aye?" Elias surveyed her and grinned again.

Then came sudden interruption. The two men who had been sent down to the landing appeared at the edge of the clearing. They halted, and one panted out hot words.

"Cap'n! He's coming ashore—boat's nearly in now!"

"Ho! Walkin' into it, is he?" exclaimed Captain Elias. "Hide there in the brush, lads! Let him come on—"

Rawdon saw the girl's muscles tense, saw her suddenly gather herself together. Swift as a flash of light, she wrenched free from the seaman who held her arm. Then, with a leap, she was gone through the doorway, into the house.

Elias jerked up his pistol; as he did so, Rawdon was upon him, landing a crunching smash behind the ear. With a bellow, Elias whirled and the pistol roared out—but it was knocked aside. Another blow staggered Elias momentarily. Then the seaman flung himself in, a knife glinting in his hand.

Rawdon caught him by wrist and belt, swung him at Elias, just as the pistol exploded again. The man screamed out horribly, struck against Elias—and Rawdon ducked into the doorway of the house. He heard Elias roaring out orders and oaths, caught the name of Brent, but there was no time now to think. Again the pistol crashed out; the bullet caught at Rawdon's hair as he dived headlong for the curtained doorway into the rearmost room.

He tore the curtain aside as he fell forward with it—fell into thick smoke that filled the whole room. Then a stab of red flame leaped up. All at once, the whole roof seemed to burst out into fire. He heard Mary Wilcox calling him, felt her snatch at his hand as he stumbled forward.

Next instant he emerged with her into the open air. Behind, a roaring crackle of flame had leaped up, seizing upon the house, running over the thatched roof and walls like wildfire.

"Quickly! Quickly!" she urged him, and Rawdon broke into a run with her. Then the trees closed around them, behind them. They were safe, momentarily.

"You were splendid!" The girl halted and faced him, her eyes in an eager glow. "I was afraid you wouldn't get my idea—we had to do it at all costs!"

"Right," said Rawdon. "Now what? Can we cut around to the landing?"

"No. Listen!" The smashing reports of rifles lifted to them above the crackling sweep of the flames. "They're shooting at Captain Brent!"

"Or he at them." Rawdon grunted. "Did you set that fire purposely?"

"Of course. It was the only way to save the gold." She flung a laugh at him, then turned and motioned. "Come along to the pulpit. You can see the lugger from there."

WHETHER or not Malacca Brent had been saved from the trap he was about to walk into, was hard to say. Elias had shot one of his own men by mistake; the seaman's screams still rang in the ears of Rawdon. Three other men remained with Elias; others must be aboard his craft. His action in landing, unperceived by Brent, had certainly upset everything.

Another path that wound through the trees—they were following it toward the high rock pillar which gave the islet its name. No further sound of shooting; the trees, however, closed out all sounds. Mary Wilcox swung around.

"May I have another cigarette? Thanks. Well, if Elias stops to hunt the gold, we're safe enough. If he follows us—no telling! He seems to think I'm rather a prize."

Rawdon smiled. "He's right. I didn't know a woman could be like you."

"Mercy!" She eyed him and laughed. "What, you too?"

"Yep, reverting to barbarism," he assented lightly. "How far is this pulpit, anyhow?"

"Another five minutes. Only one person can go up at a time, though. I'll stay at the bower; what's left of our food—and liquor—is kept there, luckily. See here! You didn't send my bags aboard; they're at the landing now. Will Elias plunder them, do you think?"

"Sure of it. He'll be on the hunt for loot of any kind."

She made a wry grimace, then turned and went on along the path.

The trees thinned, giving way to pandanus scrub and brush. Ahead appeared the almost abrupt pillar of rock, nakedly rising from the brush. Mary Wilcox turned aside to a thatched hut visible at the left.

"Wait a minute," she called. Darting into the hut, she came out with a pair of binoculars. "You can go straight up the rock on this side. Steps are cut."

She went back into the hut, or bower as she termed it. Rawdon headed on for the rock, and found the ascent narrow but fairly easy.

He was none too sanguine of anything. As he well knew, that break from Elias had been madness; only sheer luck and the girl's swift action had saved them from death. Weaponless, cut off here, they had little to expect; but that little was sure. Elias would follow. To him, as to Brent, this girl was a prize no less than the gold.

Gaining the upper part of the rock, Rawdon settled himself in the hollow of it. The high back curved up behind him. From this pinnacle on the high end of the islet, he could see over the trees to the inlet. There was the *Vesper,* and there, floating idly—

EXCITEDLY, Rawdon focused the glasses. Yes, the lugger's boat! Brent had been caught after all, then. The boat was floating out toward the lugger; one of the lascars lay across the bow thwart, and Rawdon had no doubt he was dead, from the blood in sight. Otherwise, the little craft was empty.

He turned to the lugger and counted the Malays in sight. Six in all, talking together on the forward deck. The others who were in the boat with Brent must have swum for it, then. Even as Rawdon looked, one of the lascars went to the rail and plunged over. His head showed, as he made for the boat. But where was Malacca Brent?

No sign of him anywhere. He must have pitched overboard when the rifles opened on him. From the trees where the house had stood, a thick trail of smoke was winding up into the sky, but the quick flames had died out. Rawdon caught the girl's voice and looked down. She was standing out before the bower, gazing up at him.

"What luck?"

"None," he called. "Looks as though they got Brent. The boat's adrift, but the lascars are getting her—"

Whang-g-g!

A bullet struck the rock beside him and ricochetted. The rifle-crack echoed up from the trees. Rawdon jumped for the steps cut

in the rock, scrambled hastily for the ground. A second bullet threw dust in his face. Half way down now. A growth of bush around the base of the rock offered shelter if he could reach it.

He was still eight feet from the ground when two rifles cracked together. For an instant his hands clawed at the knobs of rock—then they loosened. With a rush, his body shot down and went sprawling out of sight amid the brush. An exultant bellow from the throat of Elias rose upon the westering sunlight. Rawdon did not move.

At the edge of the trees, a moment later, the huge shape of Elias appeared. Two of his men were with him. The third, no doubt, was on guard back at the landing, watching the lascars of the *Vesper*. Elias held only his pistol. Each of his men, probably better shots, had a rifle—the two rifles left on the veranda.

"Keep your eyes peeled for her, lads!" cried Elias. "And mind, don't hurt her! What's that yonder—a hut? Rout her out of there, lads, rout her out!"

The two seamen darted forward toward the bower that sheltered Mary Wilcox.

V

THE sun was lowering toward the western sea-rim.

As the two men ran in, with Elias waiting to see if they flushed their prey, neither of them sighted a tiny something that seemed to float down the sunlight toward them. One of the two men halted abruptly and caught at his bare chest.

"Blast it!" he cried out. "Where'd that come from—"

The rifle fell from his hand. He staggered, took a step forward, then his knees were loosened and he pitched over on his face and was quiet.

The second man halted his run, looked at his falling comrade. Then he jumped violently and flung up his arm. A frightful scream broke from him. He threw away his rifle and plucked at something in his arm.

"Look out, cap'n!" he yelled frantically. "Look out—natives—"

He turned around and began to run for it. He stumbled. His face, turned toward Captain Elias, was a contorted mask of terror and anguish. Then his knees gave way beneath him and he, too, dropped forward and lay inanimate, sprawled on the sand.

Elias stood there as though frozen. The silence was terrible. He peered at the two fallen figures, eyed the trees behind him and the brush ahead, lifted one hand and pawed the sweat from his eyes.

Then a sudden harsh laugh rang across the silence. Elias started. He swung around. The voice of Malacca Brent rang out, vibrant, mocking, scornful, but no Brent was in sight.

"You, Elias! Down on your knees, damn you, and pray—"

Elias threw up his automatic. He caught a movement there among the trees and began to pump bullets at it. The explosions rang out in powerful staccato. Then came another, not from his pistol. Elias staggered. He clawed at his beard, and then collapsed, coughing.

From the trees, after another slow moment, stepped Brent, pistol in hand, a ragged smear of blood across one cheek. He walked forward to the body of Elias, stirred it with his foot, then looked up.

"Rawdon! Anywhere around? Miss Wilcox?"

"He's over here. Hurry, hurry!"

The girl's figure emerged from the hut. She broke into a run, hastening toward the brush at the base of the rock, where Rawdon had fallen. Brent darted a glance around, then advanced to join her, running, pounding along the sand with heavy feet. His streaked hair, his trousers and boots, showed the effect of immersion. That he had swum ashore was evident.

His pale eyes, however, were fastened upon the girl's shape. She reached the brush ahead of him, tore it apart, and dragged out the body of Rawdon, who was senseless.

"What became o' the gold?" panted out Brent as he drew near. "Did Elias get it?"

"It's in the house—burned," she said briefly. "Here, give me a hand! He's coming around, I think. Looks like just a scalp-wound—oh!"

She knelt beside Rawdon, lifting his head, absorbed in him. Malacca Brent leaned forward. His long, lean arm, streaked with red hair, darted past her. His huge hand gripped on her wrists—gripped both of them.

With a heave and a swing, he brought her suddenly erect, lifting her to her feet, wrenching her up.

"Never mind him—it's me you're interested in from now on!" he said abruptly.

White as death, she flew into a passionate fury of rage, struggling, striking, trying her best to get clear of him. Brent, smiling grimly, held both her wrists in his one hand and watched her efforts. When she swooped forward to fasten her teeth in his wrist, his other hand darted down to her face and shoved her head back, roughly. A gasp broke from her lips. She struggled anew, but now there was fear in her eyes as she realized his strength. Brent drew her closer with his one hand.

A movement caught his eye, Rawdon had wakened, was trying to sit up. Dragging the girl behind him, Brent strode forward a pace and lifted his foot. It took Rawdon under the jaw and knocked him backward. He lay quiet.

MARY WILCOX fought on; silently now, desperately, with ebbing strength. Brent pulled her forward suddenly, swept his other arm about her, held her close. One instant her hands beat at his face, his breast, his wide shoulders, as she stared into his eyes. Then she relaxed in a dead faint.

"Good enough." With a chuckle, Malacca Brent whipped out a dirty handkerchief and bound her wrists tightly together. He stood gazing down at her, an eager, lustful glitter in his eyes. "So it was you who sent them native darts, eh? Killed those two rats—and a good job. You're the proper girl for me, you are."

He stooped, swung her limp form up and over his shoulder, and strode off. As he passed the body of Elias, he spat at it without halting. When he approached the trees, however, he slowed down, stopped, swung the girl to the sand. His gaze drove ahead. He had not forgotten the fourth and last of Elias's men, who would probably be drawn by the shots. An instant later Brent suddenly crouched low behind the brush. Aye, the man was coming!

The seaman emerged from the trees, came out into the open, and stood staring around. He saw the three bodies sprawled in the sand—then Brent came erect with a snarl. "Drop your gun!" The man, startled, swung around, obeyed. "Clear out! Tell your mates Elias is dead—the lot of you skip out, quick! You and your blasted craft, skip!"

Terrified, yet babbling out a curse, the man turned and broke into a run, diving into the cover of the trees. Brent laughed and picked up Mary Wilcox again. He forgot the man at once, dismissed him from reckoning; but men signed on by Captain Elias were not to be so lightly dismissed, had Brent known it.

Presently he paused by the ruins of the house, eyeing the smoldering pile. The ashes of the thatch had disintegrated; a dark mass showed what had been the pile of gold-sacks. Fallen bilian poles were strewn and stacked about it. Burned, they retained their shape and heat, like white-hot metal rods. With a shrug, Brent went on. Here under the trees, darkness was falling. He came at last to the landing and set down his unconscious burden. His voice sent a piercing blast at the *Vesper*. The Malays saw him and scurried down into the boat.

Brent gazed around, curiously. The two bags belonging to Mary Wilcox, left here among the mangrove roots, had been broken open and plundered. Their contents was scattered all over the place. Clothes, pictures, books, knicknacks of every kind. With a grunt, Brent began to gather everything up, throwing the stuff together haphazard in the bags. In the midst of this, he suddenly desisted, to stare down at a photograph set in a silver frame.

It was an old photograph, somewhat faded. Brent's jaw fell, astonishment widened his eyes, as he looked at the woman's face thus pictured. It was a pleasant, smiling face, that of a young, fair-haired woman.

A grunt escaped Malacca Brent. He looked up and saw the boat coming from the lugger, then he looked down again at the silver frame. There was something graven along the bottom of it. He peered closer, read the words:

Mary Stevens Wilcox
1891—1916

Brent's eyes shifted to the girl's face, then to that of the picture. Another grunt escaped him. He rose as the boat came in, the serang

chattering excitedly at him. With an oath, he shut up the lascar and loosened the neck of Mary Wilcox's khaki shirt. He slid the framed photograph in under her shirt, picked up her limp figure, and plunged into the water. Knee-deep, he laid her in the stern of the boat.

"Take this stuff along," he said, sweeping his hand at the half-filled bags. "Take her out and put her in my cabin. Then come back and wait for me. I'll go aboard later."

"But, tuan!" cried the serang. "Those other men—"

"They're done for," said Brent grimly. "Obey!" The serang assented meekly.

VI

RAWDON, meantime, had come to his senses even before Brent appeared and shot Captain Elias; but his senses were weak and wandering.

When Mary Wilcox dragged him from the brush, he was aware of it. He realized everything that was going on, but he was very sick. Then, when Brent seized the girl, he had partially risen, by a tremendous effort. Brent's kick stretched him out anew, bitterly helpless but still conscious.

The scalp-wound, ragged although far from serious, was one reason. Another and more important, was his fall from the rock. He had landed flat on his stomach across a hummock of coral; this hurt left him weak, deathly sick, unable to speak or move.

Gradually, in the silence that ensued, he came back to himself.

After a little he was able to crawl on hands and knees. Thus he made his way, painfully, to the hut at one side. The sun was now down almost to the horizon; when night came, it would fall quickly, with no twilight.

At the doorless hut, Rawdon gripped the thatch and drew himself erect. His abdomen was sore, badly bruised, but the nausea was passing. He stood looking around, saw the three bodies lying in the open, saw the rifles, and the pistol which the dead Elias still gripped. His drawn features took on the shadow of his old gay smile, and his gray eyes lit up a little.

He turned into the hut and looked around. By the door lay a four-foot sumpitan, a blow-gun of the Dyaks. Beside it was a pouch partially filled with tiny sliver-darts, each one a deadly thing. She had said that what little food remained was here—ah! He saw it piled in one corner. A case of gin, unopened, and above this a few tins, nothing more.

Rawdon went at the case, finally tore it open, took out a bottle of squareface, and drank. The liquor put strength into him at once. He emptied some of it into his hand and rubbed his hurt body; it stung like fire, but the alcohol had immediate effect on the bruised muscles and flesh. The soreness began to go out of him. Food? No time for that. He turned away, able to walk now much more easily, and left the hut.

Going to the body of Elias, he caught up the automatic pistol and inspected it. The clip was nearly empty; a search of the dead man's pockets revealed a fresh clip. With this in place, Rawdon started for the path. The sun was gone. Only the afterglow filled the sky and cast a crimson glare over the trees.

A redder light grew ahead, as he approached the ruins of the house. Rawdon halted when the clearing came into sight. It was filled with a scarlet glow, a weird, unearthly radiance from the ironwood poles of the house. Like fiery rods of steel, they lay heaped, retaining their red glowing heat, diffusing the whole place with a clear rosy light.

In this light, Rawdon was astonished to see the shape of Captain Brent pacing up and down. The man was chewing at an unlit cheroot, muttering savagely to himself, lost in some abstracted thought. After his first surprise, Rawdon threw up his pistol and strode forward.

"Hands up, Brent!" he ordered sharply.

Brent whirled about, peered at him, uttered a grunt.

"Oh, it's you! I'd forgot about you—"

"Up, you fool!" Rawdon's voice was suddenly edged. Brent's hand went to his own weapon, and Rawdon pressed the trigger. Nothing happened.

The pistol had become jammed—no doubt by sand.

But, to the utter amazement of Rawdon, the other man merely took his pistol out and sent it into the bushes with a flip of his hand.

"Never mind all that," Brent growled. "Glad you turned up, mister. I want to have a word with you—blast it, I dunno what to do! There's the gold for the having. She's aboard, and safe enough too. Only—"

He broke off abruptly, as though listening. Rawdon heard nothing. So astonished was he at this unexpected occurrence, that he was at a loss what to do or say. Was Brent drunk? No, the skipper seemed sober enough.

RAWDON removed the clip from his automatic. It was still jammed. He shook it, blew the sand from it, took the cartridge from the breech. Suddenly it clicked, worked perfectly. Rawdon replaced the cartridge and clip, wondering at the ways of fate. But for this jam, he must have shot down Malacca Brent—he almost wished he had done so. The man was past all understanding.

"What d'ye mean, Brent?" he demanded. "Are you going to do the square thing by her?"

"Her!" echoed Brent with puzzling scorn. "To the devil with her. I'm a fool, Rawdon! A blasted, weak-minded fool! But I can't shove through with it, somehow."

Rawdon still stood at the edge of the trees. Brent swung toward him, the slowly fading red glare of the bilian poles striking out his figure and face with a grotesque effect. Then his head jerked sharply, sideways.

"What's that?" he cried out.

In reply, a spurt of fire leaped from the opposite trees. Brent caught at his chest, and crumpled in his tracks to the shot. Another sounded. Then Rawdon, whirling, broke the night with the repeated roar of his pistol. Something crashed in the brush, then a man's shape stumbled out and fell in the open, rifle in hand.

It was the man from Elias' schooner whose life Brent had spared, and who had slunk around, obtained one of the rifles from the dead men, and secured his revenge. At the cost of his own life.

Rawdon lifted Brent's head. Both bullets had gone through that hard red chest.

"It's your job, mister," muttered Malacca Brent, the words bubbling from his lips. "Mary Stevens' girl—couldn't make up my mind to it then—think o' me turning softhearted, would you? But it was her girl—"

He made a queer sound in his throat, and died.

Rawdon failed to comprehend the meaning of it all. Nor did he fully comprehend it, indeed, until after the moon was up that night and the schooner of Elias had stolen past like a wraith on her flight seaward.

Then, sitting in Brent's cabin with Mary Wilcox, Rawdon saw the silver-framed photograph on the table. She pointed to it.

"My mother, Rawdon. She was Mary Stevens—my father married her at Thursday Island."

"Stevens!" Rawdon caught at the name, looked up sharply. He was going through the steel box that held the ship's papers and other things. He glanced at the photograph; then, from the box, he drew out a replica of it. The same face. The same photograph, even.

Their eyes met in startled silence. They both understood the queer thing that had torn Malacca Brent's soul asunder in his last hours.

"Strange!" said Rawdon. "He must have been in love with her, sometime in the far past. You never can tell—there are curious things hidden away in the heart, in the secret places of a man's life—things that come up suddenly and unexpectedly—"

He thought of the work awaiting them ashore in the morning, of the gold that must be salvaged from the ashes—the greenish pale gold, the ghastly gold of Celebes.

"We might bury that picture—with him," said the girl softly.

Rawdon wakened from his abstraction, met her gaze, and smiled a little as he nodded.

The G-Man Had a Heavy Date, and It Was Going to Take More Than a Few Jail Breakers to Make Him Miss It

G-DATE

By ROBERT H. ROHDE

BY PLAN and as it got under way, it was a three-man crush-out. Boyd Norman and Nate Cloke and Jerry Westervelt, bank robbers de luxe, as desperate a trio as Powerton Penitentiary ever held, had been all set with smuggled guns to shoot their way over the wall that cloudy Wednesday evening. But when the smoke of battle cleared and the prison siren whooped its alarm it was only Cloke and Norman who were missing.

A fast automobile lurking nearby had streaked off with them, vanished into the night before pursuit could be organized.

Westervelt stayed behind, though. Clipped down by a yard-screw's bullet, he died clinging to his hot-barreled get-away pistol; and because that was a U. S. Army gun, stolen property of the Federal Government, a lot of things happened that would not have happened otherwise.

Immediately the recapture of Boyd Norman and Nate Cloke became a direct concern of the Federal Bureau of Investigation; so instead of carrying a mere bulletin on the Powerton break the F. B. I. teletype carried reams. Instead of being legally bound to stand by in the role of passive looker-on-er, a certain starspangled Old Guy with Whiskers snapped up his galluses and swung spryly into the chase. And instead of keeping his biggest of all dates with the loveliest of all blondes at two the next

afternoon young Mr. Donald Fargrave, L. L. B. and F. B. I., found himself officially and harrowingly jammed up with silk stockings and diaphanous stepins and a badly wanted public enemy brunette.

Finger prints on Jerry Westervelt's automatic were at the root of that catastrophe. Some were Nate Cloke's and showed that the pistol had come into the prison by way of the package room, where Cloke had been a trusty. Others gave evidence that it had passed recently through hands far smaller than Cloke's or Westervelt's, and by noon on Thursday Uncle Sam's inquisitive G-men not only knew those smaller prints were a woman's but knew who the woman had been.

Then, *cherchez la femme!* From coast to coast teletypes chattered and long-distance wires burned, and finally Washington, D. C. was putting through a rush call to a city a couple of hundred miles south of Powerton.

FARGRAVE was just leaving the Fed office there, walking on air, blissfully sure that the rest of the day belonged to him and blonde Julie Haywood. He stopped at a towel-cabinet mirror to run a comb through his crisp rusty hair and to fuss at his necktie. And:

"Hi, Fargrave!" a quick voice speared as a phone receiver clicked behind him. "Oh, Fargrave, just one moment, please!"

That was the voice of Garry Loman, the special agent in charge, and there was an electric tingle in it.

He said briskly:

"I'm afraid, Fargrave, you'll have to call off that date of yours."

"But—but I can't," Don Fargrave bleakly protested. "She's driving all the way up from Oklahoma City. Everything's been arranged for me to meet her out in Brockville. If I don't show up—listen, I mustn't miss! My whole life, *her* whole life—"

Loman shut him off. Himself a veteran whose service with the Bureau reached back beyond the big reorganization, he had learned long ago that G-men's dates were made to be broken. Fargrave might be new in this office, but he had spent a year on the job down in Oklahoma and should know by this time that the Bureau had first call on him seven days a week and twenty-four hours a day.

"Sure," Loman said. "I've had dates like that, so I know. Hell, I was always having 'em—and mostly breaking 'em—before my hair started to go. Never think I don't understand or that I'm not sympathetic. But this is a hot lead on the Powerton break, Fargrave. It's got to be followed lightning fast—and you're the guy that follows it. That's orders direct from Washington."

Fargrave gulped. "Washington?"

"Right. Somebody took a quick riffle through the occupation-record file. That's how come. You worked your way through college and law school selling fripperies to the fair, didn't you? Went around canvassing with hosiery and undies and such like—ain't it so?"

It was only too true. Fargrave flushed, and Garry Loman grinned.

"Swell!" he congratulated. "Now listen!"

Fargrave listened; and listening, he threw an anguished glance at the wall clock. His train for suburban Brockville would be pulling out in less than five minutes, and it got away without him—what then, what then? There was red, after all, in the gold of Julie Haywood's hair; enough red to make her reaction to a stand-up desperately uncertain. Would she be docile and blonde and stick around? Or red-head and chuck everything?

GARRY LOMAN was talking about that rod left behind in the Powerton break last night. Talking about finger prints on it.

"Jerry Westervelt's prints, and Nate Cloke's prints, and Rae Kling's prints—they were all there," Loman said. "The pistol was one of a bunch looted out of a little National Guard armory somewhere in Iowa a few months ago, and the prints tell the rest of the story.

"Rae was Boyd Norman's woman before the cops up above grabbed him and the judge threw the book at him. A gun-moll queen. She was the one who did the outside rigging for the escape, plain enough. She took the getaway gats up to Powerton and slipped them to Cloke in the package room. Then she made arrangements to have the getaway car ready and waiting.

"So the way to get a line on Norman and Cloke is to put a plant on Rae Kling. Washington's dope is that she's here in this town. There's a woman living out in the Lakeside section who goes by the name of Louise Laplatte; and she's your lady this afternoon, because there appears to be a mighty close connection between her and Rae Kling.

"Louise may be just a friend of Rae's. Then again, it's quite possible that she and Rae are the same person. Your job is to find out who and what, and the old occupational disguise should click you right in with no need of false whiskers. For background, I'll get you a car with a package-carrier body. I'll phone a friend who's lingerie buyer at the Boston Store, and he'll let you borrow anything you think might take Mademoiselle Laplatte's eye. The rest'll be strictly up to yourself. Use your patter and use your bean. Clock the joint. See if there's any sign of men having been around, or of company being expected. And whatever else you do, don't fail to bring back a nice set of the gal's finger prints."

Fargrave was staring glumly at the clock. It was one-thirty, even, and the Brockville train was rolling. He thought of Julie, starting out before daylight in her flivver so that she'd be sure to hit John Brunner's by two. Thought of her getting there frazzled, finding that he couldn't even travel twenty miles by railroad to open his arms to her when she'd driven more than a dozen times twenty miles to throw herself into them.

He shuddered and Garry Loman, who really did have a heart, slapped his shoulder.

"Isn't there somewhere you could phone and leave word for your other lady?" he asked.

Of course, there was Brunner's. Thinking of that, Fargrave brightened; if he hadn't been knocked so completely galley-west the first thought in his mind would have been to call Brunner. There must be hotels in Brockville, and if the bad news was broken to Julie in just the right way maybe she'd go to one of them and rest a few hours. She had to be back at the hospital in the morning—but, hell! Brockville was an airport and there'd be a plane, Oklahoma-bound, stopping there for fuel somewhere about midnight. Why couldn't she leave the flivver and fly home? Wouldn't that be the sensible thing, anyway?

He ran through the "B's" in the suburban directory, and while Loman was calling the Boston Store on one phone Fargrave was calling Brockville on another.

There was a buzzing and a long wait, and then a brand new operator came chipperly onto the wire.

"Are you," she asked Fargrave, "calling a party named John Brunner?" And then she told him with the formal and aloof politeness prescribed in the Bell Book of Etiquette: "I am sorry, sir; that line is out of awdah!"

In the private office Garry Loman finished talking with his friend the lingerie buyer and proceeded to call still another friend in the automobile line. Outside, sweating, Don Fargrave called Western Union. And worse and more of it.

"We can't accept messages for Brockville," somebody said. "We have no office there.... No, Postal Telegraph hasn't either."

THAT, poisonously, was that Fargrave, hanging up, felt and looked as if something heavy had dropped upon him from a great height. For a moment he thought desperately of telling Loman to go jump in a bucket. But that was just a flash, the madness of despair. He couldn't do it; knew he couldn't. Taking this job, he had signed up for grief with his eyes wide open, and what he had sworn to do he was bound to do. If it had to be a stand-up for Julie, stand-up it was. The thought that missing her today might mean losing her forever was intolerable. It was a risk he must take, though. Must, absolutely. Julie Haywood might be the only girl he'd ever give a damn about—but Uncle Sam came first.

Garry Loman stepped briskly from the rear, rubbing his hands. He said with ghoulish cheerfulness, "Fixed! Buck up, Fargrave. It shouldn't take so long. Just get the prints back here to me, and you're loose until nine tomorrow morning. Now get this. Go over, first, to—"

It was beautifully simple; Fargrave himself had to concede that the scheme could hardly miss. According to the downtown

diagram, A, ostensibly a house-to-house canvasser, would have an obvious, logical, suspicion-proof reason for approaching B —who might or might not turn out to be C, depending on results. He would offer for B's inspection wares infallibly of interest to any person of B's sex, goods as a matter of course, packaged in pasteboard boxes. Obeying a law of nature, B would handle the boxes. And she could not possibly handle them without leaving those finger prints so eagerly desired by the F. B. I.

"There you are—A B C!" chuckled Loman, speeding Don Fargrave on his way.

And it surely did look like a pushover assignment at that moment, neither Garry nor crushed young Mr. Fargrave having a gift of second sight to advise that even then a certain accident was getting set to happen north of town—an accident that would have consequences directly and cosmically complicating Don Fargrave's little chore.

Out on a smooth but little traveled road not more than thirty miles from the city, a pebble had got into a cut in a front tire of an outwardly commonplace little green sedan that was rolling swiftly southward. The pebble had worked through rubber and fabric to make contact with the tube, and at each revolution of the wheel the tube was wearing precariously thinner.

A blow-out was due, and presently—*bang!*

The tire went flat with the speedometer behind it reading fifty-five, and the green sedan, wildly lurching, slued for the ditch and fetched up against a telegraph pole with a smack that astonishingly changed the facial aspect of the stocky man wrenching at the wheel.

He wasn't hurt nor was his companion in the car, but the neat small mustache which the driver had worn at the moment of impact had been curiously dislocated by the jolt. Flown from his upper lip, it clung weirdly for an instant to the tip of his nose; then, all in one piece, it dropped to the sedan's floor. And without the mustache the man at the wheel was unmistakably Boyd Norman, lately No. 5673 in Powerton Penitentiary.

It was, very naturally, the former No. 5592 who was beside him—Nate Cloke, studious and solemn in large, round, owlish spectacles that had abetted that deceptive wisp of crepe hair in carrying the green sedan unchallenged over long hundreds of miles of highway.

Not less than a dozen times the two had passed state troopers and never, thus far, had they drawn a second glance; never had there been a suspicion of need for use of the two big automatics tucked into the seat cushions or the bigger and deadlier sub-machine gun lying ready for instant action underfoot.

The breaks had been a hundred per cent all the way from Powerton; now, abruptly the luck had soured. The radiator was smashed, the front axle hopelessly twisted, the flight definitely ended so far as the little green sedan would further it.

Norman got out and looked at the front of the car and swore.

"If this ain't pretty! We're in a sack now, for fair."

Cloke felt his ribs and said, "Well, there's a bright side. We didn't get our necks broke."

"Might have been better if we had," gloomed Norman. "Look at the angles, Sunshine! Look at all of 'em. And what? To start with, this car is so hot that you could fry eggs on it. We can't have a wrecker come get it, because it wouldn't any more than hit the garage before they'd see where the numbers had been changed on the engine block and chassis."

"Well, we don't get a wrecker. We leave it and lam. There's a bus line into Drummond."

"Sure. Or we could get a train. Or split and one of us take the bus and the other the rattler. That part's all right. But how long before some cop is snooping around the wreck? How long before he drops to the phony numbers, and somebody guesses that it might be our Powerton getaway car? And then how long before there's smoke on our trail?"

Cloke submitted, "We'll be O.K. once we make Rae's hide-out in Drummond."

"Like hell we will!" scowled Norman. "We can't sit anywhere in this part of the country. Not for ten minutes. The one good bet is to get to Arkansas. It's the only place I'd think of holing-up now.

Only place where the heat wouldn't be so that we'd be all one big blister from it."

NO OTHER traffic had been in sight when the tire blew and none to this moment. But now a car was coming around a curve to the north. Boyd Norman tossed one automatic to Cloke and pocketed the other; grabbed the machine-gun out of the sedan and hurled it into the brush beyond the ditch.

"If they find it, they find it," he grunted, and then he was in the middle of the road, trick mustache forgotten, waving his arms to flag the approaching car.

Ten minutes later he stood in a phone booth in a small-town drug store, and in Drummond Miss Louise Laplatte, elsewhere known as Rae Kling, was listening to guarded phrases reporting calamity.

For a moment she was bleak. She said, "Yes, yes, I know it means more traveling. But my own car, honey—it's the damnedest thing! I've been getting sicker and sicker of looking at that mopey blue color. You know how I hated it."

"Well, what?" Norman snapped.

Her voice was faint. "This morning, I—I ran it in for a new paint job. Told 'em to rush it, and they started scraping off the old paint. And now—" She broke off. "Hold it a second, hon! A machine just stopped in front of the bungalow and somebody's coming to the door. Wait till I take a look."

She ran to the window, sped back to the phone. Her bleakness, and faintness were both gone, her tone changed, lively.

"Quick, baby!" she said. "The bell's ringing—and it looks like Santa Claus without the whiskers. How fast can you get here?... That's fine. Come flying. The car you're going to Little Rock in is right outside now. Hurry and I'll hold it for you!"

II

IT WAS Don Fargrave, victim of a past, who had rung that door-bell in semi-suburban Lakeside, half an hour out from downtown Drummond.

There had been no picture of Rae Kling in the local D. of J. office, but from her teletyped description the young woman who in a moment answered his ring might very well have been Rae herself. She had midnight hair, olive skin, snapping black eyes, and if you liked them hard and glossy she was something to look at a second time.

She was smiling. At a glance, her reaction to the stack of stocking boxes under his arm was a cordial one—to a young man already long overdue on a date in distant Brockville, ominously cordial.

Fargrave had hoped he could make it snappy. Just to get one of those boxes into her hand and get it out again—get it downtown to Loman—was all he wanted after he had glanced at the name on her letter box and said, "Miss Laplatte?" and she had nodded, "That's me!"

But she didn't touch the hosiery box. Not then and not there. Instead, she opened the door wide.

"Stockings?" she said. "Well—I *could* use a few pairs. Come in and show me." Then in a living room with windows looking out on wooded, unbuilt lots across the way, she invited: "Sit down. Make yourself comfortable. I've got to finish something I was doing in the kitchen. I'll be just a minute."

Her minute lengthened and Fargrave sat frothing, thinking dismally of Julie Haywood, shuddering at what her state of mind must be on discovering she had driven two hundred and fifty miles to a stand up. Would she try to get him at the office? If she did, would Garry Loman have the eloquence to square him?

He began to sweat, knew he had to snap out of that. Worrying wouldn't get him anywhere. Instead of sitting, fretting himself sick, why the hell wasn't he taking advantage of this opportunity to give the place a frisk? What better chance could an agent ever ask to once-over a suspect layout than Louise Laplatte was offering right here and now?

She had closed the door when she left the room, and the hall beyond it was uncarpeted. Her mules had clicked emphatically on the bare floor there as she went slap-slapping to the kitchen, so they could be depended on to give sure timely warning of her return.

Fargrave got up and walked to a table littered with ragged copies of confession

magazines. There was a drawer in the table, but nothing in the drawer was interesting. Then he was opening another drawer, this one in a shiny, cheap new desk, and at first glance that looked like a dud too. It held merely a scatter of violently scented writing paper and envelopes and a brown folder with "Rand-McNally" on the cover.

He closed that drawer, started away and was drawn back. The folder might be worth looking at, it had suddenly occurred to him. The hunch was vague, but in another second or two he knew it had been good. Startlingly good. With the folder open he was staring at a road map showing the highways not only of this state, but of the whole tier of states embracing it. Powerton was on it and Drummond was on it—and between Drummond and Powerton somebody with a black leaded pencil had drawn a heavy line along those roads representing the shortest hard-surfaced route!

Heel-taps sounded to the rear, and he whisked the map back out of sight. His interest in finger prints had abruptly and amazingly dwindled. When the door opened the case was closed. He was certain it was Rae Kling who stood there.

She had not, he saw, spent all that time in her kitchen. She had changed out of the filmy negligee she had worn earlier, and she was dressed now for the street. Dressed and lip-sticked and brightly rouged, ready by all outward appearance to go places.

"Sorry," she said, "I kept you waiting. I thought I'd better get into some clothes. you're not in a hurry, I hope."

Fargrave told her, "I—I sort of had a date."

She smiled. "Girl, I bet. Pretty nice, is she? Ought to be. You look kind of nice yourself." She glanced at the stocking boxes piled on the floor, then at a little gilt clock on the desk. "Well, if you *are* a tiny bit late, wouldn't a good sale even things up? You see, I've got a couple of brothers who'll be getting here any minute. They've been away on a long trip, and they're boys who make a lot of money—just oodles. If you stick around until they come you probably won't be sorry. Like as not they'll practically buy you out."

Fargrave grinned, but behind the grin his mind was racing. Two brothers! Was it possible that one of the "brothers" would turn out on arrival to be Boyd Norman, the other Nathan Cloke? In that case, what style of game was this dizzy brunette rigging? Certainly she must know that the papers were plastered with pictures of both of them. So what?

He thought, "So then she's playing the hosiery salesman for a patsy. She sees him being socked down, cleaned out of his day's collections while she helps herself to whatever looks good to her in the truck. And that means—cinched!—that they'll be pulling out of here pronto for some other cover."

It was a spot for quick figuring. Fargrave kicked himself for having come to Lakeside unarmed; with a gun in his hand and surprise on his side, he'd gamble his life on his ability to take over a pair even as tough as the Norman-Cloke combination. But alone, weaponless—where would he be?

He had to have help, that was sure, and swiftly he saw how he could bring it. Still grinning, he said:

"Listen, Miss Laplatte, you're full of good nature yourself. But my girl downtown—she raises the roof when I'm late. This was going to be my last call for the afternoon, and I was cutting it fine when I made it. Now, if you wouldn't mind letting me use your phone a minute—"

A slim dark hand waved. "Help yourself, Handsome! You'll find it in the hall."

Fargrave knew he would, had seen it when he came in. Calling the office, he gave the private number and when Garry Loman came on stunned him with a chipper, "Hello, Toots—it's me!"

Loman growled, "Wrong number! Wrong number, you ape!" But then he caught the voice coming in as Fargrave's and softened his own. "What is it?"

"Honey Dew," begged Fargrave, "please don't be sore now. I'm tied up. A lady out here in Lakeside is buying a lot of stuff. But I've got to stick. It's this way—"

He knew, telling about those open-handed brothers momentarily expected, that Garry Loman had got the drift. Loman said, his voice as light as he could make it, but nevertheless carrying a crackle, "Maybe yes, maybe no. But it's a bet we can't pass. Foster and I'll be out as fast as rubber

will roll. Good work, sweetheart! You hang where you are as long as you can. In twenty minutes the joint will be covered."

A taxi was stopping in front of the bungalow as Fargrave put back the receiver. He saw two men get out, saw the taxi pull away, saw that one of the cab's passengers wore large, round, professorial spectacles.

Then, peering through the curtained entrance door, he heard a light step behind him. It was the good-natured brunette, and she had something in her right hand. Fargrave couldn't make out exactly what it was, but it was heavy and it was hard. Hard enough and heavy enough so that when it had swung down once on his crown, the second tap she gave him was entirely superfluous. He'd been out cold when he hit the floor.

III

THERE was a lounge in the living room and Fargrave was on the lounge when he opened his eyes. He didn't open them far or keep them open long. When a brief foggy glance had told him the two men now in the room were indubitably Nate Cloke and Boyd Norman, he clamped down the lids again. Clamped them tight.

Rae Kling—somebody had just called her "Rae"—was talking.

"So there it is, you pasty-faced jailbirds, and do you say, 'Thank you, pretty lady', or what? A grand little truck for you, a wagon that no copper would ever think of finding a couple of big escaping ball-and-chain men in. The way to Little Rock is wide open for you."

"Yeah? And what about this buzzard here?"

"You've got to do me a little favor when it comes to him, Boyd."

"Such as?"

"Don't croak him in the house. Take him with you and dump him somewhere outside of town. Then I'll have time to sell the furniture, and when the paint job's finished, I'll follow. Honey, you won't know the car!"

The heavier voice rasped, but Fargrave missed out on what it said. The light on his eyelids was dimming, and when he next knew what was going on he was up off the lounge, in transit, with one pair of arms under his shoulders and another under his knees.

They had brought his truck around to the rear of the bungalow on a private driveway. He saw it through slitted eyes as he was carried through the kitchen, out onto a small porch and down steps.

In this part of Lakeside houses were far separated, the vacant lots heavily wooded. The yard behind the bungalow was securely screened from any neighbor's view, but they nevertheless wasted no time getting him into the truck. They swung him back and forth, let him go on momentum, feet first. Cloke, who had worn the goggles, had shed them now. He climbed in after Fargrave and drew the doors to.

Norman stood talking for a space to Rae Kling. "You're tops, little cuckoo—tops all the time," he said. "I'll make you a present of a jayhawk bank for this, the whole damn works, just as soon as I cool off enough to start operating. So long, Kiddie. Be seein' you in Little Rock."

He kissed her then — audibly — and climbed into the front seat. Fargrave couldn't see him, because that end of the truck body was sealed up solid, but he had felt the car lean under Norman's weight on the running-board and heard him plop down behind the wheel.

The starter whirred, and the engine popped and settled to a thrum.

"Everything O.K. back there?" Norman's voice came through the forward bulkhead.

With the doors closed behind him and no glass in the partition walling off the driver's seat, there was only a faint light inside the truck's panel body now—light that came through a crack below the doors. Fargrave, too weak to lift a hand, knew that Cloke's face was close to his for a moment.

"All quiet and orderly," Cloke said. "The boy friend's still in dreamland. *He* won't be any trouble. If he wakes up I'll just pow him again with the flat of my rod. Let's go. Home, Jeems—and make the next stop Arkansas!"

They moved. And Garry Loman hadn't hit Lakeside yet. The best proof of that

was that nobody stopped the truck when it turned into the street. Fargrave's feet were at the front of the body, which was just long enough to permit him to stretch out. Cloke settled himself by the feet, and held conversation with Boyd Norman, putting steam on his voice to carry it through the wall.

He said, "There's a lot of boxes in here. Silk stuff. Stuff for dames. Will we get rid of it same time we get rid of the guy? Or hold it and see if it's anything that Rae wants?"

Something clicked then, a flash idea of leaving a marker for Loman, and Fargrave stopped listening. His right hand was lying not on wood but on silk—on a stocking that had slipped out of its box. With Cloke's back turned to him, he got hold of it and edged it up to that crack beneath the doors. He shoved it through and groped for another. And another. And another—

Norman, leaving the bungalow drive, had turned right. That meant he was heading for open country. After a few minutes of fast driving, he pulled up and Fargrave knew he must have struck a light. But that was the last light. When it had turned, the truck increased speed and evened out at what Fargrave thought must be at least a fifty-mile clip.

His strength was returning. His head ached terrifically, but the damage done by Rae Kling's love taps wasn't anything permanent. He had that to console him when he ran out of stockings—and by then he had dropped nearly two dozen on the flying truck's trail, Cloke never tumbling to what he was doing.

The Powerton crashers were still talking back and forth. Boyd Norman said, "I'm kind of glad now we had that blow-out. Between Drummond and Little Rock, I'd take Little Rock every time. All around, it's a better town. Only reason Rae picked Drummond for the hide-out was on account of a skirt in Little Rock that made a play for me one time. A skirt I sort of cotton to, at that."

FARGRAVE suddenly saw light. Norman and Cloke had wrecked their original getaway car, had they? So that was why Rae Kling had strung him along! Nice people! Even now they didn't know—obviously didn't know—that he was a G-man, a sworn enemy of all their breed. He was a casual, harmless stranger, in their eyes; but still they planned without a flutter of compunction to kill him so that there could be no heat on the truck, no search for it before it had served them.

A cold rage gripped Fargrave. He thought, "If I had a gun in my hand now I'd be a sucker to try to make a collar. Ought to let 'em have it, shoot 'em down as cold-bloodedly as they figure on shooting me!"

At that moment his last hope of rescue had flickered out. Then his fingers, seeking one more stocking to put through the crack, touched metal and new hope flamed. What he had touched was a steel jack handle; and might not that win him a gun—the gun, precisely, that Cloke had proposed to pow him with?

He gripped the steel bar, and felt revived strength surging into his forearm, his wrist, his right hand.

The roof was low; the swing would have to be lateral. He saw that, and then Cloke knew he was sitting up, and turned with a shout.

"Drop it!"

Cloke's hand, going back for his pocket, never reached it. The jack handle came too fast for him, struck him behind the ear, slumped him across Fargrave's legs.

The truck slowed with screeching brakes and came to a full stop. Boyd Norman roared. "What's wrong, Nate?" Then he was down in the road, rushing back, flinging open the doors.

There was a gun in his hand—an army gun.

Standing there, open-mouthed, the pistol muzzle down, he was a fair target. Fargrave, now holding a duplicate of the gun himself, could have bowled him down while he stared. But his finger stayed light on the trigger. He had said, "I'm the Law—give up!" and had seen fire spurt from the other gun before he squeezed.

He was glad a moment later, that it had been that way. A car had come streaking after them from the direction of Drummond with Garry Loman and Bill Foster in it. And knowing he had got his man clean

he could look them in the eye when he told them:

"It's Boyd Norman. He missed. I didn't."

IV

NATE CLOKE, sitting up in the truck but still not quite himself, was holding his hands to his right ear. Both hands, for his wrists were braceleted together and where one hand went the other could not but follow.

Boyd Norman wore no handcuffs, never would wear them again. He still lay where he had fallen, arms outflung, bored almost dead centre through the forehead by the Law's one shot.

Five minutes had passed since the F. B. I. car had arrived. Other cars had stopped. People crowded around the truck, gaping. Loman asked, "What's the nearest town?" And when somebody said, "Brockville," he met Don Fargrave's eyes and blinked.

Fargrave flipped over his wrist and looked at his watch. He said in a strained, small voice, "There wasn't any call for me downtown, was there? Then for the luvva Pete, get me to Brockville. That's all I ask. Fly me there!"

Loman blinked again, and nodded. "We need local police. Get in."

Foster stayed behind. Garry Loman, at the wheel of the geared-up Government car, opened the throttle wide. One corner of his mouth smiled while out of the corner toward Fargrave he said seriously:

"Good thought of yours, blazing the trail. But extravagant as hell. We owe for a lot of stockings." And then. "You certainly are a weird guy, Fargrave. You've had one foot over the Grand Canyon and you've done things that'll knock 'em clean off their swivel chairs in Washington, and all you can think of is that you're late on a date. Who is she, anyway? Queen of Sheba?"

Fargrave, with a pessimistic eye on a speedometer showing "78," dolefully shook his head.

"She's a student nurse down in Oklahoma City. Nobody in particular to you, but the whole damned world to me. And she's just the baby to say the hell with a bird that stands her up, and go back to Oklahoma and fall in the arms of an interne chappie that looks like a movie hero and just inherited two hundred grand, cash money. The same week I was transferred to Drummond. Oh, she's rolled her hoop out of Brockville a long while ago—I know it! And the way she'll be feeling when she hits the hospital again after driving five hundred miles for nothing—"

Garry Loman whistled. "*A big* date, I'll say!"

Fargrave chucked away a half smoked cigarette; chucked it viciously.

"That," he said, bitterly ironic, "is putting it pretty strong, Loman. The fact of the matter is, we were only going to get married."

They were coming in to Brockville then. Directly ahead of them a plane was settling on a field faced by a line of hangars, and that was the Brockville airport. Beyond the hangars were half a dozen outlying houses of the village.

"Slow, now," said Fargrave. "It's that house with the gables where I was going to meet her. You'll see a sign on the gate—'John Brunner, Justice of the Peace'."

Loman hadn't spoken. There might be a right thing to say he thought; but he couldn't, somehow, find the words. The best he could do, at the gate with the Justice of the Peace sign, was less than inspired. He said, in a voice as flat as Fargrave's, and no happier, "Here we are. This is it. G-good luck!"

FARGRAVE jumped out of the car. He stood for a moment fingering first one and then the other of those two large bumps under his matted hair. Then he went to the gate, opened it, started in—and stopped as suddenly as if he had come up against an invisible brick wall.

He stood staring down the street. A little black car was coming toward the airport—coming bumpety-bump on a flat tire.

It labored to Justice Brunner's gate, and a girl got out and went straight for Fargrave, running. She was a blonde with just a trace of red in her hair—not a great deal of it, that Larry Loman could see. Her face and hands were grimy, and there were streaks on her cheeks that would mean, to an eye as acute as Loman's that she had

(*Continued on page* 128)

Snake Creek Was Five Miles from Lumber Camp 16 —Five Fateful Miles As It Turned Out

BUCK HOOKER GOES TO SCHOOL

By ROY W. HINDS

THE Larkey grub-driver, Buck Hooker, fell into a contemplative mood, induced perhaps by the listless creaking of his conveyance and the dull, monotonous thumping of wagon bolts. A lazy squint came to his eyes, which were trained upon the strip of corduroy road exactly halfway between the left ear of his nigh horse and the right ear of his off horse. Mr. Hooker's loosely jointed body nodded and rocked gently in such perfect rhythm with

the wagon that he might have been a part of its frame.

It is quite likely that the soft, declining sunlight of a spring evening and the gentle fussing of birds seeking roost in the pine woods to the right and the left also had something to do with the preoccupation of Buck Hooker. It should be added that the spring payday was very close at hand in the Larkey logging camps, to be followed quickly by frolics in the towns along the Tittabaw River.

The winter's wages were to be handed out the very next day at Camp Number Sixteen, to which Mr. Hooker was attached, and in a large leather sack, somewhat in the form of a mail pouch, the money for the payday at Sixteen, as well as other Larkey camps, reposed in the wagon box behind.

Very close to Buck Hooker's hand lay a loaded Winchester. Upon a second seat in the wagon, facing to the rear, sat another man with a Winchester across his legs and a capable revolver slung in a holster at his side. The money sack lay between the two men, and contained something like seventeen thousand dollars in gold and bills, as well as a small amount of silver.

The preoccupation of Buck Hooker was perhaps responsible for the safety with which a lurking figure in the woods to the right moved into the shelter of tree after tree, slightly to the rear of the wagon, and managed to keep his distance from lengthening.

This man apparently had no fear of the man on the rear seat of the wagon. In fact, they occasionally exchanged covert signals.

Buck Hooker calculated that he would reach Camp Sixteen about an hour after dark. The road lay through a wild stretch of rolling forest land. It was a short-cut between the lumber town of Midland, at the confluence of the Tittabaw and Chippewa rivers, and Camp Sixteen, on the Tittabaw, which described a wide arc. The ring of the woodsman's axe had not been heard as yet along the road, for the timber lands there were not so handy to the river, which, in the spring, was a highway of drifting logs.

The road lifted and dipped in an enchanting, winding course, and, in the languishing sunlight, its various lengths unfolded like the leaves of a book. Long shadows fell toward the east, and presently dissolved into the evening. A smart breeze which had blown from the south throughout the day vanished with the sun, and night fell like a blanket upon the forest. After a short period of heavy darkness, stars crept out overhead, and revealed to the upturned gaze of Buck Hooker the astonishing depths of the universe.

"How far?" asked Isaac Storkey, the man at the rear of the wagon.

"Millions an' millions o' miles," Mr. Hooker replied dreamily.

Ike Storkey turned his face toward the front of the wagon. He withheld a puzzled exclamation, and regarded with satisfaction the dim form of the grub-driver. He could see that Buck Hooker's face was turned upward.

"Guess I'd better leave him be," Storkey chuckled inwardly. "I allus knowed he dreamed a good bit even in daylight—an' he couldn't pick a better time than right now!"

But Mr. Hooker's contemplation of the infinite had not removed him altogether from earthly affairs. It was but a momentary flight, and he descended to solid ground before Mr. Storkey had time for more than mere transitory rejoicing.

"What's that you said, Ike?" the grub-driver demanded.

"I ast how far?"

"Oh!" Buck peered into the woods at each side. "Six miles from here to Sixteen. I heard what you said first time, Ike—but my mind wasn't on it. I d'clar, them stars get more int'restin' to me ev'ry time I look up. I'd get a book about 'em, if I could read it."

Ike Storkey grunted, and gazed intently into the woods. The lurking figure was lost to view now, but Storkey had an idea that everything was all right. If they were six miles from Sixteen, they were only a mile from Snake Creek.

The road crossed Snake Creek at the bottom of a hollow, and its course from there lay up a steep hill. The creek wandered on into a tangled area of rock and brush; pathless, swampy in spots, and inexpressibly dismal even on the sunniest day.

"I calc'late I better be thinkin' about the

road," Mr. Hooker resumed. "We're gettin' clost t' Snake Creek."

"I don't rec'lect that the road's bad at Snake Creek. I never went over it but the onct—comin' down to Midland with you, but it seemed—"

"It ain't the road, but that gully down there's a mighty lonesome place."

After a moment's silence Ike Storkey asked, " 'Fraid o' somethin'?"

"No—not exac'ly; but I g'n'ly keep my eye peeled at Snake Creek."

"Maybe a holdup, eh?"

"Uh huh."

"Well, you look sharp up there; I'll 'tend to things back here— But you ain't never been held up."

"No; an' I ain't never died yet, but I expect I will some day. It's been seven years now since the Larkeys begun payin' off at the camps, 'stead of at Midland after the drives come down. This is the seventh spring for me to pack the paysack through these woods. I alluz take this road—it's shorter'n the river road; though it's sort o' wild. I ain't never had a bit o' trouble, but you can't never tell."

"Why do they pay off in the woods—'stead of in town, like the other strings?"

"John Larkey claims the men save money by it. Time that he paid off in town, the whole pack of us fellers run straighter'n a pikepole for the s'loons. We just throwed our wages on the bar, an' told the bartender to likker 'em out. Bein' paid off in the woods is diff'rent. We ain't got no place to spend our money right off. We put it in our pockets, an' take it out ev'ry onct in awhile for to count—an' we sort o' get uset to it thataway. It gives us a chanct to think, an' maybe figger on buyin' things that ain't suitable for drinkin'. Time was when I never got more'n a pair o' shoes out o' my winter's wages. Why, last spring I bought nineteen dollars worth o' clo'es an' got my hair cut 'fore I got drunk. It's been like that ev'ry spring that I been gettin' my money in the woods. A man that stops an' thinks 'fore he gets drunk ain't likely to be such a wild drinker while he's at it. He holds his head better, an' maybe quits 'fore he's broke. Last spring I had seven dollars when I got sober."

"Saved seven dollars, eh?"

"Yup! But I lost it next day playin' poker in Charley Oscar's s'loon—Here's the hill down to Snake Creek. Easy, hosses!"

Buck Hooker got the first warning when his horses were about to set hoofs on the bridge across Snake Creek, at the bottom of the hollow.

"Draw up that team!" cried a shrill voice from the road behind.

"I got my guns on both of you! Draw up quick!"

Buck Hooker was a peaceful man; he never really had anticipated a holdup. Such things were practically unknown in the woods. Also, perhaps, he was a bit beyond the prime of life. Whatever the cause, there was a moment of hesitation. At the outset he could have tumbled from the seat and made a fight for it, but in the flicker of an eyelash Storkey cast the die.

"My God," whispered Storkey hoarsely, "we're held up and he's got us covered. If we move we're dead men!" Automatically Buck stuck up his hands. When he realized it, it was indeed too late.

"Driver, don't turn your head, or I'll bore it," the man in the road commanded. He talked now in a piercing tone, almost a shriek. "Here you—in back there—let that Winchester roll off your knees, and don't lay a hand on it! That's right! Unloosen your belt now; don't lay a finger on that revolver! Drop belt and all into the road! That's it. Driver, pick up your Winchester by the barrel, and drop it into the road. My guns are on both of you. Out with that Winchester—that's it. And don't turn your head! Now you, in back there—that money sack, toss it out!"

Ike Storkey complied. The thud of the money sack upon the road was like a heavy weight hurled upon the heart of Buck Hooker.

"Now, driver, whip up that team!" the bandit cried. "I'll give you two minutes to get up that hill, and you'll have to drive like hell! I can see clear up the hill, and I'll pot both of you if that team lags a step! You'd better have race horses there, driver! Whip up!"

Buck Hooker's team perhaps to this day holds the record for the Snake Creek hill.

A short distance over the crown of the hill Buck Hooker stopped the team and faced Ike Storkey.

"What's the matter o' you, Ike?" the grub-driver demanded.

"I never seen him, Buck, till he spoke! He must 'a' stepped out into the road a second after the tail o' the wagon went by. I wasn't watchin' that partic'lar spot just at that minute, an' he had me covered 'fore I could lift a finger. Guess I'm to blame for it, Buck."

"No," said Buck slowly, "we're both t' blame for it. That's the way we'll take it. Did you get a good look at him?"

"Uh huh—kinda."

"You'll know him, eh—when you see him ag'in?"

"Uh huh. Lestways, I'll know his voice."

"His voice! Huh! That wasn't his reg'lar speakin' voice. That screech was all put on, so't we wouldn't know him if we ever heerd him speak again." The grub-driver mused. "I'm wond'rin' what we ought to do now."

"We ain't got a weapon o' no kind."

"That's what I'm thinkin'."

"An' we'd be foolish to tackle that feller—an' maybe a gang hid by the road."

"That's what I'm thinkin'."

"Might's well drive into Sixteen; we can't catch that feller."

"I'll catch him," said Buck Hooker quietly, "but I don't know just how or when. I ain't goin' to let him get off 's easy as all that. Guess the nearest help's at Sixteen. G'long, hosses!"

AND no one ever knew the profound depths of gloom which Buck Hooker sounded on that drive; for he was justly celebrated in that region for his fidelity to duty, and was very proud of his previous record.

Andrew Brogan, string foreman of the Larkey logging camps, whom Buck Hooker found at Sixteen, listened quietly to the grub-driver's story of the holdup and to Ike Storkey's supplementary remarks. The string foreman asked a few concise questions, and turned to Cordy West, camp boss at Sixteen.

"Send a man into Coleman," said Andy Brogan. "That's the nearest point to reach an officer. Better send him on a horse, and have him tell the officers there, and they'll telegraph the sheriff at Midland. You and Buck scrape up all the guns there are in camp and load 'em in the grub-wagon. We'll take a half a dozen men, and go down into the Snake Creek swamps."

A thorough search of the Snake Creek swamps and tangled passes, throughout the night and the following day, availed nothing except to convince the searchers that Snake Creek was the most dismal and treacherous region in the county. They struggled through the brush and bogs from the scene of the holdup to the river in one direction and to a strip of stumpy farmlands in the other. They hunted among the rocks and among fallen, rotting trees, which had been washed out in the various rampages of Snake Creek. Thy found no trace of the stolen pay money nor of the man who made away with it.

The search, except for the lookout maintained by Sheriff Joe Blackmore and his deputies throughout the county, was abandoned. The important business of starting the winter cut of logs down the Tittabaw River toward Midland occupied the Larkey logging camps.

Apparently the great John Larkey looked upon the payroll robbery as a closed incident to be charged up to profit and loss, for both he and his foreman reassured old Buck that he couldn't be blamed and that the thing to do now was to turn in and make enough out of the winter cut to cover the loss. Actually, however, the grub-driver and his guard were under close observation by the lumber chiefs to see whether they might betray any guilty knowledge of the affair.

Though ignorant of this fact, Buck Hooker was a crushed man. He seemed to have aged ten years under the knowledge that he had failed at the crucial moment of his life. Besides, he fancied that his companions of the woods, now enjoying life so boisterously in the town, were shunning him. When he did enter a group it seemed to him that conversation died and that he could sense contempt in the glances of his erstwhile friends. Ike Storkey did not take it so hard. Even if he had no other reason, Ike Storkey hadn't the feelings toward the Larkeys nor the jealousy of his own trustworthiness that characterized Buck Hooker.

Ike Storkey, who formerly had been a workman in the Saginaw mills and at one time a deputy sheriff in Saginaw county,

had been in the Larkey camps only one winter. He was not much of a drinking man, and his reputation as a crack shot and the standing which former deputyship brought him led to his having been chosen early in the winter as a guard on the grub-wagon, whenever the wagon carried valuable property or money.

But Buck paid no attention to the attitude of the men toward Storkey, being too deep in his own gloomy meditations for aught else than self-contempt and plans to find the robber.

THE immense drives of logs reached Midland, and the Larkey woodsmen got their winter's wages there. They met woodsmen from other strings. The annual season of roistering started at once, and the days and nights were filled with wild cries and flying fists. Gamblers from Detroit and Saginaw worked skillfully with the cards and dice.

The woodsmen, except for the few who would go back to the camps for "brushing" and for work on the camp buildings, would work in the mills during the summer. They got rid of their money rapidly; and the mill owners in a way were glad for that, for they needed men, and none could be drawn to a job until necessity drove them to it.

Buck Hooker didn't get very drunk that spring. Released for the time from his work as a grub-driver, he sought solace in the companionship of Sylvester Moon. Mr. Hooker and Mr. Moon had been friends about five years.

Sylvester Moon came to Midland with a show troupe, and remained there for the reason that he was getting old and walking did not agree with his constitution. The younger members of that dubious organization, which was known as the Sunrise Minstrels, departed in the general direction of Saginaw, where, it is safe to say, they got in touch with box cars.

The Sunrise Minstrels perhaps would have shone luminously in Midland had not the management sought to rebuild its dwindling fortunes all at once by a process commonly known as short-changing. They came to town in the spring, when the woodsmen were there, and money flowed freely. Tickets had been on sale only a few minutes when the report gained circulation that certain patrons had been fleeced in the matter of change; the woodsmen joined forces, and the Sunrise Minstrels did not rise in Midland.

After the theatrical organization had been led out to the Saginaw road and assisted on its way with a series of swift kicks, it was found that one of its number lingered, for the reason perhaps that his slumbers under a table in the Blue Goose saloon rendered him oblivious to the proceedings and invisible to the vigilantes.

The table became desirable to a half dozen rough shod poker players. The first man to sit down wore calk-soled boots, and he sat down with a determination to win, planting his feet firmly. The calks aroused a violent protest under the table, and Sylvester Moon was dragged into view.

It was remembered that he belonged to the Sunrise Minstrels, but just as quickly it was remembered that he was an old man, and that he drank his whiskey straight and fearlessly. Furthermore, he apparently had nothing to do with the short-changing operations. He was at once escorted to the bar, and the subsequent attentions of the woodsmen account for Mr. Moon not recalling the events of the night. He awakened in the morning in a room in the Findlater Hotel, and was mildly surprised to find himself in bed with a lumberjack and a bulldog.

Sylvester Moon, upon reappearing among his friends of the night, was treated as a man of distinction. He could hardly account for that, and concluded that his tall hat, frock coat, flowing necktie and patent-leather shoes induced respect among the red-shirted and heavily-booted brethren of the woods. Perhaps his gray hair and solemn visage had something to do with it.

Theodore Mountain, proprietor of the Blue Goose, addressed him:

"Mr. Moon, you appear to be a man of parts. I never see a man play the fiddle and speak pieces right out of his head like you did last night. And the mouth organ, too. You appear to be musical to a high degree. Now I wonder if you can play a regular organ—one of them with black and white keys, and stoppers that work in

and out, and bouquets of flowers carved all over it?"

"Yes, sir," Mr. Moon replied promptly.

"And could you learn children to play it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then why don't you stay right here in Midland, Mr. Moon. I got a boy and girl—boy's fourteen and the girl's twelve—and we got an organ; but they ain't never got anything out of it but 'I Took My Gal to the Circus Grounds.' You can learn 'em to play by sight. This town needs a music teacher bad. I hear the women folks talking, and you'll find plenty to do. I got a fiddle here that you can have, and maybe some of the youngsters will take lessons on that, too. This is getting to be a big town for kids, and kids have to be learnt something. That boy of mine is fourteen, and he ain't even learnt to tend bar yet—'count of his mother. But she'll want him to learn music—and the girl, too—after school."

These incidents account for the residence in Midland of Sylvester Moon. It was the life which apparently he had long sought, for he dropped at once into a mood of serene contentment; beloved by the children, consulted by the women in matters of etiquette and education, and respected by the men as a philosopher who had roamed strange lands, who was ever ready but never forward with kindly advice, and who, for the most part, drank his whiskey like a gentleman.

Among his close personal friends was Buck Hooker, and the grub-driver spent considerable time in the little house in the "Paddy Hollow" district of the town, where Mr. Moon kept bach, and where he came to be known as the "Philosopher of Paddy Hollow."

TO THE home of Sylvester Moon, Buck Hooker carried his troubles arising out of the Snake Creek holdup, after he had given to "Shorty" Price, compositor and editor of the *Sun*, a full account of the holdup, which Mr. Price reduced to type in his own bright and inimitable style.

"I ain't goin' t' get drunk this spring. Seems like the boys don't hanker after my society since the holdup," said Buck Hooker to Mr. Moon. "Anyhow, I brought along

a few drinks for you—I calc'late there's about a gallon in that jug; but I ain't goin' to touch it just yet."

Sylvester Moon surveyed the jug. Buck Hooker was not the only man who indulged in the pastime of bearing liquor to the philosopher, and thereby inducing choice diversion in the way of recitation and song, sprinkled with precious nuggets of wisdom. It was a sport described by Shorty Price as "getting the Moon full."

Mr. Moon sampled the jug, and found it good.

"You are not going to drink much this spring, you say?" he inquired.

"Not very much."

"That's fine. Now I suppose you can find time to learn to read and write?"

"Maybe— S'here, Sylvester, why is't you're so anxious to have me read an' write?"

"Because," said Mr. Moon solemnly, "it behooves a gentleman of your attainments to be able at least to read his own mail."

"I never get no mail."

"Suppose you should get a letter?"

"Then I'd go to college, an' learn to read it."

Mr. Moon tapped his fingers musingly on the top of his imposing hat, which lay on the table. The vacuum of this immense headpiece was such that Mr. Moon's finger tips brought forth a sound not unlike the rolling of a snare drum.

"Perhaps you're right," he agreed; and turned once more to the jug.

Mr. Hooker suggested, "You mentioned my attainments. I didn't calc'late that I had any special attainments."

"Oh, yes, you have," declared Mr. Moon. "You have what so many people lack—imagination. You look into the sky, and the stars set your mind to running. You see things in the woods besides trees and brush. Yes, you have imagination."

A puzzled frown gathered on the grub-driver's brow. "I alluz thought imagination was somethin' diff'rent than that. I figgered that tellin' a man he had a good imagination was just a genteel way o' callin' him a liar."

"Oh, no, my boy! Imagination is the truest thing in the world. It is the ability to see things as they are—to see the inside of a tree by looking at the bark; to tell outside of their houses. Imagination is nothing but unusual perception, the faculty of seeing the truth no matter how densely it is buried. I look through this open door here, and what do I see? Ah! Look there! A pig coming out of Mrs. Flavey's kitchen. Do I have to go into Mrs. Flavey's kitchen to determine what sort of woman she is?"

The old gentleman again bethought himself of the jug. Buck Hooker's eyes twinkled mischievously.

"Well," he suggested, "tell me somethin' about th' pig. You seen his outsides."

Sylvester Moon studied the pig gravely, and resumed:

"What do most people think about a pig? They think a pig is the most selfish creature in the world. When they wish to describe a man as selfish, they call him a pig. That is what a pig looks like on the surface—a selfish creature. But I use my imagination, and see something just the opposite in that pig, grunting so contentedly at Mrs. Flavey's kitchen door. That pig is just an ordinary house pig, in reality the most unselfish of creatures. Why does Mrs. Flavey keep that pig? To kill, of course. And when will she kill it? In the fall, when he's nice and fat. And what does that pig do? Why, he tries every minute of the day to get fatter; he eats all he can get hold of, thereby hastening the time when he shall be fit for killing, and thus provide an abundance of pork for the poor widow and her children.

Can you think of anything any more unselfish than that?"

Buck Hooker grinned. "There's that jug still settin' there, lonesome like." Mr. Moon took advantage of the suggestion, while Mr. Hooker announced seriously, "Guess I will learn t' read an' write. It'll be a good way to put in the spring. But listen, Sylvester—I want to tell you about that holdup."

NEXT afternoon, Sylvester Moon busied himself about the town with his music pupils, and time hung heavily on the hands of Buck Hooker. The grub-driver, not wishing to drink, wandered disconsolately through the streets, hoping for the development of some miraculous circumstance which would enable him to run to earth the perpetrator of the Snake Creek holdup.

In a very short time he grew lonesome, and drifted into the Oscar House barroom.

There he met Ike Storkey, his fellow victim in the holdup. Mr. Storkey was not so depressed in spirit as the grub-driver, for he had been sampling the liquor stock of the Oscar House. Buck resisted his importunities to drink.

There was quite a crowd in the barroom. Buck Hooker sauntered about, exchanging a word here and there, but managed to keep at a sober distance from the bar. A diversion occurred in the form of a short, sharp fight, but that was soon over.

Presently there entered the barroom a man who had been known to Midland for about three months as Harry Greep. Mr. Greep had no visible means of support except an engaging personality and a knack at the cards and the dice. He managed to impart to his person a sort of dandified appearance without lessening his engaging personality. He was the sort of man who could dress smartly without danger of being called a dude—which was something of a trick in those days in Midland, where, except on bridegrooms and pallbearers, a boiled shirt drew unmitigated scorn and a pair of starched cuffs aroused open indignation.

Harry Greep was not reviled for his niceties of dress. They became him too well, and at once it was seen that he was a fine fellow. He lived at the Oscar House, and plied his trade of gambling in the various barrooms.

Buck Hooker had a casual acquaintance with Harry Greep. He knew that Mr. Greep was widely known among the woodsmen, so he didn't think it at all strange that Ike Storkey and Greep should have a drink together, which they did very soon after the latter came in. They also had conversation of a serious nature, but this passed unheeded by Buck Hooker.

In time someone suggested poker. Harry Greep was willing to play, and Ike Storkey decided to take a hand. Buck Hooker also got in, for lack of anything else to do. Altogether there were six players at the table.

It soon occurred to Buck Hooker that Harry Greep exercised a sort of quiet guardianship over Ike Storkey. Mr. Storkey

insisted on a drink every few minutes. Mr. Greep protested mildly, apparently as one good fellow would try to protect another; but underneath his careless demeanor, Buck Hooker thought he detected serious concern in Harry Greep. However, he paid but little heed to this.

The play finally came to a point where Harry Greep and Buck Hooker tied up on a pot, all the others having dropped out of that hand in the betting. The grub-driver possessed four queens, and he liked them very much indeed—so much, in fact, that he saw and raised every bet of his antagonist. Finally Harry Greep shoved in his stack.

"These cards of mine seem to be worth that amount," said he.

Mr. Hooker meditated, and studied his four queens gravely, peering at their edges. They looked very pretty, but of course four queens is not the best hand in a poker deck.

"Well," said the grub-driver presently, "these cards o' mine sure have took my fancy. It's awful hard t' part with 'm." He picked up his somewhat meagre supply of checks, and held the stack between his thumb and middle finger. "I calc'late these cards 're worth this much."

Still he hesitated.

"If that's the case," Harry Greep suggested, "drop your stack into the pot."

His tone had taken on a faint sharpness. Slow, deliberate players sometimes made him nervous.

Buck Hooker looked up quickly. He couldn't account for the thrill Mr. Greep's words gave him. Somehow he thought of the night at Snake Creek when an unseen man had told him to drop his Winchester "into the road."

He gazed intently into the soft blue eyes of Harry Greep, and was seized with strange ideas.

The grub-driver's chips mingled with the pot. Harry Greep displayed four kings. Buck Hooker threw his hand into the discards, and dropped out of the game.

THAT evening Buck Hooker took his first lesson in reading and writing at the home of Sylvester Moon. Mr. Moon wrote in a round hand a series of maxims designed to include every letter in the alpha-

bet—"Honesty is the best policy," "Be supple, be quick, be spry," "Do your tasks with zest and extreme caution," "When thieves fall out, honest men get their dues," "Beware of the cup that cheers and the jug that bringeth joy," and so forth. Upon these Mr. Hooker set to work, his tongue keeping pace with his pencil.

But he was strangely preoccupied, and Sylvester Moon was not much impressed by his pupil's aptness. He forbore to mention this, however; and sought solace in the jug that broughteth joy.

The next morning, awakening in his room at the Oscar House, Buck Hooker found that certain vague suspicions had taken firm hold of his consciousness and arranged themselves into definite form; and he proceeded to his self-appointed tasks of the day with "zest and extreme caution."

Late that afternoon he again visited the home of Sylvester Moon.

"Sylvester," the grub-driver inquired, "can you give an imitation of a drunken man?"

Mr. Moon, who was preparing his supper, studied his visitor curiously.

"After supper," said he, "if that jug holds out, I'll show you the finest imitation of a drunken man that you have ever seen."

"I'm talkin' serious," Buck Hooker remonstrated. "I've learnt a sight o' cur'ous things today, an' my head's poppin' with funny ideas. I don't hardly know how to straighten 'em out so's to tell you about 'em. But I know you uset to be on the stage, and I've seen you give some correct imitations in your house here. Thinks I, Sylvester Moon is an actor, an' he can change his voice to almost any style and pitch he likes. Maybe he can help me."

Mr. Moon perceived that his friend was singularly agitated. At once he invited the fullest confidence.

"I don't like to mention a man's name in a thing like this," Buck Hooker pursued, " 'less'n I know what I'm talkin' about—and I don't know if I know what I'm talkin' about or not. That remains to be seen, as the feller says. But yesterday I got an idea that I heard that holdup man's voice again. Just two or three words sounded like it, or maybe 'twas the way the words was put together.

"I don't know. Least'ways I got suspicions, and I couldn't help thinkin' of 'em; and the more I thought of 'em, the more suspicious my suspicions looked. I'm goin' to mention some names to you, and I know you'll never breathe 'em if it turns out that I'm wrong. Sylvester, I think that Harry Greep is the man that held me up—an' I think that him and Ike Storkey was workin' in cahoots."

Sylvester Moon at once demanded particulars.

"This mornin'," the grub-driver resumed, "I set to work, thinkin' maybe I'd find out somethin'. It didn't take me long to find out that Harry Greep and Ike Storkey both live at the Oscar House, an' that their rooms is right next to each other. That don't prove nothin', I know; but durin' th' day I see that they was uncommonly thick. If anybody's a mind to watch 'em, he can see that their heads are together a good bit at odd times durin' the day. Least'ways it appeared thataway to me. Maybe I didn't see things right, bein' suspicious; but my head's set on what I'm tellin' you.

"They're both drinkin' consid'ble today, sometimes together and sometimes with other folks. They'll be loaded for bear 'fore long. Course, Greep won't get so drunk that he can't play cards—but he'll get drunk. Ike Storkey, if I don't miss my guess, will be asleep in the next two hours. It'll be my bus'ness to see that he goes to bed in his own bed. I can fix that, bein' a friend o' his. Greep, he'll play cards most o' the night, an' stay just nicely loaded. I hope so anyways. Now if I can get you to help me—"

"I'll help you," Sylvester Moon interjected quickly.

THAT night the sodden slumbers of Ike Storkey were interrupted by a commotion in the next room. It was the room of his friend, Harry Greep. Mr. Storkey, whose head was very foggy, wasn't sure that he heard a noise, and didn't care much whether he had or not. He turned over, and sought again to slumber.

He was kept from this by a repetition of the commotion in his friend's room. It sounded as though a man, perhaps two men, were stumbling in the room.

"Harry must have a load on," Ike Storkey reflected; "an' him that's alluz tearin' me inside out for tunin' up a little bit. I hope he's drunk; I hope he's drunker'n a polecat!"

A voice in the next room muttered thickly, "Where's that light?" A volley of curses was uttered upon the elusive lamp, and presently Ike Storkey heard the scratching of a match.

Storkey decided that there were two men in Greep's room. "Someone's had to fetch him to bed." He could hear the men talking, for there was a door, closed now, between the rooms.

"Don't talk so loud," a strange voice warned.

"Nev' mine him—he's drunk!" the thick voice of Harry Greep rejoined. "He's drunk, drunk, drunk—the blockhead!"

"But he may wake up!"

"Not that fellow—not's drunk's he gets. That's why I'm cutting away from him; he gets drunk too much. I'm afraid he'll blab."

Ike Storkey was all ears now. Softly he crept out of bed. He saw a thread of light sifting under the door. He applied his eye to the keyhole, but it had been plugged up. Ike hadn't noticed the keyhole before, and didn't know how long it had been plugged.

"So he's cuttin' away from me, eh?" he asked inwardly. He was sobering fast now. "That's all right with me, providin'—"

"Tomorrow night we'll dig out, while he's drunk," went on the voice of Greep. "We'll dig fast, eh, old boy? That bum isn't entitled to anything, and he won't get anything. Tomorrow night, we'll dig out."

"Sh-h-h-h!"

"Sh-h-h-h—nothing! Tomorrow night, I said. Le's go down and have another drink."

All the protests of the strange man in the next room availed nothing. The other man insisted on a drink, and soon the two left the room.

Ike Storkey paced up and down the room, occasionally nipping at a bottle. Soon he left the room and, unobserved he thought, made his way out of the hotel.

The task of following Ike Storkey was extremely difficult. Buck Hooker and Joe Blackmore, the sheriff, found that out—but they accomplished it. He set out on foot

along the corduroy road leading to Snake Creek. They crept after him, clinging to the shadows as much as possible, while Ike Storkey, with but one thought in mind, kept in the middle of the road and kept on feverishly.

With pursued and pursuers worn out, Snake Creek came into view in the middle of the next afternon. Ike Storkey, hastening his faltering footsteps, plunged at once off the road. He disappeared under the bridge that crossed the creek—about as safe a hiding-place as the thieves could have picked.

Buck Hooker was happy. Until that moment he had an idea that they had yet to journey through the swamps and rocky defiles of Snake Creek's bottom. He and Joe Blackmore were in hiding off the road.

"I reckon he's come to it," the grub-driver whispered.

"That's a safe place," said the sheriff. "None of us ever thought of looking at the spot where the holdup was pulled off."

Ike Storkey soon crept from underneath the bridge and up to the road. He gazed in all directions, puzzled.

"He's wondering what he ought to do now," said Joe Blackmore. "He's got it under that bridge all right. Let's close in on him."

It turned out that way. The stolen pay-sack, containing all the Larkey money, was found under the bridge. Sheriff Blackmore and Buck Hooker got a full confession out of Ike Storkey, who thought himself being double-crossed by Harry Greep, and late that night Greep was arrested at Midland.

"Eddication is a wonderful thing," said Buck Hooker to Sylvester Moon. "Eddication learnt me how to catch them fellers."

"How's that?" inquired Mr. Moon.

"Well, one o' them pieces that you give me to write says, 'When thieves fall out, honest men get their dues.' I thought about that over an' over, an' got an idea of makin' them thieves fall out. That's what made me think of goin' into Harry Greep's room, an' havin' you let loose all that talk. Yes, eddication is a great thing. Get out th' pencil an' paper, Sylvester, and let's have more of it."

The Story Tellers' Circle

African Secret Societies

ABOUT his story in this issue—*The Lake of the Dead,* which is about the ever popular "Major" and Jim the Hottentot—L. Patrick Greene writes:

"First of all, I had better confess that I wrote the story from the title. I have a friend who was formerly a District Commissioner in Nigeria, and one day he referred to it casually. I remarked that it sounded like the title of one of those wildly improbable romances, and he retorted that I, of all people, ought to know that nothing is improbable in Africa. In fact, I have said such a thing once or twice myself in the Major yarns. Naturally after that I asked a lot of questions about *The Lake of the Dead* and my friend told me that he knew of two such lakes and supposed that there may be others. The one I have described in the story is, actually, in the Cameroons. I used a fiction writer's license and moved it across the border. It was discovered in 1910 and until that time, though there had been a Government station for years within a few miles of the lake, not a hint of its existence came to the ears of the white men. Indeed, the German officials only discovered it by accident. And even after they were aware of its existence, some months elapsed before they located it. This lake—named by the Germans the *Toten See*—Dead Sea—is believed to be haunted by ghosts of the dead of the Ekoi people. According to the natives the center of the lake is bottomless and contains a whirlpool which would suck under anyone who dared to bathe in its waters. They also believe that a great snake dwells beneath the lake. Except for the ledge of rock which appears above water at the center of the lake, I have given a fairly accurate description of the place. But I needed that ledge of rock!

"The cave, with its underground rivers, is an actual place—though I have placed it nearer the Lake of the Dead than it really is. This system of vast, underground halls and tunnels stretches for miles. It is the home of millions of bats—and as bats are a favorite food with the natives of that region, the caves are highly protected!

"I suppose everyone has heard of the

Leopard Society of the West Coast of Africa. It still flourishes—though its operations are not so bloody as formerly—but it is not the only secret society by a long shot. As a matter of fact, the West Coast native seems to be an inveterate 'joiner'! A society will spring up over night and become very powerful until another one is formed to combat it. But the big societies seem unchanging. Some are partly religious, some formed for amusement, some for mutual protection and yet others to carry out special celebrations and weddings and funerals. Most of the societies are for men only and women are strictly forbidden to take any part in their mysteries or enter the club houses. Even the slaves have a society and its mysteries may not be witnessed by a free-born man nor by any woman.

"The *Ekkpa* society, however, is a women's society, and it is one of the most powerful. It is devoted to the worship of Nimm—and that entails a great deal more than may be set down here. But that is true of all the societies.

"The *Ikkpai*—Whip—is one of the few societies to which both sexes may belong. At their dances the members carry whips.

"Occasionally—when something big is brewing, a war or a rebellion, for example—the chief of the men's societies and the *Ekkpa* unite *under the rule of a woman.*

"ONE thing that has always fascinated me about the West Coast native is his fatalism, his easy acceptance of malignant spirits and of death.

"In *The Lake of the Dead,* a native is pulled out of a canoe by a crocodile and his companions believe that the croc had been sent by Nimm to punish the man for insulting her. Well, that incident is founded on fact and the man's tragic fate actually aroused less comment amongst his comrades than I have described in the story.

"Reverting for a moment to the societies; it is well to bear in mind that though the West Coast natives are incredibly superstitious, they are superior in many ways to the natives of the South. They are farther advanced artistically and intellectually. And, before we laugh at their societies, with their weird regalia and ceremonies, we'd better

consider our own propensities in that direction!

"It must strike a white man as laughable when a native claims to be an elephant 'soul,' or a buffalo 'soul,' with the power to transform himself into a beast when he pleases. But would you laugh if a man—a B. A. of an English university and an exceedingly clever lawyer—solemnly swore to you that he had actually witnessed an elephant 'soul' turn from a man into an elephant then back to a man again? You will find men of that caliber on the Gold Coast, natives, who are ready to affirm on oath that they have witnessed such things. The fact that natives cheerfully go to prison rather than deny that they are were-animals, proves nothing. Not so many years ago—as history counts time—women boasted they were witches though their boasting condemned them to be burnt at the stake.

"About a secret writing used by the Woman of Nimm, very little is known of it, and nothing of its origin. Legend has it that the Uyanga people were the first to use it and that they learned it from monkeys! It is not generally used—so far as is known!—to send messages in the way the Woman of Nimm does in the story. But I see no reason why it should not be so used. It is commonly used to record trials—generally of divorce! or, at any rate, of marital difficulties. The record is carved on a gourd. Authorities agree that its origin is a very ancient one. Some suggest that it is a debased form of the ancient Egyptian writing. Certainly one can trace an Egyptian influence in the art of these people, and in their religion—as shown, for example, in their veneration for the crocodile and, in some districts, the cat.

"There is nothing, I think, in *The Lake of the Dead* that is improbable and I have checked up the local color very closely.

"I hope I've succeeded in getting across the fact that the West Coast native is entirely different from the native of the South. I know the Major realizes that! The last I heard of him he was heading for Liberia—the African republic which was fostered by the U. S. A. After that, for Jim's sake, he is returning to the diamond fields."

L. PATRICK GREENE

G-DATE

(*Continued from page* 112)

been crying. But she was pretty. Cleaned up, she'd be a knock-out; the acute eye got that, too.

"Oh, Don, Don!" she cried, in Fargrave's arms. "I couldn't—couldn't get here a minute sooner! Every darn tire has laid down a couple of times and I had to do most of the fixing myself. And the one that's flat now is the brand new s-spare."

Over her shoulder, Fargrave was looking at Garry Loman. He winked a prodigious wink and lifted a finger to lips spread in a beatific, yard-wide smile.

"Honey Dew," he said tenderly to the girl, "don't feel bad. Punctures and blowouts do happen. And I didn't mind waiting one little bit. Honest." Then, opening the gate again, he turned around to Loman. "Boss," he said, "when you get through that business in the village, rush back and meet Mrs. Donald Fargrave. And, say, thanks for the ride to Brockville—and thanks for the afternoon off!"

THE SHOOTER'S CORNER

(*Continued from page* 6)

permanently held by the undercut. In case of a silver, gold or platinum figure or animal, the detail is of course cut after the precious metal is in place in the steel. Many of the most beautiful examples of this kind of decoration (inlay plus engraving) may be found in some of the big art galleries—a number of excellent examples are on exhibit in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City.

There are very few master gun-engravers in the United States—it wouldn't surprise me if the number could be counted on one hand. As a result, there have been very few really fine custom engraving and inlay jobs turned out since the war. At the present time, however, there is an increased demand for highly decorated firearms, especially handguns. Smith & Wesson have been foremost in producing engraved and inlaid revolvers, with the Rex Arms Company of New York City, being the exclusive distributor. Other arms companies are also in the act, and now most any American firearm may be had decorated to fulfill the customer's desires, limited only by the magnitude of his purse!

Be seein' you next issue.

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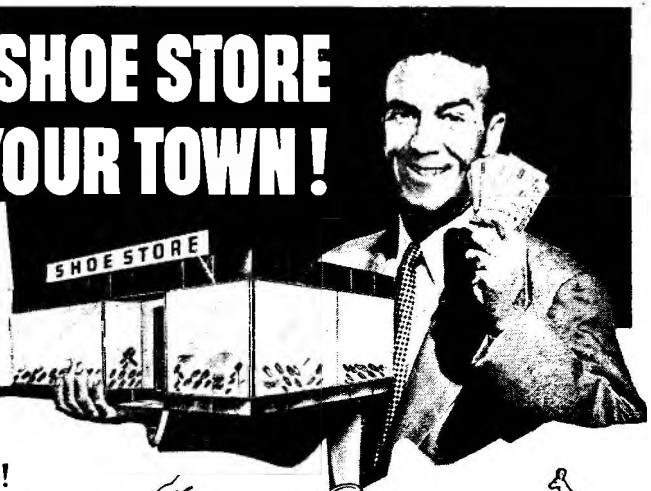

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