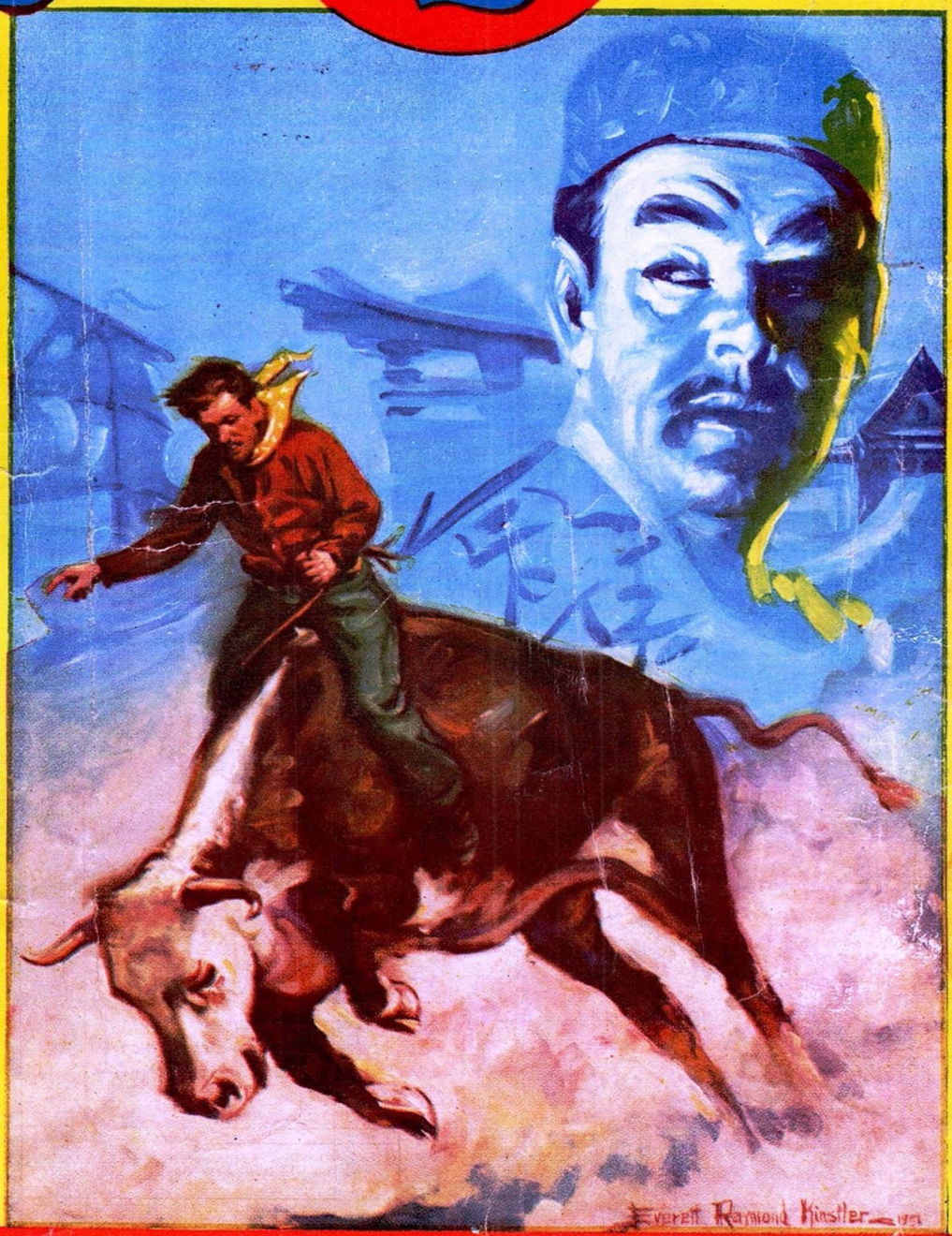
ANC

Short Stories

May

25



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EDITOR
D. McILWRAITH

May, 1951

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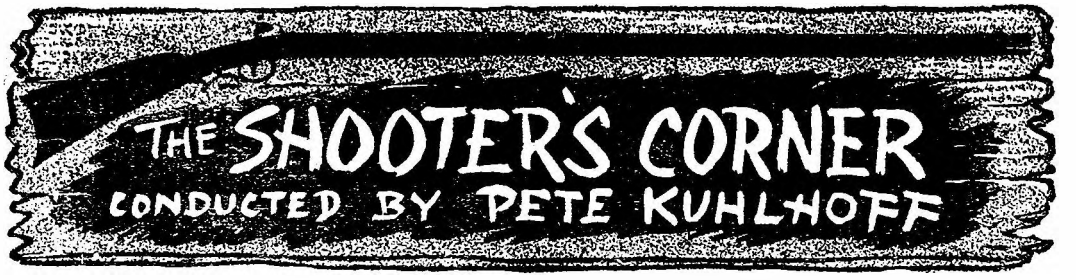
WILLIAM J. DELANEY, *President and Treasurer* **M. DELANEY,** *Secretary*



Job Lots

SEVERAL weeks ago I had occasion to observe a .22 Long Rifle caliber automatic rifle in operation.

This little experimental machine gun was made primarily for the purpose of function study by high speed photography. During the course of the experiments photographs were taken showing the empty cartridge cases flying out of the receiver as they were fired. The magazine held fifteen rounds and all fifteen empties were easily photographed in a continuous stream as they were ejected after firing.

I never did find out how fast the little spit-fire was actually shooting. An ordinary pocket stop watch could not be hand operated fast enough to time the firing of the fifteen shots. That's real fast shooting—a guess would be that the rate of fire was several thousand shots a minute.

Of course that is much too fast for any practical use, but for the study of stress and strain of moving parts of the weapon, as well as function of ammunition, such experiments are very informative, and I must say that it was very interesting to watch and it was one heck of a lot of fun to shoot!

It was surprising to find that a very small fifteen shot group could be fired before you could snap your fingers. And one of the engineers whimsically advanced the idea of using such a weapon for warfare—especially for the type of fighting going on in Korea. Of course the rate of fire would have to be cut down to around four hundred or less rounds per minute and a new bullet especially designed and developed for the purpose, which would be easy to do!

What would happen to a horde of enemy soldiers advancing en masse, if a line of our troops turned loose a withering fire, say at from 50 to 150 yards, of these 45-grain bullets. My bet would be that such a charge would be stopped in its tracks—it would be a slaughter!

Many seem to have the idea that the .22 rimfire cartridge is a weak sister, in about the same class as the ordinary Daisy air gun. 'Tain't so! I can speak from experience. One time I was shot through the thick part of my left foot with an ordinary low-speed .22 short. The little bullet not only penetrated the foot, but also went through the heavy leather sole of my boot. As far as locomotion on my hind legs was concerned, I was immediately out of business—and remained so for quite some weeks.

Judging from that experience, I would say that two or more (one would do the job in many instances) .22 Long Rifle bullets in the body would take the fight out of most any soldier, no matter how tough he might be.

Of course I know that around the turn of the century it was found that the .38 caliber army revolvers, as used in the Philippines by the United States forces, were found to be of too small caliber to stop and knock down the native headhunters. This was fairly low-speed stuff, not the more powerful .38 Special cartridge, which was developed later. Also, the shooting was at very close range where the fanatical headhunters had a chance to swing their razor-sharp machetes before feeling the effect of the .38 slugs. I wonder if these knife wielders could have traveled 50 or 75 yards with two or three of the present-day .22 Long Rifle high-speed slugs in the body, and then have been able to get in their dirty work.

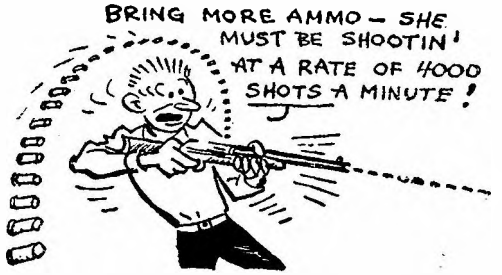
For every .30-'06 caliber cartridge a soldier could carry seven or eight .22 Long Rifle cartridges—certainly would be quite an increase in fire power. Maybe it's silly to contemplate an army armed with .22 rim-

(*Continued on page 6*)

(*Continued from page* 4)

fire rifles—but, it's interesting to think about! Sure I know there are a lot of arguments against the use of such a small cartridge, but we really don't need a cartridge as heavy as the old .30-'06.

The M1 (Garand) rifle was tested and accepted for use with the .276 cartridge. There wasn't time to change ammunition, so it was rebuilt for the .30-'06. The .276 was a very good cartridge, lighter in weight, but developing more energy out at a 1,000 yards than the .30-'06.



Now I understand that ordnance is experimenting with a new .30 caliber cartridge. Examples that I have seen look about like the .300 Savage, and I have been told that the ballistics are about the same.

Incidentally, what has happened to our small arms production program? At this writing (last of February) there is nothing much being done that I can see. A few thousand rifle barrels and other odds and ends are being made by the big arms plants—but nothing really important!

It looks as if the "powers that be" are having a tough time with the job of standardization of weapons for the allies (everyone on our side). This is a worldwide project, and as I understand it, includes everything from small arms on up to, and including, the big naval guns. The idea is to simplify the supply problem in case of real trouble!

A new gun is being produced. It is to be included as a part of the survival kit for fliers and others who might be lost in the wilds and have to be able to live off of the country. It's a fold up (wire stock) bolt action repeater of .22 Hornet caliber. Being accurate enough to take game at 100 yards or more, it certainly is a big improvement over the .45 Automatic Service Pistol which was included in the survival kits of World War II. This new gun is nothing elaborate, but it will do the job!

New Book

ROBERT ABELS has written a dandy and informative little book. It is titled *Early American Firearms,* and it's very good-looking—something that is comparatively rare among gun books.

Mr. Abels is one of our foremost dealers in firearms for the collector, and in that business has had an opportunity to examine and study a very large quantity of rare as well as ordinary arms.

His book is necessarily small and of more or less fixed format, as it is one in The American Arts Library series, published by The World Publishing Company, Cleveland, Ohio. But, he has included a lot of information in slightly more than sixty pages —to say nothing about thirty-four fine illustrations, nine of which are in full color!

The book, divided into six chapters (rifles, pistols, percussion revolvers, derringers, freaks and oddities, and cartridge revolvers), is interestingly written and will appeal to beginners in gun collecting and those interested in Americana. Come to think about it, maybe the advanced collector will get something out of it too!

Believe it or not, it sells for one dollar! It's the biggest buck's worth of gun book that I have ever seen!

Colt Frontier Revolver Finale

THE other day I was talking to some of the boys up at the Colt plant. During the conversation I bluntly asked if it was true, as reported, that the manufacturing machinery for the famous Colt Single Action Revolver (also known as the Peacemaker or Frontier Model) had been destroyed.

The just as blunt reply was that it hadn't been destroyed, the durned machinery just naturally had worn out!

Seems logical when you consider that the Peacemaker was in production from 1873 until 1940—68 years, count 'em!

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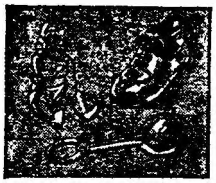

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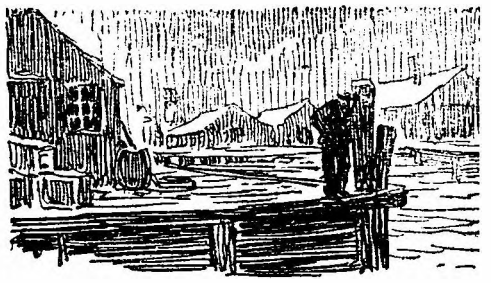

NO TRESPASS TRAPPING

By
RAYMOND S. SPEARS

The Price on Some Pelts Is Higher Than Others

JUD TRUSLOW floated down the Mississippi looking for a place to trap furs and spend the winter. This was his first trip down and naturally he just didn't know some ideas prevailing among a certain set of river people which might have saved him trouble in the beginning—or perhaps it wouldn't. A Yankee is a good bet and never a sure thing as regards his activities, wherever he is.

Truslow saw a big dark raccoon sunning himself in the afternoon sun on a cottonwood limb; he saw a mink playing at sliding down hill on a slick clay bank; he killed two wild geese flying over, shooting them with his 25-35 repeating rifle; and he tied in to the bank at Bearhide Bayou right in the middle of Troublesome Reach.

He shot the coon out of the cottonwood and set a trap for the mink, and settled down to stay. The season was late, furs were prime and so far as running out lines of traps Truslow appeared to know all about his own business. For one thing, looking around, he made sure that no one else was located anywhere through that reach either for hunting, trapping or fishing. That made it look like open country, but the element who lived up Bearhide Bayou had run everybody out of there, not caring to have neighbors around who might be nosey as to their affairs. Truslow didn't see what this meant to him.

The Cobberts were a bad family, in those parts. They had always lived on the River in shanty-boats, and every generation or two one or another achieved distinction getting hung legally or shot in an uncommonly notorious fracas; the hanging or shooting was always preceded by a long and varied series of exploits. Now there were three of the Cobberts, supposed to be cousins, but perhaps they had just decided to hide their true identities behind a name which, locally, had achieved a distinction in the clipping files of newspapers where the hard, mean characters of Old Mississip are kept on file for historical or entertainment features. Usually they were known as the Bearhide crowd. Lon Cobbert was the leader, a tall, slab-sided and nearly white-eyed man with a soft, reddish beard and a yellowish complexion.

TRUSLOW had a hundred traps put out within three days. He caught five coons, three possums, four mink and a small otter the first night. Subsequent catches were sufficiently numerous to stir his Yankee trapper heart with delight. He crossed over to the Hearsay landing and bought supplies behind the levee in that old cotton town. He mentioned his surprise that nobody appeared to be trapping across the river either up or down stream.

"You trappin' yon side?" the grocery man inquired politely.

(*Continued on page* 10)

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(*Continued from page* 8)

"Oh, yes—good fur country! Why?" Truslow asked.

"Why-uh-h—I reckon seo-o!" the man admitted noncommitally.

In the hardware store, where Truslow bought ammunition for his shotgun and laid in 500 shells for his 22 rimfire 10-shot automatic, the dealer inquired if he was off the river, recognizing that he was, of course, by the mud on his rubber boots.

"Oh, yes!" Truslow answered, "I'm trapping across on the east side."

"Sho! Yo' *are!*" the man exclaimed. "Huh—"

Truslow wanted some domestic meat—a beef steak—so he went to the butcher shop. There he mentioned, casually, that he liked tame meat for a change, and added that he was trapping just across the river, and would probably be coming over every few days.

"Yo' ain't trappin' anywhere near Bearhide Bayou, are you?" the man asked.

"Oh, yes, just above there, about a half mile, on the dead eddy, against the thick-brake island."

"Sho!" the man exclaimed, and quickly wrapping up the meat, he seemed glad to get his pay, before anything happened.

Truslow was nonplussed. He had quite a bag full of supplies to tote back to his skiff and he started on his way. Even people in the drygoods stores and passersby came out to watch him go past. He felt like a one-man parade along Main Street. Every one was looking at him and stopping to watch him on his way.

SUDDENLY, from around the corner of the large entertainment hall at the corner opposite the levee, a tall, slithering, long-legged man suddenly emerged and confronted the trapper who came to a quick stop to prevent a collision.

"Howdy!" the interrupter greeted, and Truslow saw on his suspender over a dark blue flannel shirt the badge of City Marshal, No. 1.

"How de do!" Truslow greeted, wonderingly.

"Yo' all a stranger in these parts?" the officer asked.

"Yes, sir—I started down east in the Montezuma Marshes, of New York, in an automobile. I traded it at Evansville, Indiana, for a shanty-boat outfit, practically complete, and dropped down the Ohio. I'm tied in over above Bearhide Bayou; I'm trapping there on the islands and across the Bottoms, into the Scatterings."

"Yas, suh, so I heard, suh," the City Marshal nodded. "I reckon yo' got friends, lots of friends in theh, among the folks?"

"Why, no," Truslow shook his head, "I haven't seen any one at all. In fact, the first man I've spoken to in more'n a week was here in the groceries."

"Sho! Mr. Brocker was tellin' me, suh—what yo' said," the officer twisted uneasily. "Course, 'tain't nobody's business—everybody is plumb peaceable, naturally; at the same time some reckoned, yo' bein' probably a stranger mightn't to know, suh, the sityation."

"Oh, I have a hunting-trapping license!"

"An official license or did somebody tell yo' hit'd be all right trappin' oveh theh—that nobody'd have any hard feelings?"

"Why, I didn't specify where I'd stop—just in the state!"

"Then the—uh-h-h—yo' got local permission oveh theh?"

"Is that a private preserve? It isn't posted!"

"Well—uh-h—not 'zactly private—but—uh-h-kind of subject to quit-claims, suh!"

"So-o! Somebody here claims that territory?"

"Oh, not—not anybody this side the river!"

"Say, Mister! Just what's the joke or hook? I bite!"

"Well, of course, if yo' got relations—anybody important, back where yo' come if there should be a difficulty—an unfortunate incident—like you being found dead or even got mixed up into a fracas, naturally it'd be regrettable. We'd much rather hit'd happen somewhere else. Course, that ain't even in our state jurisdiction, oveh theh, but the news of it'd be sent out from here, likely, and so we'd get the credit of

(*Continued on page* 12)

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(*Continued from page* 10)

having had a stranger killed up here. We always like to give ev'ry body a fair warning, kind of a chance—"

"You say that's open country—in another state—and that it's none of your business?" Truslow asked. "Seems mighty friendly of you to fair-warn me, Mr.—Mr.—"

"City Marshal Tawney, suh."

"Mr. Tawney! My name is Truslow, Judson Truslow."

"Yas, suh, Mr. Truslow. We don't harm any strangers on this side Old Mississip'. People you traded with thought probably you was real innocent, ignorant and a soft-paw; two-three the girls said it would be a ter-ble shame if anything happened to you, and you neveh knew what struck you; you see how that is!"

"Why—well—is there any one, specially, that you think it would be a good idea for me to keep my eyes open, if he comes around?"

"Yah, suh! If yo' jes' step over't the City Hall I'll show yo' some documents, suh, an' yo' c'n judge for yourself!"

TRUSLOW went to the City Hall. People beamed with relief when they saw him smiling. Lots of times a stranger is touchy and doesn't realize how friendly local people are to those who trade in their stores. The City Marshal showed the trapper a file of reward notices. They recorded that Lon Cobbert, Game Cobbert and Rough Joe Cobbert were wanted, each to the extent of $1,000 reward, for being murderers, robbers, river pirates, and general nuisances.

"I be'n laying off to go git one or two of them, to kind-a break up their operations," Tawney confided. "At the same time they don't op'rate much, lately, on this side the reach, an' I'd hate to git mixed up out of ouh state's jurisdiction. Course, Sher'f Ondore, oveh in Graise County's a fine, honorable gentleman, but sensitive and high spirited. If I should interfere in his county I'm not sure'f he'd take hit kindly, in the spirit hit's meant to indicate, or if he'd feel like I was criticising his administration, the very last thing I'd have in mind; you see how that is, Mr. Truslow."

"Oh, yes! I see-understand!" the trapper exclaimed, and took a good look at the reproductions of pictures of tall, lanky Lon Cobbert, bull-built and heavy-set Game Cobbert, and the youthful, dishonorable and treacherous Rough Joe Cobbert—who all habitually carried four side arms, two butcher knives and a long gun each, for self-protection and in eternal preparedness for emergencies.

Of course, the way things were, when Jud Truslow was on his way, with the best wishes of the crowd who came to the landing to see him off, going back to Bearhide Bayou eddy-chute, he wondered at the condition which had developed. The last thing in the world he would have looked for was trouble; at the same time, he came of a good many generations of people who minded their own business and looked after their own rights, without violence if feasible, but looked after them to the full extent necessary. Of course, he hadn't said anything about this phase of his experience, inheritance and character. Some folks who watched him were of the opinion, which they were ready to bet on, that he wouldn't any more than land on his boat than he would cut loose and head for at least a hundred miles down old Muddy Gut, seeking peace and safety.

As a matter of fact, he swung his boat out into the eddy and anchored it. He had his trap sets all along the banks and in the edges of the bayous, sloughs and Shaker Lakes, where he could reach most of them from the bow of his skiff, which he drove with a light outboard motor. He had loved the wilderness tone of the Bottom Brakes and the charm of the wide, quiet Mississippi flood. Now he loved the country no less, but with a new feeling of increased alertness, resentment and readiness to attend strictly to his own business.

THE second morning after the visit to Hearsay, he saw a large white placard opposite his anchorage, stuck on the trunk of a tree. With a pair of binoculars he studied the sign and when he had figured out what it was intended to convey to him he made a copy in his own legible, and

(*Continued on page* 14)

IF IT SLIPS... IF IT CHAFES... IF IT GRIPES... THEN

THROW AWAY THAT TRUSS!

Why put up with days . . . months . . . YEARS of discomfort, worry, and fear—if we provide you with the support you want and need? Learn NOW about this perfected truss-invention for most forms of reducible rupture. Surely you keenly desire . . . you eagerly CRAVE to enjoy most of life's activities and pleasures once again. To work . . . to play . . . to live . . . to love . . . with the haunting fear of Rupture lessened in your thoughts! Literally *thousands* of Rupture sufferers *have* entered this *Kingdom of Paradise Regained* . . . have worn our Appliance without the slightest inconvenience. Perhaps we can do as much for you. Some wise man said, "Nothing is impossible in this world"—and it is true, for where other trusses have failed is where we have had our greatest success in many cases! Even doctors—thousands of them—have ordered for themselves and their patients. Unless your case is absolutely hopeless *do not despair*. The coupon below brings our Free Rupture Book in plain envelope. Send the coupon now.

Patented AIR-CUSHION Support Gives *Wonderful Protection*

Think of it! Here's a surprising yet simple-acting invention that helps Nature support the weakened muscles gently but securely, day and night. Thousands of grateful letters express heartfelt thanks for relief from pain and worry,—results beyond the expectations of the writers. What is this invention—how does it work? Will it help me? Get the complete, fascinating facts on the Brooks Air-Cushion Appliance—send now for *free* Rupture Book.

Cheap—Sanitary—Comfortable

Rich or poor—ANYONE can afford to buy this remarkable, LOW-PRICED rupture invention! But look out for imitations and counterfeits. The Genuine Brooks Air-Cushion Truss is never sold in stores or by agents. Your Brooks is made up, after your order is received, to fit your particular case. You buy direct at the low "maker-to-user" price. The perfected Brooks is sanitary, lightweight, inconspicuous. Has no hard pads to gouge painfully into the flesh, no stiff, punishing springs, no metal girdle to rust or corrode. It is GUARANTEED to bring you heavenly comfort and security,—or it costs you NOTHING. The Air-Cushion works in its own unique way, softly, silently helping Nature support the weakened muscles. Learn what this marvelous invention may mean to you—send coupon quick!

C. E. BROOKS, Inventor

SENT on TRIAL!

No . . . don't order a Brooks now—FIRST get the complete, revealing explanation of this world-famous rupture invention, THEN decide whether you want to try for the comfort—the wonderful degree of freedom—the security—the blessed relief thousands of men, women and children have reported. They found the answer to their prayers! And you risk nothing as the complete Brooks is SENT ON TRIAL. Surely you owe it to yourself to investigate this no-risk trial. Send for the facts now—today—hurry! All correspondence strictly confidential.

FREE! Latest Rupture Book Explains All!

SENT YOU IN PLAIN ENVELOPE **JUST CLIP and SEND COUPON ➡**

Brooks Appliance Co., 199 State St., Marshall, Mich.

PROOF!

Read These Reports on Reducible Rupture Cases

(In our files at Marshall, Michigan, we have over 52,000 grateful letters which have come to us entirely unsolicited and without any sort of payment.)

Never Loses a Day's Work in Shipyard

"A few weeks ago I received the Appliance you made for me. I put it on the afternoon I received it and wouldn't do without it now. My fellow workers notice how much better I can do my work and get around over these ships—and believe me, the work in a Navy shipyard is anything but easy. You have been a life saver to me. I never lose a day's work now. One of my buddies was ruptured on the job about two months ago. After seeing my Appliance he wants me to order him one." J. A. Comer, 1506 Green Ave., Orange, Texas.

Perfect Satisfaction in Every Way

"I am happy to report that the Appliance that I received from you more than a year ago has given perfect satisfaction in every way.

"In fact, I am not sure I will ever need another one, but I am asking you to send me the best grade as marked on the order blank, then if I should ever need it I would have it. I think I would want to use it when I go for long walks or work at heavy work of any kind, just for protection."—H. M. Herren, Moorheard, Ky.

MAIL THIS COUPON NOW!

BROOKS APPLIANCE CO.
199 State St., Marshall, Mich.

Without obligation, please send your FREE BOOK on Rupture, PROOF of Results, and TRIAL OFFER—all in plain envelope.

Name .....

Street .....

City ..... State .....

State whether for Man ☐ Woman ☐ or Child ☐

(*Continued from page* 12)
even copperplate script the better to get the idea, all according and without error. His transcript read:

NOTIS, RIVEH RAT!
This hyar
Bottoms frum up 2
KABOOdeLL lanIn
clar down 2
Git Aout Pint
is OURN
so YOU move NOw!
sined and
sealed by th
BARHIDE Byoo
Pierates

"The sons of guns!" Truslow grunted, and taking his .25-35 rifle, his .22 automatic pistol and his automatic shotgun he boarded his skiff, which was dangling at the stern and started up Bearhide Bayou to see about this proposition which had been so sternly and emphatically put up to him. Incidentally, he carried along some stout white line and a lunch, in case he should be gone quite a while.

City Marshal Tawney had given him information as to the lie of the Bottoms and the curves of the Bearhide green water flow, and when Truslow was three miles up the stream, he ran his skiff into a south fork and tied it to a snag. Then he cut across on foot to where he could hear shouts and yells, whistles and whoops.

A good still hunter, Truslow came through the brake, which had huge gum and cottonwood tree trunks, some red oak, a good deal of wildgrape vines—to judge by the sound as well as the looks—and patches of cane on the high ridges, some of which were a good four feet higher than the red oak growths and at least six or eight feet higher than the soft tupelo gum swamps.

When the trapper came in sight of the celebration put on for the declaration, warning and anticipated obedience of the invading shanty-boater, he saw four men; three of them he identified from the reward notice pictures, and the fourth, he guessed to be Buckteeth Hackmire, whose boast was that he could thank God that his photograph had never been taken, due to good fortune, neglect of the authorities and an elusive nature. The four were proving to one another's satisfaction that they could hold a gallon jug with one hand and drink out of it. They had four jugs and standing all in a row with their backs to the timber and, facing the shanty-boat whereon they lived when at home, they proceeded all to drink at one and the same time from jugs held by the handle with one hand on their right shoulders, except Lon, who was left-handed. Each man had as reported two belts, four holsters and two sheath knives to prove to the world that they were eternally ready to resist to the last drop of their blood, to the last twitch of their trigger fingers the encroachments of Federals, sheriffs, detectives or miserably dishonorable low-down scoundrels seeking rewards at the expense of the necks of their fellowmen.

Truslow slipped forward and spoke with a slow drawl:

"Hey, you fellows! Don't move or I'll cut your back bones right plumb in two!"

Gurgles ceased in throats while streams of distilled worked grape-juice poured down over the fronts of four shirts. Four pairs of eyes, less one which Buckteeth Hackmire had lost long since, turned on mobile necks to look back. The man they had fair-warned by placard to move on had come to them.

"Get those hands up!" Truslow said coldly. "Drop the jugs!"

The crocks tipped off the shoulders and fell to the ground.

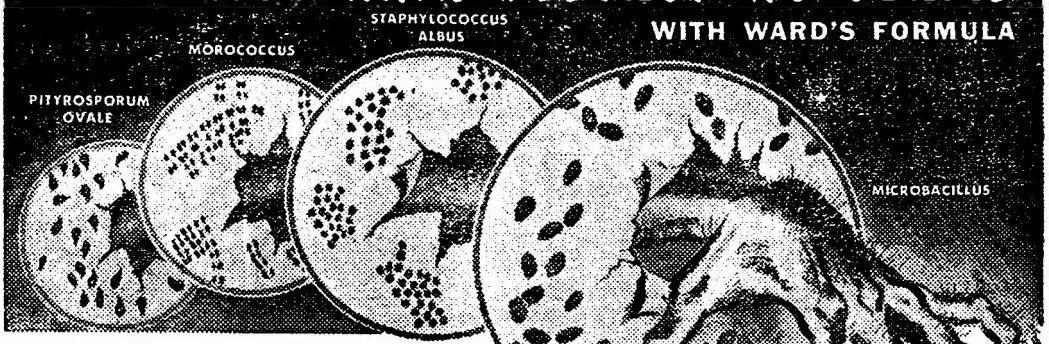
"Now, Lon! Just you and nobody else unbuckle your belts in front and let them drop—don't hurry too fast—and don't make any extra motions! All of your eyes front—and don't look around."

"By gawd—" Lon began and then stopped. He started this time with his hands and did as ordered.

When the fourth belt had fallen to the ground, Buckteeth turned to look back, and on the instant his overslung nose came into full profile a .22 caliber long rifle shell plupped in the automatic pistol. Buckteeth gave a yell, grabbing at his nose, but the cold voice of Truslow told him to let it

(*Continued on page* 120)

KILL THESE HAIR-DESTROYING GERMS WITH WARD'S FORMULA



NOTHING, *Absolutely nothing known to Science can do more to*

SAVE YOUR HAIR

Beware of your itchy scalp, hair loss, dandruff, head scales, unpleasant head odors! Nature may be warning you of approaching baldness. Heed Nature's warning! Treat your scalp to scientifically prepared Ward's Formula.

Millions of trouble-breeding bacteria, living on your sick scalp (see above) are killed on contact. Ward's Formula kills not one, but *all four* types of these destructive scalp germs now recognized by many medical authorities as a significant cause of baldness. Kill these germs—don't risk letting them kill your hair growth.

ENJOY THESE 5 BENEFITS IMMEDIATELY

1. Kills these 4 types of germs that retard normal hair growth—*on contact*
2. Removes ugly infectious dandruff—*fast*
3. Brings hair-nourishing blood to scalp—*quickly*
4. Stops annoying scalp itch and burn—*instantly*
5. Starts wonderful self-massaging action—*within 3 seconds*

Once you're bald, that's *it*, friends! There's nothing you can do. Your hair is gone forever. So are your chances of getting it back. But Ward's Formula, used as directed, keeps your sick scalp free of itchy dandruff, seborrhea, and stops the hair loss they cause. Almost at once your hair looks thicker, more attractive and alive.

We don't ask you to believe *us*. Thousands of men and women—first skeptical just as you are—have *proved* what we say. Read *their* grateful letters. Study the guarantee—it's *better* than a free trial! Then try Ward's Formula at *our* risk. Use it for only 10 short days. You must enjoy *all* the benefits we claim—or we return not only the price you pay—but DOUBLE YOUR MONEY BACK. You be the judge!

TO SAVE YOUR HAIR ACT NOW

Send coupon today for 10-day offer. Send No Money

I must admit I didn't have much faith in it, but I hadn't been using Ward's one week before I could see it was helping me. I could feel my hair getting thicker.
E. K., Cleveland, Ohio

Out of all the Hair Experts I went to, I've gotten the *most* help from one bottle of Ward's Formula.
C. La M., Philadelphia, Pa.

After using Ward's for only 12 days, my hair has stopped falling out.
R. W. C., Cicero, Ill.

I am tickled to death with the results. In just two weeks' time—no *dandruff!* *W. T. W., Portola, Cal.*

I feel encouraged to say that the infuriating scalp itch which has bothered me for 5 years is now gone.
J. M. K., Columbus, Ohio

Guarantee

This written guarantee entitles you not only to return of price paid for Ward's Formula, but Double Your Money Back unless you actually SEE, FEEL and ENJOY all benefits herein claimed in only ten days. The test is at our risk. All you do is return unused portion or the empty bottle unless completely satisfied.

SEAL

Ward Laboratories Inc.

ACT TODAY or YOU MAY BE TOO LATE!

Ward Laboratories Inc.,
1430 Broadway, Dept. 10-R, New York 18, N.Y.

Rush Ward's Formula to me at once. I will pay postman two dollars plus postage. I must be completely satisfied within 10 days, or you GUARANTEE refund of DOUBLE MY MONEY BACK upon return of bottle and unused portion.

Name .....
Address .....
City ..... Zone..... State.....

☐ Check here if you enclose $2.00 with order, and we will pay postage. Same refund offer holds, of course. *APO, FPO, Canada & Foreign add 50c, no C.O.D.s.*

DOUBLE YOUR MONEY BACK GUARANTEE

三個兒子

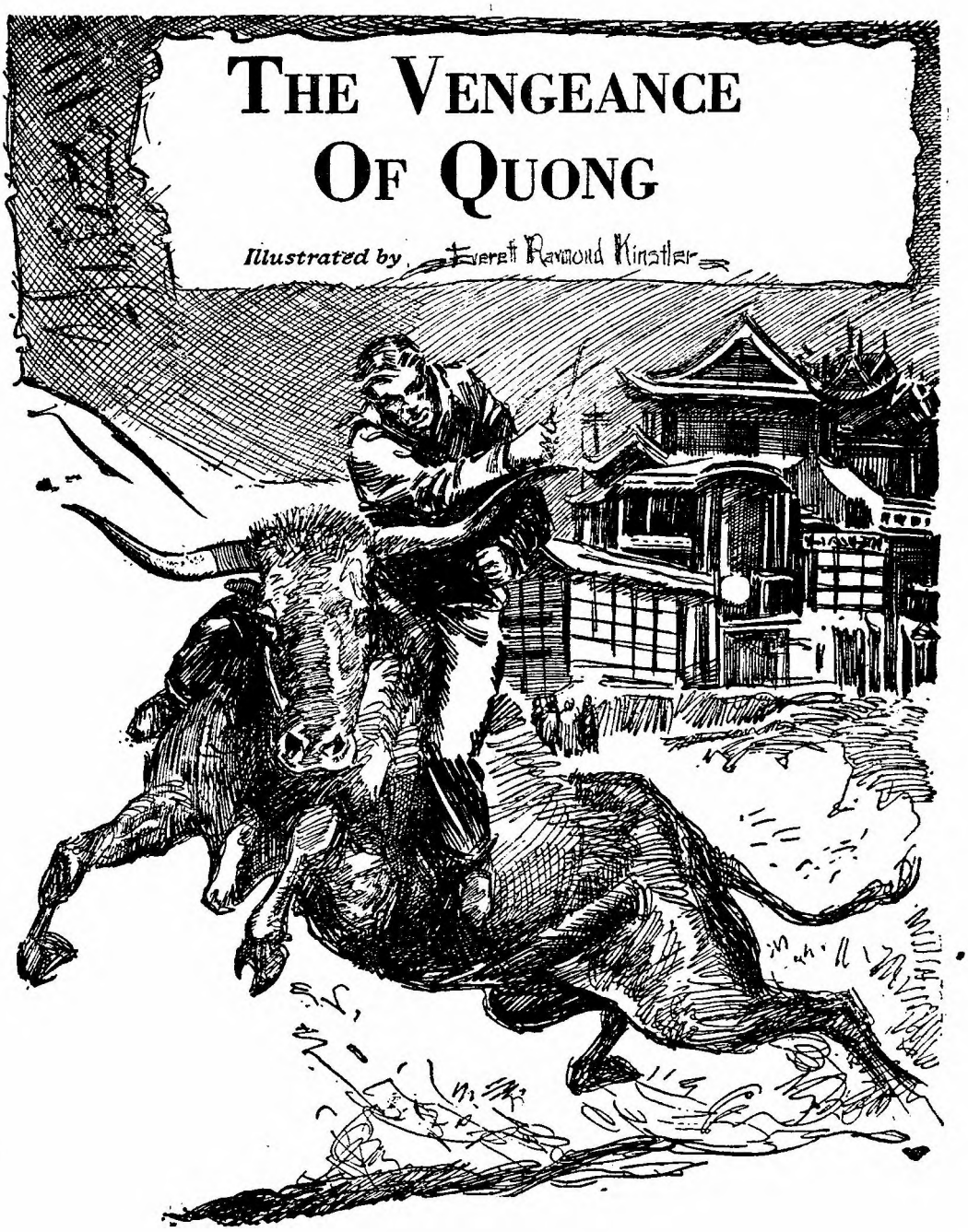
Buck Bigthumb and Dan'l Boone Meet China

WHEN Buck led the Chinaman, Quong-li, into the large courtyard of his home their arrival created much excitement. Coolies, working in the yard, took one glance at their rich master, noted the disarray of his clothing and emitted yells of alarm. Women came running from the private quarters. The Number One wife of Quong and three other females holding secondary positions in the household, burst from their rooms and with twittering cries surrounded their lord. A large chair was dragged into the shade of the willow tree and Quong sank into it. A boy rushed forward with a bowl of rice-wine.

Quong, after drinking, explained to the women who smothered him with questions. He had been attacked by footpads in the neighboring village of Hu-san, but his companion had saved him. He placed an arm around the neck of Buck and interrupted the flow of Chinese to murmur: "Ma fine Melliken flend. Heem cowboy." Quong-li had lived for some years in San Francisco and he loved to trample on the American language at every opportunity.

The women wished details, and Quong, after a second bowl of wine, gave them. The gangsters had asked for money, but he had bravely resisted their demands. They had knocked him down and kicked him. They had snatched his money-belt and were running away with it when his American friend arrived. His friend had thrown a rope which caught one of the fleeing thieves by his bare leg and brought him to the ground. Luckily he was the bearer of Quong's money-belt. The police came up, the money was returned to Quong and the thief was locked up.

The four women bowed to Buck, who



By JAMES FRANCIS DWYER

seemed slightly amused by the account of the incident. They murmured their thanks for the assistance he had given to their master. They had flat, yellow faces and were middle-aged. Their clothing, although rich and colorful, did not add to their appearance and Buck wondered as he studied them. The Chinaman, immediately after the rescue, had engaged the cowboy as a bodyguard and he had boasted of the beauty of his womenfolk,

He had affirmed their good looks in his own tongue and also in what he considered the American language. "Velly booful!" he had cried. "Velly fine womens!"

Of course the Chinaman was a dreadful bounder. A fat, drunken brute who loved to adopt a patronizing attitude towards his betters. He was also a liar. He had not told the women the truth of the affair. He had stumbled out of an opium joint and had lain stupidly by the roadside when the thieves had started to roll him. He had put up no fight against the attackers.

Buck wondered now if the Chinaman had spoken of four women or of five in his household, and, as he puzzled over the matter, a fifth female swept into the courtyard.

She came with a sudden rush that pulled Buck from his seat. She was unusually tall and as supple as a branch of the willow tree. She was dressed in pajamas of green silk. Silk that seemed to show a kittenish delight in clinging to her graceful limbs. Her black hair was loose, and while the other women walked in a clumsy fashion, forced on them by their footgear, she seemed to swim through the hot air as she approached the group.

Bowing low before Quong-li she listened to a repetition of his story, then Quong introduced Buck. "Ma Melliken fiend," he said to her, and to Buck he uttered two words. "Manchu gal," he grunted, and he laughed loudly.

The girl—she seemed to be under twenty—showed evident astonishment at hearing Quong's pronunciation of the word "American." She bowed gracefully and then cried out a question. "Is it true?" she gasped. "True what the Honorable Quong-li says? Are you—are you an American?"

Buck upset by the question and the faultless manner in which it was put, stammered out an answer. "I—I was born in Texas."

The girl regarded his face with her large eyes. "But—but you are not—not—Oh, what will I say? You are not—not a real American?"

BUCK swallowed uneasily. He felt that the question had destroyed the fine feeling of superiority that had been his before her arrival. The four stupid women and their fat patron had made him think that he was something above them, but this graceful girl, although tinted, had thrown him off his pedestal with the words, "You are not—not a real American?"

"My father was an Indian," he said, "A Chief in the Tangan tribe, and my mother was Mexican." He raised his voice as he continued, "But I was born in Texas and I fought with Americans in the late war."

"Pardon," murmured the girl. "I didn't mean to be offensive. Please tell me your name?"

"I was christened John Bigthumb, but I am known as Buck."

"And may I call you Buck?" she asked, smiling.

"Why, yes," he cried. "You can tell me anything you like." Then, smiling at her, he asked, "How come you speak the American language so perfectly?"

"I was educated in a convent at Canton. Two of the Sisters were Americans."

Quong-li, who was all ears as Buck and the girl were exchanging remarks, now butted into the conversation. "Fodder beeg mans," he said, pointing to the girl. "Muchee money. Losem eblythink." He drew a forefinger across his throat, suggesting a suicide.

A red flush appeared on the cheeks of the girl. "Father was unlucky in speculating." she murmured. "It was the war that ruined him."

The Number One wife wished to take Quong into the house, but he objected. He was in a contrary mood. He called for another bowl of wine, and after swilling it down he thought the moment favorable to speak of the ability of his new employee. "Ma fiend," he began, speaking in his pigeon-American to the Manchu girl, "showem you funny bizness wiv lope." He spoke to the four Chinese women, bringing a look of life to their dull faces. The four watched the girl, and to Buck it was plain that they held a joint hatred for her.

Quong grinned as he made a motion of his hand to Buck, then he cried a command to a coolie who was crossing the courtyard. The servant approached, and Quong

with great volubility, instructed him to stand still till he, Quong, gave him an order and then to run swiftly towards the big gate opening on the road.

Grinning with delight he turned to Buck. "Lope heem," he commanded, "'bout ten yards."

Buck started to make objections, but Quong showed temper. "Queeck!" he cried impatiently, so the cowboy took from his pocket a rope that he had stolen from a Buddhist Monastery at Tung-chow on his way up the Yangtze and uncoiled it. He had accepted service with Quong-li and had to do his bidding.

The waiting coolie looked suspiciously at the rope. Other coolies stopped their work and watched. There was silence in the courtyard.

Quong-li gulped down another basin of rice-wine, then made a gesture with his fat hand to Buck and at the same time he shouted a command to the coolie.

The poor half-naked devil started for the gate at full speed. Buck had a moment of hesitation, fearful that he might hurt the fellow, then he tossed the rope.

It fell around the bare chest of the runner, threw him off his stride and flung him backward with a curious display of legs and arms. He created a cloud of dust when he fell.

Quong yelled with glee. Number one wife and the three concubines standing beside her followed the example of their lord by mildly showing their amusement, but the Manchu girl expressed her indignation.

"That was cruel!" she cried, addressing Buck. "You hurt him."

"Not much," muttered Buck.

"But you did," she asserted.

"I'm sorry," he murmured. "I have been hired, and at the present moment I am broke."

The Manchu girl turned and walked swiftly through an opening in the wall that led to a smaller yard. The coolie picked himself up and limped back to his companions.

Quong recovered from his laughing fit and waved the four women away. He called for more wine.

Turning to Buck he said: "You tink Fa'hey Lily nice?"

Buck reasoned that Fairy Lily was the name of the Manchu girl, the word Fairy troubling the tongue of the Chinaman. "She is very pretty," he said.

"Peoples one time beeg peoples," hiccuped Quong. "I buy Lily. How much you tink?"

"I couldn't guess."

"Two thousand Mex," said the Chinaman proudly. "Velly much money. You like talkee her?"

"Why, yes," admitted Buck.

"Alli. She eat you an' me."

BUCK BIGTHUMB, in the quarters to which Quong-li took him, came to the conclusion that he had taken service with a rich and dissolute person. But Buck's finances at the moment made him seize the position with avidity. He was at the end of his rope.

Stretched on the many-quilted bed he reviewed his movements since the end of the war. He had served in Papua, helping to stop the wild rush of the Japanese upon Australia. There he had heard much from Australian soldiers of the wealth of their big island, and when demobilized at San Francisco he had hurried back to Sydney thinking to get a part of it. Buck couldn't find it. He went northward, through Banjermassin and Singapore and finally landed at Shanghai. There he had paused for nine months.

It was a strange move of fate that sent him up the Yangtze. In a bar on the Ningpo Road he had been questioned by a cunning Englishman as to his birthplace. Buck was annoyed. He answered snappily. "I was born in the biggest hunk of land that is left in one piece," he said.

"What's its name?" questioned the cunning one.

"Texas," snapped Buck.

"Huh," said the questioner. "You don't know you're alive, boy. This China could pack some fifteen cow paddocks like Texas into her belly and have room left over."

Buck had never studied geography and the statement annoyed him. He had always heard that Texas was a mighty large piece of

ground and the jeering stranger taunted him. He put up his last ten dollar bill to back his belief, the American Consulate on Whangpoo Road to decide.

The counter clerk gave a decision against Buck which made him angry. He used rude words and a Chinese doorman was told to put him outside. The fellow caught Buck by the arm and proceeded to take him roughly to the street, but he got a surprise. The cowboy tossed him across the room, and in transit the fellow broke a globe of the world and smashed a chair.

Buck fled. Some time later he came to a wharf where a boat was just moving away. He sprang aboard without ticket or money.

A uniformed official was immediately beside him. "Ticket, please?" he said.

Buck parleyed. "Where are we going?"

"Up the Yangtze," said the other. "Jardine, Matheson boat. First stop, Tungchow."

"Sorry," said Buck. "I forgot my pocketbook."

THEY flung him off at Tung-chow. The police had no desire to interest themselves in the matter, so Buck strolled around. He found a Buddhist Monastery and offered to amuse them. He borrowed their clothesline and did some fine rope work which delighted them. When the boss of the monastery handed Buck a handful of copper cash he, Buck, slipped the clothesline into his pocket for future adventures on the big river.

He went on to Chin-kiang in the same careless fashion as he had boarded the first boat. Was tossed off, humbugged the police called upon to arrest him and did a little performance with the rope on a vacant piece of ground. He took a certain joy in his travel methods. He listened to stories concerning the three terrible rapids on the river and they excited his curiosity.

The I-chang gorge thrilled him. He decided to go through the two others and then return to Shanghai. He did so, and then, tired of the river, he looked around for the means of getting back.

It was then that he saw a fat Chinaman being kicked by a trio of ruffians. He tossed the rope at the last of them, dragged him to the ground, received the thanks of Quong-li and the offer of a job.

"And a damned rotten one," he soliloquized, as a boy announced that Quong awaited him at the table.

THE Manchu girl had changed her costume for the meal. Now she was dressed in a kimono of soft blue silk and her hair was banded with a blue ribbon. She had recovered from her fit of temper and she saluted Buck gracefully. Quong-li was evidently an autocrat in his house. The Number One wife came into the room, thinking to take part in the meal, but he roughly ordered her to leave. Only himself, Buck and Fairy Lily sat at the table.

Quong-li had consumed more wine since the incident of the morning. He was nearly intoxicated, quarrelsome with the servants and boastful in his talk to Buck and the girl. He ate in a greedy fashion, using his chopsticks wildly and talking with his mouth crammed with food. He was the salvation of China, according to his own belief. He had been to the United States and he was introducing American ideas into the country. American ideas were extraordinary. "Wunnerful! Wunnerful!" he shouted, after describing every labor-saving device he had seen. "Mellikens big blains! Velly big blains!" He gripped his head with his two hands to show Buck where the thinking processes lay. He was, he asserted, going to bring a thousand American ideas into China.

Near the very end of the meal he mentioned the longhorn bull. That very year he had thought of turning his huge property into an American ranch, breeding cattle instead of wheat, millet, soy and rice. He had heard through the Chinese paper, *Sung-poa*, that an American cargo boat had come into the Woosung with a load of cattle. It excited him; he had dashed down to Shanghai and boarded the steamer. A shrewd New England captain had sold him a longhorn bull.

"A bull!" cried the astonished Buck.

"*Shih, shih!*" cried Quong. "One bully bull! Heem horns so long!" He stretched out his arms to show the length of the animal's horns. "You wantem look see?"

Buck was startled by a soft kick that he received in the right ankle at the moment, but he answered promptly to the proffered invitation. "Why yes," he said, "It would be right in my line."

He decided in the moments that followed that the kick had been delivered by the soft slipper of Fairy Lily, but why he couldn't tell. He sat back and listened to the Chinaman telling of the trouble that he had in getting the bull up the Yangtze.

It appeared that the animal didn't like China. The frightening odors troubled his bull brain. Instead of the perfumed winds of the western prairies his nostrils encountered the stench of rotting vegetation, stuffed drains, sweat, excrement, and all the other odors of an old world. At Tien-hsing-chiau he broke out of the junk and injured two coolies, and at Kiu-kiang, famous for its pottery, the bull escaped a second time and wrecked a dozen stalls before he could be secured. The town kept Quong as a semi-prisoner until he made good the damage.

"One bully Melliken bull," grunted Quong, then exhausted by the telling and the amount of rice-wine that he had consumed, he fell asleep.

The girl, Fairy Lily, waited patiently till Quong was snoring loudly before she spoke. Leaning across the table she whispered to the startled cowboy. "You mustn't go near the brute," she hissed.

"Why?" asked Buck.

"Because he is dangerous," she gasped. "He—he might kill you!" Alarm showed on her face. Buck was thrilled.

"I know bulls," he said softly. "I was reared with them."

"Not with beasts like him," she murmured fiercely. "And I—and I want your help. Want it badly."

Quong-li made a queer rumbling sound with his throat and woke up with a wild start. Immediately he remembered what he had been talking about when he fell asleep. "Me showem bull tomolly," he said, then he rose and staggered away. Fairy Lily gave the cowboy a searching glance and followed Quong. Buck went to the quarters that had been assigned him. He felt a little uneasy.

THE visit to the longhorn was postponed on account of the indisposition of Quong-li. The effects of the kicks and blows of the gangsters kept him to his bed. He sent a message to Buck telling him to amuse himself by looking round the property.

Fairy Lily was not on view during the morning, but in the afternoon Buck exchanged a few words with her. She was hurried and excited and tossed quick answers to his questions.

"What did you mean yesterday?" he asked. "I mean when you spoke of my help?"

"To get me away from here!" she cried.

"But—but ain't you married to him?" demanded the cowboy.

"No, no, no!" she shrieked. "I have been bought to be—to be his—his—" One of the other women appeared at this moment and Buck missed the last word as the girl ran. For hours he tried to think what it was. He came to the conclusion that it was "concubine."

Buck Bigthumb had had little education. Very little. In the night he lay awake thinking of the word. He was ignorant of its meaning.

He had a vague idea that he had heard it before. A soldier at Port Darwin had used it in the company of Buck, but he had never explained what it meant. Yet it had left a queer feeling in the mind of the cowboy. He had thought of it as a "bad word." A word that should not be uttered in public. A word that should not be spoken before females. Then why the devil did the fat and dissolute Quong-li apply it to the girl, Fairy Lily?

Buck made comparisons between China and the United States. They were unfavorable to the former. His stay in Shanghai had proved to him that many happenings in the Chinese city would have not been permitted in any American town. He expressed himself aloud in the hot darkness. "No, they darned well wouldn't," he growled. "I guess we're a whole lot cleaner than these yeller dogs." The word "we" comforted him. He was an American. An Indian, yes, but an American Indian with American manners. He would stay around and see what he could do to help Fairy Lily. She had been educated by American nuns so she had ideas of American life.

QUONG-LI was ready for the journey the next morning. The pen where the bull was confined was at the extreme end of the Chinaman's property. Quong rode in a sedan chair while Buck straddled a donkey. Number One wife, the three Chinese women and Fairy Lily farewelled them. Buck thought that the Manchu girl looked tearful.

At the end of an hour's ride Buck sighted a circular building with walls some fifteen feet in height. Quong pointed excitedly. "Heem locked up!" he screamed.

Buck was amazed. When they reached the huge corral the Chinaman explained. Under pressure from the local police he had been forced to erect the walled building and enclose the bull within it. Two coolies, acting as guards, were sitting on top of the wall when the visitors arrived. Two others, who had been on night duty, were asleep in a nearby hut. The police had ordered a guard night and day on the American animal.

Filled with wonder Buck wished to see the bull at once. He climbed by a bamboo ladder to the top of the wall, Quong, on the ground, screaming warnings about the danger. Quong had no desire to see the animal. He remained in his sedan chair.

Buck reached the top of the wall, straddled it and stared at the lone prisoner. A big longhorn standing quietly in the middle of the filthy yard. A yard that had never been cleaned since the unfortunate animal had been thrust into it.

For fifteen minutes he stared, oblivious of the yells of Quong-li. He felt strangely upset. He had a feeling that he was not in China. The sight of the beast in the filth of the corral had suddenly swept him across oceans. He was in America! He was in Texas! He was on a ranch where he had spent happy days before the war.

Suddenly a thrill of delight passed through his frame. The body of the bull was caked with dirt, but the brand showed! Buck recognized it. He gave a cry of joy. *He recognized the bull!*

The coolies on guard thought that the strange visitor had become suddenly

insane. With fierce energy he dragged the bamboo ladder from outside the wall and dropped one end of it into the pen. The guards screamed of danger, but Buck ignored their yells. He was scrambling down the rickety construction into the dreadful filth of the yard! While they stared he had dropped from the lower rungs and stepped towards the bull!

The longhorn turned his head at hearing Buck's approach. He wheeled, tossed his head and gave every indication that he objected to intruders on his solitary life.

He was on the point of charging when Buck cried out a single word in a voice of thunder. *"Boone!"* he shouted, and his cry could have been heard a mile away, then, as he moved slowly forward, he added, *"Dan'l Boone!* Don't you know me?"

The angry longhorn had paused at the cry of "Boone." It had an effect upon him. He stood in the center of the pen and stared at the man who was slowly approaching.

The words seemed to have stirred his bull brain. He tossed his head as if making an effort to remember, and Buck spoke softly now as he walked towards him. "Boone," he said soothingly, "it's Buck. Buck who fed you when you were a little fellow. Buck Bigthumb who christened you. Gave you the name of a great American, Dan'l Boone."

The watching coolies had ceased their screams. Now they were jabbering answers to Quong-li. They were speaking of magic: extraordinary magic that the visitor was making within the pen. They shouted unbelievable news. The American was reaching out his hands to the bull, the bull who remembered.

Buck touched the animal. He scratched his right ear and whispered to him. "You remember, Dan'l Boone? Remember me at the ranch in Texas? Dear old Texas. Of course you remember? These dirty dogs have locked you up in filth, but I'll get you out. Wait a few minutes and I'll have you free, Dan'l. Wait!"

Buck screamed orders to the coolies on the wall. He cursed them for their slowness. Slowness caused by the paralyzing quality of the scene they had been witness to. He called them *kui-eul-ze*—children of turtles —and threatened to beat them senseless if they didn't show speed. He had taken a quick glance at the inside of the bull prison. There was no opening. The animal had evidently been thrust within and then the opening hurriedly bricked up. Dan'l Boone had been immured like a prisoner in the Middle Ages.

ANGRILY Buck screamed for picks and sledges to break down a portion of the wall. The wild chatter from without told him that Quong-li had been informed of his doings. The ladder by which he had descended was hurriedly drawn up and used to bring the boss Chinaman to the top of the wall.

There, as he nervously peeped at Buck and the bull, he unloosed all the curses of the Chinese tongue. They foamed from his lips. He had sent two coolies for the police. It was murder to unloose the bull. A hundred persons would be killed by the animal. No, a thousand! *I-chien!* Possibly ten thousand! *I-wan!*

Buck waved him away. He wouldn't listen to the threats of the angry yellow man. All his thoughts were directed to the work of rescuing Dan'l Boone from his prison. His patriotism was aroused. An American bull that he had nursed when a small calf was locked up in a filthy yard, and the bull looked to him for help.

Quong disappeared from the wall. A coolie shouted the information that the sedan chair had gone off at a gallop to bring a policeman. The coolie, won over by a promised bribe, tossed a pick into the corral.

Buck attacked the wall. It was Chinese masonry and it crumbled before his vigorous blows. The bull seemed interested. He stood quite close to the cowboy and now and then he gave a low bellow as if to show his appreciation of the effort being made to release him.

Inside an hour Buck had made a hole sufficiently large for the animal to pass through. He took from his pocket the clothesline he had stolen from the Buddhist Monastery, tied it round the horns of the beast and led him through. The longhorn unloosed a great bellow of delight.

"Now," said Buck, "we must beat that Chinaman to his home. There's a lady there, Dan'l, who wants our help," and saying that he sprang upon the back of the bull and jabbed him with his heels.

Men and women working in the rice fields shrieked with fear as the galloping bull appeared on the country road. Some stood petrified with fear, while others threw down their implements and fled. Pedestrians on the road leapt over fences, calling on their gods to protect them. A startled countryside saw the parade.

The bull caught up with the sedan chair carrying Quong. The coolies dropped the handles when they heard the noise made by the hoofs of Dan'l. They took to the rice fields, leaving Quong in the center of the road. Buck waved to him as he passed at a gallop and the Chinaman hurled curses in return. A sharecropper fired a gun at Buck, but the missiles of old nails and bits of iron whistled over his head.

THE house of Quong-li occupied a commanding position in the walled town. A watching coolie saw the approach of Buck when the bull was half a mile away. He shouted the news to the Number One wife and she ordered the gates of the courtyard closed. Swiftly the news was conveyed to the town gatekeeper. As Buck rode towards the gate the fellow tried to close it, but the cowboy called on Dan'l Boone for an effort. The beast charged and the gatekeeper fled for his life.

Up the narrow winding street Buck steered the bull to the house of Quong. Now he was thrilled by the sight that met his eyes. The gateman was struggling to close the heavy gate but his efforts were made futile by the opposition of a slim girl who fought him with her fingernails and her feet. It was Fairy Lily, a Manchu wildcat as she struggled to keep a passage for the cowboy.

Buck didn't know it at the moment, but he heard the story later. In the history of the Manchu Dynasty there is a thrilling tale concerning a great Manchu general who, after the conquest of China, became the Emperor Chien-Lung. During the invasion the general's horse fell with an arrow in his heart, but the rider was unhurt. Picking himself up he jumped upon the back of a blue-skinned buffalo in a nearby field and continued the pursuit of the fleeing Chinese. This story was known to Fairy Lily, and the sight of Buck galloping towards the gate on the back of Dan'l Boone stirred all her Manchu blood. She fought the orders of the Number One wife and did it with such vigor that Buck rode in in triumph.

The girl, being the only receptionist—the others having fled to their quarters and barred the doors—the gallant cowboy did what seemed to be expected of him. He leaned down from the back of the longhorn and took Fairy Lily in his arms. She made no objection, and while they were still embracing joyously the sedan chair of Quong came through the untended gate and made the Chinaman a witness to the affectionate greeting.

The coolies carrying the chair, finding themselves so close to the bull, dropped the handles and fled, leaving Quong stranded in the courtyard. An insane Chinaman now. He cursed Buck and Fairy Lily. He ordered the cowboy to take the bull from the yard so that he could climb out of the chair, but Buck, instead of complying, moved Dan'l Boone closer to the gaudy conveyance and Quong screamed as the bull sniffed at the door, blowing foam over the occupant.

Fairy Lily whispered to Buck and retired, then the cowboy spoke to the imprisoned Chinaman. His words were quiet and carried a dash of humor. "When I rescued you from the toughs that had robbed you," he began, "you promised me one tenth of the boodle that the footpads had to give back. When I mentioned the matter to you yesterday you dodged away. Listen. If you give me this longhorn I'll call it square. What say?"

"Take heem!" screamed Quong. "Take heem queeck! Get out! You one bad mans!"

"Careful boy," said Buck. "Watch your tongue. This bull has a lot of hate packed up against you for your cruelty."

Dan'l Boone tossed his head, flinging nostrils of foam over Quong. The terrified Chinaman tried to crawl under the seat.

Buck laughed loudly, mounted the bull and rode out of the courtyard.

The whispered words of Fairy Lily directed his steps. He turned towards the gate of the town. The terror inspired by the bull gave him free passage. Scared Chinamen peeped at him from tiny windows. A policeman and three soldiers came around an angle of the crooked streets, fell over each other at the sight of Dan'l and fled at top speed. The gatekeeper was absent.

Fairly Lily had whispered of a meeting place. She had named a grove of tamarind trees immediately outside the town. Buck halted there. He gathered a bundle of green stuff for Boone, washed the dirt off the animal as he waited and kept a close eye on the house of Quong. Now he rebuked himself for leaving without the girl, but her instructions had been implicit. She had wished to collect some Manchu treasures that were in her quarters and she had ordered him forward alone. She would join him in the grove.

Sitting in the lengthening shadows of the trees he considered his actions. Were they correct? He recalled the conversation of Quong and that of the girl. Quong's purchase of Fairy Lily had taken place only a few days before Buck's arrival at the homestead. Quong had been on an opium bout in a neighboring village, so the chances were that he had not interfered with the girl during the time she had been in his house.

FAIRY LILY came when the night crept over the countryside. Breathless and excited. She had slipped from the house

without being seen. The occupants were all upset by the happening of the afternoon. Quong had collapsed. He had been carried to his bedroom and the whole female section of the settlement was endeavoring to soothe him.

"We must get away at once!" cried the girl. "The soldiers will be after us!"

Buck was amused. "Not the ones I saw," he said. "But we'll move if you wish it."

It was dark now, but Buck lifted Fairy Lily onto the back of Dan'l Boone. He took the rope in his hand and stepped out beside them. The girl whispered of robbers, but the cowboy laughed. "None will attack us," he said. "This bull has earned a reputation in this part of the country. You should have seen them hopping over fences and galloping through rice fields when I was riding by."

The road followed the river, and before dawn they approached a walled village. They waited till the gate was opened, then they rode in. They stopped at a small Chinese hotel and Buck demanded two rooms.

"One," whispered Fairy Lily.

"Two," said Buck. "That is for today at least. We might find a missionary around here who will marry us."

They put Dan'l Boone in a stall with a bundle of greenstuff and ate their breakfast on the bamboo-shaded terrace. Buck was delighted; Fairy Lily's joy was immense.

After breakfast Buck hunted through the village and found an aged American missionary. He had been in China for thirty years. Yes, he should have gone home, but he had stayed till the desire had grown so weak that the stinks around him did not trouble him. The country held him.

He listened to Buck's story. He questioned Fairy Lily. He had heard of Quong-li as a dissolute person with frightful scandals connected with his name. Had the girl any voice in the sale by which she had become the property of the Chinaman? Fairy Lily shrieked a negative. She had been sold by creditors of her father after his failure. She wept before the aged missionary. She would commit suicide if she were forced to return to the house of Quong.

The gentle old man considered the matter for a long while, then with a sigh he consented to perform the service. He blessed the pair after the ceremony. Fairy Lily, much excited, kissed his worn cheek.

"Now," said Buck, smiling down at his wife, "we can cut expenses by getting rid of the extra room. Married life is cheaper."

That afternoon they moved on. Fairy Lily had a fear of the vengeance of Quong.

IT WAS in a walled town some thirty *li* from the place where they were married that Buck started his exhibition of fancy rope throwing. It was a solution of the money problem. China was cheap, but one had to have a little money to meet the expenses of the day.

Buck, in himself, was a curio to the country folk. He dressed in a manner that made him noticeable. He was traveling with a great horned beast the like of which they had never seen, and he did wonders with a rope. Besides, his lady was a vision of beauty that made the local women stare.

Fairy Lily came into the show as a self-appointed treasurer. She took a great delight in passing round Buck's big hat for the coins after the performance. She coaxed and bullied the spectators. When a fat Chinaman grunted a *fu-shih* as she held the hat under his nose she clung to him till he handed out a contribution. Buck was thrilled with her activities. Even Dan'l Boone showed an interest in the business. Washed and wearing several colored ribbons around his wide neck he walked with pride around the ring and his deep bellow had the quality of a siren in dragging the folk from the narrow streets.

Buck and Fairy Lily counted the returns in their bedroom. The mass of small *cash* didn't amount to a dollar in American money, but the sum thrilled them. It was sufficient to keep them for a day, and they went to sleep thinking of improvements to their show.

When morning came they moved on to the next village. It was springtime and the country looked beautiful. The annoying odors were in a way squelched by the new blossoms that tried their best to put them to rout. Passersby saluted the newly married couple. They stared at Dan'l Boone with the gay ribbons around his neck.

They ate a meal by the roadside. They were very happy. Buck assured Fairy Lily that such a day had never come into his life and she agreed it was the same with her. She whispered of her fears. The day was so glorious that she thought some terrible happening would suddenly disrupt their life.

"Nothing can, darling," cried Buck, and forgetful of the promenaders they embraced to the great joy of the simple folk who seemed to enjoy their evident happiness. A blind minstrel, led by a tiny child, stopped before the lovers and played a little tinkling tune on a wooden pipe. Fairy Lily asked him to play another, and this time she sang to it. She bought the child a cake from a traveling merchant and she gave the blind man some coins for which he blessed her.

"I am still afraid," she whispered to Buck. "It is written in the Book of Rites that one should be afraid of great happiness because the gods are jealous."

Buck laughed loudly. "Let them be jealous," he cried. "Nothing can hurt us."

That evening they gave an extraordinary performance. A very rich Chinaman begged them to give a display in his grounds, and he invited all his neighbors. He paid Buck highly for the performance and he gave an amethyst brooch as a souvenir to Fairy Lily. They returned to the small Chinese hotel drunk with joy.

THE disaster that Fairy Lily feared struck them on the following morning. The two were seated on the terrace of the hotel eating their breakfast of small rice-cakes with basins of tea, and watching the stream of hurrying folk in the narrow street. Buck had turned his head for a moment to look at a curious figure of a man dressed out in rags of different colors. When he turned back to his cakes he found beside his bowl a black marble about the size of a large walnut that was still trembling as if it had just been placed there. There was no one on the terrace but himself and Fairy Lily, and the presence of the black object gave him a strange feeling.

Fairy Lily had not seen the marble, but Buck drew her attention to it with a gesture of his hand.

The effect upon her startled him. She dropped the basin that she was carrying to her lips and unloosed a scream of fear. She sprang from her chair and stumbled back from the table as if she thought the black marble would suddenly open and produce a cobra. Buck was thunderstruck by her actions.

"What is it?" he cried. "What is wrong?"

Terror showed on the face of the woman. Her actions suggested that she was on the verge of fainting. Buck hurriedly grasped her and carried her to a bamboo settee.

"Tell me!" he cried. "Why has it frightened you?"

Her whispered words had a coating of horror. "He, Quong, has put the Black Dragons on our track!"

Buck, leaning over his bride, cried out questions. Who were the Black Dragons and why did Fairy Lily fear them?

With terror-dried lips she stammered out words. "They drive people mad," she gasped. "Persons that they are paid to torment! They never escape them!"

Buck was puzzled. His ears drank in her choked words, words that were hobbled by dread. He lowered his head and listened to sentences that were moulded by despair. The Black Dragons, according to Fairy Lily, was an organization of torturers. When hired by a wealthy man they followed the person who had incurred the enmity of the payer and made his life a little hell by placing black marbles near him day and night in such a mysterious manner that the tortured one became insane by their unexplainable tricks.

"I'll break their necks if I catch them!" growled Buck.

"But—but you'll never see them!" panted Fairy Lily. "They have never been seen! Never!"

The boy who had served their breakfast came onto the terrace at that moment and Buck hailed him. Angrily he demanded if the youngster knew anything of the black marble that had been put upon the breakfast table.

The boy approached fearfully. He took one glance at the marble, unloosed a yell of great terror and fled. The puzzled cowboy heard shouts and cries in the service department as the find was reported. Then came

the slippered rush of the proprietor and half a dozen employees.

At a trot the fat boss of the outfit approached the table, stared for an instant at the marble, then cried out an order. An order to Buck. It was a howl of dread, lacking all the politeness that he had shown up to that moment. It was backed up with abuse and threats. From the stream of insulting words Buck understood that he and Fairy Lily were to get off the hotel premises in the quickest possible time and never return.

Buck attempted to argue with the fellow, but the man had become crazed. They were to leave within the minute. The cowboy, standing a yard over the insane yellow man, made a motion as if he would wipe the floor with the landlord, but Fairy Lily intervened. "No, no, no!" she cried. "He is right! He is in danger if he lets us stay! Let us go!"

They left, Buck leading Dan'l Boone, the proprietor and his help urging them forward, the street crowd listening open-mouthed to the denunciations.

ON THE highway Buck questioned Fairy Lily. She knew little, and what she did know was told with quivering lips and a voice that was unsteady. Buck heard of a society of devils that only China, the home of trickery, could produce. For a heavy fee they undertook to torment a person cunningly and continuously. Tirelessly they followed their victim, and by the mysterious arrival of a marble or a coin they played on his nerves till he was distracted. Their power was so great that no one wished to have the tormented one in their house or even to be seen in his company lest they incur the wrath of the society, and in many cases the only escape was suicide.

Buck listened to her words. It seemed un-American to his mind, yet his imagination could conceive the torment brought about by the deviltry of the Black Dragons. Fairy Lily knew nothing of their whereabouts. From somewhere or other a secret agent would come from the society to a rich man who had a grievance against another. This agent collected the money and the torture began.

"And you think that Quong-li is responsible for this?" asked Buck.

"Who else?" demanded Fairy Lily.

"That's all," said Buck. "Don't worry any more. Let's forget it for the moment."

The bright sunshine and the amusing scenes of the road put the incident of the breakfast table out of their minds. By midday they had forgotten it completely. They were young and in love.

They had traveled some eight *li*, about three and a half miles from the hotel out of which they had been evicted when they came to a nice fruit shop on the road. Fairy Lily suggested that they should eat their lunch in the open like the previous day, and Buck decided to purchase an early melon as a dessert. They put it in a bag strapped to the back of Dan'l Boone, and they went on, gathering other commodities for their picnic. They had money from the performance of the previous evening and they bought candied fruit, tiny cakes and noodles from the barrows of wandering cooks.

About two *li* from the fruit stall where they had purchased the melon they found a stunted oak that acted as guard to a poppy field and there they halted for their meal. Buck was gay and he tried his best to lift the sadness from the mind of Fairy Lily. He joked about the different packages of food that they had collected and he forced her to eat when she showed a poor appetite.

"Now we come to the treasure," he said, picking up the early melon.

He sliced it in two with a quick stroke, then he dropped the two halves with a muttered curse. From the interior of ripe pulp there rolled a black marble similar to the one that had appeared mysteriously on their breakfast table!

For a full ten minutes they stared at the thing in silence. Fairy Lily was too terrified to speak, Buck was too angry. At last the cowboy got to his feet. "We are going back to that fruit stall," he said. "We must get to the bottom of this business."

He turned Dan'l Boone and lifted Fairy Lily to the animal's back. He led the beast, silent, his jaw set. The trickery maddened him. He longed for something or somebody upon whom he could put his strong hands.

He wondered if such a game could be played in the United States. He thought not. The country was young and clean in com-

parison with China. It required an old diseased country to hatch out the devilish scheme which was tormenting him and Fairy Lily. Filled with a great anger they reached the stall where they had purchased the melon.

Quietly Buck talked. Did the melon man remember him? He had bought a melon there some hours ago? The Chinaman said he remembered the honorable stranger perfectly. Was there anything wrong with the purchase?

Buck took the black marble from his pocket and thrust it before the face of the fellow.

The man gave a yell that stopped all the pedestrians on the road for a full mile. He endeavored to run, but Buck caught his loose jacket and held him. He wished to know from whom he had bought the melon and when.

The poor stuttering wretch was so terrified by the sight of the marble that he couldn't answer. His wife came to his aid. She explained that they had bought the piece from a traveling hawker an hour before they had sold it to Buck. She didn't know the man. Neither her nor her husband had touched the fruit. They had simply placed it on the stand and it had rested there till the honorable stranger had purchased it.

Buck let the fellow go. He was greatly puzzled. He had found no sign that the melon had been "tapped," and if it had been monkeyed with by the itinerant hawker how did the man know that he, Buck, would be the purchaser?

Fairy Lily took him by the arm. "Let us go on," she whispered. "We will get out of their reach."

"I am thinking of returning to Quong's house," growled the cowboy. "I have an inclination to break his neck!"

"No, no!" cried Fairy Lily. "He is rich. He would have you put in prison. No, we must get far away from him!"

A beggar who looked as if he might be a hundred years of age hobbled along with Buck and Fairy Lily, his claw outstretched, his whining voice demanding alms. Buck, who could think of nothing but the demons who were tormenting him, looked at the wrinkled face of the beggar and put a soft question. Did the old one know anything concerning a crowd of bad people who were known as the Black Dragons?

The effect of the question on the ancient was extraordinary. Up to that moment he had great difficulty in dragging his legs through the dust at a pace that kept up with the easy walk of Buck, but the query electrified him. He bolted forward at a speed that would do credit to a youth of twenty. His begging pouch fell from his shoulders but he disregarded it, although other travelers, with loud shouts, drew his attention to his loss. He burst through a fence of osier bushes by the roadside, threshed through the water in a rice field and disappeared in a tree clump on the far side. The people on the road, who had watched the flight, glanced queerly at the bull and Buck and Fairy Lily, then with much strange jabbering they went on their way.

THEY gave no performance that evening in the village they entered at sundown. They were too upset. They stayed at a Chinese inn, a *Ko-chan* of the lowest type, indescribably filthy and uncomfortable. They ate a dreadful meal of pork and bean curds and went to their room.

Before retiring Buck locked the door and also the small window, then he made a minute search of the room. There was little furniture—the bed, a rickety chair and a strip of matting on the floor. The latter the cowboy took up and shook till Fairy Lily protested against the dust that he raised.

"I'm in a temper," he said. "If I catch one of those devils there's going to be a murder."

Fairy Lily tried to soothe her angry husband, but the events of the day had roused his Indian blood. He longed for a tangible enemy that he could throttle.

He lay awake through long hours of darkness, listening to the clamor of gamblers in the lower rooms of the inn, and it was near dawn when he fell asleep.

He woke with a start. It was plain daylight. Fairy Lily was sleeping peacefully. Buck lay for a few minutes trying to puzzle out what had roused him. Failing to find an answer he rose and, without disturbing his wife, he started to dress. He glanced

at the door and the window as he sat on the rickety chair. They seemed to be in the state he had left them on the previous evening, their old-fashioned locks, plain to his eyes, were seemingly untouched.

He put on his shirt and trousers, then his socks. It was then that he noticed that a decorated headstall he had bought for Dan'l Boone on the route had slipped from a peg to the floor. Wondering, but finally dismissing the thought that it had been touched by an intruder, he reached down and picked up a shoe. He tilted it to place it on his right foot when, to his great amazement and sudden fury, *a black marble rolled from the shoe, dropped to the floor and raced across the room!*

Buck's cry of anger awakened Fairy Lily. She sat up in bed and watched the marble with frightened eyes till it had stopped rolling.

Neither spoke. Buck put on his shoes, laced them, walked across the room and picked up the marble. It was identical with the two others that had been mysteriously thrust under his notice. He sat down on the bed beside the woman.

Fairy Lily started to speak. "The only way to stop the persecution is by my death," she said quietly. "Then you will be free. I have brought trouble on you. Great trouble. I asked your assistance and you gave it, never thinking of the torture that would come to you. Now I must go to the place of my gods and leave you free."

Her words infuriated Buck. Angrily he told her that she was talking nonsense, then, wishing to find someone on whom he could vent his temper, he dashed from the room and found the landlord of the inn. Buck asserted that his room had been entered during the night, but the fat owner was indignant. Such a thing was impossible he cried. Rumors had been circulated regarding the presence of robbers in the town, and he, the landlord, had hired a special guard who had been promenading around the inn all that night. What had been stolen from the honorable stranger?

Buck forgot at that moment his unfortunate dealings with a former landlord. In his anger he took the marble from his pocket and thrust it at the fat man. He shouted his reply. Nothing had been stolen, but the thief had left him a little present in the shape of a black marble.

The owner of the inn took one glance at the object, staggered against the flimsy wall, slipped to his knees and lay gurgling on the mat.

Buck tried to pick the fellow up, but the Chinaman shrieked protests. He didn't wish his lodger to touch him. The cowboy, to him, was unclean. He must get out of the inn at once or he would contaminate the establishment.

The words did not please Buck. To think that he would soil the filthy hovel made him furious. He stooped and slapped the fat greasy cheeks of the hotel man and then the smelly warren became alive. The shouts of the fellow brought his servants and a score of boarders. They fell upon Buck, burying him under their sweaty bodies, screeching like a million fiends.

FAIRY LILY heard the riot and came out of the room to inquire. The hotel man had been dragged out of the mass of bodies and was sitting up on the landing. He saw Fairy Lily and shrieked an order. His wolves sprang upon her, carried her bodily through the narrow passages and tossed her carelessly into the roadway.

Buck fighting a dozen or more did not see her removal, but when he finally fought himself free and found that his wife had been thrown out he gave a very good impersonation of the taking of a Japanese island. He tore part of a handrail from the stairs and using it as a club he swung it at the heads of his assailants. They fled before him. Up and down the passages he pursued them and he paused only when Fairy Lily cried out to him from the road. Gallantly she had run to the rear of the inn and had brought Dan'l Boone out of the stable so that they could retreat when the opportunity occurred.

"Quick! Quick!" she cried. "They will bring the police!"

Buck took her advice. He lifted her onto the back of Dan'l Boone and started the bull at a lively trot towards the open country.

They were certain that the innkeeper would make charges against them, charges that would be upheld by the court and which

would bring heavy penalties. A dense wood covered a stretch of ground between them and the river. They found their way to the darkest spot in the century-old trees and waited. Fairy Lily was unhurt, but Buck had a thousand scratches on face and hands, and bruises innumerable. When Fairy Lily wept, he laughed and tried to cheer her up.

"It's nothing," he said. "Just little scratches. I've had digs from bayonets, hundreds of them."

But her tears flowed without ceasing. She made accusations against herself. She had brought Buck into troubles unending, troubles from which they would never escape.

"Yes, we will," growled Buck. "I've decided on a way."

"What is it?" asked the woman.

"How far do you think we are from the house of Quong?" he asked.

"About four days' march," whispered Fairy Lily.

"Well, we will stay here till night comes down then we will start for his place. I'm finished with retreating. Now I'm going to attack."

"What—what will you do?"

"I'm going to kill him," said Buck joyously. "I'm going to choke the life out of his yellow carcass and sling it out on the road."

Fairy Lily became hysterical. She was against the proposition. Buck would have his head chopped off if he lifted a hand against Quong-li. The Chinaman was a power in the land and Buck had no right to touch him.

"I have a thousand rights!" cried Buck. "What right has that old ruffian to buy you and bring you into his house for—for immoral purposes?"

"The law—the law thinks he has," sobbed Fairy Lily. "It is done all over China."

"Well, Quong won't do it again after I finish with him!" cried the angry Buck. "I'll teach him that one wife is all he has a right to."

Fairy Lily's excitement and tears brought sleep to her. Buck stood on guard. The wood had a haunted appearance which he thought might keep his enemies at bay, and when the night came no Chinaman would be

abroad. He felt happy as he considered the plan he had formed.

BUCK must have dozed when the dusk fell. He woke with a start. He looked around for his wife. Fairy Lily had disappeared from the spot where she had been resting.

A wild fear gripped him. He stood up and softly called her name. There was no answer. He felt his way to the spot where Dan'l Boone was standing. The bull greeted him with a friendly bellow, and Buck, seized with terror, touched the ear of the animal in answer. A feeling of horror gripped him as he did so. His hand had touched the little net bag of Fairy Lily—the bag in which she carried a few Manchu treasures. *It was tied to the horn of the bull.*

The icy hand of terror gripped the heart of Buck. While he stood transfixed one sound alone came to his ears. The noise of the night wind in the trees was stilled, the chatter of night birds and the whine of insects were wiped out. He heard only one terrifying sound—the far-off whisper of the Yangtze as it fought its way down to the sea.

Buck knew. A blessed omniscience came to him. A wisdom that was like a searing flame. Fairy Lily had gone to the river. Gone to the river to wipe out her life, lest the preservation of it would bring the head of Buck under the axe of the executioner!

Of the hours that followed Buck remembered nothing. An insanity possessed him and when it passed all the agony of the moment was sponged from his mind.

But the moments—the absolute moments after the roar of the river came to him, bred happenings that couldn't be recorded. No tracing of them could be stencilled on a human brain. Not as Buck saw them. Snaky lianas clutched at his throat and tried to strangle him. Great trees, a hundred times bigger than the old trees of the wood, were flung up in his path to block his running feet. But hope came to him. A great hope. The roar of the river became louder. Louder. It was deafening. It filled his ears with a sound that put a force into his legs. He marveled at it. He never knew that sound could be turned into force in a way that made him leap over great obstacles as if they didn't exist.

A Chinese moon came out for an instant and flashed the river bank before him. On a rocky point he saw her. Silver white and shapely. Face to the river. Bowing to it. Making sweet obeisance to her executioner that would save Buck from the prosaic axe.

Buck screamed out to her but the river swamped his voice. The river wanted her. Wanted her beauty and the spirit of love hidden in her heart.

Now Buck was close. Running along the strip of rock that bored into the stream. She was plain to him. Naked. She was making her last bow to the water. She was moving towards it.

Buck hurled himself forward, arms flung out to reach her slim ankles. Blinded with tears he waited for the strong fingers to tell him the news, but it was the touch of her flesh that cried the joyful intelligence to him. He had pulled her down on the rock when she was a foot from the angry stream!

Not leaving go of her he crept up beside her. "Why? Why?" he gasped.

"Let me go!" she breathed. "A body given to the gods will save you."

"I'll give the one the old gods want," growled Buck. "I'll give them Quong's. It's fatter and less beautiful than yours and no sweetheart wants it."

Leaning on each other they fought their way back to Dan'l Boone. He received them with a soft bellow of joy.

BUCK and Fairy Lily were four days on the march to the village of Quong-li. They avoided the places where they had trouble, but they had a joyous reunion at the village where they were married. The old missionary was delighted to see them, but he grew sad when Buck told him of the damnable persecution they had suffered.

"And why, my son, are you going back to the place where this bad man lives?" he asked.

Fairy Lily was for the moment in the mission garden and out of hearing. "I am going to kill him," said Buck softly. "Yes, with my hands."

The missionary implored him to consider his action, but it was no use. The Indian

blood was hot for revenge. They left in the afternoon, heading for the village of Quong-li, Buck's face set and drawn, Fairy Lily weeping and praying to her particular gods.

Near the big gate of the village they found an unusual excitement. A stream of persons passed in and out of the cluster. Buck, who had thought of leaving Fairy Lily at the tamarind grove where he had waited for her on the night of her elopement, asked a coolie for the reason of the flurry and the wild jabbering.

The coolie wiped tears from his eyes before he answered. Didn't the honorable stranger know the sad news? The Honorable Quong-li, the richest and most distinguished man in the village was dying!

Buck unloosed a roar of laughter, a mad wild roar that astonished the crowd. He ran to inform Fairy Lily. Quong was on his death bed. Her prayers to her little gods had been answered.

Fairy Lily dropped on her knees, her slim body shaken with joy. Buck cried out to her to await his coming and he joined the crowd that swept up the narrow street towards the gate of Quong's house. All kinds of persons who were interested in the death. Relatives, friends, Chinese priests, silk merchants, flower sellers, and weeping beggars, hoping their faked tears would bring a few coins from the throng.

There was no control. No guard at the gate. Buck was unnoticed. He was carried by the compact mob across the big courtyard where he had lassoed the coolie only seven days before. Jammed between two Buddhist priests he was swept into the very bedroom of Quong.

He was close to the bed. To the huge bed covered with eiderdown quilts on which the dying man rested. It was uncanny. The man to whose side he had been traveling fast for four days with the idea of murder in his mind, was there before him, slipping quietly into another world. He felt a little stunned.

Close to the bed, hedged in by a protective barrier of flowers, stood the Number One wife and the three concubines, all looking as if they too were passing from the world. They wept in a blind automatic manner and their sobs blended with the mutterings of the priests and the noise of gongs that were pounding slowly. The odors of incense were overpowering. Buck thought that Quong must possess a strong constitution to stand up to the stench.

PRESENTLY there was a disturbing interruption. A tall vigorous Chinaman, possessed of the manner of a man of affairs, fought his way to the bedside. He upset the strange atmosphere of the big chamber. In a loud voice he made a demand of the dying man. A demand for money.

The room listened. The muttering priests were silent, the gong-beaters' hands were paralyzed. All wished to hear what the interrupter was saying.

Buck caught a word. Another. He thrilled. He pushed a mourner roughly out of his way. The big man was demanding money for a debt Quong-li had contracted. He asserted loudly that it wouldn't be paid by Quong's heirs. Why? Because it was an illegal debt and the courts wouldn't recognize it.

Quong-li opened his eyes. The big man was continuing his loud demands. Payment must be made before Quong passed. He stated the law. It was a secret debt with no papers to warrant a demand.

Quong's eyes fell on Buck. A look of low cunning passed over his face. He lifted a finger and drew the attention of the big debt collector to Buck, then he spoke clearly. "Heem payee you," he said. "Payee you velly well." He closed his eyes. They were his last words.

A great joy came to Buck as he met the questioning eyes of the debt collector. A happiness that he had seldom known rushed through his body. He knew the nature of the debt that Quong had contracted! It concerned himself! Concerned his wife, the slim and beautiful Fairy Lily! The money had been spent on them both! Spent for torture!

Buck nodded to the collector. He made a motion to the fellow to follow him and he fought his way roughly through the packed crowd. The debt collector followed eagerly. He looked immensely pleased. Quong was dead, but a new man that he had never seen was willing to pay the debt.

Buck remembered the path to the room

he had occupied during his short stay in the house. He led the way, the big man on his heels. They entered, and Buck shut the door.

He asked the collector a question. He wished to make sure of the debt before he paid it. Was he right in assuming that it concerned a society called the Black Dragons? If it was so, the payment would be immediate.

The other choked in his hurry to get out his words. Yes, yes. It was a debt to the Black Dragons. They had acted for Quong in the matter of plaguing a runaway concubine and the man she had run away with. Quong had promised immediate payment but his illness had prevented it.

"Then," said Buck, "you'll get it now!" And with the words he drove his right fist into the big mouth of the other. "In full," he added, bringing up his left in an uppercut that sent the big man reeling across the room.

The Chinaman was not a pugilist but he was a judo expert. And he had courage. Lots of it.

He picked himself up and rushed. Buck slipped slightly on a rug as the fellow came in. The Chinaman got a grip on his right leg and paralyzed it. The pain was maddening. It ran like a red-hot wire through the cowboy's body, and for the moment he was at the attacker's mercy.

WITH a tremendous effort he broke the grip that the man had on a muscle of his leg. He slammed his two fists into the yellow face, brought up his left knee when the fellow again felt for his leg grip and drove it into his stomach. Words dashed through his mind. Who was he fighting for? Who had been tortured by the unclean devils who received money for their dirty work. "Fairy Lily!" he shouted, as one of his straight body punches knocked the wind out of the collector. "Fairy Lily!" he cried and rocked him with a right swing that would have stopped a charging elephant.

Now he had the debt collector at his mercy. He was too groggy to use the tricks that he was a master of. He staggered around the room, and Buck hit him at will. He fell, picked himself up, rushed and was stopped with a punch in the eyes that blinded him. Down again, but up once more to receive a knockout punch that laid him flat on the floor.

He didn't move, and looked as if he had no intention of taking any exercise for a long while. Buck, standing over him, searched in his own pocket till he found one of the black marbles that had tortured him and Fairy Lily. He placed it in the Chinaman's open hand and closed his fingers around it. "A gift from a very sweet lady," he murmured, but the debt collector didn't hear him. He was in the land of dreams.

Buck went out and closed the door. He walked down the narrow street to the town gate and out to the spot where he had left Fairy Lily. He was happy, intensely so.

He had definite plans which he explained to his girl wife. They left immediately for the village where the old missionary lived, and to the great delight of the holy man they made him a present of Dan'l Boone.

"A fellow American who will make you think of home," said Buck. "His name is Daniel Boone."

"The Mighty Hunter!" cried the missionary. "I know he will make me think of America. I came from Reading, Pennsylvania, where Boone saw the light of day. I thank you for the gift."

They said good-bye to the old man who gave them his blessing, then the pair walked towards the river. Buck spoke. "Now," he said, "we will get a cheap junk passage to Shanghai and then we will try to find a steamer that will take us to a country where there are no stenches."

"Oh, Buck!" cried Fairy Lily. "Is there—is there such a place?"

"Well, there might be a teeny-weeny odor on a very hot day," he admitted, "but any Chinese smell could whip a thousand of America's strongest odors and think it child's play."

"And—and will they let me in?" murmured the girl.

"We'll try," he said. "My old general will speak for me. I've got a bunch of medals I won in this war and he won't forget me. They're great people, sweetheart! Come on for Texas!"

It Sometimes Takes an Expert to Tell the Low-grade from the High-grade in People as Well as in Ore

CARCAJOU

By ROBERT E. PINKERTON

TOM DANIELS and his dog Mike were traversing Lost Valley only because it offered the shortest route. The place was gloomy and desolate. Game shunned it. A trapper could not earn tobacco within its limits. Prospectors took one look and went away.

The frozen wastes were unmarred even by rabbit tracks as Tom broke a snowshoe trail down Lost River and helped Mike drag a small toboggan. He thought only of hurrying to his own trapping grounds in the Moose Lake district, and he was wholly unprepared to find a fresh trail leading down from the bank.

Having been a trapper and woodsman all his life, Tom quite naturally stopped and studied it. All wilderness creatures are curious, men no less than animals, and Tom noted each detail of the fine lacery of webbed imprints.

Thus he was not surprised, when he turned a bend in the stream, to find three men laboriously breaking trail a half mile ahead. Tom kept on, but they did not see him until they turned off to the right bank.

Then they halted abruptly, and the two leaders shifted their rifles to have them ready.

Tom did not stop until he was a few feet away.

"How are you?" he greeted.

"How long you been followin' us?" one of the men demanded harshly.

"Haven't been following you," Tom answered. "Hit your trail where you came off the bank a couple o' miles back."

"Yeah?"

"Listen, feller," Tom retorted. "There's fresh snow and fresh tracks. Go have a look."

He started on downriver, tugging at his toboggan.

"We're not doubting you," a second man said. "Better stop and eat with us."

The speaker touched Tom's arm. He was scarcely more than a boy.

"Come on," he urged. "A strange voice is better'n a drink. And Trost just hates to think he broke trail for somebody."

"Sure!" the third man said with sudden cordiality. "My name's Joe Kaylor, stranger. Pleased to meet you. And this is Billy Rice, who's so hungry for fresh words. Ed—"

But Ed Trost had gone up on the bank. Tom saw a cabin in the thick growth beyond, a heavy drift across the door.

Several things had aroused Tom's suspicions. The mere presence of men in Lost Valley was off color, and his observant glance had already checked off half a dozen details that prompted further doubts. Being of the wilderness, and curious, Tom Daniels left Mike and the toboggan on the trail and followed the others up the bank. As they reached the top they heard Ed Trost cursing violently in the open door.

All three men crowded through. Tom waited, examining the cabin and its surroundings.

"A bear has wrecked the place!" Billy Rice shouted.

TOM stepped inside to find the three staring in helpless amazement. And the place was wrecked. Blankets were torn into

strips, the sheet iron stove had been knocked over, and on the floor was a litter of ashes, beans, sugar, flour, dried fruit, coffee, tea and bits of shredded clothing.

"That's where he got in," Ed Trost said, pointing to a place in the roof where several poles had been pushed aside.

"Bears sleep in winter," Tom objected. "I've been trapping in this country twenty years and never saw one."

"Then what was it?" Joe Kaylor demanded fearfully.

"Looks like carcajou. No other animal plays such tricks."

"Sure!" Trost exclaimed. "A wolverine!"

Tom Daniels now observed the most interesting fact of all. Ed Trost was vastly relieved. Their camp was wrecked, bedding ruined, food rendered unfit. They were far from a source of supplies, in a gameless valley, might be facing starvation, and yet the man's face lighted up.

"Sure it's a wolverine," Trost continued. "I've heard of 'em, getting into cabins and spoiling everything just for pure cussedness. And what they can't tear or break, they scent up so it can't be used."

He talked excitedly, as if he were happy it had been a carcajou.

"But what we going to do?" Joe Kaylor demanded. "Nothing to eat. No bedding."

The ruin was complete. Even a cupboard had been torn from the log wall and the spruce boughs from the bunks. Brown, dead needles were thoroughly mixed with the food. Several slabs of bacon had been clawed. Trost smelled of one, dropped it with an exclamation of disgust.

"Good thing we've got three cabins," Billy Rice said.

Tom Daniels covered his surprise at this by picking up a slab of bacon. He smelled it, examined the claw marks. He studied a shredded blanket and the place where the carcajou had torn a hole through the roof.

"What's a beast want to be that mean for?" Joe Kaylor asked.

Tom hesitated before he replied, and studied the faces of the three men.

"It's his nature," he said at last. "I've known trappers to be driven out by 'em. They'll spring every trap, and steal the bait, and break into cabins and caches."

"Can't they be caught?" Kaylor insisted.

"I've caught several," Tom answered. "You got to catch a carcajou or get out."

"You mean he'll do this to our other cabins?" Billy Rice demanded in alarm.

"If he ain't done so already."

THE statement was a bombshell. Tom Daniels found fresh mystery in the reactions of this strange trio. They were frightened, but they did not speak of their greatest threat, starvation. And in their uncertainty they turned to him. Ed Trost drew three one-hundred-dollar bills from a wallet.

"They're yours if you catch this thing," he said. "Get busy."

Fur prices were very low, and the money would be welcome, but it was wilderness curiosity that drew Tom Daniels.

"All right," he said. "Get going to your next cabin. I want to study the tracks around here."

After he had watched them depart down the river ice, Tom ripped a thin board from a box and went to the rear of the cabin. There, beneath the hole in the roof, he found faint indentations in the newly fallen snow. Using the board as a fan, he blew the snow away, shoveled at the sides and worked down close to the ground. When he had finished he walked to his toboggan on the river, where Mike was curled up asleep.

"We'll cook us a lunch, boy," the trapper said. "We got to think this over, 'cause we never set out before to trap a two-legged carcajou."

Mike looked up with an anxious expression. He was accustomed to hearing Tom discuss the day's events and knew each shade of meaning revealed by his master's tones.

"Those three," Tom continued as he built a fire near the cabin, "are not trapping or prospecting. They're green, and suspicious, and scared. They was afraid of me, and they was afraid it hadn't been a carcajou that wrecked 'em."

He dumped frozen beans into the frying pan and set tea water to boil. Mike's gaze never turned from his master's face.

"A carcajou does a neat job," Tom ex-

plained, "but this was a bit too thorough. The dead spruce needles and flour and beans was too well mixed. The blankets was ripped too regular. The claw marks was spaced even and sharp cut. Looked to me like some nails in a board."

The trapper was pleased with his deductions and Mike's head was cocked on one side and his ears lifted.

"Then," Tom said, "the smell clinched it. What a carcajou can't eat, he scents up so no other animal can. But a carcajou's got his own particular scent and that bacon had nothing but a mink smell. As if that wasn't enough, it was a man's tracks leading from the hole in the roof. The snow quit the middle of last night, a heavy fall of dry snow. I could blow it away with a board. Mr. Carcajou came yesterday morning, I'd say, which gave him plenty of time to get away and have his tracks well covered. Let's eat."

Mike was fed only at night and expected nothing, but he still sat at attention, waiting for every word from his master. Tom grinned at his expression of interest.

"Just how much *do* you understand?" he asked.

THEY went on together, following the trail the strange trio had made.

"I have a strong hunch," Tom said, "that Mr. Carcajou beat 'em to the other cabin. But what's three men who don't trap or prospect want of three cabins, and what they doing in Lost Valley anyhow?"

The trapper was right in his deduction. He met the trio on the trail, returning. They were excited, and yet strangely subdued. Rice and Kaylor looked a bit frightened. Trost was angry.

"You got to get that carcajou!" he exclaimed.

"He wrecked it complete?"

"Same as the other. Come on with us before he gets into the third cabin."

"You would 'a' done better if you'd put everything in one shack and watched it," Tom said.

"That's our business," Trost snarled.

"Easy, Ed," Billy Rice said, and then he explained to Tom. "We've got three claims and we're afraid they'll be jumped. And we thought, in case of a fire, we'd be safer with the stuff divided."

"Nobody'd jump a claim in Lost Valley," Tom answered. "Where's your third shack?"

"Upriver. We came from there this morning."

"Then I'd get back," Tom advised, "You've got a chance if you hurry. Who else has been in Lost Valley this winter?"

The question had a startling effect. Kaylor was aghast.

"Seen signs of somebody?" Trost demanded harshly.

"You told me you was afraid your claims would be jumped," Tom countered. "But you're wasting time. It'll be dark in an hour and I want a look at this second cabin. Maybe Mike can follow the beast. I'll be along later."

Tom hurried on with his dog, for he wanted to determine, while the light was still good, whether the second cabin had been wrecked before the first. If not, less snow would cover the mysterious despoiler's tracks and they might be followed.

The trapper recognized in the destruction of the supplies an attempt to starve out the trio, and his woodsman's soul was revolted by this basest of crimes that the wilderness knows. Yet Tom was aware, too, that the presence of the three men in Lost Valley was nothing to their credit. Their actions had been strange, and they had lied about mining claims.

"Rice, the young one, seems all right," the trapper commented to Mike. "But Kaylor is the cunning sort and Trost is downright bad. I wonder—"

NOTHING he found at the second cabin served to turn his thoughts from the three men. It had been wrecked before the other, and the tracks of the despoiler were covered by deeper snow.

"They winter in Lost Valley only because they want to hide out," Tom said as he stared at the ruined food, while Mike sniffed with interest. "No mineral, no fur, and the three cabins don't make sense. That three hundred dollars Trost offered me so quick—he had a lot more in his wallet, too."

Tom went outside.

"Seems logical," he continued. "They hide, and someone they're afraid of finds 'em and tries to starve 'em out. Maybe they should be starved, and maybe I should 'elp 'em. Rice seemed decent."

He looked at Mike and grinned.

"Nothing to butt into," he chuckled. "This two-legged carcajou might take a pot-shot at us. We could leave now, and it's the wise thing to do. But I'd hate to go away and never learn what it's all about."

He went back on the trail, three miles to the middle cabin and on upriver. Darkness had come long before but the sky was clear. Just before he turned off at the point where he had first encountered the strangers' trail, he saw that they had stopped to examine tracks in the snow.

Mike growled, and the hair on his back rose.

"Sure it's a wolf," Tom grinned. "You never fooled me on one yet, and I've seen enough of their tracks."

He went on through two miles of forest to a lake, and after a half mile along the shore he reached the third cabin. The door was thrown open at his knock.

"Time you got here," Trost said excitedly. "That beast is after this cabin now."

"So?" Tom said as he looked around. The place most evidently had not been touched.

"Back on the trail!" Kaylor exclaimed. "We saw its tracks. It came from the north side, crossed the river and was headed this way. Didn't you see them?"

Tom stooped to brush snow from his moccasins.

"But he can't do any harm long's you're here," he evaded while considering this matter of their having mistaken the wolf's tracks for those of a carcajou.

"Can't stay in camp all the time," Trost growled. "Got to work our claims. Let's get after this beast now."

"Sure!" Kaylor agreed. "Run him down in deep snow."

Tom considered. Billy Rice was washing dishes. Now that the young man was without his cap, the trapper had a better look at his face, and liked it.

"All right," Tom suddenly agreed. "Shootin's the only way we can get him because I haven't any traps with me. But I've got to eat. The lad here can get me a snack while you two go back to the river and pick up that trail. When I've eaten, Rice and I'll make a circle of the lake to see if we can cut it."

Trost looked at Tom Daniels with quick suspicion.

"If you're worrying about this place being unwatched, I'll leave Mike inside," Tom said. "No carcajou will come near with a dog watching."

"That's it!" Kaylor exclaimed. "We may get a shot at him."

"Don't let him rest," Tom said. "He can't travel fast in this deep snow and maybe you can tree him."

Trost still hesitated but Kaylor handed him a rifle.

"Hurry it, Ed," he urged. "It's that beast or us."

Billy Rice was already preparing a supper for Tom, and Trost let himself be pushed out the door. After a few minutes Tom went outside to get some moose meat from the toboggan for Mike.

"I thought so," he said to the dog. "Trost didn't want me and the lad alone together, but he's more scared of starving."

THE trapper did not talk while he ate, and, as he had agreed, he left Mike in the cabin when, after the meal, he and Billy Rice departed. But when they reached a point on the lake shore half a mile above, Tom stopped and filled his pipe.

"Son," he said, "you don't know much about mining."

"Don't need to," Billy laughed. "Ed and Joe know a lot."

"You their pardner?"

"Better than that. They found the gold but I'm to get a half interest."

"For how much?"

"Ten thousand."

"It's getting a lot lighter," Tom said. "Moon must be coming up. You paid over the money?"

"Sure, but not until I saw the ore. We've got 'most as much as I paid already."

Tom's pipe was out, and leisurely he lit it again.

"You mine it yourself?"

"Most of it. I was in the lake cabin, Ed

the upper river, and Joe the lower. We were working separately, driving tunnels, trying to prove out the best claim before spring. Joe shot a couple of holes a month ago, and after one look he came running after Ed and me. I—why, I never knew there could be gold like that! Handfuls of it!"

"It sometimes happens," Tom assured him. "And I suppose you sunk your roll in it."

"Every cent. But we're sitting pretty now. With my money, and what we'll get for the ore we take out this winter, we can bring in machinery and have a real mine. This isn't finding that carcajou, though."

Tom Daniels did not display any concern about the carcajou. He was wondering just how much he should tell this eager youth, and, because he was a woodsman, caution triumphed and he decided to remain silent.

Then the question of what he should do next was taken out of his hands. From down the lake came the faint sound of a barking dog.

"The carcajou's at the cabin!" Billy Rice exclaimed, and he started swiftly on the back trail.

Tom followed. He knew Mike would not bark unless there was cause, and he was equally certain no carcajou was prowling about the cabin. The only explanation he could find was that Trost, his suspicions aroused, had returned.

AS THEY neared the cabin, they saw that a dim light was shining in the window, and Tom and Billy had left the place dark. Billy pushed the door open and they entered together.

"Them guns is red hot," a hard voice sounded. "Lay 'em down before they burn your hands."

Tom obeyed. Billy was slower, and a rifle barrel poked him in the ribs. Tom turned to see a little old man glaring at them with eyes in which hatred burned.

But that hatred quickly faded, gave way to amazement.

"Who are you?" he demanded of the trapper.

"Tom Daniels, from the Moose Lake country."

"Where's Trost and Kaylor?"

Tom answered slowly, and while holding the stranger's gaze. "They're out hunting a carcajou, one that walks on his hind legs."

"Huh! Them tinhorns! Dirty crooks! Sneak killers! They couldn't tell a carcajou track from a rabbit's."

"They couldn't tell the smell of a mink from one," Tom admitted with a grin.

The little old man snorted contemptuously. He still held a cocked rifle and did not relax his vigilance.

"But I want to tell you something," Tom continued, and suddenly his voice was harsh. "If you've hurt my dog I'll tie your legs in a knot around your neck and choke you to death."

"I've drove too many dogs ever to kill a good one," was the unconcerned reply. "Yours is muzzled and tied under that bunk. But two crooks like Trost and Kaylor! Who's this lad?"

"I'm their partner," Billy Rice spoke up heatedly. "They're not crooks. We've got a rich mine here and—"

"How long you been pardners with them rats?"

"Since we struck ore two months ago. They found the mine, but they were broke. I came in with them. Met 'em at Jeffers' trading post. They weren't sure of it then but they played fair. I never put up a cent until we struck rich ore. Then I turned over ten thousand dollars for a half interest."

The burning hatred faded from the old man's eyes as the youth talked.

"Where you from, son?" he asked Billy.

"St. Louis."

"How long you been in Alaska?"

"Since summer. My uncle died and left me some money, and I'd always wanted to come up here and prospect."

"Got any of that ore here?"

"There's some in that sack in the corner."

"Dump it on the table beside the candle. . . . And I'll blow your head off if you make a funny move."

BILLY RICE complied. The stranger waved him and Tom Daniels into a corner and, without relaxing his caution, examined several pieces of the broken rock.

"That's the final proof," he muttered,

and suddenly he straightened, his eyes blazing again.

"Daniels," he burst forth, "you believe this ore came from Lost Valley?"

"I know it couldn't. This valley is queer. Like the Ten Thousand Smokes place out to the westward. Volcanic. Not even any game in it."

"But I dug it out myself," Billy Rice protested furiously.

"Son," the old man said gently, "I'm glad to hear you say that. It stamps you for a fool, though that's to be understood, but it likewise saves your life. Daniels, untie your dog and put him outside."

Tom complied. Billy watched in perplexity.

"What's this mean?" the youth demanded.

"The old sourdough's right, lad," Tom answered. "I knew Trost and Kaylor was cheap crooks from lookin' at 'em. I knew it was a man and not a carcajou that wrecked the cabins. And from what you told me down the lake, I saw you were being gypped with a salted mine. The rest of it—"

"Never mind the rest of it!" the old man snarled. "And I'll bet Trost and Kaylor was planning to leave you here to watch the mine while they went out in the spring with the ore. That so?"

Billy admitted it was.

"You'd never seen them or your money or the ore again, even if you lived to get out yourself. It's an old game with a new twist in it, and—"

Outside the cabin, Mike began to growl.

"Daniels, let your dog in and take a peek down the lake to see if them carcajou hunters ain't coming," the old man said.

When Tom reported that they were, he was ordered to roll under a bunk, out of sight against the wall. Billy Rice was forced beneath another bunk.

"And stay hid," the old man barked. "There's goin' to be more volcanic action in Lost Valley, and them's the safest places I know of."

Again the old sourdough's eyes were ablaze with hatred. Tom had considered refusal—but not when he caught those danger signals. He had never seen this old man before, but he knew the type. The old man was one of the prospectors who had come in '98 and had spent most of their lives in lonely valleys. They were not only dangerous as dynamite but had uncanny competence.

They waited in silence for ten minutes. Then Mike began to growl again. Tom saw the stranger step back to be behind the door, and in a moment Trost and Kaylor entered.

For an instant there was no sound. Tom Daniels could see three pairs of feet, all motionless.

"Here's your carcajou," the old man said. "Come and get him."

Still the feet remained motionless. Tom could see also the butts of two rifles on the floor beside Kaylor and Trost.

"Drop them guns!" the old man snarled. "Drop 'em quick or I'll blow your hands off'n 'em. Now! Back up against that wall. I'm goin' to talk to you but I want you far away. The breaths of rotten rats like you would poison an honest man."

HIS voice had become shrill as his rage mounted. Tom wished he could see the faces of the two across the room.

"I was going to starve you out," their captor said. "I knew you couldn't tell a carcajou from a field mouse. I was going to see you hungry, and cold, so I could watch your rotten souls shiver. I was going to drive you back every time you tried to get out of Lost Valley, and when you was down to your last breath I was going to come and laugh at you dying. But this trapper, wanderin' in by chance, spoiled all that. You've got a break, you two. You're going to die easy."

"You crazy?" Trost demanded in a shaking voice.

"Yep! Plumb crazy! Crazy as a carcajou. I been crazy ever since I found Barry Sloat with his head mashed in."

An instant of silence and then a shrill yelp from the stranger.

"Hah! That got you! And that ore on the table! Barry and me worked so hard for that I can remember every piece of it. But that wouldn't go in court. Neither would them tracks I found at our camp, or fifty miles downriver. Nothing would go in court, but it all goes with me. I know you

two killed Barry Sloat sure as I know my name is Gold Dust Jimmie Barnes. I can't prove it to a judge's way o' thinkin', but I couldn't let my pardner lie there knowin' I hadn't lifted a hand. So I took after you. And now I've caught you."

The last had a terrible sound. Tom Daniels, lying beneath the bunk, started when he heard the words, though he knew what was coming.

"You're plumb crazy!" Ed Trost exclaimed. "We never heard of Barry Sloan."

"That got you!" Jimmie Barnes shrieked. "I said Barry Sloat, not Sloan, and Sloan was his name. You saw him at Jeffers' place, and followed him back when he brought our supplies. And now, with that ore you stole from us, you try the old saltin' trick on a kid so young and green you couldn't light him with a blow torch. How do you want to die?"

"You're crazy," Trost repeated weakly.

"I've admitted it. Who wouldn't be after losin' a pardner like Barry? And to a couple o' stinkin' rats like you! Crackin' him over the head when he was cookin' a meal for you! You want a chance to run for it, or will you take it standin' up, pretendin' in the last minute that you are men?"

TROST and Kaylor did not reply. Tom Daniels could see only their feet, and he found them expressive. Trost's suddenly disappeared upward.

A rifle roared. Trost struck the pole floor like a sack of grain.

Kaylor started toward the door. The rifle spoke a second time.

Then again there was silence. Tom Daniels waited.

"Come out, you two," Gold Dust Jimmie Barnes said at last in a tired voice. "The eruption's over."

They found him sitting on a bench, absently stroking Mike's fur.

"I'm law abidin'," he said. "But I couldn't 'a' proved a thing against this pair with lawyers buttin' in. And Barry Sloan was the finest pardner ever in Alaska."

"You've got nothing to explain, or worry about," Tom Daniels said gently.

He picked up the two rifles on the floor, fired each one out the door, and then laid them beside the dead men.

"This is the way we'll report it," Tom continued. "I happened through here, comin' from Jeffers' post, and found Billy, this lad, on the river. He was worrying about his pardners. Hadn't seen 'em for a week. So I came up here with him, and this is how we found 'em. Each wanted that ten thousand in cash."

"Thanks," Jimmie Barnes said. "And you help the lad get his money, what he gave those two."

But Billy Rice was not thinking of that.

"You mean that the gold I dug out of the tunnel myself never—never—"

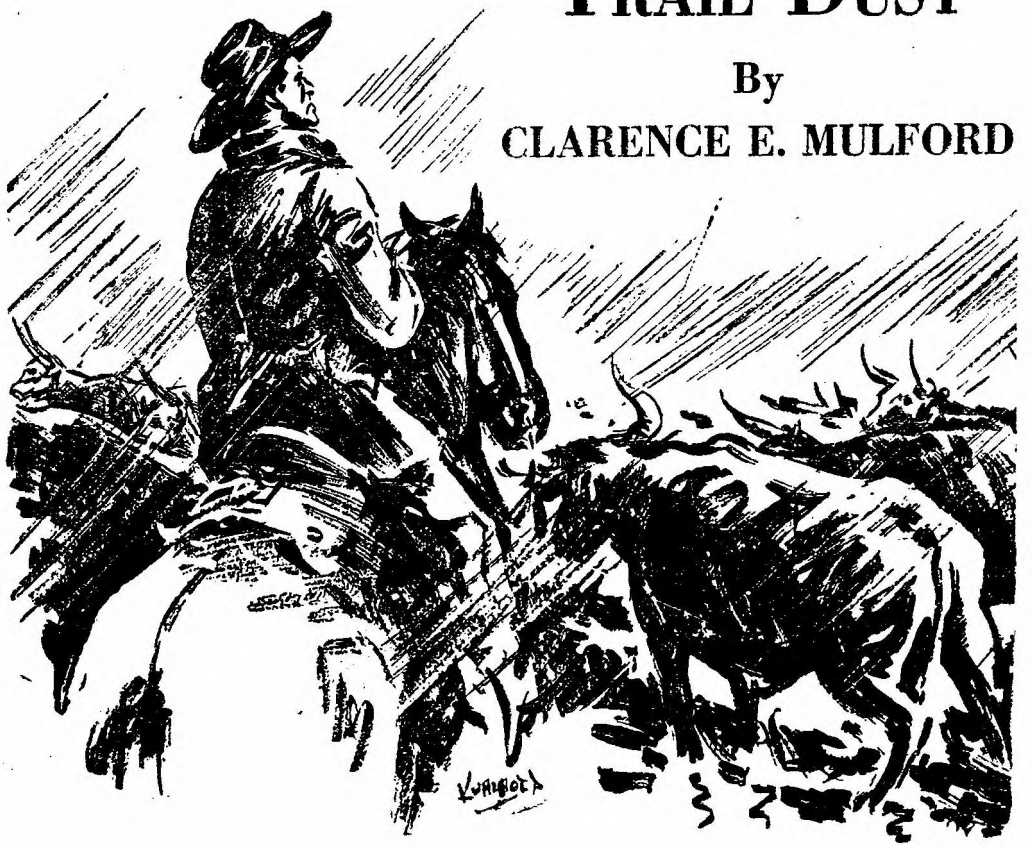
"Never grew in Lost Valley," Jimmie Barnes concluded the sentence. "But don't worry about it, lad. It was low grade. Mostly silver and copper. Barry and me cached the good stuff. Only these two, they just didn't know nothing about anything."

"Especially carcajous," Tom Daniels added.

TRAIL DUST

By

CLARENCE E. MULFORD



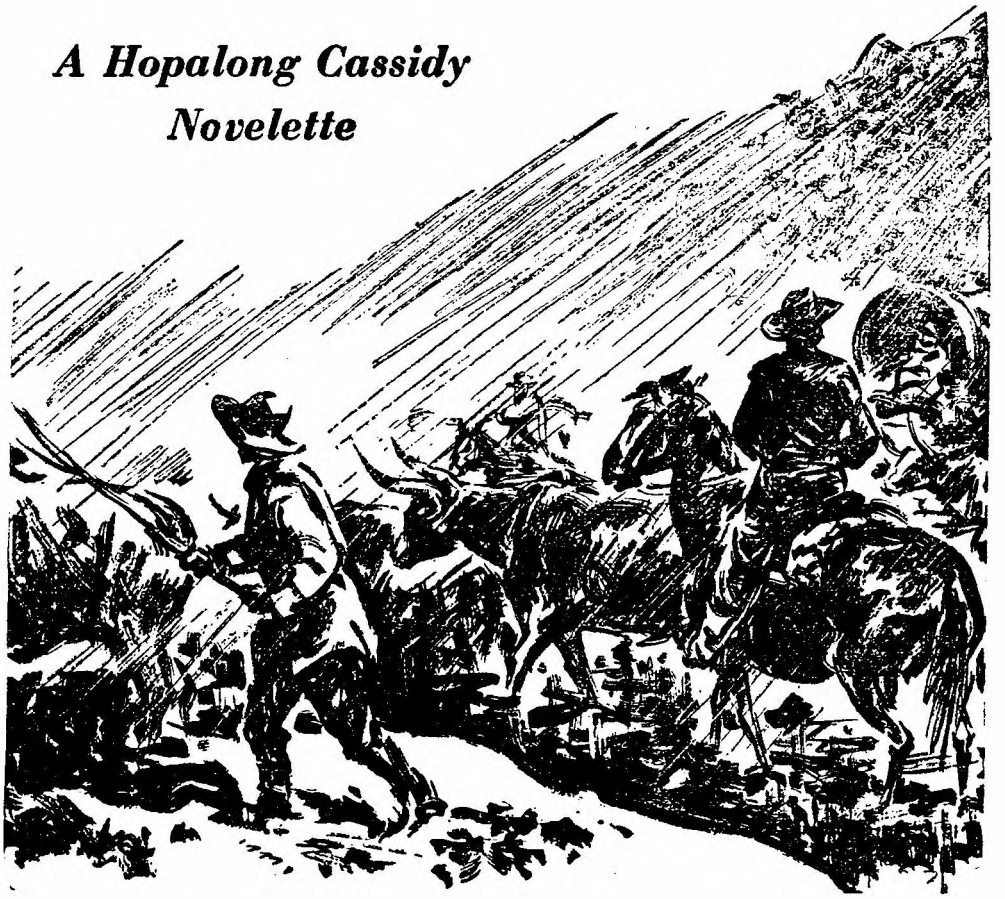
I

THE chuck wagon wandered a little, but it held fairly well to the proper course, the team knowing its job and doing it with small aid from the driver. The driver was the cook, and a mighty sick cook, at that. For him it was the morning after the day before, and all the well-known symptoms were present, with various bruises added.

The herd shuffled along in the dust, sending the yellow fog streaming into the air, minute after minute, mile after mile. Lanky Smith now rode at left point, for the trail boss had given himself another job. The corresponding place on right point was proudly handled by Johnny Nelson, youngest of the riders. Occasionally, he yielded to a certain restrained eagerness and turned in his saddle to look behind him on his right. He was looking for signs of war, but all he saw was grim preparedness—two distant riders moving parallel with the plodding herd, and a little behind it. He thoughtfully rubbed his chin, and the motion reminded him of Red Connors' uncalled for criticism of two days before. He flushed and faced around again. Just because he didn't have a beard was no sign that he wasn't a man. In this he was right, for a great deal of the history of the West was written by beardless youths. During his abstraction two steers had pushed out from the herd and started for a distant bunch of grass, which was exactly no better than the bunches in front of them. Others pushed out to follow them, and Johnny was busy for a moment.

Behind him Johnny heard a voice raised in song, telling Susannah not to cry. He wondered why anyone should feel like singing, in all the dust and heat, and then he grinned as the question answered itself—

A Hopalong Cassidy Novelette



Billy Williams was glad to get away from the smother of dust which he had so long endured as drag rider. Misery, too, is comparative.

Again Johnny turned around in the saddle, this time all the way around, and rested one hand on the back of his horse. He tried to pierce the thick dust cloud for a glimpse of the drag, which was now getting along on its own, and then gave it up. The dust was like a curtain. However, he did see a vague figure rising and falling in the fog and he replied to the cheery wave. Billy's song continued uninterrupted, and the herd pushed on, heads bobbing, hips and shoulders rising and falling, and the imponder-

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"But All the World's a Movin' Herd
Where Men Drift on Together,
And Some May Spur and Some Are Spurred,
But Most Are Horn and Leather!
Heeya-a! the Rider Sings Along,
Heeyow! the Reined Horse Swings Along
And Drifts and Drags and Flings Along
The Mob of Horns and Leather."

Badger Clark

able dust blanketing everything. Thirty dollars a month and found; constant discomfort, potential dangers ever present, double and treble tricks with the herd instead of sleeping the short nights through when stormy weather threatened. But it got into a man's blood, crept among the fibres of his being. Johnny himself, began to sing Billy's air; but the words he chose cannot be put into the record.

OVER east of the slowly moving herd the trail boss, a mere youth himself, jogged silently along beside his silent companion, who was another youth. Now and again one of the two would pivot at the waist and look searchingly behind them over the shimmering plain.

"I don't reckon they'll be botherin' us today," said the trail boss, grinning widely. "I busted their guns, an' they got nothin' to ride."

"Then why you lookin' behind you?" jibbed Red Connors.

Hopalong sighed.

"Because I got this damn' herd on my hands," he answered. The weight of responsibility rested squarely on his shoulders. "I wish Buck would meet us at Buffalo, an' handle the money part of it hisself."

Red nodded, and absentmindedly stroked the lean stock of the Sharps rifle bobbing before his knee. The money part consisted of taking care of a draft, and being certain that it was in proper order, or the handling and carrying of money. A possibility for future trouble popped up in Red's mind, and he chuckled. A thousand dollars in silver would weigh sixty-two and one-half pounds,* which any Southern cowman knew. This herd, delivered into the shipping pens, would mean in the neighborhood of twenty-five thousand dollars. Red gave up the mental arithmetic, and chuckled again.

"Suppose they pay you in hard money?" he brightly asked, his grin threatening the safety of his ears.

"Suppose you go to hell!" growled his companion indignantly. "Ain't I got trouble enough now, without you pilin' it on?"

"Boy, wouldn't that old wagon jingle goin' home?" pursed Red with relish.

Hopalong turned in the saddle and looked backward, and then eased around again. Red looked at him and laughed.

"Takin' care of the money all ready, huh?" he prodded. "Thought you said you busted all their guns an' turned loose their cayuses?"

"Shut up!" snapped Hopalong. "That feller Job had his boils, but, by gosh, he didn't have you!"

Mile after weary mile jolted along behind them, and then Red saw the chuck wagon pop into sight as it rolled over the crest of a distant rise.

"I've been on a couple of hell-benders, myself," he admitted; "but cook shore wins the prize. When he put his hat on this mornin' he held it a foot above his head, an' then lowered it plumb slow an' gentle." His sudden burst of laughter startled the horses.

Hopalong swore under his breath.

"The damn' jug-head!" he snapped. "Lemme tell you that I figger to bear down hard on any man in this outfit that takes a drink of hard liquor before we get home ag'in!" His growl drifted into silence.

"There you go!" snorted Red, indignantly. "All dressed up in yore eagle feathers an' wampum! You shoulda brought yore Sunday school along to trail these steers!" He glared, and continued almost without taking breath. "You can start bearin' down on me any time you want, for I shore aim to drink some hard liquor right pronto after we turn these animals loose at Buffalo!"

"Oh, is that so?"

"Yes, that's so!"

"I can wait till you start!" snapped the trail boss.

"Suit yoreself!" retorted Red.

"You sound more like yoreself, now!" sneered the trail boss.

"An' you'll mebby find that I'll *act* more like myself, when you start bearin' down onto me!"

"Yeah?"

"Yeah!" snapped Red.

HOPALONG snorted, and then stood up in his stirrups, the better to see. He looked straight ahead, long and searchingly.

*NOTE by author: This was the customary computation in use on the southern ranges at the time of this story.

"There's a branch trail comes in, up yonder," he said. "So far we've had lots of room, an' ain't been crowded."

Red nodded his agreement to both statements. Their herd had seemed to be the only one on the trail, but he knew that this was just the luck of the spacing. Cattle stretched ahead of them almost to the Canadian line, and behind them to the Gulf Coast, all moving, all sending the dust aloft.

"We'll be comin' into dust that ain't our own," he said, also peering ahead.

"Yeah," agreed his companion.

Again a period of silence. They dipped down into the little depression between the two rises, and then rode slowly up the farther slope. At the crest they drew rein.

"If it wasn't for the heat waves, I'd figger that was dust," said the trail boss; "an' there ain't no wind," he added significantly.

"No wind a-tall," grunted Red. "If it's dust, it's being stirred up by hoofs," he said, and rode forward at the side of his friend.

They gradually edged over toward the herd, which moved over the hot plain like some huge, vari-colored worm. Then Hopalong said something out of the side of his mouth, and pushed ahead at a lope. Red looked up the trail and forthwith spurred to overtake his friend. A solitary rider was coming down it, an animated blob in a little cloud of dust.

They passed the herd and kept on riding and the stranger pulled up at the side of the trail to wait for them. He was smiling, but they were not. He raised a hand in salute, but they ignored it. Then Red saw a paper sticking out of a pocket in the stranger's vest, and swore.

"Trail cutter! Great gosh, ain't they got nothin' else in this part of the country?"

Hopalong ignored the outburst, nodded to the solitary horseman and stopped at his side. The trail cutter's gaze had flicked to the brands on the punchers' horses, and away again.

"Howd'y," he said, with a smile.

"Howd'y," answered Hopalong without friendliness.

"What's yore road brand?" asked the stranger, carelessly.

"Circle 4," grunted Red, shortly.

The cutter nodded, offered his tobacco sack and papers to his two companions, and in turn rolled a cigarette. The three men sat smoking in silence, their eyes on the slowly approaching herd. Hopalong made a slow gesture, and in answer to it the riders with the cattle opened up the herd. The animals plodded past, spread out so that the brands on most of them could be seen. The road brands were uniformly just back of the left shoulder; the range brands, according to the marks. There wasn't a vent brand on the lot, which meant that they never had been sold or traded. The herd went by, the curling dust rolling over it, and slowly closed up again. The cutter glanced at the inconsequential drag, and nodded approvingly.

"Nice bunch," he grunted, once more looking at his companions. They nodded but said nothing.

"Might be a right good idear not to make too much time along here," continued the cutter. "There's eleven herds ahead of you in the next thirty miles."

"Great mavericks!" grunted Red.

Hopalong's expression also bespoke surprise, and he looked inquiringly at the cutter.

The trail cutter smiled and explained the situation.

"They found the Squaw roarin' over its banks," he said. "It's a mean river. After it went down they had to wait for the bottom to pack an' settle. There's a sight of quicksand in it. The first herd that reached it simply had to wait, an' the others caught up with it. They lost so much time waitin' that they crossed over as soon as they could, all of 'em, an' moved right along, without worryin' very much about spacin'. It was poor feedin' country an' they wanted to get shut of it. They took a chance, for if any of the leadin' herds had stampeded, there would have been a mess from there back that woulda taken so much untanglin' it wouldn't 'a' been good news for nobody."

Hopalong nodded, but he was not thinking of what might have happened on that trail. He was thinking that what was left of the grazing along the main trail, after eleven closely spaced herds had passed over it, also would not be good news for the Circle 4.

"How far ahead is the last bunch?" he asked.

"Plenty. Near ten miles."

"The feed won't be none too good for us," growled Hopalong.

"You can get by with it," said the cutter. "The grass was extry good this year. The first three, four herds are keepin' right on the trail, close bunched, an' steppin' right along, figgerin' to open up longer gaps, an' get outa the way. They're all range stockers, an' losin' a little weight won't make no difference to 'em."

"Hope they keep on steppin'," growled Red.

"Many beef herds?" asked the trail boss, thinking of the possibility of a glutted market and falling prices, although this contingency did not affect him or his herd.

"Two. The others are headed for the open ranges, North an' West. One of 'em is bound for Dakota, another for Montana, an' one of 'em is goin' clean through to Canada." His eyes glistened, for while he was a cutter now, he had been over the trail with the herds; and once that virus gets into the system, the patient is usually ruined for life, that is, any other kind of life. "*That's* a drive I'd like to be on; but they had a full crew." For a moment he was silent, looking after the placidly moving herd, and then he glanced back along the trail it had followed. "Anythin' behind you?"

"Not that we know about," answered Hopalong. "We ain't had no visitors from the rear, an' we ain't seen no dust sign behind us."

THE trail cutter nodded, and regarded the two riders rather closely.

"See anythin' of the sheriff?" he asked.

"Shore," grunted Hopalong, grinning. "His tail was up, an' he was pawin' the ground; when he left us he had quit pawin', but his tail was still up. If you should run into him, you better tell him that I got the fake trail cutter he was gunnin' for. Got him over in Waggoner's trail station."

"You *did?*" quickly asked the cutter. "By gosh, Mister, I'm right glad of that. Did he try to run a cut on you?"

Hopalong explained recent history as briefly as possible, and the three men rode slowly after the herd, talking things over. They passed the feeding branch trail, now deep with dust and littered with broken bushes. Far ahead there was a faint, yellowish tint in the lower sky, where the dust, freshly churned by thousands of hoofs, were still soaring. The trail boss shook his head.

"When we bed down, from now on, it'll shore be well off the trail," he said.

"Yeah," said Red, nodding. "There's shore a mess of cattle up the line, an' if anythin' busts loose we want to be well out of the way."

Hopalong glanced at the trail cutter, a grim smile on his face.

"When you figgerin' to throw us for a cut?" he asked.

"Not yet," answered the guardian of the surrounding range. "I looked 'em over while they walked." He glanced from Hopalong to Red, and back again, a grin wreathing his thin lips. I'll mebby ask for a cut before you get outa my territory, but not now. I don't aim to be no more bother than I have to be. I been up the trail, myself. A

cut down here, with all the rest of the range to cross, wouldn't mean anythin'." The grin grew. "I'd only have to cut you ag'in' an' that's plumb foolish."

"Friend," said Hopalong, slowly, "yo're shore one of them fellers we hear about, but don't often meet up with. Any time you want to cut us for range cattle you say so. Once, or more'n once. We'll pitch in an' help you trim out the range strays so fast it'll open yore eyes. An' any time yo're near our wagon, drop in an' sample the cook's cookin'. You have any trouble cuttin' them herds up ahead?"

"Not yet," chuckled the trail cutter. "I don't figger to cut none of 'em till they're about ready to clear out of my country. That means I got nothin' to do today; an' that means I'm droppin' my war bag at yore wagon tonight." He shoved his hat back on his head and sighed. "I'll be plenty busy tomorrow, with three or four herds to cut. Those first few range stockers are steppin' right along."

THE herd was watered shortly after noon, and it moved slowly forward again until about four o'clock by the sun, when the riders turned it aside and drove it more than a mile off the beaten track. The distance was none too far, considering how the trail was cluttered up ahead of them. Here it was loosely herded and allowed to spread out and feed unmolested on good range grass, which assured full bellies, which in turn promised a placid night. The weather was clear, with no threat of a storm.

Hopalong rode back to the busy wagon and found the trail cutter lending a helping hand to the sullen cook. He glanced at the culinary artist, but said nothing—the cook was paying for his recent mistakes. Hopalong tossed the reins over the horse's head and for a moment sat quietly in the saddle, looking steadily northward. As he finally swung to the ground the trail cutter, glancing from the clear, dustless air under the northern sky to the trail boss, nodded slowly and spoke.

"The feed wasn't so good along the branch trail from the Squaw," he said, thoughtfully. "Them fellers pushed their cattle purty rapid, to get over it an' onto the main trail. The last two herds I passed, comin' down here today, was spread out an' feedin', which was killin' three birds with one stone. It fed the cattle up, let 'em rest, an' gave time for the gaps to open up between the herds. I figger yo're far enough off the trail not to worry none about them fellers. Yo're located about right."

Hopalong nodded gravely, and a smile crept over his face. It was a little strained, but it was still a smile.

"Shore, I know that," he replied, "but I figger to keep movin' ahead a little every day. I got a delivery date to think about. I don't want to step on them fellers' heels, an' I don't want to speed up the pace an' go around 'em. That ain't hardly polite. I've got somethin' in my mind that's been botherin' me all day. Oh, well—what the hell! Just whereabouts in the lineup are them two beef herds that you spoke about?"

The trail cutter was regarding him curiously.

"They're the last two," he answered with a smile. He couldn't understand why his companion should be worrying about anything.

"Well," growled Hopalong, "there are times when I'd rather see dust in the sky than not see it. This here is one of them times. I hope to see plenty of it in the mornin'."

"Somethin's got you worried," said the trail cutter, curiously.

"Reckon that's because I'm allus puttin' myself in the other feller's place," replied the trail boss.

The cutter grinned, said something to the cook, and added a few sticks to the fire.

THE shadows lengthened with increasing swiftness and the heat grew suddenly less. The herd was still grazing, without unified forward movement, its guardian riders purposely keeping well away from it. Men rode in to the wagon, laughing and joking, eagerly waiting for the cook's call. The cavvy fed industriously, and paid no particular attention to the departure of the night horses. The wrangler knew what horses would be wanted, and had cut them out to save time. Hopalong and the cutter stretched the flimsy rope corral from the front wheel

of the wagon and closed the gap after the night horses were inside it. The smell of cooking food followed the air currents to tickle appreciative nostrils, and the eyes of the busy cook turned more often toward the coffee pot nesting on the incandescent coals. Cook held strong prejudices against letting it boil over.

The shadows died out, absorbed by the greater shadow of a ridge which had traveled eastward like a bullet. The cook took three quick steps, grabbed the coffee pot as its contents began to swell, and placed it on the ground near the outer fringe of the fire. He lazily moved a hand and yelled loudly, whereupon action became instant and general. A brief burst of action, of men moving past the tail board of the wagon, of men seating themselves expertly on the earth with both hands full was followed by a silence broken only by the scraping of steel knives on tin plates, or the grateful exhalation of some feeding human.

The twilight deepened, and then came darkness under a suddenly star-stabbed sky. The faint glow of the fire lighted the faces surrounding it and picked out the more prominent features, turning some of them into gargoyles. The trail boss sat as silent and rigid as a statue, a grave, troubled expression on his face. He was frozen into the immobility of deep thought; and from surface indications his thoughts were not pleasant. Responsibility wears heavy spurs.

". . . he climbed right straight up in the air, an' went over backwards," Johnny was saying.

Hopalong arose, and motioned to the speaker and to Red.

"Take a little ride with me," he ordered, and strode toward his saddled and picketed night horse, closely followed by his obedient but curious friends. In silence they mounted and swung into the night, straight toward the place where the cavvy should be found. After a short interval of riding a voice hailed them and they replied to it, and soon joined Pete Wilson. The horses were still grazing. On Pete's face was a look of curiosity, masked by the darkness.

"What's the matter? he asked, a little sharply.

"Not nothin' *yet;* but we come out to help you shift the cavvy," replied Hopalong. "We'll drive it back acrost the trail, an' hold it there. Red'll stay with you. You'll have to spell each other."

Grunts of surprise sounded in the darkness.

"What fool idear you got now?" demanded Red, with some asperity.

"One that I've had all day, off an' on," retorted the trail boss. "Come on; let's get busy an' shift this cavvy."

"This may be yore idear of a good time, but it shore ain't mine," growled Red.

"Yo're so damn' grouchy you wouldn't know a good time if you saw one," retorted the trail boss. "Come on; quit grouchin', an' let's start!"

THEY drove the horse herd slowly northward and then on an arc of a circle until it reached a point as far east of the trail as it had been west of it. There the trail boss stopped the driving and quietly watched the cavvy until thoroughly satisfied by its actions that it would settle down.

"Pete, you an' Red can figger out yore shifts to suit yoreselves," said Hopalong, wheeling his mount to face the trail. "Drive 'em back ag'in at daylight."

Red raised an indignant voice in the darkness.

"Wait a minute, Hoppy!" he called, his words clipped. "What you figger yo're doin'? Don't you reckon I need my sleep?"

"I know what I'm doin', an' you'll get yore sleep, some of it, if you ain't bothered; an' I don't reckon you'll be bothered over here," replied the trail boss. "You ain't takin' yore shift with the cattle, are you?" He continued without giving Red a chance to reply. "While you an' Pete are takin' things easy over here, me an' the rest of the boys will be ridin' guard on the cattle, over west till sunup. Them fellers, back at Waggoner's, have had time to get hosses an' guns. How could they get square? How could they pay us back an' hurt us plenty? By stampedin' an' drivin' off our cavvy. We've already had one sample of a night raid. They could run cayuses a long ways before mornin'. If they did that, then everythin' would purty near go to hell. I've been smellin' trouble most all day. They won't be

able to find the cavvy now, unless you go loco an' light a fire for 'em. *We'll* be in the spot they'll head for. You an' Pete will mebby have it easy, compared with us." He kneed his horse and spoke to Johnny. "Come on, Kid; let's be ridin'."

"Hey! Listen, Hoppy!" yelled Red frantically, fearing that he was missing a fight. "You'll be needin' me an' my Sharps! Hey! *Listen!*"

Over the sudden drumming of the departing hoofbeats came a derisive voice as the trail boss made reply.

"You an' yore Sharps! It'll be too damn' dark to see rifle sights. You stay there with Pete!"

Johnny's voice chimed in, jeeringly, eagerly. It was his opportunity to return Red's insult of a few days before, and in Red's own words.

"You got a razor, Red?" he asked, and the Kid's laughter died out swiftly.

Red pushed up his hat with an angry gesture and swore loudly; but that was all the good it did him. He remained with Pete, whose voice now intruded on his thoughts.

"What shift you want to take?" asked the night wrangler, placidly.

"Any damn' shift a-tall!" snapped Red.

Whereupon Pete calmly chose the first shift, which would let him enjoy the comfort of his blanket roll from midnight until dawn.

II

HOPALONG pulled up at the fire, while Johnny rode out to join the two riders with the cattle.

"Between now an' mornin'," said the trail boss calmly, and with a faint smile, "this fire will mebby be right unhealthy." He looked at Billy, who was unrolling his blankets preparatory to turning in. "Fork yore cayuse, Billy, an' foller me."

Billy looked up with some surprise, his hands holding to the blankets. His trick with Red was some hours off.

"Where's Red, an' what's up, Hoppy?" he asked curiously.

"Red's with Pete, an' nothin's up *yet*," answered the trail boss. "Roll up them blankets, an' come along with me." The speaker turned as Billy obeyed, and looked down at the cook and the trail cutter.

"I don't know where to send you fellers," he slowly said; "but I figger almost any place will be healthier than this. The darker it is, an' the quieter you keep, the better off you'll mebby be. Waggoner's gang ain't likely to forget the blazer I run on 'em. Me an' the boys will be out with the herd. The cavvy's been shifted. It'll take some time to find it in the dark, if they can find it; an' if they do find it, Red an' Pete will be waitin' for 'em. We prodded Red before we left, an' he'll be pizen mad till daylight. If you boys want to risk it you can stay right here; but I'd shore copper that if I was you. We'll see you in the mornin'."

"Wait a minute!" snapped the trail cutter, remembering that this trail boss had killed the man who had murdered another trail cutter. He was holding that man's job, right now. "I'm a right pore sleeper, an' I crave excitement. Hoke Redfield was a friend of mine. I'm teamin' up with you boys."

"You needn't put on no airs!" snorted the cook reaching for his boots. "I'm doin' the same thing. I owe *that* gang a-plenty." While he talked he was kicking dirt over the fire. Somehow his head began to feel much better, but he still had a healthy grouch, and a Winchester. He fairly yearned for slaughter. He had no horse, but the trail cutter proved to be a friend in need, and the horse did not seriously object to carrying double. In another few moments the dead fire stank beside the deserted wagon.

THE sleeping cattle lay on the little prairie swell, caressed by a gentle wind. Here or there some animal blew contentedly or chewed its cud in bovine placidity. The two shift riders drifted endlessly on a wide circle around the bedded herd, softly singing, and paying no attention to a certain point on the prairie just southeast of them, where reinforcements were hidden by the night. Midnight came and passed, and then there came the sounds of many movements as the cattle got to their feet for a sort of midnight stretch, stood quietly for a few

moments and then again lay down, changing sides. Sometimes this was a critical moment, but all was peace and tranquility on this night.

From the southeast there came a low singing, steadily growing nearer and the slow, steady beats of walking horses could be heard. The night herder on the side nearer the trail stopped his horse and waited. Two figures pushed into sight and then into a silhouetted definition. They still were singing, and they did their talking in song.

"Well, the night's half gone an' nothin's happened yet," chanted one of them cheerfully.

"Shore suits me," grunted the shift rider, pressing knees against his horse. "They've just got up an' lay down ag'in. See you at breakfast." He drifted off into the darkness, his relief moving off on the circle.

The second relief man sat quietly in his saddle, waiting for the owner of the barely heard voice to come around to him. A blot in the night grew slowly and became a mounted man. The low chant continued, but its words were now different.

"Any trouble?" he asked, well knowing that if there had been he would have heard it when it started. After two hours of being by himself it was a relief to talk to a human.

"Not none-a-tall," softly answered his relief. The speaker yawned prodigiously and grinned in the dark. "Seems like I just got to sleep when Hoppy shook me. Everythin' all right out here?" he needlessly asked.

"Shore," grunted the relieved shift rider, facing in the direction of the dark and silent camp. "They're all your'n now, take 'em. I can use some sleep." He rode away in the night, his place taken by his friend, and the low chanting continued, but in another voice.

The first relieved night rider on his way to camp heard the metallic clicks before he could see anything. He pulled up abruptly.

"All right, Hoppy," he softly called.

"All right—come ahead," said a low voice from the dark ground somewhere to his right.

The rider grinned. This was businesslike. A man lying flat on the ground could see at night for a surprising distance. Anything moving against the faint light of the sky would be visible long before the prone watcher could be seen. The blotting out of the light of a star was all that was needed.

THE rider went on again at a walk. When he stopped he could make out the shapeless blots on the ground which were sleeping men. He took care of his horse and returned on foot. In a few moments his blankets were spread, his boots off. In another moment he was asleep.

The second returning rider also heard the sharp clicks. They were on his left. He, too, pulled up abruptly.

"Don't you shoot me," he chuckled. "I reckon nothin' goin' to happen."

"Mebby not," grunted the prone sentry. "Hope not, anyhow."

"Yeah," replied the rider.

"Cattle quiet?" asked the sentry.

"Yeah. They just lay down ag'in."

"You boys ridin' wide of 'em, like I said?"

"Yeah."

"All right. Get yore sleep."

"Reckon Red an' Pete're making out all right," said the rider.

"Reckon so. Get yore sleep."

"Buenas noches."

"Good night," replied the sentry as he turned around to face in the other direction. There was a ridge a little to the south which was silhouetted against the faint light of the sky, and Hopalong watched it closely. His eyes played him tricks, but he knew all about that.

Two hours later was another shift, and still another two hours after that. Dawn paled the eastern sky and stretched its pearly sheet swiftly westward. That strange thing on the ridge which had puzzled the trail boss all night now became two clumps of grass, peculiarly arranged in relation to each other. He grinned at them, and stretched.

The sleeping figures in camp stirred restlessly but did not waken. After a moment the cook moved an arm, pushed the blanket from him and gravely observed a new day, crisp and bright. He sat up, looked around

him with an expression of wonderment on his sleepy countenance. Where in hell was —then he nodded, turned at the waist and saw the wagon just where they had left it the night before. He yawned, stretched and reached for his boots. Shortly thereafter he was on his way to the wagon, there to light his fire and get breakfast started. The riders out with the herd were watching him with a keen interest. They were hungry.

Some distance from the little camp in the other direction Johnny Nelson moved under the hand on his shoulder.

"Yes, Hoppy!" He was wide awake.

"Time to get up, Kid. Cook's headed for the wagon a'ready."

Johnny nodded and drew on his boots. Then he looked at his friend accusingly.

"You let me sleep right through!"

"Yeah," replied Hopalong. "Somehow I wasn't a mite sleepy." He ignored his companion's protests and looked at the distant herd, now on its feet and already spreading out to feed. Then he glanced at the little temporary camp, and from it on to the wagon. The cook was bending over his economical fire and the first faint streamer of smoke was climbing skyward, straight as the flight of an arrow.

Things seemed to move even smoother after breakfast. Sleepiness went out of all faces, smiles began to appear. Here and there a snatch of song could be heard. A little goodnatured chaffing rewarded the trail boss for his needless precautions of the night before; but the trail boss, enjoying his first cigarette since last night's supper, was placidly looking at the feeding herd, and the pleasantries glanced off his hide like hail from a roof. He saw the cavvy appear, and it brought a grin to his face.

TWO men rode off to relieve the riders with the cattle, so the latter could enjoy their breakfasts. Cinches and latigos were being tested. The fresh mounts had been selected, the night horses turned into cavvy, and the cavvy driven off again, to graze and move forward under the watchful eyes of the day wrangler. For some reason Red had nothing to say, and that meant that everything was serene.

The trail cutter, ready to ride on about his day's business, stopped at the side of the boss.

"Well, they didn't bother you last night," he said with a smile.

"No, they didn't," imperturbably replied Hopalong. "Which was just as well; but that makes it a little more certain for tonight."

"Uh-huh," said the trail cutter for the sake of saying something. He pulled his hat down a little more firmly on his head. "Well, I got me some work to do. I figger to start with the herds farthest up the trail, an' work back this way. In case I'm anywhere near you tonight I'll join up with you, in case I'm needed."

"Good. Be glad to have you," said the trail boss with a grin. "I shore figger to be waitin' for 'em ag'in tonight. They're mebby due."

"Uh-huh," grunted the trail cutter. "Well, so-long. So-long, cook."

"So-long," said the cook, smiling for the

first time in thirty-six hours. His head had resumed its natural proportions, his mouth was sweet again, and so was his disposition. As he poured the boiling water on the eating utensils in the wreck pan, he burst into song.

The trail boss regarded him for a moment, glanced at the work horses harnessed and hitched to the wagon, flipping a hand carelessly and rode slowly off in the direction of the drifting cattle. The slight frown on his face disappeared—there was no use worrying any more about Waggoner and his crowd until night fell.

III

IT WAS midforenoon before the Circle 4 really started up the trail. Hopalong had been content to let the cattle drift lazily along from one bit of grazing to the next, satisfied under the circumstances to let them feed rather than to gain mileage, but he was conscious of the fact that he was supposed to have them at the pens in Buffalo on a specified date.

On the trail north of him were the herds which had come in over the branch trail from the Squaw and, according to the trail cutter, the last two of these were beef herds bound for the open range near Buffalo and the shipping pens. These two, in turn held up by the closely spaced range herds ahead of them, were marking time and letting the cattle feed well while the gaps between the whole eleven herds opened up into more reasonable distances.

Hopalong, riding up around the left side of the scattered cattle, at last reached Lanky Smith and stopped for a moment to speak to him.

"Reckon I'll go up the line an' see what things look like up there," he said.

"You figger on passin' some of 'em, if you get the chance?" asked Lanky.

"Reckon so. We're beginnin' to lose some of the time we saved back along," replied the trail boss. "We got a delivery date to think about. If I find them two beef herds well off the trail I'll begin to think about passin' 'em. I don't mind gettin' behind the range stockers because they'll be movin' faster than we will. It's them two beef herds we got to think about."

"Might make trouble," said Lanky, not speaking from fear but rather from the angle of fact. "Some trail outfits are right touchy about bein' passed."

"There's a right side of 'most everythin'," replied his companion. "An' nobody's got the right to block a drive trail. I'll know more about it when I get back."

"Then we'll keep 'em as they are," said Lanky.

"Yeah. See you later."

Hopalong rode on, his questing gaze on the northern sky. There were no dust signs, no indications of moving cattle. Mile after mile went behind him and then he saw what he had ridden up to find. Two miles to the east of the patchy trail was a grazing herd, well spread out. Its position, in regard to his problem was plain enough—it had given up its place as a trail herd, and could be passed by any herd behind it. Of course, there was no law against a forced passing, but custom was rather strong against it. It was not polite.

The trail boss turned toward the distant wagon and replied to the gestured greetings of a rider with the cattle; and as he changed the course of his riding, he saw a rider leave the farthest fringes of the herd and also head in for the wagon. The two men reached that point at the same time. It was nice timing on the stranger's part.

HOPALONG nodded to the loafing cook and raised a hand in salute to the slowing horseman.

"Howd'y" he said. "I got a bunch of Circle 4's a few miles down the trail, an' figgered I'd come up an' see what the chances are for us to make up a little lost time. You fellers figgerin' to throw back onto the trail right soon?"

"Yore herd beef for the market?"

"Beef for the pens," answered Hopalong.

"Well," said the stranger, slowly, "we pushed 'em purty hard from the ford of the Squaw. If we found that we had plenty of time, we was aimin' to let 'em put some flesh on their bones. Yo're headin' for Buffalo?"

"Yeah," answered Hopalong.

His companion was regarding him closely.

"You said for the pens. Then you ain't lookin' for a buyer?"

"No," answered Hopalong. "We're sold on delivery."

"Yeah. That's right good," replied the other trail boss. He now did not need fear that the Circle 4's would lower cattle prices at the pens in case general conditions were unfavorable. They were not in the market, but were sold already. "Reason I asked," he said, with a grin, "was because we'll be lookin' for a buyer, an' already there's one beef herd ahead of us."

"You hadn't oughta have no trouble findin' a buyer this early in the season," said Hopalong, also grinning. "We're purty well ahead of the peak of the beef outfits this year. The trail cutter told me that nine herds ahead of me are range stockers. That leaves you, an' that other outfit ahead, a purty clear field. That also means that if I get in behind the trail stockers they'll be movin' further out of my way every day we travel."

"Yeah," grunted the other trail boss.

"How big is the gap between you an' the next herd?" asked Hopalong.

"Not so much north an' south; but plenty when you figger it east an' west. I understand they're not goin' to throw back onto the trail for two, three more days. They're over on the other side of the trail. Turn to the left at the next crick an' you'll find 'em without no trouble."

"Reckon I will," said Hopalong. "What's their road brand?"

"T Dot Circle."

"Well, reckon I'll drift," said Hopalong, wheeling. "See you up in Buffalo soon, I reckon."

"Reckon so. So-long."

Hopalong rode back to the trail and followed it north. In due time he came to the creek, a trickle of water meandering eastward. He turned and followed along it.

THE T Dot Circle cattle were well spread out, the guardian riders at reasonable distances from them, and loafing in their saddles. Then Hopalong saw the thin finger of smoke which indicated the position of the chuck wagon, and not long thereafter breasted a sharp little rise and found the camp in the hollow on the other side. He drew rein on the crest, waited for a moment, then pushed slowly down the slope at a walk.

The three men at the wagon stopped their conversation and watched the newcomer in silence. They replied to his raised hand, and one of them slowly stood up.

"Howd'y," said Hopalong.

"Howd'y. Light down," invited the T Dot Circle man.

"Hardly stayin' long enough," replied Hopalong, with a smile. "I been ridin' up the trail to kinda look things over. I got a bunch of cattle back aways. I don't want to be crowded, or crowd nobody else; but I got a delivery date to figger about. So I just dropped in to learn how you boys are located. I see yo're off the trail an' feedin'."

"You got a delivery date, huh?" asked the T. Dot Circle boss. "You headin' up for Buffalo?"

"Yeah, for the pens."

"For th' pens, huh?"

"Yeah. Our herd's sold to Phillips Brothers, of Kansas City, when we get it into the pens," said Hopalong.

"Huh!" muttered the T Dot Circle boss thoughtfully. He turned something over in his mind and eyed the horseman speculatively. "We been waitin' for the range stockers to open up an' get outa our way. They've been doin' that right along, an' I was figgerin' to throw back onto the trail tomorrow or the day after. How far you behind us?"

"Near a dozen miles, I figger."

"Then yo're crowdin' the 3 TL outfit purty close."

"No. Anyhow, they crowded in ahead of us," said Hopalong, still smiling. "That's the trouble with a branch trail. We was on the main trail, comin' up. The 3 TL, you fellers, an' nine range herds cut in ahead of us from the Sqaw. Of course, nobody's to blame for that. The question is, have I got to stand still, let you two outfits graze yore cattle, an' nine more move along as they feel like? My herd is sold, an' I got a delivery date to worry about. You say yo're goin' back on the trail tomorrow or the day after. Why not make it the day after? The 3 TL are still grazin', an' won't

be crowdin' you. I just talked with their boss. By day after tomorrow I can go past both you fellers, an' be outa yore way."

"Then that'll put us between you an' the 3 TL," growled the T Dot Circle boss. "How much of a gap will you open up between you an' us?"

"As big a gap as you want," answered Hopalong, turning his horse.

"Well, all I want is plenty."

"All right—I'll see that you get plenty. We'll push right along an' get outa yore way. Much obliged," said Hopalong, and rode up the little slope and over the crest.

The T Dot Circle boss stood quietly looking in the direction of the departed visitor. His seated companions had nothing to say, and one of them reached out and broke off a weed stem, idly twirling it between thumb and finger. The seconds slipped past. The weed stem broke with a sharp little snap, and the cook looked up curiously.

"Phillips Brothers, huh?" he muttered, glancing at his boss. "You reckon his herd's shore sold?"

THE boss shifted his gaze from the crest of the little rise and looked thoughtfully at his seated companions. From the questions he had asked the trail cutter he believed that he would get good prices for his herd at Buffalo; but that, of course, depended on other things. He knew that so long as he was off the trail, that the trail was open to any following herd; if he was on it, trail ethics urged that he be not passed without his permission.

"Don't know," he growled. "That feller had a lot to say. Too much mebby."

The man with the broken weed stem tossed the halves away.

"Me," he said, slowly, "I'd figger that the gaps are wide enough ahead of us. An' they wouldn't have to be very wide, at that, to suit me. He's been drivin' along, havin' things all to hisself. Suddenly he finds himself plumb behind eleven trail outfits. Count 'em—eleven! That put the lather on him."

"Yeah," grunted the trail boss. "Them gaps are shore long enough," he said with sudden decision. He swung toward his horse. "I'll send in yore work hosses, cook. You put 'em to the wagon, an' light out. Come on, Jim: we're throwin' back onto th' trail, an' we're doin' it now." He laughed derisively. "Sold on delivery, huh? Hell, I wasn't weaned yesterday!"

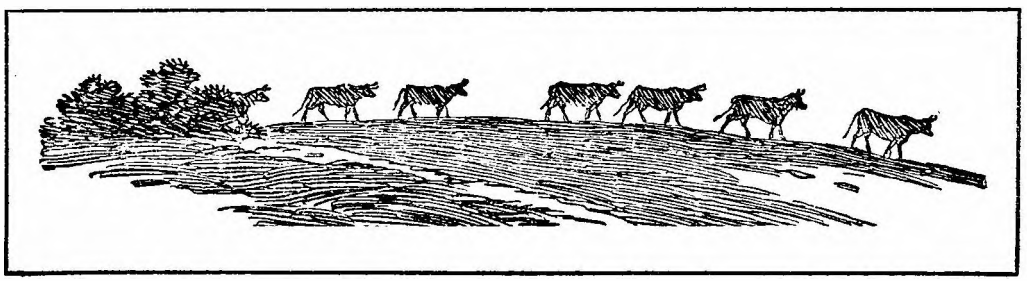
Jim hesitated and then, dismissing his scruples with a laugh, still gave them utterance.

"This good weather's due to break," he said. "If we throw back onto the trail now, it'll put that hombre purty close behind us. We all know that trail cattle allus stampede th' way they came. He'll be right close ahead of that 3 TL herd, an' we'll be out in the clear if anythin' busts."

"Shore but I wasn't thinkin' so much about that as about prices in Buffalo," replied the trail boss. "To hell with him, an' the 3 TL, too!"

IV

HOPALONG rode straight toward his herd, parallel with the trail. When he reached it, he gave orders to step the cattle right along. He had promised the T Dot Circle boss a reasonably safe trail



interval, and he would make good that promise, even if it meant to drive for half the night. He did not especially care for night driving, but the situation might require it. The herd had been drifting lazily along, moving as they grazed, with no thought for the gaining of much mileage; but now they were pushed into a brisk trail gait, which made the dust climb into the sky.

Hour after hour went past, and at last they reached the little creek beyond the 3 TL, where the T Dot Circle had been holding. Not far beyond the creek, heavy cattle tracks cut into the trail from the west, and Hopalong regarded them with surprise. His own herd, well watered at the creek, was moving at the same brisk gait again. He let the animals pass him and then crossed over behind the drag. It was not long before he overtook the right point rider.

"Red," he said, "foller up that creek we just crossed for about two miles. You oughta find the T Dot Circle outfit close to it. I want to know if they're still there. Get a move on."

He turned in his saddle, swung his hat, and Johnny Nelson left his swing position and rode ahead to join him.

"Take the point, Kid, till Red gets back ag'in," ordered the trail boss. "Somethin's wrong, an' I'm goin' on ahead for a look. I passed the words to the swing riders to keep 'em steppin' right along. I'll be back soon."

It was midafternoon when he returned, and he was scowling. He made a gesture to the left point rider which meant to keep the cattle moving as they were, and Lanky acknowledged it with a like gesture. Hopalong then joined Red at right point.

"Yo're loco," greeted Red, pleasantly. "There warn't no herd, wagon or nothin' else up that crick. Nothin' but signs."

"I know it, now," growled the trail boss, his eyes glinting. "That T Dot Circle outfit has deliberately run a blazer on us. They told me to come right along an' get outa their way, an' then they threw back onto the trail an' put us between them an' that 3 TL crew. There ain't no harm in that, but I'm damned if I like to be made a fool of." His lean jaws tightened. "All right. They gave me the right of way, an' by gosh, I'm takin' it! I'm takin' it if it means to drive all night!"

"Yeah!" grunted Red. "All night, all day an' all night ag'in, if we have to! What you figger he's got in his mind?"

"Brand worms, mebby!" snapped the boss. "Red, you go up the trail far enough to see their dust, but not so far that they can see you. As soon as they throw off for the night, you streak it back here, an' let me know which side they take." He quickly placed a hand on the arm of his eager friend.

Wait a second. Cook's up ahead with the wagon. I didn't stop to speak to him. Tell him to keep a mile behind you till you ride back, an' then to move right along till somebody tells him to stop."

RED grinned, pulled his hat firmly down on his head and left a trail of dust behind him. The boss rode off to speak to the day wrangler with the cavvy, and not long thereafter returned to Red's place at right point, where Johnny was doing the honors.

"All right, Kid," he said. "Pass the word back to keep these animals movin' as they are, an' then take yore reg'lar place."

The afternoon went slowly past, and it was twilight before Red returned from his scouting expedition up the trail. He joined Hopalong and rode with him leg to leg.

"They just left the trail an' threw off it to the west," he reported. "Cook's goin' right along as soon's it's dark enough to hide him."

"How far ahead are they?" demanded the trail boss.

"Three hours good drivin'."

"All right," growled Hopalong. "I don't like night drivin' any more than the next man, but we're goin' on for more'n three hours. The whole damn' thing is, they thought I was lyin' when I told 'em I was sold on delivery." He laughed grimly. "They told us to pass 'em, an' pass 'em we will!"

Through the twilight and the growing dusk stepped the herd, steadily marking off the miles. The point riders laughed, the swing riders grinned and the drag rider

swore, but the herd kept to its steady pace.

It was dark when Red, who had been closely watching the landmarks along the trail, waved a hand and spoke.

"Here's where they turned off," he said.

"Two hours more, then," growled his companion. "I'll take over this job, while you find the cook an' tell him when to stop. As soon as he stops, tell him to get supper, an' right quick. Then he's to kill his fire. We'll throw off a mile west of the trail. When he's located, you come back to the trail an' wait for us, to show us the way to camp. You savvy?"

"Shore," replied Red, and again rode northward, wondering why his friend and boss was laughing. Red could see no reason for mirth in a forced night drive—but he lacked the imagination of his friend.

The herd marched on, six to eight cattle wide, and moving like the trail-broken animals they were. In the early days of the drive they had moved twenty to thirty miles a day to keep them too tired to raise hell at night; since then, however, they had been allowed to take things easy with an average daily progress of less than ten miles. And since then, in turn, they had averaged less. *Clack, shuffle, clack; clack, shuffle, clack.* A figure suddenly appeared out of the night and spoke to the right point rider.

"Hoppy?"

"Yeah, Red. This the place?"

"Yeah. Head 'em off an' over. Cook's got a little fire goin', down in a hollow. It's just a bed of coals, an' it's all right; you can't see it over the rise."

Swiftly the word passed down the flanks. Lanky drew rein and let the leaders swing past in front of him. *Clack, shuffle, clack.* Hopalong glowed with pride over the regimentation of the cattle in this herd. They moved, with hardly a break in their formation, from the well beaten trail and plodded westward.

Some of their good behavior was doubtless due to fatigue. In less than half an hour they were checked, stopped, and allowed to spread out over the bed ground, where expert knowledge of cattle psychology in letting them spread out enough but not too much, of not riding too close to them, and in letting them feel the least possible restrain, had its reward. They were full of water, they had been well fed, and they were tired. After a little while they slowly, one here, a bunch there, lay down for a well merited rest. The riders hurriedly ate a still warm supper, and the two men with the cattle rode in shortly after the first trick riders had departed. These fed themselves and flipped their blanket rolls, but as the rolls unfolded they remembered the watch of the night before, and looked inquiring at the boss.

HOPALONG stood up and motioned to Red.

"Well, boys," he said, "we hit the trail at noon."

"An' give them T Dot Circle coyotes a good six hours to get on th' trail an' put us behind 'em again?" asked Lanky pugnaciously.

"They won't hit the trail at daylight, or at noon, or even by dark tomorrow," replied Hopalong, grinning. "They're goin' to have troubles of their own, come mornin'. It will all come from tryin' to run a blazer on the Bar 20."

"Yeah?" asked Red, with total lack of whatever reverence a trail boss is supposed to receive.

"Yeah," grunted Hopalong, and then laughed outright.

"We goin' to fool around all night, waitin' for Waggoner an' his gang, like we did last night?" demanded Skinny.

"No, not tonight, or any night," answered Hopalong, and laughed again. "All you boys have to do is to roll up, get yore sleep, an' take over yore reg'lar tricks with the herd. That T Dot Circle boss is laughin' in his sleeve, right now; but there won't be no laugh left in him when mornin' comes. Red, you come along with me. I'll mebby show you what happens to smart Aleck trail bosses. The rest of you boys turn in an' get yore sleep."

"Where you goin'?" asked Red, who thought that he, too, could use a little sleep.

"I told you to come along with me," rejoined his friend and boss.

"Oh, I heard you," growled Red, but

he followed his friend from camp without further grouching.

COOK, obeying the orders given a few minutes before, grudgingly poured water over the incandescent coals of the fire; and not long thereafter the little camp was wrapped in sleep.

Hopalong reached out and touched his companion's arm lightly when the first faint glow of the distant fire became visible.

"We stop here," he said, and laughed again.

"What the hell's so damn' funny?" asked Red politely.

"What herd was the last up the trail, this afternoon an' just before dark?" asked his boss, chuckling.

"We was, of course," growled Red.

"Right," grunted Hopalong. "An' what would a trail herd outfit do with a beef herd, if they had common sense, when it got to be near dark?"

"Why, they'd throw off the trail an' bed down," answered Red.

"They shore would," agreed Hopalong. "An' bein' last on the trail at dark, they'd nat'rally be the first herd that would show itself to anybody ridin' *up* that trail, except the 3 TL outfit, which ain't moved, an' which we passed miles back."

"Yeah," said Red after due thought. "An' then what? An' what'n hell are we settin' out here for instead of gettin' some sleep?"

"I'll show you that before mornin'," answered his cheerful companion, his eyes on the flush in the night which marked the location of the T Dot Circle fire. He laughed in his throat. "There she burns, for everybody to see."

"An' why shouldn't it?" snapped Red, buttoning his coat against the coolness of the night air.

"Shore—why shouldn't it?" chuckled Hopalong. "Well, Red; I'll take the first watch. Get some of that sleep you been bellyachin' about."

Red took him at his word.

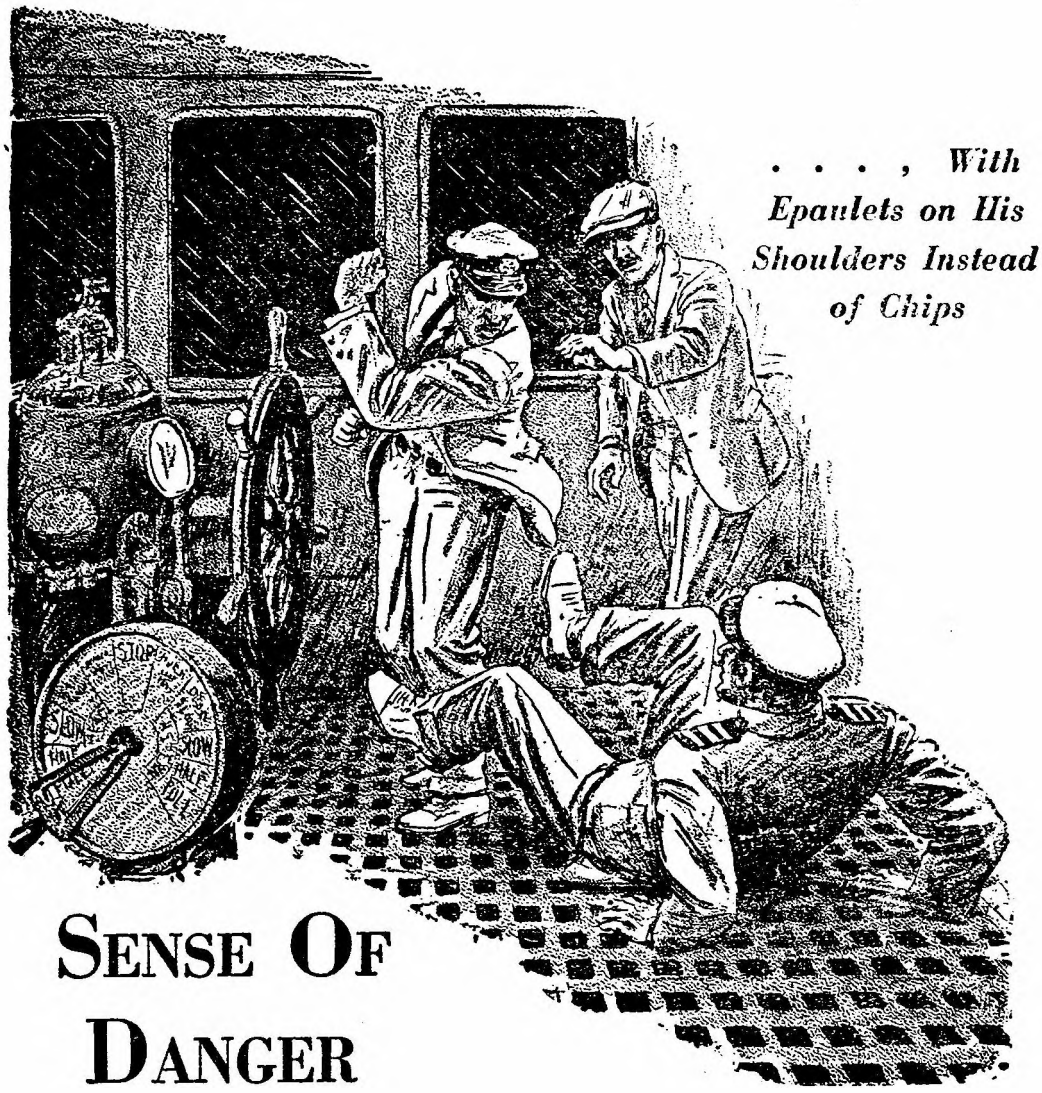
Time moved slowly. Midnight came and passed. Another hour, and then one more. Suddenly Hopalong shook his sleeping companion and Red came to instant wakefulness. There were faint flashes to the south of them, but so far away they barely could hear the roar of the heavy black powder loads. They imagined they could feel a slight tremor of the earth, and a faint roaring sound came to them like a ghost out of the night.

"Stampede, by gosh!" muttered Red.

"Yeah, stampede," said his companion, with satisfaction. "It's their cavvy, an' meb-by some of their cattle. Waggoner's gang has run it off, thinkin' that it's our'n. It's where our'n ought to be, ain't it? I told you they'd be too damn' busy tomorrow to throw back on the trail. That's what they get for bein' smart Alecks. Well, come on. Let's get back to camp an' catch up on some sleep. You an' I'll sleep late. The herd will graze till noon, an' then amble peacefully on its way."

"Well," said Red. "You long headed ol' coyote! I'll be tetotally damned!"

"There ain't no question about *that* a-tall, Red," laughed his boss, and led the way to camp.



. . . . , With Epaulets on His Shoulders Instead of Chips

SENSE OF DANGER

By STEVE HAIL

CAPTAIN PETER McCALL had nothing more serious on his mind than the shoehorning of an extra ton or so of pineapples into the freighter *Elston's* 'tweendecks when the messenger brought word that he was wanted in the Hilo port captain's office, but quick. Acting on the assumption that such urgency meant trouble, Captain McCall cuffed his battered watch cap belligerently aslant over one gray sun-wrinkled eye before taking off down the dock. Enroute, and in grudging concession to the sensibilities of the three hundred odd tourists swarming ashore from the cruise ship *Maui Queen* berthed at the adjoining dock, he tucked in his shirt and fastened what few buttons remained thereon. Considering his wide expanse of tattooed chest and the sweat-sodden conditions of the shirt, the latter took some doing.

The port captain, Alec Jamison, awaited him. So, too, did a small man in impeccable whites, standing austerely erect near the far window. The man, judging from the rake to his mustached lip, was not overly im-

pressed with Captain McCall. The feeling, McCall decided quickly, was mutual. A shipped, he guessed, browned off over a hitch in freight schedules. Well, so what? He nudged his cap forward another notch.

"Pete," Jamison began abruptly, "by the grace of God, Marine Personnel in San Francisco and a hapa-haole hack driver, you are now the master of the *Maui Queen.* Congratulations!"

The *Maui Queen!* Jamison and his jokes! McCall's eye, the one not pinned down by his cap, focused on the towering white superstructure of the liner visible through a side window. She was, he supposed, a thing of beauty, if you cared for the wedding cake school of naval architecture, which he did not. Of course, his twenty years in the ugly ducklings of the freighter fleet undoubtedly prejudiced him unduly, but even so—

He frowned. "You know I got no times for jokes, Alec. Five hours, I've got, to finish loading—and if those shutter-happy tourists don't quit bothering my longshoremen I'll never——" It struck him then that there was little levity, if any, in Jamison's manner. Nor, for that matter, in the aloof stare of the smallish gent who stood beside him. Matter of fact, McCall noted, the latter had an eye like a wave-polished pebble, hard and just as cold.

McCall swallowed, then managed to arc a suddenly trembling and incredulous thumb inward toward where his third shirt button should have been but wasn't. "Who, me?"

"You," Jamison said. "The *Queen's* Captain Hansen went uptown an hour ago. A taxi mowed him down. Broken hip. He'll be out of the picture for months. At his age, maybe for keeps. You being senior skipper in the freighter fleet I cabled the home office telling 'em you were docked here and recommending immediate transfer." He waved a hand at a message blank on the desk. "They just now confirmed it. By the way, meet Mr. Ogilvie."

MR. OGILVIE'S hand had all the muscular constriction of a long-dead mackerel. He looked down his nose, what there was of it, at the gap in Captain McCall's shirt front. For the second time in his not uneventful thirty-nine years, Captain Peter McCall regretted the hula girl tattooed expertly just above, though incorporating in an admittedly unique manner, his navel. The first time, of course, had been on his wedding night, but—— He clutched hastily at his shirt front, but it was too late. Mr. Ogilvie, it was all too evident, was no admirer of art, for he said coldly, turning to Jamison, "I'm afraid Marine Personnel has made an error in judgment. Your Captain McCall, I'm sorry to say, is hardly the type of shipmaster I had in mind for the *Queen.* The—ah—passenger trade is——"

The insult was patently personal. McCall stepped forward, fists bunched like crown knots in wet Manila. "Look, senator—" he was beginning when Jamison arose hastily and just in time.

Ogilvie's eye was not cold now. There was beaded sweat above it. However, with attack forestalled, he recovered his dignity. He spoke to Jamison, ignoring Captain McCall. "Now, that gentlemanly Mr. Simpson, first mate of the *Queen.* There is an officer who, in my opinion, deserves promotion. He——"

Jamison sat down again, though warily. "Howard Simpson is undoubtedly a fine young officer. An Academy man with recognized promise, but unfortunately lacking in experience." He looked at his cradled fingertips. "It's the Line's policy, J. V., to entrust their passenger vessels only to men with acknowledged qualities of seamanship, regardless of their — ah — social graces. Captain McCall here is more than qualified."

Ogilvie looked again at McCall as if perhaps the captain might be the source of the low tide stench rising from the harbor's edge. "I hope," he said acidly, "the passengers take the same charitable viewpoint." He walked stiffly to the door.

McCall uncurled his meaty fists. It was an effort. He angled his bony jaw after the fading Mr. Ogilvie. "Who," he demanded, "in the ninety fathom hell, is that?"

Jamison's jaw went slack. "You didn't know? That's J. V. Ogilvie, general passenger agent for the line."

"I spent twenty years hauling pineapples," McCall said bitterly, "with never a chance to so much as dance on a dowager's corn, and you ask me do I know the passenger agent. Ha!"

Jamison smiled wanly. "Well, you know him now. He and the front office——" He placed two fingers one atop the other. "Like that, Pete. I don't say he can make or break you, but he can try like hell. And he's got definite ideas about passenger skippers. It's his contention we no longer need seamen, what with the way these modern liners all but run themselves; just seagoing executives, gentlemen with polish, color. That's the only way we can compete favorably with overseas air travel, he says. A hotel afloat, where the passenger is king and the skipper is his servant. Get it?" He shrugged unhappily. "Right or wrong, he's in a position to make it stick. You'll have to watch your step, conform, play along. If you want to hang onto this berth, that is. You do want it, don't you?"

Want it? McCall thought about his thankless years in the freighters, with their uncertain schedules where a man was lucky to get home two or three times a year. He thought of the dogholes, the uneasy anchorages in the lee of stone-fanged reefs where a man could age a year in a day and often did.

He thought of—— And then he was seeing the *Queen,* with her regularly scheduled run, and the long layovers at the home port in between. Why, a man's kids might even get to know him when he opened the front gate instead of running screaming to their mother. And there would be a raise in pay, of course, that would conceivably permit retirement long before you were tangling your faltering feet in your long white beard. And—the *Maui Queen!* Hell, she was a skipper's star-studded dream. She was——

JAMISON, watching, nodded understanding.

"Swell. Now there's something else. This young Simpson. He's the front office's bright young hope, the fair-haired boy. J. V. personally has pushed him along, fast. Too fast, if you ask me." He frowned. "And another thing. Little, but important. You got whites and epaulets? Ogilvie likes his skippers to look the part."

McCall grinned. "I got whites. My skivvies, which I don't put on till I get noth o' forty. Okay?"

Jamison shook his head. "Pete, I'm serious." He got up. "One last thing. That chip on your shoulder. No good. On the freighters, yes, where maybe once in awhile you get a hard case crew." He smiled. "Or maybe even a hard case port captain. But on the *Queen,* no. There you got passengers to cater to, and brain guys from the front office. It's no good."

McCall sobered. He nodded. "Okay, Alec. On the *Queen,* no chips." He shook Jamisons' hand gratefully and left.

THE *Maui Queen* let her dock lines go with customary ceremony. There were flower leis, colored streamers and a band giving out with the allegedly stirring strains of Hilo March. On the bridge Captain McCall stood it as long as he could. He wasn't stirred. Anyway martially. "Stop that yammering!" he shouted, unthinking. The command came out with a windship-in-a-gale bellow. "Am I running a steamboat, or judging a jive contest? Mate! Get that spring line in aft!"

There was no answer to his question, except stricken silence, both from the band and from the passengers lining the rail. There was also shocked disapproval, though Captain McCall did not notice. Nor did he notice J. V. Ogilvie standing on the boat deck just abaft the bridge wing. Perhaps it was just as well. The agent's expression was that of a czar about to exile a peasant to the far, far mines.

"That's better," McCall growled at last and to no one in particular. He cupped his hands to continue his interrupted communication with the second mate aft. It was three hundred feet to the mooring deck and he took an even deeper breath, ready to give out with another windship, etc., bellow when someone plucked at his sleeve. It was evidently, Mr. Simpson. The first officer was a tall good-looking young man with a gold-braided cap tilted decorously over cool confident eyes in what was evidently the cruise

ship manner. He too had a mustache, if you could call it that. McCall found himself wondering if everyone in authority around here was trying to hide a scarred lip.

"If I may suggest it, sir," Mr. Simpson said, "we have telephone communication with all parts of the vessel." His embarrassment, it was evident, was not for himself, but for his newly appointed superior officer. "Did you wish to cast off, sir?"

McCall said, "Hell, yes, unless you want to stick around for another waltz!" but he said it to himself, remembering in time Jamison's cautioning words. Then, with commendable power of will, he smiled with what he hoped was gentlemanly courtesy. "Yes, if you please," he said, then turned his attention to getting the *Maui Queen* to sea.

That, too, took some doing, seeing she was thrice the tonnage of the *Elston.* Seeing, also, that as the day had waned a southerly wind had begun working in across the mountain range at their back, making the *Queen* as unmanageable as a dismasted schooner in a typhoon. However, and at length he got the harbor breakwater astern and the *Queen* settled down on the great circle for Frisco lightvessel. From here on for five days things ought to go pretty smoothly, he told himself thankfully. All he'd have to do was—he winced—conform, play along, let things run themselves. And they would, undoubtedly. Ogilvie appeared to be right as regards to the way these liners practically ran themselves, for although the wind had increased as they left the lee of the land, building up a nasty sea and swell that would have had the *Elston* stumbling along like a waterfront wino with a snootful of muscatel, the *Queen,* under guidance of her gyro pilot, took it all in stride, skipping before it like a school girl at recess.

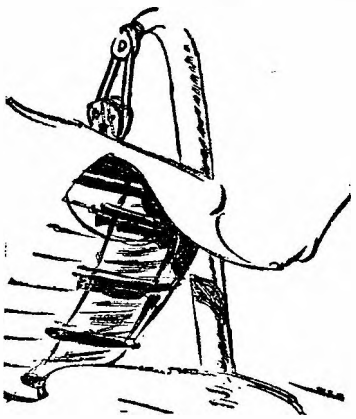
VISIBILITY, though, as McCall turned to go below, was not good, and with night settling down and a threat of rain in the humid air it would probably get no better. Mr. Simpson, whose watch it was, had the radar switched on and did not appear to be unduly concerned. McCall wasn't either, but with a caution born of long years at sea he said, "If it gets any thicker, mister, slow her down and send for me. And you'd better start the whistle, even now."

Mr. Simpson said, "Yes, sir," respectfully enough, but his eyes held the casual scorn of an efficient young man sure of his job and his future, for an overly cautious old fool who wasn't.

McCall felt the chip on his shoulder beginning to weigh heavily. With an effort he shrugged it off and said nothing. Play along, McCall. Conform.

At Ogilvie's none too subtle suggestion Captain McCall dined alone in his quarters. As the agent put it: "Ah—if the captain wished to make use of one of Captain Hansen's spare uniforms, perhaps he . . . Passengers, you know, rather expect. . . ." No, the captain did not wish to borrow any uniforms! The arrangement suited the captain fine! Furthermore, the passengers could——

So it was during his lonely meal that McCall felt the *Queen* roll heavily to a sea larger than the rest. He arose, not worried



particularly, and looked out upon the limitless unrest of sea surrounding them. The wind had increased measurably, driving before it a rain that had descended upon them with a sudden savage fury. Visibility was at best only a few hundred yards, yet he had had no summons from Simpson, heard no slowing of the turbines' whining rhythm. The *Queen,* then, was rushing through the night blind as a bat in a desert noon, and at close to twenty knots, without even the benefit of a warning whistle to mark her pass-

age. McCall cursed feelingly, worried now, and ran in great angry strides toward the wheelhouse.

Ogilvie and Simpson were both there, engaged in seemingly casual conversation, but from the manner in which the talk was bitten off at his entrance McCall gathered that he had been the favored topic. He said sharply, "I thought I was to be called if the weather thickened."

Ogilvie and the mate exchanged glances. Simpson said, "I hardly thought it necessary, sir. Everything is well in hand." The voice was cool, supremely confident.

That did it. "Is it now?" McCall snapped. "I'm excess ballast, then? A figurehead, just along for the ride? The *Queen* could as well do without me. Is that it?"

SIMPSON'S eyes wavered. Ogilvie's did not. His shoulders lifted and fell, eloquently. McCall nodded. "Okay," he said grimly, "and it's a short ride, at that. Right? But while it lasts it'll be on my course and at my speed!" He reached out and notched the telegraphs on Slow.

His answer was a lessening murmur of the turbines throttling down, and Ogilvie's voice, cold now as arctic spray, "May I remind you, Captain, that you are on a passenger vessel, not a scurvy cargo carrier whose comings and goings are of little concern? We have a schedule to keep, a docking deadline to meet."

"That we have," McCall said, calmer now, "but it could well be a deadline with death if, at twenty knots, we were to ram another vessel bound west on an opposing course. It's a fine night for it." He waved a hand at the lowered sky, the rain slanting in across the seas like blinding curtains of crystal beads.

Simpson's indulgent smile came out as a disdainful smirk as his eyes found the radar screen glowing wanly on the after bulkhead. His firm young jaw angled upward to where the antenna revolved slowly at the mainmast truck, scanning the empty miles around them. "Rather a farfetched possibility, isn't it, sir? It's a lonely track, this one from Hilo to the coast. And if on the long chance there was another vessel in the area, radar would warn us of its presence."

"Perhaps," McCall said. "Nevertheless, common sense—and government regulations—call for certain precautions in thick weather. Moderate speed is one of them. Shall I quote the others for you, mister?"

Simpson said curtly, "I'm familiar with the regulations. Sir."

That "sir" was a definite afterthought, but McCall let it go. He said, "Then we'll switch to manual steering, won't we, Mr. Simpson? So as to be able to change course quickly if necessary? And set the whistle to sound off at the prescribed intervals."

"Wait!" Ogilvie's face matched the dull red of the binnacle's glow beside him. "That does it, McCall. I've had enough of this, and of you. I thought we understood each other from the first. Evidently we didn't, so I'll set you right. The vessel's safety is your responsibility. I'll grant you that. The passengers' comfort and welfare, their peace of mind—everything they've a right to expect—is mine. If the two conflict, safety of course comes first. But I have Mr. Simpson's word that no such conflict exists. The *Queen's* navigational aids, our radar for example, makes collision an impossibility, even if there was imminent danger of such an occurrence, which there is not."

He paused, then went on. "By slowing the vessel it is quite possible that we might fail to keep our advertised, and guaranteed schedule. That, for your information, is a matter of more than casual importance to the Line's guests. Furthermore, by sounding the whistle you will cause unnecessary concern, undue alarm, all without cause—if I can trust Mr. Simpson's judgment. And I do, Captain McCall, more than I do yours."

So there it was. Laid on the line and what are you going to do about it, Captain McCall? In a way, Ogilvie was right. McCall admitted that. The agent's logic was unassailable. Or was it? McCall was aware of a vague uneasiness troubling him, a tenuous thing at best, little more, actually, than feeling, a sense of impending danger that had little foundation in fact. Yet that very sense, he knew, had been developed and sharpened by half a lifetime at sea where a man, more often than not, walked hand in hand with the unforeseen. It was hunch, sure. In-

stinct and nothing more. McCall admitted that too. And yet this time there *was* a basis, of sorts, for the feeling. It was a small thing, an almost infinitesimal factor of possible error that he had noticed when he first boarded the vessel. It was something that not one time in a thousand would lead to actual danger. One time in ten thousand, maybe. Those were long odds. Too long, certainly, for outright challenge of Ogilvie's argument. Yes, the agent was right, after all. They were safe enough here on the *Queen.* So why push his authority? Why alarm Ogilvie's precious passengers? No reason at all, really.

LOOKING at it that way, McCall felt better. The thing to do now was put this troubling uneasiness aside, peg it for what it was, a fool hunch, and let it go at that, allow Ogilvie to have his way. It would pay off in the long run, that was for sure. Oh, he'd made a poor start, McCall had, but there was still time to remedy it. In the next few days he could make his peace with the agent, flatter him, play along.

Why, before they docked in San Francisco he and Ogilvie—if, of course, they docked in San Francisco. He shook his head angrily. There it was again, that irrepressible feeling of imminent danger, the deep inner conviction that somehow Ogilvie and the bright young Mr. Simpson were wrong.

He sighed, calling himself every kind of a fool. And when he was done he said, "Hell, softly, then, "Quartermaster!" sharply, and he was levering the iron mike out of gear, putting the steering system into manual control, waiting for the stand-by man to take the wheel.

"McCall!" Ogilvie, face white as a cresting wave, stepped forward commandingly. "I thought I told you——"

"You did," McCall said calmly, and he was smiling now that the decision had been made. He was playing the fool and he might as well play it right, so he said, "We were talking of regulations a moment ago. Remember? Well, there's one that prohibits anyone other than licensed officers from occupying the wheelhouse. Believe it or not, it applies to you. Get out! Mr. Simpson, start the whistle."

No one moved for a moment, except for the quartermaster stepping quickly out of the shadows, moving to the wheel. Then McCall stepped forward, hand outstretched for the whistle control, only to have it cuffed sharply aside by Ogilvie, a brittle shine now in his stony eyes. "McCall I'll have your job for this! I'll——"

"You probably will, at that," McCall said wearily, and knew how right the other was. This was the end of everything, a career in the only profession he knew, retirement, pension, everything. Everything, that is, except his professional honor and a deep satisfying conviction that, fool or not, he was doing what was right. And with that he shouldered Ogilvie aside, only to find young Simpson, taking his cue from the agent, blocking the way. McCall clubbed him once, instinctively, unthinking, then as Simpson stumbled he hit him again, deliberately this time, full on that firm young jaw. He saw

the other stagger and go slamming into the far bulkhead and then he was flicking the lever on the whistle control, sending a hoarse bellow of warning out into the rain-shrouded night.

The whistle's echo was Simpson's moan, or so it seemed, but the moan grew in volume, alarmingly, filling the void of night with sound. And it wasn't Simpson at all, but an answering signal as another vessel plunging through the darkness, unseen, bore down upon them from dead ahead.

"Hard right rudder!" McCall was leaping for the telegraphs, thrusting one ahead, the other astern, turning the *Maui Queen* in her tracks. The other ship was on them then, or nearly so, yet even then they could not see her clearly, so thick was the pressing darkness. It was just a shadowy bulk, with a bow wave curling like a flashing smile at her low-hung lip, and a running light, glowing red as a dragon's eye, sliding swiftly by as her helmsman turned her ponderously aside. There were burning gases, hot and gagging as the devil's breath, erupting from her stack's exhaust, and then she was gone as quickly as she had come, her fading whistle a whimper of thankfulness at escaped disaster as she passed astern. Then there was silence.

Slowly, McCall swung back on course. Young Simpson, wiping absently at his swelling jaw, shook his head in quiet wonder. Then, "Are you psychic, sir?" he asked at last, and there was humbleness for once in that cocksure voice. "I've had an eye on the radar screen a half hour past, with no sign of that vessel. It's as if it was a dream."

"No," McCall said, smiling faintly, "it was real enough. A tanker, I'd say, by her loom. You get two or three a month that run this track to Hilo."

"But the radar, sir! We didn't get so much as a sign."

"She was within our one blind spot," McCall explained. "The *Queen's* antenna is on her mainmast, so that the foremast creates a shadow cone of two or three degrees. Therefore, with each of us running exactly opposing courses she remained obscured. Of course, if either of us had varied our headings a degree or so—" He shrugged. "But we didn't."

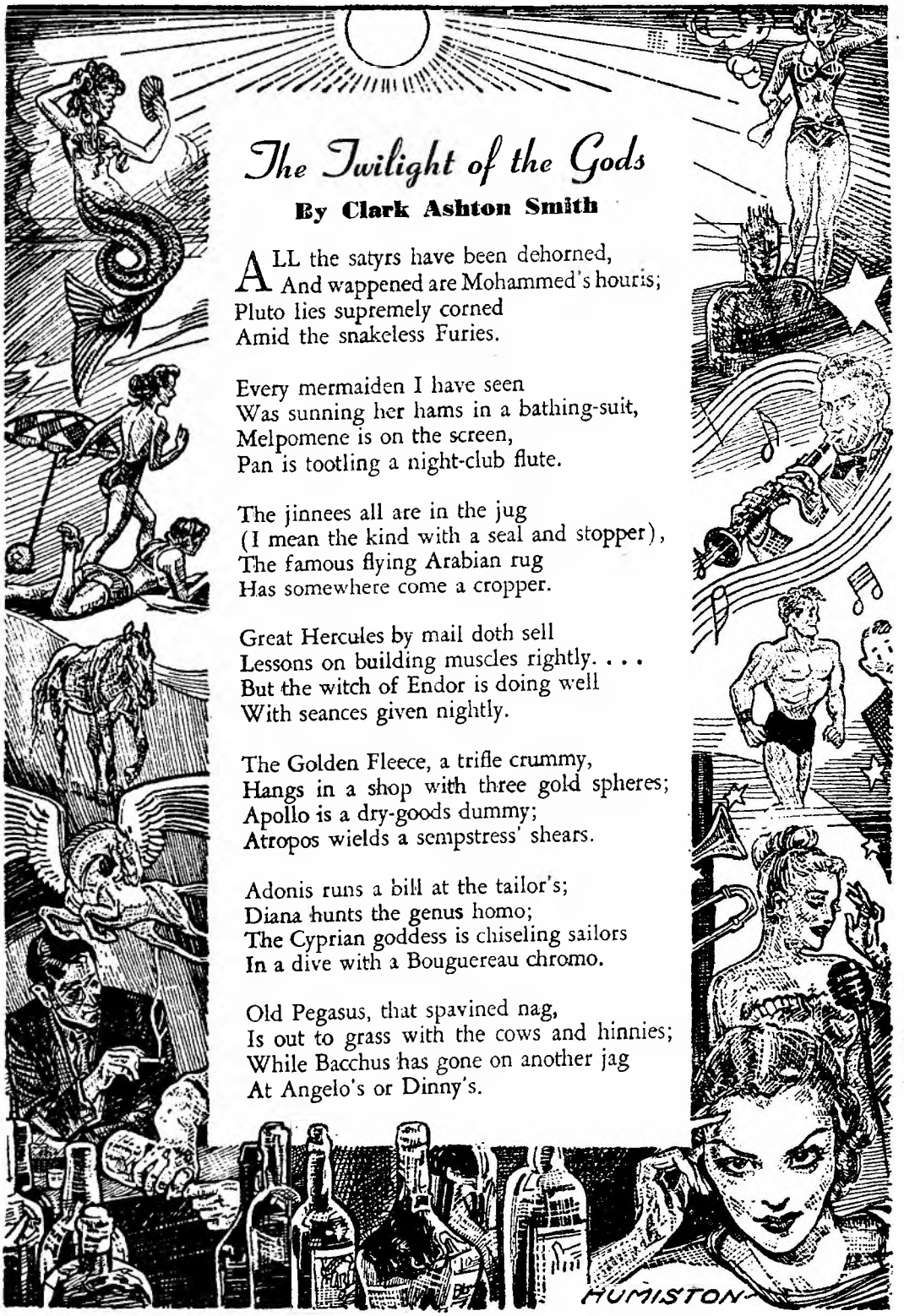
Ogilvie came forward, strangely quiet now. He said, as if to himself, "A mathematical impossibility. A——"

McCall's smile broadened. "Improbability," he said, "would be the better word. It was long odds, sure. A thousand to one or more, that this would never happen. But a man can't afford to take a chance. Because, you see, you could be wrong."

Ogilvie said thoughtfully, "Yes, you could at that. About a lot of things, McCall." He turned to the *Maui Queen's* first officer. "Right, Mr. Simpson?"

HE DID not wait for an answer, but started for the "A" deck stairs, pausing for a moment in the doorway. "There will be guests at the captain's table, McCall. Uniform or not, you'll be welcome. I'll expect you there." He waited for the blast of the whistle to cease and die away, and when he went on McCall would have sworn there was a twinkle in those cold eyes. "That's something you'll have to get used to, Captain. Passengers, I mean. I imagine you will, in time."

Thinking about it, McCall supposed he would get used to a lot of things, in time. Passengers—and their agents. A ship that resembled a wedding cake, but nevertheless was any skipper's dream. Even, maybe, uniforms and epaulets and. . . . He grinned, suddenly, to himself. What was it Jamison had said? "That chip on your shoulder. No good." Well, now the epaulets would serve a double purpose. They would do as a substitute for chips.



The Twilight of the Gods

By Clark Ashton Smith

ALL the satyrs have been dehorned,
And wappened are Mohammed's houris;
Pluto lies supremely corned
Amid the snakeless Furies.

Every mermaiden I have seen
Was sunning her hams in a bathing-suit,
Melpomene is on the screen,
Pan is tootling a night-club flute.

The jinnees all are in the jug
(I mean the kind with a seal and stopper),
The famous flying Arabian rug
Has somewhere come a cropper.

Great Hercules by mail doth sell
Lessons on building muscles rightly. . . .
But the witch of Endor is doing well
With seances given nightly.

The Golden Fleece, a trifle crummy,
Hangs in a shop with three gold spheres;
Apollo is a dry-goods dummy;
Atropos wields a sempstress' shears.

Adonis runs a bill at the tailor's;
Diana hunts the genus homo;
The Cyprian goddess is chiseling sailors
In a dive with a Bouguereau chromo.

Old Pegasus, that spavined nag,
Is out to grass with the cows and hinnies;
While Bacchus has gone on another jag
At Angelo's or Dinny's.

Morton Was to Learn More of the Man With the Inhuman Smile Who Came Aboard the Old Hooker Making Her Way in the China Seas

THE NET

By H. BEDFORD-JONES

MORTON first saw Crane and his curious follower outside the imposing palace of the governor-general. Morton, who was leaving Tonkin next day, was taking a snapshot of the tremendous building—a bit of the Champs Elysées set down here in Annam, and enormously out of place, too.

He noticed the sardonic, rather seedy white man with his nearly naked attendant—a tall, stalwart Annamite who might have been a fisherman by his looks. A queer couple. The natives, staring at the palace, made a remark in French.

"It looks like a falling net."

The white man laughed, his gaze going to the tremendous splay-sided shell or canopy of glass over the entrance. Morton, too, glanced at the thing, and smiled. This monstrosity of French civilization in contrast with the waving banners of the Annamese and Chinese streets.

The two others passed on. The white man gave Morton one swift, incisive glance, and it was a thing to remember. However, Morton thought no more of the odd pair for that day, nor ever reckoned to see them again.

He did see the white man next morning, however, and met him to boot.

The *Fei Yen*—a wallowing old tub

scarce justifying this name of "Light-flying Swallow"—was to sail at noon. Morton was enjoying an after-breakfast pipe in the hotel veranda when Captain Bray dropped in with word that the stuff was all safely aboard. This was his excuse. In reality, the fishy-eyed, bleak-nosed skipper was making a final effort to wangle a bit of help out of Morton for his own private graft, and Morton knew it.

Morton's position was a bit exceptional. An ethnologist, emissary in Annam of an American museum, he had secured a very fair collection from the up-country tribes—everything from weapons to seeds—and the French lent him every aid and courtesy. The *Fei Yen* had no business taking passengers at all, but Morton had a letter from a slant-eyed millionaire in Hong Kong who owned this and other coasters, and that made all the difference.

Bray sat down, puffed, accepted a drink and lighted a cheroot. He was a stooped, wide-shouldered man. His rather weary, washed-out blue eyes held a sharp glint at times, but he had the air of being oppressed by life.

"Now, then," he said carefully, after disposing of his errand, "I'm not the man to argue off a decision, Mr. Morton. Once a thing is done with, that ends it. But touching the matter I mentioned to you day before yesterday—well, certain things have come about, putting a new light on it. I hope, since you're an open-minded man, I may broach them."

MORTON glanced around, saw they were quite alone. He was not irritated; rather, he felt a vast contempt for the man across the table from him. Morton who was in his late thirties, had seen a good bit of the world and had studied more of it, and regarded such things with tolerant and dispassionate detachment. Captain Bray was a rascal, but that was nothing against him in Morton's sight; given the necessity, most men were rascals.

"Thanks for the compliment," he said, a flicker of amusement in his steady gray eyes. "I appreciate your confidence in my discretion. Go ahead."

Bray nodded. He took himself very seriously, and this was the chief thing Morton had against him.

"Well, I know one or two people here, and my mate, Mr. Chambers, knows one or two," he said. "When I got orders at S'pore to pick up the Manila cargo here I didn't know you'd be along. We arranged with a chap here to give us two suitcases of the stuff, and paid by cable. Now we find he's been put in the cooler. His wife has the stuff for us, but can't get it aboard. Nor can we. The French are watching things mighty close, Mr. Morton, and for some reason or other seem to have their eyes on us."

Morton repressed a smile at this naive confession. It was true that the French kept a close eye on the opium traffic. Since the big scandal broke in Paris regarding the administration here, every official had been on his toes.

"We can get the stuff, but we can't get our money back," proceeded the skipper plaintively. "Nor can we get the stuff aboard—it's remarkable how every man jack of us is watched! We've got to open every parcel we bring down to the quay, and the mere hint of a bribe makes those frogs throw their hands in the air and chatter. Now, as one white man to another, would you see us lose all that money? We're not rich. We can't afford it. All you got to do is let those two suitcases go aboard with your stuff, which won't be examined. You don't have to do a thing."

Morton tamped down his pipe reflectively.

"My dear Captain Bray," he said, "I'm sorry for you and Mr. Chambers. You're in a hole, and from what I know of the price of opium, an expensive hole. As I've previously made clear to you, I have no high moral sentiments in the matter; whatever may be my private view of dope traffickers, it's immaterial to me how much of the stuff gets on the market or how soon dope fiends smoke themselves into Elysium."

Captain Bray dimly perceived irony in this, and his fishy eyes narrowed.

"I don't get your point," he said with some asperity. "You'd see white men lose out?"

"Are you referring to the color of skins or of souls?" asked Morton smoothly. "But

to the point, as you request. It's very simple. The government here have accepted my inventory of my things without examination; they have waived formalities, treating me with magnificent courtesy. For this very reason, it's impossible to add your suitcases to mine."

"But they wouldn't know it, even!" said the skipper.

Morton smiled. "That's why. Over your head? Nonsense! But it's quite settled, so we may dismiss any further argument. Besides, I have to finish packing and get my grips aboard——"

IT WAS here that Crane appeared, just as a dark flush came on the skipper's face. Crane came striding up the steps, saw them, and approached.

"Cap'n Bray?" he asked in a quiet, restrained voice. "Heard you'd come here, and came for a word with you, if you can spare a moment. My name's Crane."

Captain Bray gazed up at the visitor. Crane had features not distinguished in any way, not singled out by any particular oddity; they were regular and rather gave him the air of a cleric, with their thin-nostrilled touch of asceticism. His eyes were remarkable, but Morton, watching him, could not tell why. They were cruel eyes, he fancied, yet level and queerly piercing.

"Yes?" said Bray, almost grudgingly, as he ran his eye over the seedy garments. "What you want of me?"

"I hear the *Fei Yen* is going direct to Manila," said Crane. "I want to go on her."

"No," said Bray curtly. "Don't take passengers."

"But you're taking passengers," said Crane. "A Mr. Morton—this is he, perhaps?"

Morton, for no reason except Bray's churlishness, rose and held out his hand, and indicated a chair.

"Yes. Glad to meet you. Sit down—have something?"

Crane gave him a swift, firm grip, shook his head to the question, and took the chair.

"Can't take passengers," said the skipper. "Mr. Morton's a scientist, a friend of the owners. Makes it different."

"Yes?" said Crane. He got out a cigarette and lighted it. "There are two of us. Mien is a native—very useful. You can put him in the black gang. I'll pay my passage, of course."

"Look here! I've told you already——" began the skipper, then stopped abruptly, and stared at Crane with a puzzled air.

"If you'd give me a moment in private," said Crane, "I might be able to convince you that I'd make a good passenger, Cap'n."

"In private?" Bray flushed angrily. "I've got no secrets Mr. Morton or anybody else can't hear, and you needn't try any bribery either. By the Lord—I've placed you! You're the chap who was at Pak-hoi a while back, got mixed up in that opium scandal, and went to prison for it! Busted ship's officer, weren't you? Some talk about being a pirate, too, but no proof. The blasted cheek of you, coming to me! Ex-convict like you! Nothing doing."

CRANE, to the surprise of Morton, took all this with an air of sardonic coolness.

"Well, well," he returned easily, "I haven't denied my record, have I? But I s'pose it does irk you to associate with an ex-convict and so forth."

"Yes, it does," said the skipper flatly, and with entire seriousness. "I couldn't afford it, not with my position. And besides, I don't hold with crooks. We don't need to mince bones about it, I guess. Out here in these waters, a white man's got to go straight or else he'd better go native and be done with it."

"There's some truth in that," agreed Crane gently. He looked up, met the twinkle in Morton's eye, and smiled. Morton had a startling impression, as though beneath this smile were terrible things. It jerked him up, made him watch Crane more closely, as the other now addressed him. "You wouldn't have offered me that drink if you'd known —eh?"

Morton took the pipe from his mouth.

"Why not?" he asked. "I never saw a pirate before."

Crane chuckled. "Well, I'm going to show you that Cap'n Bray's bark is worse than his bite," he returned. "You see, this honest skipper of ours, when it comes down to hard tacks, won't go back on another

white man." Morton could not repress a keen amusement at this throwing back of Bray's argument on himself. Crane continued, while the skipper glowered at him. "—especially out in this country. You see, Cap'n Bray has a very soft heart under his bluster, Mr. Morton. A very soft heart! When it comes to charity and good works, his right hand never knows what his left hand does. Eh, Cap'n?"

Bray growled something about blasted flattery. He did not see, as Morton began to see, a frightful and merciless irony creeping into Crane's words and tone. He perceived it sharply enough an instant later.

"You see, Mr. Morton, this good seaman of ours is very tender beneath his outer crust. Why, I've heard tell that up in Pakhoi, when he and his chief officer were appealed to by a poor French girl in trouble, who had only a native woman for friend, they——"

Captain Bray's washed-out blue eyes widened, and at the same instant all the color in his face seemed to flow away, leaving the bronzed skin a queer mottled gray.

"That's a damned lie!" he exclaimed sharply.

Crane glanced at him in surprise. "Oh, not at all, Cap'n! Not at all. I heard how you helped them away on the *Fei Yen;* it was really most generous of you, since the authorities were trying hard to locate that girl. You ran big risks to help her. And you landed her and the native woman safe in Singapore later, I hear. Yes, that was a generous deed, Cap'n. Two years ago, wasn't it?"

"Yes, S'pore," muttered Captain Bray. The mottled hue had vanished and his face was nearly normal now, but the cheroot had cracked and broken in his fingers. "Never mind all that—so you want passage, huh?"

Crane smiled at Morton. "I told you he was kind-hearted! Yes, for myself. For Mien, a berth somewhere. He's a useful hand. He was in prison with me, Cap'n. He speaks French very well."

"I'll manage it." Captain Bray was breathing heavily. "Get aboard before noon—I can fix it all right."

"Thank you," said Crane. "I was sure you could. Your ship is beautifully named, Cap'n —Light-flying Swallow! Did you ever hear who the real Fei Yen was? She was an Imperial favorite a long time ago, when Chang Ngan was the capital of China; the most famous beauty of all times, a regular Helen of the Orient. But they didn't name her 'Taker'—that's the meaning of the Greek beauty's name, you know—they called her Light-flying Swallow, because of her dancing. She was a magnificent dancer, they say. Of course it wasn't what we would call dancing—like a French girl would dance, for instance——"

Crane's voice died away politely, for Captain Bray had risen and was dabbing sweat off his forehead with his handkerchief.

"No time for this gabble," said the skipper. "You'll be aboard, then? All right. Mr. Morton, I'll send two men up for your luggage in an hour—suit you? Good. See you later, gentlemen."

He took up his cap and departed.

Crane rose. "I'll be off, too. Glad to have met you, Mr. Morton. See you aboard."

Crane strode off, unhurried. Morton gazed after him and, down the street, thought a second figure joined his—a nearly naked, bronzed Annamite figure.

"Queer!" thought Morton, reflecting on the scene and what was behind it. "Blackmail? Perhaps. Bray helped that girl clear, Crane knew of it—hm! Perhaps. Bray isn't that sort, though; he's a hypocrite, a cold-hearted rascal, a pretty devil in man's shape. Crane—well, Crane——"

He could not make up his mind about Crane.

II

NOON had sounded. The steam-winches were rattling and clanking, and the *Fei Yen* was about to haul out. She was not pretty, but this was not entirely her fault; a man with half an eye could see that her officers were a slovenly lot.

Morton stood at the rail, watching a native craft swinging out into the tide and go slipping away before the wind, her three sails bellied out. A quiet voice at his elbow, and he glanced over his shoulder to see Crane there, also looking at the craft.

"Remarkable grace about her, eh?" said

Crane. "Half junk, half prau—these Annamese coasters have the best features of each. She seems to glide over the water rather than pass through it."

"What's the crowd over there at the wharf?" asked Morton, pointing to a long, low dock at one side, where a throng of natives and Chinese were gathered. Crane stared, and then a low, queer laugh came to his lips.

"Moving picture chap—that fisherman is performing for him. Ever see it done? Then watch! It's a marvel. You never saw anything to equal it, except a stage magician. Watch!"

Morton watched. A camera-man on the wharf, turning his crank; beyond him, over the water, a motionless bronze figure—a native fisherman. In his hand the native held a coiled net—apparently a small one. He stood for an instant, statuesque in the sunlight. Then, so suddenly that the eye could scarce realize it, the whole bronze body seemed to contort in a muscular ripple. The net flew out, spread in a perfect circle fifteen feet in diameter on the water's surface, and settled from sight. The native drew it in, slowly.

"Poorly done," said Crane. "He was slow about it."

"Slow?" exclaimed Morton. "Man, the thing was like a flash!"

Crane smiled. In his eyes Morton surprised that odd cruel glitter noted previously.

"A delayed flash, then. You'd see it better done out among the islands, where it's an art. Well, see you later! Must slick up a bit for luncheon. You haven't met the officers yet? It'll be a pleasure to remember."

Morton frowned after the slender graceful figure. More irony! A queer man. Well, any man would be queer after doing time in a French jail out here.

A HALF-HOUR later, going down to the mess-call, Morton met the officers. Captain Bray performed the introductions, then went back to the bridge, where the pilot was taking the ship out. His manner to both Morton and Crane was cheerful, as though he had forgotten how one had refused to help him run opium, and how the other was an ex-convict. Morton rather thought he had somehow contrived to get the opium aboard after all.

So far as the officers were concerned, one and all had abandoned shore-clothes with the blast of the whistle, and wore pajamas at best. Mr. Chambers, the mate and partner of the skipper in the dope business, was a sheer brute—powerful blue-jowled, heavy of jaw and hard of eye. He was obviously, the efficient driving force aboard the old hooker.

The second officer was nominally an Englishman, sufficiently so to let the *Fei Yen* answer the board requirements at Hong Kong. His name was Smithers. He had sandy, nearly colorless hair, which gave him the appearance of being without eyelashes, a dusky skin and odd frightened dark eyes. His face was weak, his mouth very bad, and whenever he opened his lips he vented a chuckling obscenity which would have won him honors in Sodom and Gomorrah. Morton put him down as the product of a Cockney father and Japanese mother.

The chief engineer, Maquorrie, and his assistant, Saunders, were on extremely bad terms with the bridge staff. Maquorrie was a grizzled, bleary-eyed, unshaven old man; his assistant was unclean in more ways than one, and matched the second officer's ribaldry with an aggressive flood of billingsgate appalling to hear. Morton gathered that Mr. Chambers had infringed upon the rights of the old chief, and bad blood had risen between the two shipboard authorities. It was certainly at dangerpoint now. From the unchecked comments of Mr. Smithers, the whole crowd had apparently plumbed the depths of dissipation in Tonkin, and everybody was at a keen edge.

The presence of the two passengers caused a nominal restraint and prevented trouble. Once or twice Morton surprised upon the face of Crane that same flicker of a cold and cruel smile as the man regarded those around; insensibly, before this first meal was over, Crane and the mate together were dominating the table.

Captain Bray had blabbed—even Morton could see it, as they shook hands with Crane, eyed him, glanced one at another. Halfway through the meal, indeed, Smithers became

emboldened by the atmosphere of familiarity his general obscenity induced, and gave Crane a leer and a grinningly offensive word.

"Ain't you the chap who piled up the *Emily Jane* near Zamboanga four-five years back? And been enjoying French hospitality lately?"

At this direct insult, there was a growling oath from the others.

"Shut your damned mouth," snapped Maquorrie. Crane, however, merely gave Smithers a level look, not at all pleasant or angered.

"Why, yes," he said. "And you, if I mistake not, are the gentleman who cut the throat of a woman in Pak-hoi two years ago?"

Morton was slow to credit the frightful accusation as sober earnest, but he was swift enough to read the truth in Smithers' distended eyes and livid lips. There was a tense silence for a moment, then the second officer forced a smile.

"Lor' bli'me, if you ain't ready with the comeback!" he said, and that was all. All, except the one look of distilled venom his lidless eyes shot at Crane.

MORTON presently sought the deck and watched the receding mountains of Annam with a singular sense of oppression. The yellow men working about the decks were far and away cleaner company than the rascally pack of officers, he thought; and he looked forward to the succeeding meals aboard the *Fei Yen* with something very like distaste.

Not that company or environment mattered much to Morton. He had plenty of work to keep him busy, and was impervious to distasteful surroundings. In fact, he began to laugh at the mess-table gang, once the hot afternoon sunlight had cleaned out his brain, and in the cool rush of wind he came back to his usual poised self. Yet something lingered—something he could not explain.

Oddly enough, it was nothing he had noticed at the moment, and only now did it come back to him. Not the exchange of courtesies between the chief and the afterguard, not the startling repartee between Crane and the second officer, not the looks or the words or comments of the others. Just the way Crane had smiled when introduced to Mr. Chambers, the burly mate—that queer, inhuman smile! Crane had smiled the same way at the skipper, on the hotel veranda. Crane had smiled the same way at the portal of the governor's palace, when the native said it looked like a net.

What did this smile mean?

"Waiting!" Morton's brain flashed to the meaning suddenly. "Waiting—for what? Here's a mystery—or do I imagine it all?"

THERE was little enough comfort for passengers aboard the old *Fei Yen,* but there were two or three unbroken Singapore chairs, and Captain Bray had rigged a flapping sort of awning abaft the bridge and chart-house. Morton got Wang, the steward, to take a small table up there. With his notebooks and pencils and brain, he had plenty to do, and was left to himself for a time.

Later in the afternoon the mate and two naked saffron men from forward came into sight, the men unlashing the tarpaulins over each lifeboat, while Mr. Chambers made an inspection of the regulation Board of Trade contents, from sail to stores, and substituted a keg here, a box there. When it was finished, he came over to Morton, dropped into a chair, let the cool breeze blow upon his hairy chest, and lighted a cigarette.

"I'm the only seaman aboard this here blasted craft o' perdition," he said profanely. "Didn't get anything stole at Tonkin, anyhow, but I'm takin' no chances. Bray's got a bottle on the bridge—blast his dirty old soul, I expect he wants to forget things! He's a soft 'un, he is."

"Doesn't look soft," said Morton, amused, studying the brute.

"What's rotten is allus soft," said Mr. Chambers profoundly. "You're a scientific chap—why is it, huh? Apple or mango or man, don't make no difference."

"Decomposition," said Morton. "It's merely a chemical change, Mr. Chambers—an organic change. Whether in the fibers of an orange, or in the moral fibers of a man, it's the same thing."

"Huh!" Mr. Chambers scowled, dark eyes glittering from beneath shaggy brows. A

long shadow fell across the deck between them, but neither man noticed. "Huh! I s'pose death is the same thing, huh? Worms —it all comes to worms, huh? Well, there's more'n one man aboard here got worms in him, lemme tell you! Yep, I guess death's the same thing."

The shadow lengthened, spoke, and Morton looked up to see Crane there, smiling.

"No, no, Mr. Chambers," said Crane in his level, restrained voice. "Death is not the same thing at all. It's the same thing so far as the body's concerned—but when the heart stops, something leaves the body. Something goes out of it that worms can't touch, that dissolution can't affect, something invisible and beyond comprehension. And that's death."

"Huh!" said Mr. Chambers, looking up with a sidelong glance. "I know what you're driving at—preachers' talk, huh? Soul! That's all bosh, same as heaven and hell. You can't hand me that sort o' slaver. Don't believe it. Nobody else does neither. You ask Morton, here—he's a bug-hunter. He knows better."

CRANE took the third chair, stretched out easily, yet carefully, as though—as though waiting, it semed to Morton. Odd fancy! Amused, Morton eyed the other two. Crane was mouthing a cheroot critically, before lighting it. Mr. Chambers stared at the horizon and his squat, heavy fingers played with one of the gorgeous buttons on his pajamas.

They were very gorgeous, those buttons, and caught Morton's eye. Strange contrast, gold and lapis buttons and cheap cotton cloth! An impossible thing in any town, but quite possible here aboard ship, where Mr. Chambers had his washing done by the steward and so could indulge his fancy for expensive trimmings.

Crane glanced at the mate, looked for a moment at those gold and lapis buttons, and Morton could have sworn that in this instant the man's eyes flickered as though from some swift and intolerable anguish. Then Crane smiled and turned.

"Well, Morton, how about it? You're a scientist, so back up Mr. Chambers with sound reason in his denial of heaven and hell."

Morton laughed. "Unfortunately, I can't," he said. "My little fund of science tells me there's something everywhere I can't understand."

"Bah!" growled the mate, giving him a scornful look. "Twanging harps and shoveling coal—huh! What factory turns out them harps, huh? Where's the devil's coal come from?"

"You don't get me," said Morton. "As you said, Crane, there's something that escapes from the body. And hell or heaven is the condition of that something, I think. Call it a state of mind. Call it what you like. But what matter? We'll learn some day."

"Oh, hell!" said Mr. Chambers, and heaved up his hairy bulk. "You chaps can talk it out all day if you want. I know what I know—there ain't any such bunk."

"Those are fine buttons of yours," said Crane. "Chinese work?"

"Huh, them?" Mr. Chambers twiddled a button in his fingers and inspected it as though for the first time. "I dunno. Found 'em in a bazaar up to Canton. Well, see you later."

"Wait!" said Crane. His voice leaped out suddenly, sharply, and the mate turned about in surprise. But Crane was smiling up at him. "Don't you know what those buttons are? Where they came from?"

"Huh?" Mr. Chambers scowled, and Morton was aware of a deep-flaring menace in his gaze, and perhaps a hint of fear as well. "Huh? What you mean?"

"Why, there's a native story," said Crane easily, "about a set of buttons like those. I don't know the details. Something about a native woman, very highly born, and a splendid set of gold and lapis buttons denoting her rank. I heard a lot of talk about it while I was in that up-country jail of theirs."

"You did?" said the mate, staring down at Crane and fingering the button. "You did?" He paused. He seemed fascinated by the story. "What was it?"

Crane squinted out at the horizon. "Hm! Hard to recall it now—seems to me this princess or whatever she was had got into some sort of a fuss with the authorities, and

skipped out, and tried to get out of the country but drowned herself. Her body was recognized by the buttons, if I remember rightly."

"Huh!" said Mr. Chambers, and looked down with conscious pride at his ornaments. "Well, these ain't the ones, sure. Reckon I've had these all of three-four years now—and they couldn't ha' got from there up to Canton, huh? Lots o' buttons in the world."

"I'll give you an English sovereign for one of them," said Crane. "For a souvenir."

"You will?" Chambers stared at him again, and grinned suddenly. "Done. I got two-tree extry ones anyhow. Done with you, here and now!"

His powerful fingers twisted one of the buttons around and around. It came loose, and he held it out. Crane motioned Morton to take it—he was trying to extricate the coin from his trousers' pocket. He pulled out the gold coin and Mr. Chambers pouched it with a grin.

MORTON examined the button. It was certainly handsome, being a stud of true lapis set in Chinese-worked gold. He glanced up, and saw that the mate had disappeared. Crane shook his head as Morton extended the button; the man's face was, of a sudden, all wet with sweat.

"No—wait," he said. "Do you read Chinese, Morton?"

"Unfortunately, no."

"You think I'm a fool to pay five dollars for that thing? Well, it's worth a good deal more than that price—not intrinsically. Upon it hangs the life of more than one man. I've gambled carefully for this bit of evidence, Morton; more carefully than you'd ever believe. I've gambled with time, with money, with careful planning. Upon what you're about to tell me, depends success or failure."

Morton frowned slightly. For an instant he wondered if Crane were a bit off—then he knew better. For Crane was smiling at him—that same terrible thin smile with its hint of inhumanity, of merciless precision. And under that smile Morton felt a tingle of fear.

"Look at the back of the button," said Crane. "If it's an ordinary button, nothing is there—and I lose. If it's the button of that native woman I told Mr. Chambers about, it will bear two very tiny Chinese ideograms—and I win."

Morton held up the button and looked it over. He shook his head, then frowned and looked more closely. Sure enough, he saw two very small ideograms, beautifully chased in the gold.

"You win," he said, and held out the button.

Crane took it and stuffed it into a pocket, then relaxed in his chair. He opened his mouth and exhaled a deep breath, gazing out at the sky and sea. When his eyes came back to Morton, a flame was kindled in them. The hint of sardonic mockery was clear fled out of his face; it had become resolute, hard, bitter hard.

"I lied to Mr. Chambers about that native woman," he said softly.

Morton gave him a casual look. "You seem to have a lot of information handy today about native girls," he said. "And I'm sorry to see you're beginning to take yourself very seriously. I thought you had more sense."

Crane looked astonished, then broke into a laugh, got out a fresh cigarette, lighted it. Amusement wrinkled the bronzed cheeks about his eyes.

"I like you, Morton!" he exclaimed. "Sensible—that's the word for you. Dead right, too; I mustn't take myself seriously or I'd go mad. Would you like to hear about that native woman?"

"Very much," said Morton, looking at him.

"Good. She was the native ruler of a little up-country state in the hills. A white man was there with his wife—just married. She was a French girl. He had located some very good sapphire ground and was taking out stones. The French got wind of it and came down on the place like a ton of brick. The princess got into a whale of a row with them, and a French officer slapped her face. Oh, yes, the French do that sometimes—you know the life of a Frenchwoman of the lower classes, don't you?

"Well, the princess took some of her jewels and skipped out. She went with the white man and his wife, who had to skip

also. They took their sapphires as well. They got to the coast and a native boat took them up to Pak-hoi, en route to China and safety. But on the way, the white man came down with fever. He was out of it, clear out of it."

Crane paused, and puffed at his cigarette for a long moment, his eyes narrowed at the horizon.

While the man spoke, Morton had a twinge of memory. Where was it he had heard of a French girl and a native woman —why, in connection with Captain Bray, of course! Bray had taken them aboard at Pak-hoi and had landed them at Singapore. That was what Crane had blackmailed the skipper with—forced him to grant passage. Was this some other fact of the same story? Very likely.

"The three of them got to Pak-hoi all right," pursued Crane, cocking up his feet comfortably. "But the white man was clear out of it with fever, and his wife was down with it, too. They had to keep clear of the authorities, of course, and the princess, who had only one man with her, did not speak French and was pretty well up against it. However, a ship was in the harbor bound for Singapore, a tramp steamer, and she heard it was a ship from Hong Kong, and she knew all Englishmen were good men. So she went to the skipper of the ship, she and the man who served her, showed him their jewels, and asked for passage to Singapore. She gave him one of the jewels, and he agreed."

Crane paused again, and seemed rather uneasy for a moment.

"I remember now you mentioned it to Bray," put in Morton, but the other seemed not to hear the words.

"This sea captain, this bluff, honest, good English soul," Crane went on, "saw no earthly reason why he should not benefit from the situation in more ways than one. He and his chief officer put their heads together. They got the four fugitives safe aboard—the white man was delirious, the French girl, his wife, was little better. The two women were given one cabin, the white man another. That night they knocked the native chap in the head and dropped him over-side, and took the white man ashore. It was not difficult to rig up a charge against him and make it stick; they hired a few gentlemen to attend to it, and make sure the white man would go to prison for a good safe term. At midnight they hoisted the hook and left Pak-hoi with their loot of women and jewels."

MORTON was startled by this turn to the story, and somewhat incredulous. He did not put such an action past Captain Bray, but the thing seemed impossible.

"Bray said," he put in quietly, "that he had taken the French woman to Singapore."

"No, I said that—he agreed, in much relief," and once more Crane, turning his face full to Morton, smiled his queerly inhuman smile. "Mr. Chambers agreed, in much relief that the native woman, the princess, had been found drowned. In actual fact, neither of these things happened. The French girl never reached Singapore, nor did the princess ever show up again."

Morton stirred restlessly.

"I'm not protesting the story—I know nothing about it—but it hardly sounds very logical," he objected. "That the white man should be clapped into prison, for example."

"Real life, my dear chap, is it ever logical?" and Crane laughed curtly, sharply. "He was going under a French name at the time. In reality, he was an American ne'er-do-well, an adventurer, who had previously been sentenced at Pak-hoi for smuggling opium and had escaped from prison up-country. He was not a good man at all, but he did love that French girl, and had married her. These two honest seamen knew nothing about him, thought him a Frenchman, in fact, and did not go near him on account of his fever. They never even clapped eyes on him! But when the French got their hands on him, they jugged him right. It goes to show how those two honest seamen fell into luck without knowing it."

"Hm!" said Morton, thoughtfully. "You knew the man in prison?"

"Yes." Crane looked out at the horizon, and fell silent.

"Well," said Morton at last, when he felt the silence awkward, "what's the rest of the story? What happened to the two women—French girl and princess?"

"Nobody knows. I fancy Bray took the

French girl, and Mr. Chambers the princess —our good chief officer is not particular as to color. Of course, this is only guesswork. Since neither of the women showed up at Singapore and had vanished on the voyage, and since neither was of the type to accept undesired love, it may be taken for granted that they committed suicide. This, at least, is the kindliest solution."

Crane fell silent again, a somber quality in his voice at the final words. Morton stirred a little.

"Look here, man—is this a fairy tale? Or do you know these things to be true?"

Crane held up the button, taking it from his pocket.

"What more do you need? There's the evidence."

"You say it is. There may be dozens of buttons like this."

"No. Specially made. However——"

"And," broke in Morton, uneasy before all the bald stark ugliness of it, "you say this happened a couple of years ago. If these two men ever hauled in a fortune in stones, would they stick right along on this old ship? Not much. They'd clear out, dissipate it, invest it—do something with it!"

REAL amusement wrinkled Crane's eyes. "Logic! Well, that's true. But they didn't get the jewels. The French girl had her husband's sapphires, and the princess her own stuff. Those women either hid the jewels here aboard, where they've never been found, or else chucked 'em over the rail, once they got on to the skipper's game. They were that kind, Morton. Shall we look-see? If we found the stuff, I expect that'd be the best sort of evidence, wouldn't it?"

Morton was silent for a moment, staring at Crane. Those words showed him something.

"Are you looking for evidence?" he demanded bluntly.

Crane shrugged. "No. I don't need it. I'm amusing myself, that's all."

"With what end in view?" snapped Morton. Crane gave him a slow look, half sardonic, and the man's face had become masked.

"Oh, mere distraction—passing the time! By the way, you have the cabin of those two women—suppose you look around. You're intelligent. Neither Bray nor Chambers have any imagination. Find those jewels. Might give you something to think about. Well, see you later."

Crane rose lithely and strode away.

III

TWO days passed, in which Morton saw very little of Crane.

The story Crane had told grew and grew in his mind, with his daily and hourly contacts with the officers of the ship. Captain Bray might be drinking, but did not show it. Mr. Smithers continued his obscene comments, and seemed to have all sorts of startling information as to the private life of his colleagues, nor were his jests resented. In this happy give-and-take came out hints here, a word and a look there, which touched upon the women sometimes carried unofficially by the *Fei Yen*.

Morton, usually so impassive to any such external things, found it all reaching into him. Talking with Bray, he would discover himself thinking about that French girl. Across the table, the brutish blue jowl of Mr. Chambers would remind him of a slim brown native woman who preferred death to shame. The chuckling comments of Mr. Smithers would strive in his mind for some double meaning, some connection with the story—and once or twice he found it beyond any doubt.

On the third day out, early in the morning, there was trouble. How it started, Morton never learned—the causes went far back and deep. The finish was a mad conflict on the forward well-deck between Mr. Chambers and Saunders, the assistant engineer. The mate, blood running down his face from a clip with a spanner, bent Saunders back across the hatch-cover and hammered him, and Saunders died that night of a broken back. Old Maquorrie cursed the after-guard with flaming and terrible blasphemy and threatened to have them all up in court, but the skipper took him below and drowned his anger in liquor.

At the burial of Saunders, next morning, Morton for the first time caught a full sight of the native, Mien, who had come aboard

with Crane, entering the black gang. Mien stood at the rail, watching the body go over as Captain Bray read the service; naked, tall, straight as an arrow magnificently powerful in every muscle and line. The man's eyes were ugly and smoldering, and Morton was startled by their vicious look.

However, there were other things to ponder. Morton wondered much about Crane, about where Crane came in on the story and why Crane was interesting himself in the lapis button and the evidence in general, but the more Morton thought of the whole thing, the more he became impressed with the possibility of finding the jewels.

He cared nothing about them as jewels, and less about their probable value. If they were here, however, they would stamp Crane's story true; the incredible would become the proven. About this possibility hovered the horrible fascination which invariably lingers around a gruesome mystery. Had this skipper, this mate, calmly going about their duties, actually done these things? Possible enough. Mr. Chambers was no more worried over the broken back of Saunders than if he had killed a fly. But then, that was hot-blooded fight. This other was cold, deliberate inhumanity, cruelty planned for gain and lust.

SO MORTON, intermittently, began to look about his cabin. He began, in fact, soon after his talk with Crane, but did not go into it very earnestly until the following day. That night after he saw Saunders' back broken, he was stirred, his imagination was at work, he sat down and concentrated on the thing. After all, it must be simple—if true! Or was it all a wild-goose-flutter? Had those women been here in the cabin?

Then he remembered that Crane had not seen the reverse of the lapis button until after asking about the two ideograms. This was a bit startling.

Morton looked around. He had already searched, vainly enough, everything in the two-berth cabin. Granted the story was true, then; either the jewels had gone out through the port, or they were here. Where? Where could a woman hide such things? Where might they lie for two years undiscovered? The cabin was bare enough. Steel walls, iron berths, two old gray life-jackets in the rack overhead—not a hiding place of any kind visible! Then the jewels must have gone out the port, to keep them from falling into the hands of the fishy-eyed skipper and the burly mate.

Perhaps—and yet—Morton's glance roved around. What had he overlooked? What, so simple, so impossible, that men of no imagination would pass it by? Where, undisturbed and undiscovered during two years?

He rose and locked the door. Then, standing on the berth, he searched for crannies in the wall, searched the rack of the life-jackets, found nothing, no place of hiding. He was folding the life-jackets to replace them, when he halted abruptly. Two of them lay there side by side on the berth —what was that hint of red against the canvas of one? The other did not match it. He looked closer and saw one of the seams sewn with red thread, red silk thread. The other was not, certainly——

Morton got out his knife and ripped open the seam of the life-jacket, got his fingers into the powdery cork within, felt a hard object. In two minutes he had the thing wide open. Out across his bunk spilled a dozen hard little bluish polished pebbles—were they sapphires, then? No matter. With them were other things—stones in fragments of their mountings. Pearls, a diamond, several rubies, jade, three necklaces of pearls and two of fine deep green jade, not the poor light article of commerce but old and valuable jade.

Morton stared at them all, then gathered them up and put them into his pocket. The fact hammered at his brain, hammered remorselessly at him. The blood of women was on these stones, the crimes of men—lust and gain! Their value was nothing to him. He saw only the greater and more important thing. Evidence!

A KNOCK sounded at his door. Swiftly, he turned over the ripped life-jacket, flung the second above it, and opened the door. Captain Bray came in, genial and friendly, a breath of liquor on his lips.

"Well, are you getting settled, Mr. Morton? Sorry I haven't had much time to give

you so far—papers, you know, details, charts and so on," he said. "Are you comfortable here? Anything we can do for you?"

"Oh, everything's fine, thanks," said Morton, and wondered why.

"I dropped in to see if maybe you'd splice the main brace with me," said the skipper. "As a matter of fact, that business down for'ard got on my nerves—poor Saunders! My officers have been with the ship for years, most of them——" He produced a bottle, and laid it on the table. Then he saw the life jackets, and his eyes widened on them. "What's the matter? Afraid we're going to strike an iceberg?"

"Trying the things on," said Morton uneasily conscious of the spilled cork-powder.

Captain Bray said nothing more. In this fleeting quarter-minute, however, the color of his face changed. His eyes narrowed slightly, and took on an unguessed predatory expression; his large nose tautened and quivered.

The drink, the discussion of Saunders' death, was mechanical. Presently Captain Bray departed with his bottle, and seemed glad to get away, as though something inside were hurrying him, spurring him off. Barely had Morton settled down over his pipe when Wang knocked at his door and came in, staggering under a load. He brought a brace of white and shiny new life-jackets, and word that new ones were being issued out to all the cabins to replace the old jackets.

Morton let him take the old ones away, fold and place the new ones in the rack, without comment. In this ten minutes before his pipe was lighted, he had worked. The canvas was sewed up. None the less, he knew they would know. "They"! Morton, for once, was conscious of a criminal guilt. The stones in his pocket weighed down his conscience. What should he do about it? No doubt now, no doubt whatever!

"They" would know he had found the stuff. He could fancy the skipper and Mr. Chambers over a bottle, glaring, cursing their own bad luck, their own vain searches. After two years! The stones lying there all the while in the most conspicuous and yet the most inconspicuous of all places, under their very noses, unseen and unguessed! Perhaps they had even poked around in those same life-jackets, without ever seeing the tiny glint of red silk thread!

THEN poise returned, gradually working back, and Morton laughed whimsically again as he thought of it all. What matter if they did know? They would glare at him, and not dare breathe a word. And what would he do about it He did not want the cursed stones, the price of blood. Well, wait and see! He got out his notebooks and worked late, but when he turned in, he locked the door and left the key in the lock.

He wondered, next morning, how they would look, and to his surprise they looked just as usual; neither skipper nor mate seemed to have any ulterior thought when they regarded him. He could not imagine the least thing in the exchange of words at breakfast, and cast his half-worry aside. There were many things to be attended to, and much talk of Saunders and past dissipation ashore, and old Maquorrie with senile tears on his eyelids.

Morton did not see Crane at the burial service, but he saw Mien there among the other men, and it seemed to him that this brown native, distinct from the yellow Chinese, was more of a man than these others who stood around while the skipper prayed and assumed a gravity they did not feel.

Under the makeshift awning on the bridge-deck, he found Crane sitting.

"You didn't attend the ceremony?" he asked, dropping into a chair. Crane looked at him briefly, sardonically.

"Let the dead bury their dead," he said, and no less bitter than the words was the inhuman smile touching his lips and not his eyes.

Morton fumbled for a cigarette; he was tired of his pipe.

"What a blast in those contemptuous words!" he said, though he had not meant to voice the thought. Crane looked a trifle startled.

"Eh? Well, I suppose so. I've no use for the gang. They've no use for me, but they're a bit afraid of me."

"Why?" questioned Morton. He lighted his cigarette, and wondered how he would get around to the weighty subject in his pocket, what he would say about the stones.

"They know my record." Crane laughed frankly now, in real amusement. "You see, they know I lost my master's ticket for piling up a ship. They know I went to prison for dope-running in Pak-hoi. But——" He hesitated here, dwelling on the word with a certain relish, a deepening of his amusement.

"But—*but!*" and he laughed again. "You see, Morton, they don't know a thing more about me! They don't know where I've been the past two or three years, they don't know what name I was under, they don't know one solitary blessed thing! And how they'd jump if they did know!"

"You're a queer man," said Morton reflectively. "I've seldom met a man I couldn't understand, but I don't savvy you a bit, Crane. I would, perhaps, if I knew all that lay behind you, behind your presence here this minute. No, no—I'm not inquiring; I don't mean it that way. I was thinking out loud. This white man whom you knew in prison, the one they sent there—what was his name?"

"Delattre," said Crane. "A French name he had taken."

"You hate this crowd for what they did to him. Then why come on this ship?"

Crane gave him a slow, cruel look. "You'll know that soon enough. My one worry is about you, Morton—you're a man. A clean man. I like you."

"Eh?" Morton frowned at him. "And I worry you?"

Crane flung out his hand with a laugh, dismissing the query.

"Let it go! We'll find a way. Done any looking around for that evidence?"

Morton nodded. "Yes. Do you know what the stuff was? Did Delattre describe it?"

Crane looked at him for a moment.

MENTAL suggestion is a queer thing. Perhaps the recent burial had quickened brain and nerves, perhaps not. Morton, in this look, knew suddenly, without words, that his question had given him away, had told his secret to Crane. He could not read it in Crane's face at all—he just felt it inwardly, knew it with absolute conviction.

"Why, yes," said Crane in a low voice. "There were three chains of very fine pearls, belonging to the princess, with a diamond, one or two rubies, and some odds and ends —all heirlooms. Worth a lot. Delattre had about a dozen sapphires, I understand; uncut stones, but picked for quality. I suppose the lot would be worth a pretty large sum, Morton."

"Is Delattre alive?"

Crane's head jerked assent.

"Yes. I'm the only one who knows where he is, who he is, what his story is."

"Then——" Morton hesitated, but his brain drove him on. Crane knew. Crane had the inventory of those stones down pat. There was no longer any possible doubt about the crime of two years ago. "Then—in case the stones were found——"

"They belong to Delattre," said Crane incisively, curtly. For an instant he was silent, then added, "Not that Delattre would want them or keep them. The price of blood, or his wife's blood—no, no! He's a queer sentimental sort, Delattre. He'd fling the things into the ocean rather than keep them or profit by them, even if he was starving. You can understand that."

"Yes," said Morton. "Yes. I'd feel the same way. Here, you'd better take them."

Crane watching him, without any surprise, he scooped the stones out of his pocket and extended them, in both hands. Crane took them and put them in his lap, without the least visible emotion.

"Found them, eh? Where?"

"Sewed into a life-jacket. The last place anyone would look."

CRANE laid both hands over the stones and stared out at the horizon. Morton watched him. The man was absolutely impassive, did not move a muscle, did not so much as move his eyes; he stared at some point on the skyline, unseeing. He was seeing something not there at all, something no one else could see. And, as the bronze of his face slowly whitened and died into pallor, Morton's brain hammered and clicked again. He knew exactly what the man was seeing, out there on the whitish blue sky-line above the sea, knew as clearly as though he himself were seeing it.

Crane was looking at the two women locked in their cabin, desperate, facing death

and lust, sewing those jewels into the life-jacket. And Morton did not disturb this mental vision.

Mr. Chambers disturbed it. In pajamas and sneaks, the burly mate bore down on them and grinned. Crane did not move at all—his hands quite concealed the jewels.

"Well, Dad Maquorrie has got to work double now," said the mate. "Real powerful prayer the skipper put up, huh? You two gents still talking about death and hell?"

Crane looked up, gave the mate a full, deliberate regard.

"Do you know how the Annamese catch fish, Mr. Chambers?"

"Huh?" said the mate. "Catch fish? Same as everybody else, I reckon. Why?"

"No. A different way. You'll know one of these days." And Crane turned back to contemplate the horizon once more. Somehow, in this cold, deliberate regard, Mr. Chambers had been stirred and touched, and showed it.

"By the Lord, I think you're daft," he said, and went away again, growling.

Morton might have thought the same thing, and was tempted to think it still more, a moment later. For Crane uncovered the jewels in his lap, took up one pearl necklace, and put it in his pocket. Then, filling both hands with the stones, he rose from his seat, took a step to the rail—and flung them out into the ocean.

He stood there, his back to Morton, until the latter spoke, half rising, incredulous.

"Good Lord! Crane—did you mean to do that?"

Crane looked at him, made a little gesture, started away, then turned, pausing.

"Wouldn't you, if you were me?" he said, and then went on, walking slowly away.

Morton sat in paralyzed comprehension, a little chill creeping up his spine.

IV

MORTON sat there until the noon mess-call, looking out at the sea, smoking, thinking, readjusting himself. He was no longer facing a quiet, peaceful crossing to Manila, but action—and very deadly action.

Crane, of course, was Delattre in person. Rather, had borrowed the name of Delattre for a time, under this name had met and wooed love and fortune—and lost all again, all and more. No one knew he had been Delattre, thus far. Morton mulled this over thoughtfully.

"Neither the skipper nor the mate know him for the fever-stricken Frenchman they sent to prison and robbed of everything," he reflected. "Hum! Is that possible? Perhaps. They'd been afraid of the sick man, afraid of contagion, had not looked at him, knew him as a Frenchman named Delattre. So they framed him, robbed him, knocked his native man on the head, and sailed off with his wife and the native princess. Now they've been talking with him every day, eating with him, living with him—and never knew it. My Lord, what a situation!"

Comprehension beat in upon him, wave after wave; understanding of little things he had passed by unseeing at the time. He had never dreamed of Crane being that man, so fearfully and mortally injured by these two! Now he remembered that cruel, inhuman smile, and it lingered before his mental vision.

He could interpret the smile, with what he had just learned. He saw why Crane had come aboard this ship, why he had spent time, money, brains, toward this end. He could perceive why the lapis button had been one definite scrap of evidence, and why the jewels had completed the work, making this chain of evidence damning beyond all words. On and on came the waves of comprehension, reaching even farther back—back to that morning on the hotel veranda where Crane had spoken of a French girl and Captain Bray had turned white as a sheet for an instant.

Bray had been afraid then—not of the French authorities, perhaps, as much as of something within himself. Remembrance? Conscience? Well, so much for Bray. It was far different with Mr. Chambers, who probably had neither regret nor conscience. And what did Crane intend to do?

Morton's reflections settled into a repetition of this mental query. What did Crane intend to do? Why had he come aboard here, bringing the stalwart native with him?

Did he intend vengeance? Naturally, yes—but in what way? Evidence, this evidence which he had sought and then flung away—he could not bring Bray and Chambers to the gallows with it alone! What on earth did the man intend?

That he intended something. Morton was convinced.

The odd part of it, Morton recalled as the mess-call sounded, was that Crane had not flung the lapis button overboard, and had not flung all the jewels overboard, but had saved out one string of pearls. Why? This inconsistency loomed and bulked larger, until upon it Morton began to hang the other question—what did Crane intend?

He went down to mess hoping to find out, but failed. Crane was there, whimsical, sardonic, quiet as usual.

In the bursting light of this amazing discovery, Morton had temporarily forgotten his own share in the matter. Mr. Chambers had the deck, the skipper was presiding over the table; although he searched probingly enough, Morton could not unearth anything the least unusual in Captain Bray's words or attitude. Yet it flooded back on him how Bray must know he had the stones. What, then, did Bray intend? And did the mate know?

With a shrug, Morton forced away the whole thing, refusing to let it weigh further on his mind. He went back to his notebooks that afternoon and saw nothing of Crane.

THE watches were changed at eight bells, four o'clock. Aroused by the voices, the tramp of feet, Morton left the shade of the awning and went forward to the break of the bridge. Down on the forward well-deck, the watch just up from below, naked yellow men and one lean bronze figure, were hauling in buckets of water and sluicing it over themselves.

Off to one side, by the forecastle head, Morton saw Crane standing, watching the men. Presently he saw Crane make a slight gesture. Mien, the bronzed Annamese, came over and joined him. For a space the two stood there talking, none near them. Crane put something in the hand of the brown man, took it back, tossed it over the rail. He put something else in the brown hand, and Mien drew himself up. This other object, too, went over the rail, but as it went, Morton watched it, and saw a slender uncoiling line of white. The two men below separated.

Here was a new query, and a most puzzling one. He hesitated to broach the whole thing to Crane, shrank from it—yet, toward sunset, did just that. He was standing at the rail in the stern when Crane came along and halted, and Morton turned to him abruptly.

"Why?" he asked. "Why? I don't understand it. Why drag Mien into it?"

"Eh?" The gaze of Crane bored into him for a moment. "Oh! You saw me, did you? Yes, I remember you were at the bridge-rail. You don't miss much, by the Lord, you don't!"

Morton smiled. "Well, why save the pearls to show Mien?"

"So he would recognize them and the button. His brother was the native servant of the princess. Both of them were boys in the palace. Mien knew all those jewels by heart, every one of them. That was another link in the chain——" Crane broke off, uttered a short laugh, corrected himself. "Rather, another mesh in the net."

"The net of evidence?" said Morton. "Then you intend——"

He paused. Crane shook his head quietly.

"My friend, what I intend is strictly my own business—without offense. But I've been keeping my eyes open, Morton. I saw something this afternoon just before watches were changed. Bray and Chambers were at the port side of the bridge, looking back at you, and there was an odd look in the mate's face. Could Bray or Chambers, by any chance, suspect you had found those stones?"

Morton's brows lifted. "If they did—would it be another mesh in your net?"

"Naturally. If they suspected——"

"They don't suspect—they know," said Morton calmly.

HE TOLD of Bray's visit to his cabin the previous evening, of his conviction that Bray had guessed, of Wang's visit with the new life-jackets.

Crane squinted out at the water and nodded slowly. "I expect they're on to you, right enough," he said. "I noticed Bray was

smooth as butter to you this noon. Hm! They'll think you still have the stuff."

"Naturally they don't connect you with it," said Morton.

"Hm!" Crane scrutinized him. "I don't know about you. You're an aloof sort, Morton—watch things going on and hold out of it. If I intended to punish those swine myself——"

Morton smiled. "You? Punish them? When we get to Manila, you mean. Well——"

"I didn't mention Manila. The point is, is it any of your business?"

"No." Morton was tempted to parry, but gave honest answer. "I have no concern in it, of course. And I don't believe in personal vengeance. Oh, I'd be quick enough to knock a chap down—I mean other things——"

Crane broke into an amused laugh, a real laugh.

"My dear man," he said with just a hint of deep mockery, "you're too intellectual to lose your temper—and when you lose it, heaven help the other fellow! You don't believe in personal vengeance—from ignorance. You know nothing about it. Any idea of what vengeance means to a man is far from you. You should be a judge and sit on the bench to sentence criminals with whom you have nothing in common. Then, you're really too lazy to work up enthusiasm over anyone else's wrongs—you have your own work to do. You're incapable of hitting a man unless he slapped you across the face and stung you. You——"

"Just what's the idea of all this analysis?" put in Morton stiffly. He was a little red, feeling within himself that perhaps Crane was right. "What are you driving at?"

Crane reached out and tapped him on the breast.

"Just this," said he. "If you've got a gun, you dig it out and carry it—and watch your step!"

With this, Crane turned and strode away, leaving Morton very much confused.

"Confound the fellow!" he thought. "He rattles off character and motives like one of these imitation psychoanalysts who milk the innocent public—and yet I've half an idea he may be right. What of it? I'm not ashamed of myself or my character, and if he doesn't like it he can go to the devil. But carry a gun, eh? Nonsense; not a word will ever be said by the skipper about those jewels. They might try to steal them—nothing more. Bah! There's nothing for me to worry over. The point is—what's going to happen? Crane and Mien had a purpose in coming aboard here, and they weren't looking for evidence either."

Here was the thing Morton was really worrying over, and now he faced it as he looked out at the white tumbling wake of the *Fei Yen*, faced it squarely. He was no fool. He could see how everything had come to a focal point on Crane's words—"What business is it of yours?" This had really been a polite inquiry, not a brusque turning away.

Where did he stand, where must he stand? Morton put the question to himself and strove for honest answer. No blinking it—Crane and Mien were here for action. To put it in fantastic melodramatic fashion, for vengeance. And where did he stand? Must he stand motionless and look on? Crane meant killing, or worse, and was unhurried about it; his attitude gave that same singular appearance of waiting, waiting, as a cat watching a mouse!

"But where do I come in?" Morton demanded of himself. "Do I stand apart, detached, unconcerned, and let Bray and Chambers be killed? Warn them—no, that's unthinkable? They deserve all Crane can do, and more. Join Crane? No; that were insensate folly. It's none of my affairs. Yet it is my affair, from a standpoint of self-preservation! I want this ship to reach Manila, and I've no altruistic interest in seeing a pair of scoundrels receive their just deserts—particularly at my own expense. Hanged if I know what to do!"

HE WENT down to dinner, still wondering. The same unshaven faces, the same obscene jests, the same growls and oaths swirled about by the old-fashioned strumming electric fan. Not the same, though, for Saunders was missing.

For a moment, just after the second officer came in, Morton saw him glance at Crane. He started slightly with remem-

brance. Mr. Smithers had not forgotten, then!

Morton remembered that Crane had spoken out before them all, asking who had cut the throat of a woman—had Mr. Smithers done this thing! In this one swift glance from a venomous lidless eyes, Morton had an awakening.

He began to see Crane in a new light, as it were, bathed in the glare of hatred from all sides. Bray and Chambers did not know him for Delattre, true, but they knew he was in some measure aware of the story of the two women—since this knowledge was responsible for his having got passage. They would fear and hate anyone who knew this story. Mr. Smithers was certainly not anxious to be published to the world as having cut a woman's throat; his darting eyes said as much, though his tongue dared no longer touch on Crane. Whose throat had this Eurasian cut? What dark story had Crane picked up in prison? No matter.

"I'm sick," groaned old Maquorrie in the middle of dinner. "I'm main sick, Cap'n—I'll be gae'ing tae lie doon a bit, a wee bit——"

The old man rose, and his face was a livid gray. It was the heat down below, he said, and the good Lord must look after the engines, but they were in fair shape enough— So he went out, mumbling words that came to nothing. Captain Bray looked after him uneasily. Mr. Smithers caught the look and instantly pounced on the skipper, with a giggle.

"It always comes that way—less'n five days out!" he said with profane emphasis. "It always comes that way! Mr. Morton, I s'pose you know all about plague?"

"Shut your damned mouth, mister!" cried out the skipper in a burst of passion, his pale eyes opened wide at Smithers, and sudden choler purpled his cheeks. "I've had about enough of you and your ways. Any more of your smart talk and—"

"And what?" demanded Mr. Smithers, as Captain Bray paused. His demand was inpudent, cheeky, brazen. "And what, hey? What'll you do? Not a thing, and you know it. You dare to threaten me, and you know what!"

Watching them, Morton saw clear as a bell that Mr. Smithers had the whip-hand here. For all his bluster, the skipper was inwardly cringing before this threat. He sat silent, looking hard at the second mate, licking his lips, seeking words to save his dignity. He was helpless, afraid of the little man with the evil, lidless eyes.

THEN, abruptly, Crane's voice crackled upon the silence—drove out scathingly, sharp and bitter as acid, untouched with anger yet biting like a lash.

"What? Speak it out, you little devil! Think you know something on your captain, do you? Well, he knows something on you. He knows about that woman in the singsong house, savvy? He knows how you cut her throat and all about it."

Captain Bray evidently knew nothing at all—he jerked his head around and gave Crane a sharp look of astonished gratitude. Mr. Smithers did not see this, however. He, too, had turned upon Crane, his teeth showing in a snarl.

"What the hell you talking about?" he cried.

Crane sat there and smiled at him, and under the smile his soul crawled and his voice died. Then Captain Bray, who was sharp enough, perceived the chance afforded him to escape and seized it with both hands and a roaring voice.

"You this-and-that little Eurasian rat!" he bellowed profanely, pounding his fists on the table. "I've had enough o' your back talk. Aye, mister, I know all about that there girl. And you can take your choice—jump ship at Manila with your pay, or do your talking to the French consul there! Understand?"

Mr. Smither's seemed to retract into himself, to coil like a snake.

"You better look out—you and Chambers both!" he shot forth. All his anger turned from Crane to the skipper, yet his eyes were furtive and fear-filled. "You know cursed well I can tell about them two women who killed themselves and why—"

"What's that to me, hey?" stormed Captain Bray. Obviously, he had now determined to rid himself of this incubus once and for all. Morton shrewdly suspected that Mr. Smithers had presumed on his knowl-

edge ere this—probably had turned it to profit.

"Yes, mister, you go to Manila, and you go blasted quick!" proceeded the skipper boldly. "I've had enough o' you board this hooker, and now you're done. You and your talk about them women—all nonsense! A pack of cursed lies, and you ain't got a smidgeon o' proof to back 'em up. You just let me hear that you've done any talking about me or about this ship—understand? Just let me hear it!"

"Aye," said Mr. Smithers in sulky, wide-eyed fear.

Captain Bray leaned over the table. "Aye —what? Out with it, blast you! Learn some respect aboard here or I'll iron you this minute!"

"Aye, sir," replied Mr. Smithers, and blinked rapidly.

"As for your plague talk, that's nonsense too," went on Captain Bray, determined to assert himself to the full once he had taken the bit between his teeth. "The chief is done up wi' the heat. He ain't got a symptom o' plague. So keep your mouth shut from now on."

Mr. Smithers did so, but his eyes were eloquent of the fury in his heart, and when he met the deliberate smile of Crane, he shoved back his chair and left the table muttering. When he had gone, Captain Bray beamed genially at Crane.

"Well, sir, I owe you thanks for the tip," he said. "Did he really cut a girl's throat?"

"He did," said Crane calmly. "He and another chap did it for her jewelry. The other man didn't know Smithers by name, but described him to me—we were in the same prison. Smithers had got away. When I saw him, I recognized the description at once. There you are."

"Any man who'd do a thing like that," said Morton, looking at the skipper, "ought to be disemboweled."

"Right you are, Mr. Morton," said Captain Bray warmly.

CRANE lighted a cheroot in the darkness. The reflected flame from his cupped hands gave his face an odd highlight, illumined it with an unguessed strength, mastery. Morton puffed at his pipe and looked out at the blazing stars and the white-tipped sea. The *Fei Yen* was shoving ahead through long rollers that made the stars swing, when one looked up at them.

"Our friend Mr. Smithers," and Crane uttered a soft laugh, "seems to have been doing a bit of blackmail. Didn't the skipper jump to get rid of him, though!"

"You inserted that remark very cleverly," said Morton. "Why? To make use of him?"

"To weave another mesh in the net—perhaps the last mesh," said Crane. "Now we've learned the fate of those two women, haven't we? That's why I did it, my friend."

"And what next?" asked Morton, though his pulse leaped with the query.

"How do I know?" said Crane, in a tone of surprise. "There's no hurry. It's amusing to watch and wait. Everything turns around you now, also; you're the pivotal point of the next little scene."

"I?" said Morton.

"Of course. You've been standing aside, looking on at my little game. Now I'm standing aside in the same detached way, and looking on at yours. I'm curious to see what'll happen, What Bray and Chambers are thinking of doing, how they'll try to get those stones from you. If they haven't searched your cabin yet—"

"My things were badly tumbled about today," said Morton. "So that was it, eh?"

"That was it. And now you'd best watch your step," said Crane.

Morton laughed amusedly. "Confound you! I'd wish you'd finish up your game, whatever it is! I don't relish this a bit—it's interesting, fascinating, but I don't enjoy it."

"Well," said Crane, "I didn't make you find those stones and then tip off your hand to Bray, did I?"

With this he turned and walked away.

Morton was tempted to anger at this cool thrust, then it only added to his amusement. The subtle irony of Crane's words appealed to him. He appreciated the quiet, dominant way Crane was pulling string after string—literally enough to make up the meshes of his net.

And now, though he did not like it, he knew he had bungled that business of the

jewels, and he must see it through. Despite himself, he was being dragged into the affair, while Crane stood off and watched with a sardonic grin.

THE watches were changed, Mr. Smithers taking over the deck from the mate. Morton was pacing up and down the bridge-deck, enjoying his pipe and the cool of the breeze and the swaying stars. At each turn aft, he could see the glow of a cheroot and a white shape down below, at the rail of the after well-deck; but he left Crane alone.

From the chart-house drifted sounds of a furious altercation. Captain Bray had come up. He and Mr. Chambers and Mr. Smithers were all three at it, to judge from the storm of oaths and imprecations, but what it was all about Morton did not know or care to know. Of a sudden the figure of Mr. Smithers appeared, glided past him, and vanished aft. A moment later Mr. Chambers came out to the side of the bridge, bawling after the second officer.

"Smithers! Come back here, blast your dirty soul—I want my dinner! You take the deck—where ye think we are, huh? On a railroad train? Get back here!"

Smithers had vanished, and made no response. Captain Bray stepped out and spoke to his furious mate.

"Go on," he said wearily. "I'll take the deck, mister. Go on."

Mr. Chambers crossed to the port ladder and descended. Captain Bray stood looking at Morton as the latter approached, and then spoke.

"That you, Mr. Morton? A fine evening, very! I suppose you heard this unfortunate scrimmage of tongues?"

"I heard the sounds of it, at least," said Morton. "We all have our troubles, I expect. How are we making the road to Manila?"

"Oh, fairly, fairly," said the skipper. "I hope Maquorrie will come about in the morning. None of these yellow devils know a thing about engines. The old man is in a bad way, though—his heart, I think. Know anything about such things?"

"Little," said Morton. "I—what's that?"

Both men turned, startled, senses taut. A wild, shrill cry came from somewhere below, a queerly panting, inarticulate cry. Then, as they listened, it burst into words.

"Chambers! He—he done for me—he done—"

It fell silent abruptly.

"My good lord—that's Mr. Smithers' voice!" cried the skipper. "Come on, Mr. Morton!" Something's happened down there—"

Morton was already on the ladder, and Captain Bray almost on his shoulders. There at the ladder's foot, under a decklight, lay the second officer on his back, dead. Blood was still streaming from a jagged, terrible wound across his left breast; and above him, knife in hand, stood Mr. Chambers.

The mate lifted his blue jowl as the other two approached.

"Here's a hell of a note!" he cried out. "Smithers comes along the port passage hollering, and staggering like he was drunk, and then lets out a yell at me about some him—and there he is! Here's the knife—"

Abruptly, Mr. Chambers stood silent, his heavy voice dying out, as he looked from one to the other. Morton said nothing.

Captain Bray broke the silence. "It didn't sound that way, Mr. Chambers," he said in a quavering tone, as though he must speak against his will. "Is he dead? Yes, yes. Dead enough, poor devil! It sounded like he said you had done for him, mister."

The mate was not a man of great imagination, but had already read the accusation in both their faces. Now he burst forth and swore a great oath, and held out the knife.

"It ain't so, it ain't!" he roared. "It's a cursed lie, I tell you! That ain't my knife—you know blasted well I don't carry any knife! It's like I said. I seen him running, and caught him, and there he is. I s'pose because we had that fuss up above you think it was me—but it ain't so, blast it! Don't he a durned fool, cap'n—"

"What's all this?" said a quiet voice, and Crane strode up along the passage from aft, and joined them. His voice shrilled as he saw the prostrate figure. "Eh? Murder? Who did it, Captain Bray?"

The skipper glanced around, saw one or two figures, and mopped his sweating face with a shirt-sleeve.

"For the love o' heaven shut up, all hands!" he exclaimed irritably. "Most of them chinks know English. Go down in my cabin, all of you—I'll be right along. Wang! Where the devil's that steward? Boy! Wang!"

"My come topside, cap'n," came the response, and Wang patered up. The skipper ordered him to have the body of Mr. Smithers carried below and prepared for burial, then wiped his brow again and went below, and so to his own cabin.

Mr. Chambers sat there burly, scowling, furious at the whole affair and yet oddly dumb before the startling evidence damning him so clearly. Crane was chewing an unlighted cheroot, impassive, frowning a little as he looked at the reddened knife the mate had laid on the table. Morton glanced from one to the other, unable to balance fact against fact, unable to see where truth lay. Chambers must have done the murder; yet apparently no one remembered how Mr. Smithers had gone aft instead of descending at the break of the bridge.

"Well, gentleman, this is a hell of a mess," said Captain Bray, his face mottled and streaming perspiration. As he looked at the knife, his big nose quivered. "This has got to be logged. We can't get away from it. Mister," he said, as Chambers looked up, "mister, you keep quiet. I'm master o' this ship."

He cleared a space at the table, well away from the red knife, and got out his rough log, and sat down, Mr. Chambers was staring at him, hard.

"Somebody did this," said the skipper. "Maybe it was you, mister, maybe it was one of the hands. Nobody ever seen this knife before? Nor did I. Now, mister, speak your piece."

MR. CHAMBERS growled out his story without variation, and anger grew upon him against the unbelief all around. Morton thought his attitude rang true. He finished with a glare and another burst of gusty oaths. The skipper looked at Morton.

"You were with me, Mr. Morton. There's bound to be an inquiry about this," and he paused for an instant, wetting his lips, "unless—unless it's cleared up in the log. Did it look to you like Mr. Chambers had done it?"

"Yes," said Morton quietly.

"Blast you—" cried out Chambers, but the skipper silenced him.

"Did it look to you like Mr. Smithers said Chambers had done for him?"

"Not necessarily," said Morton. "The words might be so construed. On the other hand, they might refer to a third party—someone whom Mr. Chambers had seen running away, perhaps."

"Blast it, there wasn't no one else in sight!" growled the mate, glaring. Then he started. "But look here, cap'n! Mr. Smithers didn't go down the ladder ahead o' me—he went aft! Right past Mr. Morton!"

"Yes," said Morton.

To save his life he could not help a glance at Crane. The latter sat looking on, listening, a cynical lift to his brows, the slightest shadow of his inhuman and terrible smile touching his thin lips.

"What d'you know about it, Mr. Crane?" said the skipper. He seemed in difficulty, perplexed and troubled. His breathing was laborious.

"I?" Crane shrugged. "I came up, saw Mr. Chambers there with the knife—that's all I could say about it. Very likely his story is true. I'd been down in the after well-deck. I think you saw me down there, Morton?"

"Yes," said Morton.

"Blast it!" said the skipper fervently. "If you didn't do it, mister—and I don't think you'd lie to me—then one o' the hands done it. If I put down this sort of a yarn, there'll be an inquiry sure. And I got to log it, mister. Here's two witnesses."

MR. CHAMBERS looked from one to the other of the witnesses. His scowling gaze spoke tacitly but very clearly. His eyes said he wished most devoutly both of those witnesses were out of the way. Under Crane's smile of comprehension, blood rushed to his face.

"Blast you, all of you!" he exclaimed, and came to his feet. "I want some dinner.

If I'd knifed that red-haired fool, I'd ha' done it proper, without all this monkey-work! And you can take it or leave it in your blasted log."

He stamped out. Captain Bray wiped his face, and left his pencil untouched. Crane fumbled for matches and lighted his cheroot.

"You're up against it, cap'n," he said, as though he enjoyed the words. "Mr. Chambers may be an old shipmate and all that, but it looks bad. It'll look worse if you don't log what happened, and do it tonight. Tomorrow you can look for the owner of that knife among the crew."

"I hadn't thought o' that." The skipper brightened visibly. "Good for you, Mr. Crane! I'll do it. We're in for hard times this voyage—lucky thing there's good weather ahead, with everything gone wrong like this! A drink all around, gentlemen. We need it, eh? And I'll have to get up to the bridge now."

The drink was provided, then the three departed. Captain Bray turned in at the chart-house door, Morton and Crane walked aft along the bridge-deck.

"You did it well," said Morton.

"Eh?" Crane looked sideways at him in the starlight. "Eh? Did what?"

"Why evade? I'm not a fool," said Morton, quietly. "Smithers came down the after ladder, and ran slap into you. The rest was coincidence, but you played it well. Your net has gone tight on Chambers, and no mistake. He can't possibly get his yarn believed by any court. It's the truth, but it's too improbable."

"Hm!" said Crane. "You're that *rara avis*, a well-balance man with clear vision, my friend! Perhaps you deceive yourself. At any rate, except for you and me being on hand, it would be logged as an accident or direct mutiny, like the death of Saunders. Wouldn't they like to be rid of you, though! Yours is the damning evidence against Chambers, and you're the one who has the stones—presumably. Look out for yourself."

Morton laughed softly. "Dragging me in deeper and deeper, eh? No use, Crane. I'm a detached onlooker."

"The bystander always suffers," said Crane. "Good night."

Morton paced the deck a long while. He thought he understood Crane's whole game now—first Chambers netted, and then Bray! Crane had killed Smithers, beyond doubt. Perhaps the second officer had attacked him, furious, wrought up, blinded to everything. Coincidence or fate had done the rest, and Chambers was in the net, due for a murder charge and a stiff prison sentence at the very least.

"Clever man!" thought Morton. "I wonder how he'll enmesh the skipper?"

He went to the rail, knocked out his pipe, turned to go below. At the third step, the stars rushed at him and the heavens fell.

V

THE *Fei Yen* took a long, smooth roll up the breast of a wave. The body of Morton slid half over the edge, beneath the iron pipe-rail which was not intended to hold back prostrate figures but erect men. Captain Bray grunted, caught his coat, dragged him back, and then bent over him, breathing hoarsely.

After a moment the skipper straightened up, and an oath of astounded incredulity escaped him. He swore violently. Once more he leaned over, searched the body anew, and broke into fresh curses. What he sought was not here.

Abruptly the skipper turned and rushed away. He did not enter the chart-house, but made for the ladder and went down hurriedly to the deck below. Turning into the passage, he strode to Morton's cabin, switched on the light, and began a swift but thorough search of everything here, from trunk to mattress. He spent a good fifteen minutes at it, prying, poking, testing, and found just nothing.

"I'll be blowed!" he observed, and stared around with bloodshot, baffled eyes. "What's he done with the stuff?"

Another long roll—the sea was mounting, he noticed. His gaze stabbed about the cabin savagely; with an air of helpless futility, he swore again and went back to the passage, and sought his own cabin. There he got out the bottle and poured himself a drink, seized the glass in shaking fingers, drank the liquor.

He caught a sound from the doorway and turned. Crane was standing there, smiling.

Captain Bray opened his mouth to speak, then closed it again, wordless. Crane held a pistol, covering him. The skipper's face was slowly drained of its color. Crane stepped into the cabin, put a hand behind him, closed the door, turned the key in the lock. Then he spoke:

"Sit down, Cap'n. Sit down. You didn't get the stuff off Morton, eh? Killed him for nothing. You didn't find it in his cabin, eh? Sit down and talk it over."

Captain Bray put out a hand, felt blindly for his chair, and lowered himself into it. Crane came forward and took the other chair, across the table. His eyes and his pistol did not waver.

"Now, Cap'n, looks like you and Mr. Chambers are in the same boat, eh?" observed Crane, no longer smiling. "You lost your head when you killed Morton. You forgot he's no beachcomber, but a well-known man, a man of standing and position. There'll be stuff in the newspapers about it, and a whale of an inquiry. You can't possibly dodge it."

Captain Bray licked his lips. The whiskey was putting color into his cheeks again, but could not put color into his brain. To find that Crane knew everything was worse than staggering—it was paralyzing, held him stupefied. He wakened to the accusation of murder, however.

"It's a lie!" he said thickly. "I—I didn't kill him!"

"You did," said Crane coolly. "You lost your head. Before I could get to him, his body slipped over, slipped under the rail, was gone."

"My lord!" said Captain Bray in a strangled voice. "You—you—"

"Yes, I was watching you," said Crane. "And of course my evidence must go in before the court."

The skipper was more or less himself again, with the first passing of the shock. He broke out harshly.

"Ex-convict like you? Man with your record? Who'd believe it? Your evidence ain't worth a hang!"

"In that case, explain Morton's death—as balanced against my poor evidence," and Crane was smiling now, coldly and terribly. "Convict or not, I was a witness. The man at the wheel knows when you left. Besides, my evidence will be pretty good. It'll show why you killed Morton, Skipper. Wang will back it up."

"Wang?" Captain Bray started. "Wang?"

"Exactly. The steward. He took those new life-jackets to Morton's cabin, if you remember, at your order. We'll bring out the whole story of those jewels, and that'll bring out the story behind the jewels—about the French woman and the native woman. What was the French girl's name—Delattre, wasn't it?"

CRANE put away his weapon. He had no further need of it; his words had driven deeper than any bullets could drive.

Captain Bray sat with his hands outspread on the table, and once more his face had taken on a horrible ghastly expression—dead white about the eyes, and the veins of the cheeks standing out clearly, and the nostrils quivering. It was not fright; it was an incredible and fearful horror at finding these details known to Crane.

"Yes," went on the latter calmly, "there'll be a lot come out at the inquiry, cap'n. If you hadn't let Morton slide over, things might have been patched up, but he's too important a man."

"How—how d'you know about—about—?"

The skipper's voice died on the word.

"Oh, about the native woman and Madame Delattre? Well, Cap'n, I know a good deal more than you think I know, even about that! However, it's not to the point just now. Let's go back to the case of Mr. Chambers. You've been dead anxious to figure out some way of logging Mr. Smithers' death so the mate would slide past the inquiry, eh? But it just can't be done. You even wanted to put Morton out of the way, only you were afraid to do it right. And you were afraid Chambers would do it—afraid he would find those jewels, eh? Cap'n, it doesn't pay to be afraid, to do things half-way! If you're not efficient in this poor makeshift world, you sure as hell go under."

CAPTAIN BRAY pulled himself together. His upper lip drew back from his teeth in a snarl, a grimace most unbeautiful.

"What you driving at?" he snapped. "What are you in this for, hey? What's it to you?"

Crane smiled at him amusedly.

"You can worry over that for a while, cap'n. Let's put it this way for the moment —self-preservation! Here you and your chief officer have apparently gone crazy. Mr. Chambers has killed the second engineer and the second mate, and you've murdered a passenger. Lord help you before the court, cap'n! Naturally I mean to protect myself. You don't speak Chinese, Cap'n? Well, I do. I learned it in prison, where I learned a lot of things. And let me tell you, this crew of yours has the jumps! They know what's been going on, never fear. So does Wang, the steward."

"Huh!" Captain Bray grunted, and his fishy, light-blue eyes drove out hard at Crane. "You're no blasted angel. What you want out of it?"

"Ah, now we're getting down to brass tacks!" said Crane, with an air of satisfaction. He produced cheroots, clamped his teeth into one, extended the other. "Here, smoke up, help yourself to a drink! What do I want out of it? Well, never mind that either for the moment. I'm going to get what I want, never fear. Have a drink, and we'll talk it over."

Captain Bray reached out shaky fingers, poured a drink, downed it, and lighted the cheroot. He was recovering, now.

"Get your rough log—still on the table, eh? Well, suppose you enter up this case of Mr. Smithers, just as it happened. You know what store the court sets by the log, cap'n. First thing is to protect yourself."

"But—" Captain Bray hung fire on this. "But—Mr. Chambers—"

"Oh, you mean he'll split on you? Tell about those women and so forth? Nonsense. His word's worth nothing, and if I keep quiet, who'd back him up?"

"Ah!" said Captain Bray, and took up his log and pencil. He crowded forward above the table, writing busily. Crane smoked calmly and watched him. When the skipper looked up, Crane held out his hand, took the log-book, and read over the entry.

"Fair enough," he said.

"Now what?" said the skipper a trifle anxiously. "What about this—this——"

"This affair of Morton?" Crane prompted him. "Well, Cap'n, what do you think? Suppose Morton, who is no seaman, was at the rail when a big roll came and tipped him—eh? You grabbed for him, nearly went over yourself, missed him and were knocked silly for a moment. Then it was too late."

"Hm!" The bleary eyes of the skipper searched his face, half suspiciously. "If you'd stand by me—eh?"

"Why not?" Crane waved his hand. "Don't you see—that'd insure my safety! I take no chances on you, Cap'n. You'll need my testimony. If I swear I was there, saw it all——"

"Wouldn't do," said Captain Bray. "Admiralty courts or any other kind are hell on details, Crane. Did we stop the engines, put about, do a blessed thing? We did not. No, that story wouldn't hold. Not that sort of an accident."

Crane smiled. He seemed to be thoroughly enjoying himself.

"Suicide, then—that happens all the while," he suggested. "If you'd think back, you might recall remarks Morton had made —despondent remarks, wishing it were ended, and so on. Why, I could remember things myself! Only tonight after dinner, he was saying that he wished he were dead, and he'd like to be buried at sea like Mr. Smithers! If he was at the stern rail last we saw of him, and hadn't occupied his berth, and never showed up in the morning but was clean gone—wouldn't that be a clear case of suicide? And no court asking questions."

Captain Bray drew a deep breath, and his eyes glinted.

"By the Lord, if you ain't a smart 'un!" he exclaimed briskly. "Here, lemme see that log, now——"

He seized his pencil, opened up the book, and dashed to work. Under date of the following morning he wrote a spirited account of Morton's mysterious disappearance, with a note of the search made, and the various remarks Morton had passed. He read it aloud to Crane, and it was a veritable master-

piece, describing the whole affair clearly, neatly, efficiently.

"How's that, now?" he said genially, looking up, and passed over the log-book.

Crane read it over carefully, and smiled as he read.

"This," he returned, "is excellent, Cap'n! It describes everything in fine shape. I suppose you'd like me to witness it?"

"You'd best," said Captain Bray.

"All right." Crane rose. "I'll just keep the log until tomorrow—look it over a bit tonight. May think of something more to add. Well, good night and pleasant dreams!"

He unlocked the door and passed out.

Ten minutes later, Crane might have been observed—but was not—at the foot of the port ladder on the forward well-deck. He stood there some time in quiet talk with a naked bronzed figure, and finally sought his own cabin. And, as he passed beneath the deck-light in the passage, he was smiling.

VII

MORTON wakened to a rift of sunlight slanting in above his head, and opened his eyes to see Crane dressing. He himself lay not in his own cabin, but in that of Crane. He swung his legs over to the floor and sat up, astonished—then groaned. Blinding swirls of pain stabbed through his head.

"Hello—awake?" came Crane's voice. "Well, sit tight, old chap. You're supposed to be dead. The cap'n has no great remorse over it—confound this razor!"

Now Morton remembered how the heavens had fallen upon him. He sat motionless until the worst of the pain occasioned by his first movements had worn away. He drank in the import of Crane's words slowly enough, but was confused by discovering himself here, not in his own cabin.

"There's a tray waiting for you—I had Wang fetch it," said Crane. "Swallow that coffee and you'll be in better shape to talk business."

Morton found himself still in shirt and trousers, his other garments lying in the rack. He gladly fell to work at the tray and was feeling almost himself by the time Crane finished dressing.

"Suppose you tell me what happened?" he said, leaning back. "Who hit me? Bray?"

"Just so," said Crane. "He thinks you're dead—went overboard. When he learned that I saw the whole thing, he was much disturbed."

Morton's eyes widened. "You—you and devil!" he said, and laughed a little. "Only a minute before it happened, I was wondering what sort of a net you'd catch Bray in!"

Crane chuckled. "You do me too much honor, Morton—I've merely taken advantage of circumstances. I'd have spared you this nasty crack on the head if I'd known; as it was, I warned you to watch your step, and I was too slow to intervene when it happened. The ship is being searched for you this minute. Since you're dead, and therefore, a detached spectator once more, will you be content to follow my advice?"

Morton, fumbling for pipe and pouch, was slow to respond. Crane was making use of him; he sensed the fact, resented it, yet was powerless to avoid it. He was, momentarily, in no condition to make any use of himself or his faculties—his head throbbed intolerably. The maelstrom of human passions had engulfed him.

"So you've dragged me in, eh?" he said angrily. "No—confound you, that's not fair. I'm to blame for my own fix. Well, I'm in it up to the neck——"

"Exactly," said Crane. "The skipper and Mr. Chambers are in much deeper, however; they're between the millstones of the gods, and are feeling the pinch. You've got to do as I say, trust to me, let me do the whole thing. If I don't suit you, no matter; things have gone too far. Those two men don't dare let you set foot ashore, now! So speak up—time's short. Yes or no?"

"What do you mean to do?" demanded Morton.

"In brief, take command of the ship. The crew will remain passive. They know Chambers has killed two men, they distrust Bray, and they've been told I had master's papers—once. They're safe. Maquorrie will be safe, down below. Yes or no?"

Morton threw up his hands.

"I don't want to, frankly—but I must. Go ahead. What shall I do?"

"Nothing, for half an hour. Then, unless

I come back to change directions, come up to the bridge deck. I'll have a chair waiting for you at the top of the port ladder. Think you can make it?"

Morton nodded. Crane glanced at himself in the glass, adjusted his necktie, and went out with an admonition to lock the door behind him, lest anyone try to enter. Morton accomplished it, then lowered himself into his chair, barely repressing a groan, and got his pipe alight.

HE WAS distinctly not in good shape, either physically or mentally. He was confused by this turn of affairs, yet recognized clearly that his own life was now at stake. From the moment when, on the hotel veranda, he shook hands with Crane, he had gradually been drawn further and further by the influx of the maelstrom.

The pain caused by movement ebbed away again. Morton had no idea exactly what Crane intended to do, and did not care particularly. He was by no means in sympathy with either Bray or Chambers—had the best of reasons to lack any sympathy for them—and yet the idea of Crane deliberately killing them repelled him. Still, what was there to do? Nothing. The whole affair was in Crane's hands, and Crane was capable enough. Thus Morton was divided among doubt, perplexity, futility. Also, he felt a certain admiration for Crane, despite everything, and he was curious, very curious in a fascinated way, to see whither the man meant to push his vengeance. Perhaps, after all, he merely meant to take the *Fei Yen* into port and break the two officers—but no! Hardly that. It was not like Crane.

Time was slipping fast. Morton rose, managed a wash, swallowed the dregs of coffee, and went to the door. Every step brought torture at first. Outside, he found the passages empty. The port ladder, Crane had said; Morton headed for it, and emerged blinking into the hot, white morning sunlight.

A knot of men were gathered forward, by the forecastle head, but seemed not to observe him. He turned to the ladder and began to mount. This was work—each upward heave sent throbs over his head, and halfway up he perforce paused. They were looking up at him from below, strange yellow faces in the sunlight. He waved his hand and then went on again, and heard Crane's voice greeting him. Crane's hand caught him, helped him up.

"Come along—just right, Morton! Settle down and keep quiet, now."

Crane moved off, standing at the bridge rail just before the pilot-house, waiting.

MORTON, sinking into his chair, sighed with relief. He was at the head of the ladder, and the well-deck was outspread below him, the two yellow cargo-booms lashed together over the tarpaulined hatch. The men were still staring up. Then Morton saw a naked bronze figure walking out along the booms and come to a stop. It was the Annamese, Mien.

Mien threw down something across the booms—it looked like a net. In his hand he held a second net, small, far-folded. Watching, Morton remembered that fisherman he had seen on leaving port—Mien stood in just the same stalwart poised effortless manner. The sense of something impending tugged hard at Morton. He leaned forward, watching for he knew not what, waiting.

Abruptly, the knot of men broke apart. From the forecastle hatch emerged the burly figure of Mr. Chambers, coming out into the sunlight and staring around in his aggressive, menacing way. Mr. Chambers saw the two figures on the bridge; shielding his eyes with hand, he stared up at Morton, amazement filling his face.

"I'll be blowed!" he cried out. "Morton! If that ain't him——"

It was so swift, Morton did not see it done—actually saw only a flash of brown limbs on the boom above Mr. Chambers. Far outspread in a perfect circle, the net dropped and clung all about the mate's huge figure. After it, the naked Mien also dropped, and landed lightly on the deck.

From Mr. Chambers erupted roaring, furious curses; he lashed out at the net with both hands, kicking at it, strove to rid himself of the clinging, baffling meshes and only wrapped himself in it more tightly. He stormed oaths and orders, but the impassive yellow men had scattered, and now looked on curiously, silent, without emotion. Mien

calmly came in behind him, stooped, struck one hard, arm-long blow across the back of his knees, and Mr. Chambers toppled over.

This was all Mien needed, since the net had fallen from above. The bronze figure moved with agile precision, caught at the net, whipped it in and around and under; then, draw-string in hand, made a leap and swung up astride the boom, hauled taut his catch. It all passed in perhaps fifteen seconds —no more. So swiftly, that Morton scarce realized what he was beholding.

Mien stood up on the boom, then advanced over the hatch, and Mr. Chambers reposed on the hatch-cover, fighting, struggling, cursing, Mien drew in his slack; the native's betel-stained teeth showed black in the sunlight as he grinned. He wrapped the line about the boom, made it fast, Mr. Chambers swung an inch or two above the canvas, unable to get purchase, tangled and held futile by his own weight. Trapped!

Stooping, Mien picked up the second net, folded it, stood immobile as a statue. Mr. Chambers was shouting frantically. At the bridge-rail, Crane stood looking down, and sight of him there was all the crew needed to hold them inactive. Theirs was not the loyalty of white men. They neither knew nor cared what was going on, so long as that calm, dominant figure stood there in control.

"Blast you, hurry up!" came the mate's voice suddenly. "Get me out o' this!"

There was a stir among the men. Morton, watching, saw the figure of Captain Bray cross the well-deck and come to a stop in the sunlight, staring dumbfounded at the queer apparition of Mr. Chambers hanging in a fish-net. Crane spoke for the first time, and his voice drove across and through the curses of the mate.

"Cap'n! Look up here!"

Bray swung around. A startled cry came from him. He shoved back his cap and stood staring open-mouthed at Morton's seated figure.

SWIFTER than eye could follow, the bronze Mien unleashed his net; it was quick as the strike of a coiled snake. Mr. Chambers roared warning, all too late. The net fell, and after it dropped Mien. By design or accident, he struck the skipper in falling, and both went rolling across the deck together.

Mr. Chambers went into frantic convulsions of effort, endeavoring to tear the net apart, flinging out his strength against the yielding meshes, accomplishing nothing except his own utter exhaustion. By the time he quieted, still gasping hoarse oaths, Captain Bray was neatly enmeshed and Mien was leaping back to the boom. The skipper was presently swung into place—the two of them dangling there above the hatch, side by side. Mien leaped down and waved his hand to Crane.

"All right!" he called in French. "All right, M'soo Delattre!"

Crane made his way down to the well-deck.

At this name of Delattre, the two men writhing in their nets gave over struggling, and their voices died away, and over the deck fell a queer deadly silence. Mr. Chambers was nearly upright, and through the net-meshes his face stared out, purpled, eyes distended, mouth gasping. Captain Bray was lying on his side, one hand caught up and held over his head, and he was quite hopeless to move. A sharp breath came from him.

"Delattre!"

"Yes, Delattre," said Crane, for a moment invisible to Morton, above. "You gentlemen never knew I was using the name of Delattre, eh? Or that it was my wife who came aboard here in Pak-hoi, eh? You never looked at Delattre—afraid of the fever, eh? Well, you might better have risked the fever, gentlemen. This brown man is the brother of the one you knocked on the head. The native woman was a princess, his mistress. So we're very pleased to check over our accounts with you—after two years."

There was no response from the two netted figures. They stared and stared, wordless, swinging a little to the roll of the ship, twisting very slowly around and around, so that one moment Morton saw their faces, the next their backs. Mien went up and squatted on the hatch, and was holding a knife in his hand.

Crane came out into the blaze of sunlight and laid the skipper's log book on the hatch, and lighted a cheroot carefully.

"No excuses, gentlemen?" he asked. "No, it's not much use now—we know the whole story, even a good many of the details. Captain Bray, you honored my wife with your intentions, so I intend to return the compliment. With Mr. Chambers I have no concern—I think Mien will take care of him very handily. Mien knows how the princess disappeared and how his brother was attended to——"

"Blast your dirty heart!" roared out Mr. Chambers violently. "You let me out o' this and I'll show the two of you what's what!"

"You're very well as you are, Mr. Chambers," said Crane, smiling as he spoke. "You don't know that you're already logged by the skipper as having killed Mr. Smithers? Well, you are——"

"Blast the lot of you!" thundered the mate. "What you goin' to do? Leave us here?"

"Why not?" asked Crane.

"For heaven's sake let us out of this!" cried the skipper, his voice stifled. "If you're Crane—Delattre—no matter who you are! Kill us quickly, if you like——"

"Why should I kill you?" asked Crane quietly. "I'd like to, yes; but I don't intend to be so merciful. That is, Cap'n, where you're concerned. As to Mr. Chambers, Mien can suit himself, without interference from me."

MIEN guessed what was being said, and threw up his knife and caught it, grinning.

"What's that about me being logged?" demanded Mr. Chambers suddenly.

Crane took up the log book and ruffled the pages.

"Oh, you're down in black and white, but let it pass. Cap'n, I presume you've already noticed that Mr. Morton is very much alive? Yes? You needn't bother wasting any oaths on the inquiry. I'm going to take the ship into Manila for you, then we'll see what the court of inquiry and the Board of Trade and so forth have to decide as regards our good Cap'n Bray."

Crane paused, shifted his cheroot, and smiled over the book at the agonized skipper.

"You see, Cap'n, I was a witness to your assault on Morton. I saved him. The word of a jailbird may not be of much account, but your own testimony is right here, written down in your own hand—understand? You tell about his disappearance and so forth—a beautiful story! Then, we have Morton's testimony. You perceive what the upshot will be?"

A strangled groan burst from Captain Bray.

"You—you devil!" he cried. "You've tricked me——"

"No, fate has tricked you, Cap'n," said Crane. "You'll lose your ticket and become a human derelict, a pariah. And you really believe I'd kill you? Not a bit of it. You can go kill yourself if you like, and welcome. I prefer to let you live on, a long while."

Morton, listening to all this, watching from the bridge-rail above, comprehended for the first time how deftly Crane's net had been spun about the wretched man who hung there slowly spinning and swaying. The tough, fine fish-net compressing the body of Captain Bray was as nothing to the invisible, deadly net in which was irremediably tangled all his present and future, his position, his very soul.

Realizing the depth of Crane's bitter vengeance, Morton drew a deep breath and sat back in his chair. It was just. He had no argument against it. He had no share, except to give his plain testimony.

The net which held Mr. Chambers shifted a little, hitched downward—the rope about the boom slipped slightly. Small as was the slip, it was enough to let Mr. Chambers stand on the ball of one foot; the mate straightened himself out, the yielding meshes giving to the thrust of his body. Get free he could not, though he could move somewhat.

"Blast you!" he cried. "What about me, huh?"

MIEN rose lithely and came close to the net, grinning, his knife held out as though to thrust. The mate drew away, as far as might be.

"You belong to him," said Crane casually. "Since you killed the native woman——"

"It's a lie!" roared the mate.

"She hung herself!"

"The final mesh in the net," said Crane, and smiled.

MORTON heard these words and relaxed. They brought him a sense of finality, as though the drama which he had witnessed was now come to its ending. The final mesh, indeed—confession! He saw Crane turn and look up at him.

Then, like a flash, the unexpected happened.

Mr. Chambers, one foot on the deck given balance and purchase, gaining some small freedom of action, thrust his arms forward. Undoubtedly, the slipping of the net had aided his efforts. The grinning face and knife of Mien were almost touching him. Unheeding the knife, Mr. Chambers got the bronze throat in his grip—net and all. The knife thrust in! Mr. Chambers clutched the bronze wrist.

"Now, you damned nigger—knife a white man, will you?" growled the mate, and his growl rose to a wild exultant snarl.

Crane whirled about, saw what had happened, and leaped to the hatch-cover. He hurled himself bodily on the two struggling, swaying figures, endeavoring to pull them apart. The net would hold one man, might hold two, but could not hold three. The fiber draw-rope parted. Crane was hurled headlong to the deck; a shudder passed through his body and he lay quiet.

The other two, interlocked, rolled to the deck and across halfway to the port scuppers —a wild scramble of arms and legs, flashing knife, sinuous net. The knife rose, no longer flashing, but dull red, and fell again. The thrashing figures, still fast-gripped, fell quiet, entangled, knotted. The knife was buried, and a red stream twined across the deck toward the scuppers. The bronze head of Mien was all askew, grinning horribly.

Morton found himself at the rail, staring down.

Then a stir of men in the sunlight, and abruptly the voice of Captain Bray lifted, rang out shrilly.

"Chief! Maquorrie! Lend a hand here——"

Old Maquorrie appeared on the well-deck, a pistol in his hand. Morton saw him peering and blinking, staring at the netted skipper in astonishment.

"How the de'il did ye get there?" he demanded.

"Mutiny! Give me that pistol—cut me loose!" Captain Bray writhed, and swore as his movement made the net swing and slowly spin. "Move—hurry!"

Maquorrie took a step forward. Crane rolled over, put a hand to his head, sat up. The chief lifted his pistol.

"Mr. Maquorrie!"

Morton heard his own voice, vibrant and powerful, fill the well-deck. He saw Maquorrie turn and stare up at him. He saw the glint of yellow faces as the scattered men stared up, saw Crane rise, stagger, stand looking up also.

"Captain Bray nearly murdered me last night, Chief," went on Morton. "We've taken the ship away from his control—he's not responsible. Mr. Crane will take her into Manila."

Captain Bray, twisting in the net, screamed hot curses. Mr. Maquorrie stood peering up, jaw fallen.

"Eh, man!" he exclaimed. "Is it a fact?"

Morton saw the sardonic grin on Crane's face, and answered it with a laugh. He himself was full in the net now—drawn into responsibility, acting with Crane, no longer a detached bystander——"

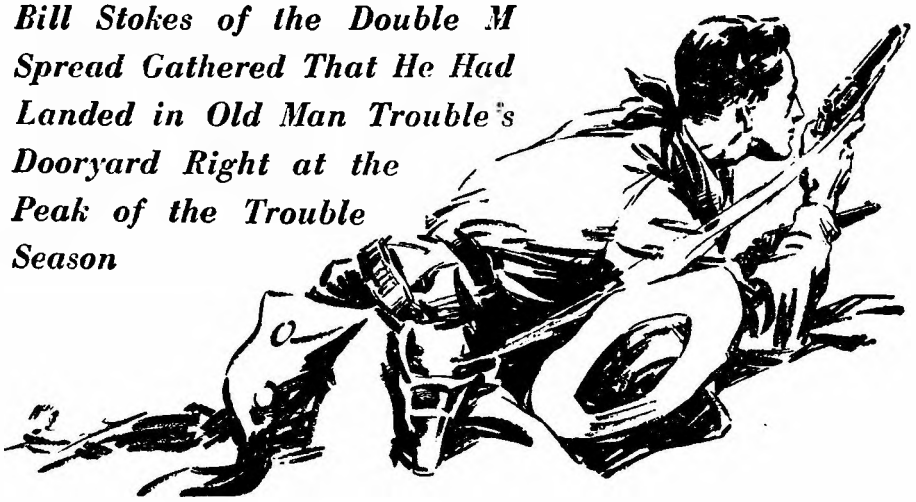
"It's a fact, Chief," he returned. "The skipper goes to trial."

Mr. Maquorrie shoved the pistol into his pocket.

"I'm damn' glad of it," he said. "I'll go look to them engines——"

The big net holding the doubled, helpless, whimpering skipper slowly spun and swayed in the hot white sunlight, and Crane, looking up, smiled.

Bill Stokes of the Double M Spread Gathered That He Had Landed in Old Man Trouble's Dooryard Right at the Peak of the Trouble Season



Too Bright A Moon

I

BESIDE the two tents of the Double M roundup, blooming like giant calla lilies by a willow-fringed stream, Bill Stokes lashed his packed bed across a horse. Bill scowled. That scowl was the barest hint of what troubled Bill. He was not given to advertising, so no one guessed Bill's mental state. And it didn't occur to Bill that old Ab Morton could surmise what had occurred. The old man came sauntering up as Bill tucked in a rope end, and turned to saddle a chestnut horse. When Morton did speak he startled Bill.

"Why cut your throat to spite your face?" he inquired mildly. "Maybe I'd oughta warned you Julie was a kinda featherhead when it comes to good-lookin' men. I shoulda told you she never was serious about anything much."

Bill Stokes' tanned face flamed. He had a habit of being serious about things he regarded as important.

"Don't do nothin' rash," the old man went on kindly. "Keep your head an' incidentally a good job."

"I can get a good job anywhere," Bill replied stiffly.

"Have some sense," Ab drawled. "In two three weeks you'll be laughin' at yourself. It's like having a horse buck you off before a hootin' crowd. First off you're so ashamed you could bite nails. Then you see the joke's on you, an' you can hoot too. I like your style, Bill. Stick around. Stick your chin out. Think it over."

"I don't want to think," Bill growled. "I want to be on the move."

By BERTRAND W. SINCLAIR

"Well, I can put you on the move," Ab Morton brightened perceptibly. "Hell, yes. Take a couple of men an' sashay down to Antelope Prairie. I contracted for a hundred Hereford bulls from Mike Turpin. Take delivery of them bulls an' trail 'em home. Take your time. Long as you're back when beef roundup starts."

"Well," Bill said reluctantly, "I suppose I could do that."

"I'd allow it was blamed small of you if you wouldn't," old Ab craftily put it as a matter of obligation. "I'd be kinda sore, Bill, to be honest, if you was to quit on me in a huff. Tom Stewart is goin' south this fall, an' I was sorta bankin' on you to handle the range work. Come on over to the house an' I'll give you a couple of signed blank checks just in case."

"There ain't no hurry," old Ab repeated when Bill was about to leave. "Talk soft to old Mike. He's kinda peculiar at times. In fact, I've seen old Mike act like he was plumb bughouse—but he sure raises fine Hereford stock. Don't stir up no arguments with him. But don't let him saw off any runty bulls on you either. I guess you won't have no trouble."

TROUBLE? Bill Stokes thought he was escaping from trouble. Only he discovered in the course of the next three days on the last lap of a journey over the roughest, most desolate region in Northern Montana that the trouble lay mostly within himself. A hot afternoon merged into twilight. Dusk fell. A moon sailed up to shine on the faces of himself, Brud Smith, Len Burritt. It made Antelope Prairie, upon which they rode now, look like a shining sea.

"Damn the moon!" Bill said savagely to himself. "Damn everything. I'm a fool and I ought to kick myself. I might just as well have been taking it easy at the Double M, instead of eating dust all day and living on bannocks and bad water. Letting a little red-headed whiffet like that get my goat. Shucks! Well, I'll never learn younger."

Somewhere off in that broad, flat area of grassland the T Down lay in the hollow of a creek. Bill and his two riders jogged silent under the moon, until a pin-point of yellow light glowed in the huge flatness.

"We're a little bit to the south," Bill said.

They turned, dipped into a draw, found running water, followed north until they came to a fence, passed through a gate, drew up at length to buildings set on the bank of a stream lightly fringed with scraggly timber. A little to one side of the stables and corrals the orange flare of a campfire outlined three seated figures.

Bill dismounted at the ranchhouse. Three steps lifted to a porch, to an open door. A man stepped out as Bill's spurs clinked to the porch level.

"Who the hell are you, an' what do you want?" he demanded hoarsely.

Bill recalled what Ab Morton had said about Mike Turpin being peculiar at times.

"I'm from the Double M," said he unruffled. "Ab Morton sent me to receive a hundred head of bulls from the T Down. You Mike Turpin?"

"I am," the other growled.

THE lamplight shone on a semi-bald pate, a round face, a short corpulent body. Over his shoulder Bill caught sight of a thin-faced man, pulling at a black mustache, visibly pricking up his ears. Bill stepped back a pace. He had got a major and a minor jolt almost in one breath. As he moved a girl appeared in the doorway behind the chunky man. Her features were composed enough. Nevertheless, to Bill whose every faculty had become tuned up like the E string on a fiddle at sight of the man sitting inside, she registered uneasiness, anxiety, in the same breath that Turpin was saying:

"What's this about bulls for Ab Morton?"

Bill repeated his statement.

"You get no bulls from me," Turpin flared angrily, for no reason that Bill could fathom.

"Don't expect to get 'em in the middle of the night," Bill returned. "Suppose we talk about it in the morning? Meantime, is it all right for us to camp on your creek and turn our horses loose in your pasture?"

"If you want," Turpin almost snarled at him. "I wouldn't turn a dog off my ranch in the night. But don't you monkey with my stock or I'll work on you with a Winchester.

Bulls for the Double M! You bet I'll talk to you in the mornin'!"

The tone, the belligerent attitude, mystified Bill Stokes. Behind Turpin the girl suddenly made signs with her hands, quick imperative gestures which Bill interpreted as a warning for him to get away. He hardly needed that. His brain was working double-quick.

"Thanks," he said to Turpin. "See you in the morning."

HE WENT down the steps. Above him Turpin muttered and mumbled. Bill swung into his saddle. The campfire with sitting figures lay across the creek. Bill kept to the west side, rode a hundred yards below, stopped, unpacked, unsaddled. They picketed a horse each and let the rest go. Bill pondered in silence while they spread their beds. Sitting on them Len Burritt said:

"The old gent was certainly on the prod, eh?"

"Did you hear what he said?" Bill asked.

"Hear him?" Len echoed. "He bawled it so you could hear half a mile. Like he took us for cow thieves."

"Queer," Bill commented. "I don't *sabe* the play. Still old Ab told me he was peculiar at times."

Bill didn't say anything to Brud about Kinky Myers. He had been sure when he looked through the door. Now he doubted the evidence of his eyes.

"I'll tell Brud when we get up in the morning," he thought. "We'll both take a good look at him in the daylight. If it is—But how in hell can it be him?"

The other two turned in. In five minutes they were snoring. But Bill's saddle-weariness left him. He had suddenly found too many potential complications facing him. There was too bright a moon for sleeping. Bill sat on his bed for a long time, thinking.

A wandering night breeze stirred a patch of chokecherry bushes a few feet from his bed. Bill's ears detected a rustle not made by any wind. He froze, listening. A footfall, very soft. Ordinarily he would have paid no attention to that. Bill had no treasure for moths to corrupt or thieves to break in and steal. Night noises, prowling animals, were part of his life. Yet he was keyed up by the sight of Kinky Myers' handsomely cruel face, the girl's distressed signal of warning. Warning of what? Bill listened for that sound again with an alert curiosity. Listened and looked and finally rose to walk casually around on the other side of that brushpatch. Cigarette in hand, apparently careless, but really tense. Man, woman or animal Bill had the conviction that an eyed intelligence surveyed him and he wanted to know who and why.

He wasn't quite prepared for Nina Turpin. Bright as the silver moon made all the creek bottom the chokecherry scrub threw a patch of dense shadow. He saw nothing until a sound came out of that dark shade.

"Hist!"

"Present," Bill said dryly, too startled to be more than curt—although he knew at once that it was a woman's tone. He couldn't distinguish her, so perfectly had she chosen her cover. Yet she was barely an arm's length away. She could make herself heard in a whisper.

"Move over in here out of the moonlight," he heard her say. "I want to talk to you. I don't want to be seen."

BILL obeyed. The brush and the blot of shadow hid them from that revealing moon-glare, which somehow gave Bill one more resentful pang, made his voice gruff.

"What's the idea?"

There was none of the wheedling quality of Julie Morton in this girl's voice. Bill couldn't see her face, but he responded to something in her tone. It was deep, rich—and troubled.

"You may think I'm terrible but I can't help that," she said simply. "I had to sneak out here in order to talk to you. You see, I know you *are* from the Double M."

"Why," said Bill, "should anybody think I'm *not* from the Double M?"

"My father doesn't," Nina declared. "Because there are already three men here to take over the hundred bulls for Ab Morton."

"Oho," Bill said. "Is that the reason I smelled a rat as soon as—say, does that *hombre* that was sitting in the room when I rode up claim he's from the Double M?"

"No. But the others do."

Bill snorted.

"Is your old man plumb crazy?"

The girl seemed to wince.

"He's—he's queer sometimes," she confessed with visible reluctance. "Four or five years ago a horse threw him head first into a corral fence. He's *not* crazy, just queer by spells. It always seems to be worst," she sank her voice to a pained whisper, "when the moon is so bright. Don't quarrel with him in the morning, no matter what he says or does, please. Just let him talk. Perhaps these other men will leave now you are here."

"Say," Bill asked, "where does this fellow I saw roosting by your fireplace come in?"

"I don't know," Nina said, "but I'm sure he has persuaded Dad these other men are what they claim to be. They're going to get those bulls in the morning."

"Maybe they will," Bill growled. "Say, lady, how do you know I'm from the Double M myself?"

"Because I saw you in Helena once last winter," she told him. "You wouldn't remember me, of course. Julie Morton pointed you out to me. You were talking to her father in front of the Hoffman Hotel. Do you know this man Hooper? Does he know you?"

"I don't reckon he'd remember me," Bill said. "Sure, I know him. He's so darned crooked he couldn't lie straight in bed. What do you say he calls himself?"

"Hooper—Jud Hooper."

"Well, there'll be some fun tomorrow," Bill prophesied. "Your dad's got riders on this ranch that know what's what, hasn't he?"

"Not a soul, only this Hooper," Nina said. "That's why I'm out here telling you. Nobody can stand him when he gets that way. He fired the last man a week ago."

"And then this outfit blows in at the psychological moment with this smooth scheme, and Mister Hooper is on the right side of him, eh?"

She nodded.

"How many in this fake Double M crowd?"

"Three."

"Three of his own calibre, I suppose," Bill said. "Well, Miss Turpin, if they get away with those bulls they'll have to go some."

"You'll be careful with Dad, won't you?" Nina whispered. "He gets into such terrible rages over nothing when he's in this state. He isn't really responsible for what he says and does. And I'm afraid of Jud Hooper."

"Don't worry," Bill soothed. "You've made clear enough what's on foot. Now you run along and go to bed. I'll be as soft as a kid glove with your dad in the morning. Kink—this Jud Hooper—is a horse of a different color. You just keep mum, Miss Turpin, and watch the show. We'll attend to Mister Hooper."

It *was* a complication, Bill had to admit when he went back to roll into his blankets with all his clothes on and his gun handy. Bill couldn't understand Kink Myers being at liberty. Yet he couldn't doubt his own eyes. If it indubitably were Kinky Myers and Kinky recognized either Bill Stokes or Brud Smith he might very well devote all his savage energy to the sole purpose of paying off an old debt. He could steal bulls later. Yes, if Kink collected either of their faces—well, Bill wondered if some prophetic urge had stirred Ab Morton to speak of trouble. From Mike Turpin's attitude, and his daughter's story, Bill gathered that he had landed in old man Trouble's dooryard right at the peak of the trouble season.

With that conclusion Bill turned on his other side and tried to sleep. Kinky Myers could hardly sneak up in the moonlight and cut their throats. Tomorrow was another day. So Bill closed his eyes at last.

II

WHILE the Double M riders cooked breakfast in that cool period between a blazon of color in the east and the first golden fingers of the sun stabbing across the plains Bill saw the trio from the other camp stalk over to the Turpin house. Old Mike, Bill reflected sardonically, extended the hospitality of his house to the wrong party. Then, as their coffee pot came to a boil, he told Brud Smith about Kinky Myers.

"Hell's bells!" Brud muttered. He stared at Bill, wrinkling his brows. "How in blazes could he be here, Bill? He got a life stretch

in the Idaho pen for that Horse Heaven trouble. You sure?"

"I ought to know his mug," Bill said. "Seeing I was directly responsible for landing him in the penitentiary. Fellows get outa the pen sometimes."

"Well, stealin' would sure be Kink's game," Brud declared. "What you goin' to do about this, Bill?"

"Don't know yet," Bill replied. "I've dealt with cow thieves and bad actors. According to this girl's account old Mike's trolley comes off now and then, and I never had no truck with a lunatic. I'll go over there and feel around. Of course, if that really is Kink Myers and he recognizes us, no telling what'll break. Six years is a long time. We've both changed a lot more than he has. You fellows just act dumb and leave this bull business to me."

"They're dumb clucks if they think they can get away with anything like this," Len Burritt said. "It's too raw for words."

But Kinky Myers wasn't dumb, Bill knew. Nor was he likely to have dumb confederates. Kinky might have learned a dozen ways about Turpin's agreement to let Ab Morton have a hundred Hereford bulls. Any bold move that would give four thieves a few days' possession of those cattle meant nine tenths of success. A day's march south of Antelope Prairie would take them into a God-forsaken area where they could hide several times a hundred bulls with little risk of discovery until a worked-over brand could head. There were places where a clever man could dispose of good Hereford stock and no embarrassing questions asked. That bunch of Turpin bulls was worth a good deal of money to anyone who could get away with them. If Kink Myers engineered that scheme he would have a good try.

SO BILL STOKES saddled a horse and rode over to Mike Turpin's house with a guileless countenance, rather glad that he had five days' growth of beard on his face. Four men sat in a row on the top step. Daylight confirmed Bill's overnight glance.

And beside Kink Myers sat a man who Bill also recognized. There had, in those long ago days, been some rather hectic proceedings on the Circle Y range in southern Idaho, and both Myers and this Contway had earned a hanging, but got off with life sentences. And now they were here together, at their old tricks. Bill nodded, looked them over without a flicker of his eyes. He was pretty sure they didn't recognize him yet. And while he dismounted Mike Turpin walked out on the porch.

In the sunlight he stood revealed as a stout-bodied, middle-aged man. The only hint of abnormality that Bill could mark was a peculiar shiny dilation of his eyes. Kink looked over his shoulder at Turpin, then back to dwell on Bill Stokes through narrowed lids. He didn't speak, nor did any of the other three. Mike Turpin snapped the first words off Bill's lips.

"Maybe you misunderstood me last night," Bill said pleasantly. "I'm Ab Morton's *segundo*. He sent me down to receive a hundred head of two-year-old grade Hereford bulls from you."

"Pack your outfit an' get to hell off'n the T Down!" Turpin stormed. "You can't fool nobody here. What kind of a sucker do you think I am?"

"Who says we're not Doube M men?" Bill asked patiently.

"I do," Turpin barked.

"We're riding Double M horses. I have blank checks signed by Ab Morton in my pocket. You know the signature."

"Any damn crook can steal saddlehorses an' forge checks," old Turpin sneered. "*Vamoose, pronto.* I don't even want to talk to you."

Kinky Myers made a significant gesture. Looking straight at Bill he put his fingers to his forehead and made a sign of wheels going round. Through the open door in the shadow of the living room Nina Turpin made frantic motions to Bill. He understood their import well enough. It was as if she screamed words of warning.

But Bill Stokes had in his brain a vivid picture of the hell Kinky Myers had raised in the Horse Heaven country. The mere sight of Kinky disturbed him. He boiled under that outward calm. The faintly amused smile on Myers' dark face didn't soothe him. And Bill wasn't given to backing away from a difficult situation. He

(*Continued on page* 100)

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(*Continued from page 98*)
couldn't take issue with a man out of his mind. Yet he wanted those bulls as a matter of obligation to his own outfit. Just how he was going to cope with a crazy man and four tough rustlers Bill didn't quite see at that moment. So he laughed, playing for time.

"You're joshing, Mr. Turpin, aren't you?" he said.

Turpin flipped a gun off his hip. The muzzle bore on Bill Stokes' midriff at a distance of six feet.

"Hit the trail," Turpin yelled. "Hit her quick!"

BILL had no choice. Anything else was suicide. The last thing he saw over his shoulder was the grin on Kink Myers' face. That threw Bill into nearly as senseless a passion as Turpin's. Only it was a passion for reprisal based on real instead of imaginary grounds.

"This thing," Bill explained to Brud and Len," is serious. It's our move before that *locoed* old fool gets up in the air altogether. But we won't move far."

They didn't. The creek bed below the T Down cut deeper, grew wider, as it bore north across Antelope Prairie. Half a mile below the north line of Turpin's fence they made another camp in the bottom. They picketed three or four horses and hobbled the others. Bill left Len to watch camp, took Brud Smith and loped back to a point on the west bank where he could spy on the T Down ranch.

Bill knew pretty well from hearsay the scope of the T Down. Years before, Mike Turpin had shrewdly looked ahead of his time and gone in for quality instead of quantity in cattle. He held a lot of land and the only water in the broad stretch of Antelope Prairie's arid flatness. He had built miles of fence in a fenceless region. He had brought in Hereford cattle from Illinois and Iowa and bred them until his pastures contained fifteen hundred of the finest stock in the Northwest. Mike's bald-faced cattle never went to market. Buyers came to his door and took his crop of bulls year by year to improve their inferior stock on the open range.

Bill could see hundreds of those thoroughbreds now, grazing in little herds, white faces and white feet on bodies of sleek red with the sun striking glints on lance-like horns. Each worth the price of half a dozen ordinary range stock. And presently Bill saw riders begin to work those pastures, bunching cattle in a mass near the ranch corrals. Horsemen darted here and there. Dust flew. It was all plain to Bill and Brud Smith.

"They've bunched a herd and they're cutting our young bulls," Bill said. "They've put it over on the old man."

Bill had field glasses in a saddle pocket. He watched them crowd the bulls into a small corral fitted with a branding chute. Smoke began to drift from a fire. Bill's eyes grew tired. Brud took the glasses.

"Runnin' irons now," Brud reported. "Ventin' old Mike's brand I suppose. You reckon this crowd's taking delivery of those cattle in the name of the Double M?"

"All I know is what Nina Turpin told me last night," Bill grunted. "Kink's been hanging around the T Down quite a spell. Them three are supposed to be Double M men. But it's a cinch Kinky Myers is engineering it. When you consider that Contway is one of the three."

"They're our bulls," Brud grumbled, "and they're stealin' 'em."

"Trying to," Bill corrected. "You don't reckon I'm going to let 'em get away with that, do you?"

Brud chuckled. They lay there screened by long grass, horses standing back out of sight in a saucer hollow. A lot of stir went on around the T Down. By noon it ceased. The bulls remained in the corral. Around twelve o'clock there was packing and saddling of fresh horses. Mike Turpin, Kink Myers, the three men shoved that bunch of bulls and a few loose horses along the creek to the south fence line, out through a gate. The little herd climbed to the prairie level and bore west.

"I'd thought they'd go south or east," Brud commented.

"Use your head," Bill muttered. "Old Turpin's still with 'em. He may be crazy but he ain't a fool. They got to point for the Double M to make the play strong. Once they shake him they'll make for the Bad Lands."

They watched the herd creep westward, a mile, two miles, turn into a black dot on the level plain. Two riders detached themselves and came loping back.

"Well," Bill drawled. "Kinky's coming back with Turpin."

"Maybe he forgot somethin'?" Brud hazarded.

Bill didn't do any guessing. He watched. Turpin and Myers rode in, stabled their horses. Thereafter for an hour or more the T Down loomed in the sunshine with no stir whatever.

"Kink will camp there for a spell," Bill said at last.

"Why?" Brud inquired.

"He isn't posing as a Double M man," Bill reminded. "He'll give Contway and his partners a good lead. Set up an alibi for himself in case of trouble later on. But he'll join 'em after a while. That's how I size this situation up. He was the brains of the Horse Heaven steal. He *is* foxy."

"What are you goin' to do about it?" Brud asked.

"Right at this minute I'm not dead sure," Bill asked truthfully.

BACK where Len Burritt waited Bill sat and pondered until mid-afternoon. Then he stirred.

"Brud, you're a pretty good trailer," he said. "Take some grub in your saddle pockets. Follow that bull herd. Don't show yourself. Just keep track of 'em. See where they head for the night camp. Hang around tonight. At daylight ride back toward the T Down to meet us. If Kink Myers sets out to overtake that outfit be darned careful not to let him ride up on you."

"He won't," Brud grinned. "If he does he'll get it where the Newport lady wears the rope of pearls."

Left to themselves Bill and Len lay on the creek bank until sundown. They ate then packed and saddled in a pearly twilight. In the first of the darkness they were up on the west bank just outside the fence where they could look down on the lamp-lit windows of the T Down.

"You stay here, Len, and keep these cayuses together," Bill gave final instructions. "Once I find out for sure which way the cat has hopped we either go after Kink Myers' bull party with blood in our eye, or we go after Kink himself, or go home to the Double M empty-handed. If any kind of a fuss should start down there don't you come and mix in unless you hear me bellow for you. I've got about an hour to pussyfoot around there before that darned moon makes everything as bright as day."

"Hop to it," Len said. "I'll stand pat."

BILL left his horse tied in a willow clump by the creek and stole under cover of the dark up to the unshaded windows of the ranchhouse. A shadow passed and repassed between lamp and window panes. Old Mike Turpin striding up and down. Kinky Myers sprawled in a chair. Nina was clearing away the remains of a late evening meal. Bill sneaked around to the back boldly took a chance and appeared in the kitchen door with a finger laid on his lips. Nina Turpin froze for a second at sight of him. Bill found time to admire her self-possession. She didn't start or speak, only motioned him imperatively back and came herself to the kitchen door, blocking the light with her slender body, watching the open door of the living-room as she whispered.

"You mustn't be here. It's dangerous."

"I got to get this business straight," Bill whispered back. "You're the only one can tell me. I've got to talk to you."

"Go down along the creek to the first brush beyond the stable," she muttered. "I'll come as soon as I've finished the dishes. Don't stay here."

Bill drew back. But he didn't seek the rendezvous at once. He could get to those willows when Nina left the house. He shifted around to an end window. Turpin was talking now, gesticulating. Myers nodded assent. Presently old Mike took a Winchester off a set of elk antlers against the wall, patted it, shook his fist. Myers watched the old man through half-closed lids. Suddenly Kinky said something to Turpin and went out into the kitchen. Bill shifted to a rear window. Myers took a drying towel and stood near the girl, smiling down at her, talking in a drawling tone that didn't carry to Bill's ears.

"Darn his rotten soul anyway," Bill fumed. "For two pins I'd walk in on him and tell him who I am, and take a chance with him. Still, I'd have old Mike on my neck with that Winchester, too," he reflected. "If the old lunatic should pop around this corner right now it would kinda spoil things. I better get *cached* and give her a chance. Gosh, that kid is up against a tough formation here. Old man crazy, and that blasted renegade sizing her up like that."

Bill withdrew frowning, gained the willows below the stable. Minutes lengthened to an hour. He knew Nina would have to make her own opportunity. A silver sheen began to brighten the upper edge of the western bank. Bill fretted in his cover. Too bright a moon! He cursed the lunar glow under his breath.

WHEN the first round edge of silver crept above the sky-line Bill saw a dim shape flit along the creek. In three more steps the girl was beside him, blended with the brush.

"I had a hard time getting away," she breathed.

Bill got a queer thrill out of that voice, and the fact that something in him responded irritated him out of all reason. Nina was a blur beside him, but he had seen her face in the moon-glow and lamplight and sunshine and it was very clear in his mind.

"I'm a darned fool, I guess," he thought. "Can't be close to a good-looking girl without either feeling sorry for her or myself. Shucks!"

Aloud he said:

"Listen. Did your father deliver those bulls to those three under the impression that they were taking delivery for Ab Morton?"

"Yes," she said. "They vented the T Down and gave him a receipt in the name of Ab Morton for a hundred head."

"Good," said Bill. "That makes it a plain steal."

"I know it," she said. "If I could just get word to the authorities."

"Don't let that worry you," Bill assured her. "We'll have possession of that stock and Mike Turpin will get paid for them. Now about this party who calls himself Jud Hooper. Where does he come in on this play? Does there seem to be any connection between him and these fellows who pretended they were Double M men?"

"Nothing that I can be sure of," Nina replied. "He came here before they did. He's quietly encouraging Dad in this crazy idea that the country's full of thieves, that we are surrounded by them. But I noticed he was quite willing to help deliver those bulls in the face of your claim."

"I know him. I know him too darned well," Bill said shortly. "If there's anything crooked around he'd be in on it. I'd like to connect him definitely with this bull steal. You any idea if he's going to stay on here? Or has he said anything about pulling out?"

"Before these men came he talked about going on, but he told me he would stay on my account," Nina said slowly. "Now, tonight, he wants me to marry him, so he can take care of me and Dad."

Bill pursed his lips.

"Does he bother you?" he asked. "Are you scared of him?"

"I'm not scared of anybody," she declared. "But I don't like him. I don't trust him. He worries me. And so does Dad. I never saw him as bad as this before."

"I'm as sure as shooting that Kink Myers engineered this bull steal," Bill said slowly. "If he came here with the idea of stealing a hundred bulls he might easy extend that to include a girl and a herd of thoroughbred cattle—if he could manage an old man that was too badly out of his head to protect his own interests. He has taken desperate chances before. I don't like the look of this. You got no business being here alone with a lunatic and a pill like Kinky Myers. Let's see. How far to the nearest ranch?"

"Thirty miles," Nina told him. "Sixty miles to Glasgow, the county seat."

Bill thought fast toward a possible solution. He had to go on after those bulls. He couldn't let Ab Morton down.

"I tell you what I'll do," said he. "I can send——"

"Ssh!" she warned. She moved deeper into the willows, drawing Bill with her. Their bodies pressed together and the agita-

tion that shook the girl stirred a deep sympathy in Bill Stokes. Because he could look out into the silver flood that began to wash the flats and see old Mike Turpin, bareheaded, his bald pate shining, prowling like a hunter, rifle in hand.

He passed near enough so that Bill could mark his face. It was strained, eyes distended, mouth open. He crouched like a man stalking some dangerous beast.

"He goes out and does that half the night," Nina whispered when he was out of earshot. "He thinks we're surrounded by enemies, thieves trying to steal his cattle."

"Not far wrong at that," Bill muttered. "Not with Kink Myers around."

"But it is all a delusion on his part," she breathed. "Oh, I don't know what to do about that."

BILL didn't like to say bluntly that her father ought to be confined in a hospital or asylum till that fit wore off. That was what should be done, and Bill meant to see that it was done as swiftly as Len Burritt could ride to Glasgow. But in the meantime he was becoming uneasy over certain possibilities. If old Mike prowled around long enough he might discover Bill's saddled horse. If he went gunning for that horse's rider and Kinky Myers boiled out to take a hand in the game it might become a very large evening on Antelope Prairie.

They could see old Mike circle stables and corrals, stooping a little, stealthy-footed, eyes roving for imaginary marauders.

Bill stood torn between duty and inclination. It was his business to go after those stolen bulls. His inclination was wholly to stay and protect this girl from a lunatic parent and a renegade who should have been hung long before. And while he considered a plan that would accomplish both ends old Mike came stealing back, this time so close that they could hear him breathe. By that time Bill had made a decision.

"I have figured a way to handle this," said he. "You step out like you'd just crossed the creek looking for him and get him back to the house. I'll make my getaway. And you can leave the rest to me."

What Bill had decided was simply to have Mike Turpin taken care of by someone with authority, by sending Len Burritt straight to the county seat to bring officers to the T Down to get both Turpin and Kinky Myers. He himself would join Brud Smith and take that bull herd away from the three thieves.

But old Mike, his hearing or his sight, or both, sharpened beyond the bounds of rationality, spilled that applecart.

Nina nodded and stepped out into the moonlight.

"I was looking for you, Daddy," she said.

Old Mike's head went up. He heard and saw her, but he had something else on his disturbed mind. Perhaps Bill rustled a twig or breathed deeply.

"There's one of 'em," old Mike shouted. "Damn 'em! They're all around us."

His Winchester came up. To Bill it seemed as if the muzzle glistening in the moonlight pointed straight at his breast. And since he had no mind to shoot down a raving maniac or be himself shot like a rabbit in the brush, he dived under that raised weapon with as near an approach to a perfect tackle as any football hero ever made on the field.

They fell in a squirming heap. And it seemed instantly to Bill Stokes that he must have tangled with a combination of bull, bear and wildcat.

III

TURPIN screamed, swore, kicked, bit, gouged, butted, with a ferocity that nearly overwhelmed Bill Stokes for the first few seconds.

But he was a powerful man with only half Turpin's years on his shoulders. Bill carried a heavyweight's punch in either fist. He clinched old Mike with the idea of subduing him without inflicting any damage. But he found he had to hit and hit hard to keep from being torn to pieces, and one uppercut with all Bill's shoulder muscles in it caught Turpin under the chin and left him limp in Bill's other arm.

Bill didn't waste time wondering what next. He had a stout silk scarf about his neck and he wore a sash instead of a belt about his trousers. With those two he tied Turpin's wrists behind his back and lashed his ankles

together. Bill had once thrown and hog-tied a full-grown steer in nineteen seconds. He bettered that record on Mike Turpin.

Then he looked at Nina. She hadn't cried out nor protested. She didn't now—only pointed silently to Kinky Myers, alias Jud Hooper, stalking across from the house.

Bill wiped some of the blood off his face. Stood up. He was ripe to tackle anything and anybody, preferably Kinky Myers. But his wits were working too.

"I thought I heard a rumpus out here," Myers said to Nina.

BILL STOKES stepped out of the shadows into the moon-glare.

"You did," said he. "You heard me rassling with a crazy man."

"Who the blazes are *you?*" Kink inquired. There was a disagreeable, not to say hostile, note in his voice.

"That's for you to find out," Bill told him coolly, "me laddie buck from Horse Heaven."

Myers stiffened. His head came forward. Bill had flung that in his face purposely. It seemed to Bill that Kink meant to accept that challenge then and there. But he didn't. Too crafty a brain functioned behind that darkly handsome face. True, for an instant his hand did move imperceptibly toward his gun—and if those fingers had quickened a trifle Bill Stokes would have been as well pleased. Kink chose, however, to let that pass for the moment.

"Plenty of people in this country know me," he said evenly. "Horse Heaven is all Dutch to me. You're a stranger. What are you doin' here in the night? An' if you had a tussle with old Mike what have you done to him?"

These peremptory demands amused Bill.

"Hog-tied him," he said briefly. "He's dangerous to be at large."

"He's a little queer maybe," Kink admitted, "but I wouldn't call him dangerous. What do you aim to do with him, now you got him tied down?"

"That's for Miss Turpin to decide," Bill replied. "Meantime, if you aren't too proud to lend a hand you can take him by the shoulders and we'll pack him over to the house."

"Why, sure," Kink agreed.

Kinky Myers didn't take his eyes off Bill as they bore the unconscious man across the yard. They faced each other in the lamplight. Myer's slate-colored eyes bored into Bill's, trying to place him, trying to gauge his knowledge and intent. Bill could read that look.

"Think you'll know me next time," he said finally, with studied insolence.

"You're the fellow that was here this mornin' claimin' to be from the Double M," Myers frowned.

"I *am* a Double M man," Bill said.

"Oh, well," Myers shrugged his shoulders. "Makes no difference to me. That was Turpin's business. Still, I'd like to know where you got any license to get high-handed round here?"

"Let me tell you something," Bill said slowly. "The fewer questions you ask and the quicker you vanish from here the better it'll be all round."

Myers started. He didn't say anything. He caressed one end of his little black mustache. His eyes took on a cold, lid-narrowing calculating look. And Bill steadied himself for the fireworks.

"You talk like a fish," Myers said at last.

"Miss Turpin," Bill kept his unwavering gaze on Myers while he spoke to the girl, "I have a man posted on the bank just west of the ranch. Go out and call to him. Name's Len Burritt. Tell him I said for him to come down."

Nina obeyed without question.

"If I talk like a fish," Bill said when she was gone, "it's because I smell something decidedly fishy around here."

"You seem to be all fussed up over something," Myers drawled. "I don't know what you are gettin' at. You hint about places I never heard of. I haven't been around the T Down very long. I've been hangin' around here because I was the only man he trusted while that queer streak was on him. If it's all the same to you, Mister Double M, we'll talk this over in the mornin' when you're calmer. I don't want to shoot your eye out over a case of mistaken identity. Meantime, if you want me you'll find me rolled in my blankets in the bunkhouse catching up on some lost sleep. Old Mike Turpin has kept

us pretty well stirred up around here for several days."

"You know," Bill said softly, "if you feel like shooting my eye out, I'd be tickled to death to have you try."

KINK glared at him. His Adam's-apple slid up and down in his throat once or twice. Then he turned his back squarely on Bill. If he had glanced over his shoulder he might have noticed a satisfied anticipatory smile on Bill Stokes' weather-browned face. But he walked straight out of the room, down the steps, and across the yard to what Bill supposed was a bunkhouse. Bill took no chances. He followed Kinky outside, his hand close to the .45 on his belt. And he moved quickly into the shadow under the porch roof.

He was standing there when Nina came back with Len.

Bill cautioned them to silence. They stood listening for a matter of five minutes. Then a quick clatter of hoofs arose beyond the stable. Plain for a few seconds in the moonlight, a horseman tore up the creek, his shadow slanting long and black on the silvered earth. Bill laughed.

"It worked," said he. "Let's go in and see if your dad has come to yet, Miss Turpin."

Old Mike's eyes were open. His heart beat normally. But he lay in a semi-stupor, either past recognizing or uncaring of his surroundings. Nina bent over him. He answered her questions with incoherent mutterings.

"What worked?" Len Burritt asked.

"Well, I had no way of proving Kinky Myers had anything to do with this bull party," Bill said. "So I called the turn on him. I knew he'd either tackle me or make a getaway. If he was hanging around here after bigger game I think he's concluded his string was played out. So he sidestepped the issue, made a bluff at turning in for the night. Instead he saddled and broke away as fast as he could. When we overhaul that bunch of stolen bulls Kinky will be with his gang."

"I don't like this." Nina stood up. "I never saw Dad like this before. Do you suppose you hurt him badly?"

"Cracking a man in the jaw with your fist," Bill declared, "don't hurt him serious. He did a heap more damage to me than I did to him."

Bill was conservative. His face was bruised and torn and generally disarranged, his shirt smeared with blood that was still seeping out of cuts and abrasions.

"You've got a spring wagon and horses here, I suppose," Bill continued.

"Yes," Nina said.

"Then we'll make a nice soft bed for him in the wagon," Bill announced. "He's got to go where he can be looked after. Len Burritt'll go along and see you through."

"But the ranch," Nina faltered.

"Have to take care of itself for a spell," Bill said.

"And you?" she asked.

"Me? I'm going after those bulls," Bill said curtly.

"Oh, I hate to take him to Glasgow," Nina murmured. "Maybe they'll put him in an asylum or something."

"And maybe they'll straighten him out," Bill encouraged. "Anyway, it's got to be done. We'll get you organized right away."

With the team hitched and the wagon at the door, Mike Turpin properly loaded with hands and feet still tied, Len Burritt on the driver's seat, reins in hand, Bill whispered in Nina Turpin's ear:

"You're a good game kid and as soon as I get these bulls where they belong I'll come back and help you out any way I can, if you want me to."

NINA looked up at him soberly, searchingly.

"Will you?" she murmured. "That's nice of you. I'll be glad. And—don't let that Myers man see you first. I watched him tonight. Twice he was just ready to pull his gun on you."

"I know it," Bill grinned. "Only I didn't suppose you did. I was wishing he would. Good luck to you.

"She's good stuff," Bill muttered wistfully as the wagon went rattling away. "Julie woulda squawked all over the place at most any stage of the proceedings. Darn it all! The moon's always been a jinx to me when she shines so bright!"

IV

AT DAWN Bill went scouting for the trail of that bull herd out on the flat reach of Antelope Prairie. It wasn't hard to find or follow. As Bill expected, a few miles west of the T Down that trail turned sharply southward.

"They'd drive hard late into the night to get well down in the brakes," he reflected. "Chances are Kink would know just about where they'd head for."

In the first of the rough country which became a nightmare sort of jumble as it sloped away toward the Missouri River Bill began to ride warily. He had covered ground at three times the speed of marching cattle. He traveled now with caution, watchful, every sense alert. Consequently he was quick to mark a figure that rose out of sagebrush on the lip of a canyon and waved both arms at him. He had given Brud his field-glasses. He didn't need them to recognize his own rider.

"Gosh darn it, they pinked you!" he exclaimed.

Brud had his shirt torn and bound in strips about the calf of one leg. The makeshift bandage was stained with blood.

"You ride up on those fellows and tackle 'em single-handed, you darn fool?" Bill demanded.

"I ain't crazy," Brud replied. "Naw. It was Kinky Myers nicked me. Right at sunrise. I was amblin' along when he popped out of a draw about three hundred yards away. Naturally I didn't want him to see who it was so I lit for cover. He cut loose on me with a rifle right off the bat. Killed my horse, an', incidentally, plugged me through the leg. I lay low in the sagebrush but the son of a gun never come close enough to give me a chance at him. Soon as he saw I was afoot he passed on. To join his partners, I suppose."

"Reckon you can ride double?"

"Sure. I can't walk much but I can sit on a horse. An' I can shoot if you'll pack me in shootin' range of them skunks."

"That," said Bill, "is precisely what I aim to do."

Three hours later from the rim of a gorge more or less masked by scrubby pines they looked down on Mike Turpin's hundred Hereford bulls. Only now they were being urged deeper into the heart of that desolate region by four riders instead of the original three.

"Kink joined 'em all right, just like I figured," Bill Stowes said. "Now we got to reckon close. There's only two of us and four of them."

"The odds were longer than that when you and Red tackled 'em at the Circle Y," Brud muttered. "An' you lived to tell the tale."

Bill knew by the lay of the country that Kink and his crowd could make the Missouri by sundown. If they swam that herd and gained the broken country on the south side Ab Morton and the T Down could kiss those bulls good-bye forever. So he studied the terrain. It was impossible to drop into the canyon where they were. It had sides like a wall, four hundred feet deep. But by following along the rim of that canyon they might find a place where they could scramble down, always provided one of the numerous impassable clefts peculiar to that region didn't bar the way.

For once luck gave them a break. They got a mile or two ahead of the thieves and their walking plunder and found a gully that gave them access to the bottom without Brud Smith having to dismount. There Bill hid his horse in a washout. He and Brud had just time to plant themselves in heavy sagebrush before the lead of the herd came around a bend.

The channel winding along the floor of that canyon was dry, but evidently the bulls smelled water farther on. They marched with heads up, sniffing. The right fringe of the herd tramped by within thirty feet of Brud and Bill. And the nearest rider was Kinky Myers.

"You stay down," Bill instructed Brud Smith.

He stood up. All four thieves were armed with rifles. Bill had only his six-shooter. But he had a lot of confidence in that, in himself. He stood up, head and shoulders above the sage when Myers was only twenty feet away. It was foolhardy, he knew, but Bill was no assassin.

"Good morning, Kink," said he.

Thus, in his own fashion, he gave Kinky Myers an even break, which was more than Kinky would ever have given him. And Kink, being faced squarely with the issue, went for his gun. He failed by the fraction of a second. His bullet went wild for he was already knocked backward in his saddle by a .45 slug from Bill Stokes' Colt, when his own finger pulled trigger. The element of surprise had lessened the odds by one for Bill because Kink was slumping out of his saddle before his three partners realized what had happened.

Brud Smith totally disregarded Bill's orders. His wounded leg held him up after a fashion. He fired as Bill fired and his shot dropped Myers' nearest confederate.

The other two turned tail. As their horses' hoofs beat on the baked earth Bill and Brud emptied their six-shooters. A third man bent double over his saddle-horn, rolled off with arms outflung. The fourth vanished around the bend, dragging a packhorse with him.

"Cleaned 'em up!" Bill said exultantly. He walked over to look at Kinky Myers. Brud Smith limped painfully at his heels.

"For six years he's had this coming to him," Bill said. "We've squared that Horse Heaven account, Brud. We've got our bulls. We haven't done too bad at all."

Brud Smith nodded, frowning a little with the burning pain in his leg.

THEY went up out of that canyon the way they came down, punching those tired bulls out along a ridge where a cooler air blew than in the gut of that canyon. Brud Smith rode Kinky Myers' horse. Four loose cow ponies, one packed animal and two with empty saddles trailed with the herd.

They made a dry and hungry camp that night. Another hard march ended with that bunch of bald-faced bulls inside the T Down fence. Bill and Brud made free with the deserted house.

"I got to go into Glasgow and report this to the county authorities," Bill said. "I sort of expected a couple of deputy sheriffs out here by this time, or Len back. But I guess they haven't had time. You should have that leg attended to as well."

Brud undid the bandages and examined his wound.

"She's a clean hole, an' she don't pain so much now," he announced judiciously. "She'll heal without doctorin'. I was worse shot in that Horse Heaven raid an' I had no doctor to tinker me up. I'd rather lay around here a few days than ride sixty miles to town just to have some old owl look wise an' paint iodine on my leg."

Bill laughed.

"I guess you're right," he said. "It looks healthy. Me, I got to go. I'll snag a few hours' sleep and ride again. Len Burritt might turn up before I start."

Len did drive in just as Bill was cooking breakfast.

"Darn it, you fellers had all the fun," he complained, "while I was bein' coachman to a lunatic. Only he kinda come to his senses before we got in. Here's an epistle for you, Bill."

Dear Mr. Stokes, it ran. *Just in case you are at the ranch when Len Burritt gets there my father asks me to thank you greatly. He is better. But he has to go East for an operation. If it is possible for you to come to Glasgow he would like to see you personally. So would I.*

Sincerely,

Nina Turpin.

"Say, this Vale County sheriff's office don't get excited about little things like rustlin'," Len said. "They said they'd send a couple of men out as soon as any was available. All the deputies was up along the Canada line on business. I have a hunch the sheriff thought I was tellin' him a pipe dream."

"Well, I'll tell it to him myself," Bill muttered. "I got to go in anyhow. So——"

At sundown of that evening he jogged into the county seat, tired but very well satisfied with himself. After putting his horse in a livery stable he located a square brick building that combined the triple function of courthouse, county offices, and bastile. He found the sheriff of Vale County at ease in his sanctum, brooding over an after-dinner cigar. Bill introduced himself, stated his business, told his tale.

"That's Juniper Creek," the sheriff nodded. "I know the place."

"So we laid the three of 'em together,"

Bill concluded. "Covered 'em with a piece of canvas, and piled rocks on that to keep off wolves and coyotes, and come home with the stolen bulls."

"Saved us some trouble. We'll find the corpses delicti," the sheriff nodded.

"This *hombre* was a pretty bad egg," Bill added as an afterthought. "I knew him long ago in Idaho. He called himself Jud Hooper here, but his real name's Kinky Myers."

The sheriff stared at Bill.

"Kinky Myers! The dickens you say," he finally observed. "You sure of that, Stokes?"

"Of course, I am," Bill replied. "I was a kid riding for old Tom Yann of the Circle Y when Kinky Myers was a stock inspector there. He and a bunch of his friends were stealing everybody blind on the quiet. He killed a darned good friend of mine. He made me kind of hard to catch for a while, myself. I was pretty much responsible for landing him in the Idaho penitentiary. How he happens to be out I don't know. He got life, and they don't pardon those twenty-minute eggs in Idaho."

THE sheriff nodded.

"Hm-m," said he. "I kinda imagine you done better than you know about. This Myers an' another prisoner escaped from that pen more'n two years back. Look a-here."

He reached into a drawer and drew forth a printed sheet, topped by the photographs of three men. A caption in heavy letters ran:

ONE THOUSAND DOLLARS REWARD
FOR THE BODIES
DEAD OR ALIVE

One photo was of Kink Myers, the other of Contway. The third was a stranger to Bill. Their names, description, deeds and crimes were duly set forth. Specifically the latest offense for which the trio were wanted was the attempted robbery of a Union Pacific express car in which they had gained no loot but had shot down a conductor, a brakeman, and the express messenger.

"That's the gent all right." Bill put his finger on Kinky's picture. "He'll rob no more trains. This is Contway. I saw him in court and the description tallies. I don't know the third man we laid out. The fourth fellow got away."

"Well, you can collect on two of them, anyhow," the sheriff remarked. "Two thousand dollars is not to be sneezed at."

"Brud Smith can have the two thousand and welcome," Bill said. "They cracked him in the ribs once and he's got a bullet hole in his leg now to remember them by. And I don't want no blood-money in my bankroll nohow. 'S old Mike Turpin in hospital?"

"Yeah. Girl's stayin' at the Great Northern," the sheriff told him. "Drop around in the mornin', Stokes."

"Sure," Bill nodded.

HE WENT to the hotel first. The proprietor directed him to the hospital. There a nurse brought Nina Turpin to him in a waiting room.

"Oh," she exclaimed, and her face lighted. "I've been worrying about you going after those thieves. Did you——?"

"We got the bulls," Bill interrupted. He didn't consider it necessary to go into the harrowing details. "How's your dad?"

"Fine," she said, "except sort of sick. Did you have any trouble?"

"Well—oh, not much. What was it your dad wanted to see me about?"

"Well, maybe it'll sound nervy to you." Nina smiled. "But remember that though he's old and not very well he's quite responsible for what he says and does now."

"Oh, he is, eh?" Bill commented. "Queer, that. Think he'll be all right from now on?"

"He never would consult a doctor before," Nina told him. "There's a pretty clever man here in Glasgow. He says those queer spells are caused by a depression in his skull—remember I told you about a horse throwing him head first into a corral fence? An operation to relieve the pressure on the brain tissue will put an end to that. But it has to be done by a special surgeon. He has to go to St. Paul."

"You suppose he wants to see me now?" Bill inquired. "I ought to pull out in the morning. Ab Morton'll be beginning to wonder what's become of me."

"Oh, yes, he'll want to," Nina said.

She led him into the room where old

Mike lay, head and shoulders propped up with pillows. His bald pate shone. His eyes, shrewd and questioning, took a good survey of Bill Stokes. Bill's face was much the worse for wear, but neither of them referred to that. Bill casually stated that he had retrieved the stolen bulls.

"That was quite a mouthful to bite off in one chunk," Turpin commented. "I'm mighty obliged to you, Stokes."

"That's a pretty good bunch of stock," Bill said. "Is it agreeable to you if I take delivery of them for Ab Morton as per contract?"

"Sure. You take 'em along and tell old Ab to send me a check when he gets around to it," Turpin agreed. "Did them three fellows show their teeth when you overtook 'em?"

"Well, yes, they did," Bill admitted. "Only there was four of 'em. As a matter of fact this Kinky Myers who called himself Jud Hooper was the king-pin of that steal. He joined his crowd. Brud Smith and I had to down him and two other fellows to get those bulls. The fourth man got away."

OLD Mike digested this, rubbing his bald head. He stared at Bill's battle-scarred face.

"Did I skin you up like that?" he asked in an awed tone. "Nina says I did."

"Yes," Bill laughed. "You certainly played you were a meat grinder and I was sausage material, for a few seconds that night."

Old Mike dwelt on Bill appraisingly for a long time.

"You married to the Double M or anything like that?" he inquired.

Bill blushed. There was a personal edge to that question that old Turpin couldn't have dreamed of.

"No," he said. "I'm slated to be old Ab's range boss, that's all, I'm not married to anybody or anything."

"Lissen'," old Mike continued more briskly. "The T Down's gettin' a handful for me. It's a money maker an' I'm gettin' old, I guess. I got to go East and have my head fixed so I won't have spells of bein' a public nuisance. I like your style. I don't know what Ab Morton pays you, but I'll give you fifty a month more to take hold and run the T Down for me. What you say?"

"Well, a fifty dollar a month raise sounds good," Bill admitted frankly. "But I'd have to think that over."

"Ab Morton must have other men on his payroll that can run a round-up," old Mike pointed out. "Right now I ain't got nobody. I'm leavin' on the noon train tomorrow for St. Paul. Sleep on this proposition. Let me know in the mornin'."

"All right. I'll do that," said Bill. "Good night."

Nina went out into the hallway with him.

"The moon didn't have anything to do with him being out of his head," Bill ventured.

"Not a thing."

"I was beginning to think the moon was a plumb hoodoo," Bill said. But he didn't explain to Nina although she looked inquiringly at him.

"Will you take his offer?" she asked.

Bill looked down at her. On impulse he put one hand across her shoulders. With the other he took her by a firm round chin and tilted her face up.

"You're going East with your father?"

"Of course," she said.

"There won't be anybody to look after the T Down while you're gone?"

"Only a man or two that can be picked up in a hurry here in town."

"You'll be back at the ranch after he gets over this operation?"

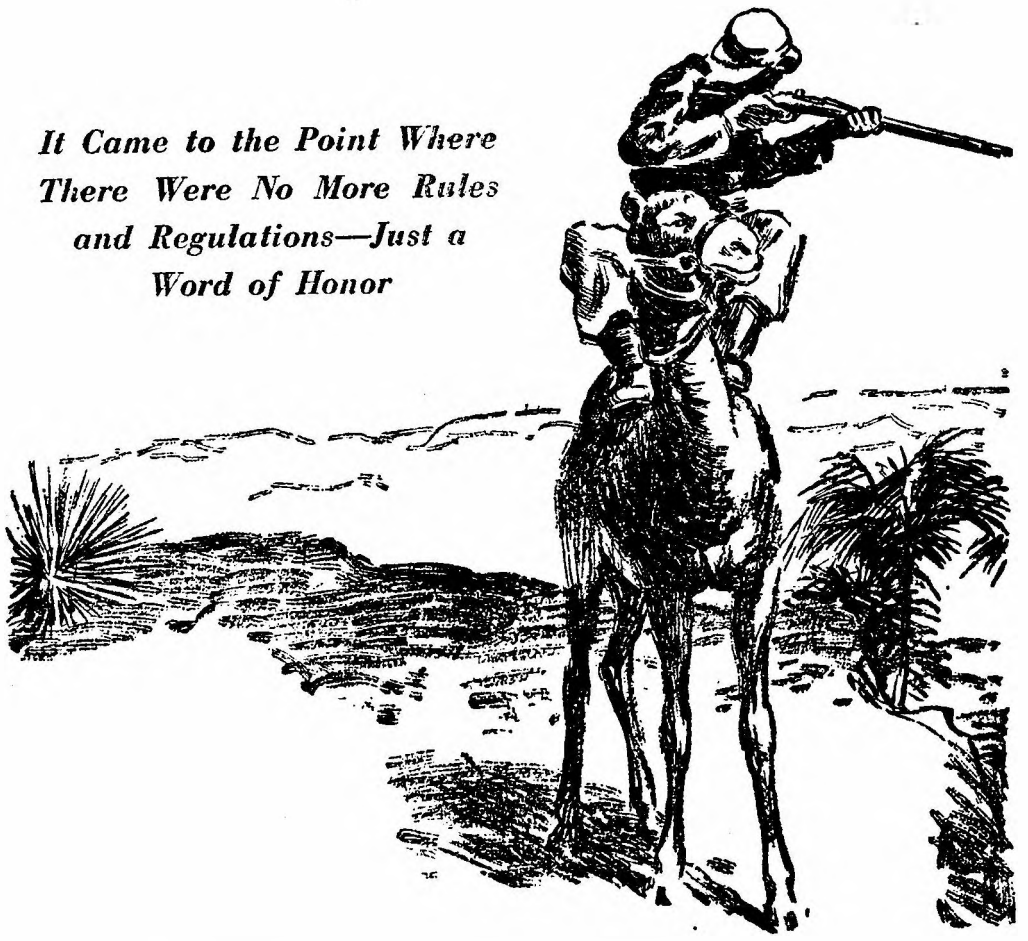
"Certainly," she said. "I'm all through school and the T Down is my home."

"I like you," Bill said deliberately. "If I thought I could persuade you to like me I'd be tempted to take that job."

Nina didn't flinch nor remove the fingers that kept her chin up so that her lips were a temptation. She looked straight into Bill Stokes' searching eyes. A faint pink stole up over her smooth cheeks. A mischievous quirk fluttered about her red mouth.

"Judging from what I've seen of you," she said very slowly, "I imagine you could be mighty successful as a persuader."

It Came to the Point Where There Were No More Rules and Regulations—Just a Word of Honor



WORD OF HONOR

By ROBERT CARSE

THE pursuit ended at Ksar Brebiche, at the edge of the far Sahara, on the twenty-second day. Hubert dismounted and went ahead alone there to scout the enemy. They were a big group of the Ait-Benou clan and all well-armed. He was fired on from the moment he left the prone line of Legion troopers.

The heat-heavy air of the narrow valley was vibrant with the peculiar double clangor of the Mauser reports. Bullets whickered in ricochet off the shaley ground all around him. He crawled slowly, keeping flat, shoving with his feet and hands. The stones burned his hands and the flesh of his legs where his breeches were torn. In his great fatigue it seemed that the sky swirled like a huge, blazing pendulum, and the throb of the Mausers gathered with the pounding of the blood through his head. Then behind a boulder within short range of him he saw an Ait-Benou warrior.

Hubert lay very still. He studied the way the warrior crouched, the profile of the man's face below the ragged twist of the head-cloth. The Ait-Benou was getting ready to shoot, drill a slug into the wavering rise of dust made by the troopers where they deployed.

With a gradual, easy movement Hubert brought out his pistol. It was a special Luger that had cost him all his first month's pay as a sergeant. He hadn't used it against a human target yet, he remembered. He'd driven himself and his outfit across hundreds of miles of desert to get this chance. Now—

Along his arm the shock of the Luger recoil flung a wave of pain to his brain. He cursed aloud. "You didn't think I'd wait for you, you slob," he muttered.

The Ait-Benou was flopping out from behind the boulder in a final, convulsive jerk. A whipping volley of fire broke above him. It came out of the further valley shadow and the crumbled mud brick walls of the old ksar. Hubert watched the place, counting the rifle flashes and smiling a little bit. About forty warriors, he told himself, and every one with a Mauser. They were gathering in the ksar, would fight from there. At last they'd had enough of running, thought they could lick the Legion here.

He got part upright to start back, and a bullet made a snapping crack right in front of him. He cursed again, staring down at his sleeve. The bright gold *galon* of his rank dangled loose, cut clean in half by the bullet. It's a sign, he thought strangely. You'll lose your stripes here for being a fool and bringing your men so far. Then confidence and his deep belief in his ability to command returned to him. "Come on," he whispered. "They didn't put you in command of this outfit for nothing. You can handle them or any outfit. From here on in it's easy."

HIS two German corporals, Kogge and Vankau, got up erect when he got back. But the men lay motionless, lopped beside the galled, half-dead horses. Kogge spoke, staring at him from reddened eyes, his huge hands tight on his rifle belt. "They're in the ksar."

"All of them," Hubert said shortly. "We're going in after them."

Vankau turned slightly; a hoarse, slow mumble came from the troopers. Their sun-puffed and blackened faces had tightened, and two or three of them were getting up.

"Silence, you," Vankau told them, and then looked back at Hubert. "The men think they aren't fit to make an attack, Sergeant," he said carefully.

"They—"

"Hubert was laughing. "There's water in the ksar," he said. "Good wells that the *bicos* will foul for us unless we get in there quick. If we stay here, we die of thirst. So let's go. Leave the horses. This has to be done on foot."

He did not look at them or speak to them again. There was a Lebel rifle with a *tromblon* grenade attachment that Kogge carried, and he took it from him. Then he started forward, the grenade sack bumping at his hip, the gun scorching and heavy in his hands. Behind him, he heard a confused growl of voices in guttural German that he did not understand. Hobnailed boots began to thump over the sand and stone, and suddenly the two corporals and all the men were in a loose skirmish line at his back.

You won that one, he thought. They know now they have to fight. You showed them, you made them. He began to whistle dimly, a grenade slipped into place on the gun, his body tensed but quiet. The tune he whistled was *"C'est le General qui Passe,"* and he could see himself straight and handsome in a new uniform as the general passed down the review line to decorate him with a medal for this.

He tore the soft old walls to pieces with the Lebel grenades. Bellied to the ground he moved steadily until the breach he made was wide enough for a charge. Then he sprang and ran and the troopers followed him howling with eagerness and excitement.

Smoking craters from the grenades filled the place. The Ait-Benou had been surprised and trapped by them. Most of them sagged dead at their rifle positions, and the few who lived fell quickly before the charge. Hubert gave back the gun to Kogge, went on through the reddish clouds of brick dust and the crashed date-palms around the wells.

The immense thrill of victory held him. For centuries this place had been the hideaway for the nomad brigand clans from all over the Hammada Tounassine. He'd finished it, finished a whole *baroud* of the Ait-Benou. He was whistling *"C'est le General*

qui Passe" again when he heard the strange, low, repeated sound.

Some of a wall still stood before him. He kicked it with his foot and the loosened bricks fell grinding and thudding. Then below he saw the hole set flush with the ground and lined with solid stone. Up from it a man's voice babbled in the sound he had heard.

Hubert's got down and took his pistol in his hand. He lowered himself into the hole, thrusting hard to enter. A rotten, sweet stench caught his nostrils and then dim light from further below caught his eyes.

There was a narrow underground cell at the end of the short tunnel he had entered. A wick floating in an earthenware jar of palm oil gave the light. Beyond, against the far wall, was the man who babbled. He was chained by his wrists and ankles to the stone of the wall.

SWEAT broke on Hubert's face. The other was white-skinned, and his eyes were quite insane. He called sharply at Hubert in Ait-Benou dialect and then in German. "You forget," the chained man said. "You are stupid when you don't remember who I am. I am your chief, by your own appointment. You have given me the rights of a *caid* and the name of El Alaman. But I am more than that. You know, you must remember. I, Lieutenant Count Adolf von Schall of the Imperial German Army, tell your swine that—"

"Be quiet," Hubert said in the crude German he had learned in the Legion. "Sit still." But the man would not sit still and the rusted chain was very strong. A kind of hysteria came over Hubert as he worked at the chain. The fetid air, the blue-burning, greasy wick and the smells of this man's filthy body made him almost sick. He backed away and up and out of the tunnel.

Kogge and a file of troopers came running when he called them. "Go down there," he told the corporal. "There's a man there, chained to the wall. Get him out."

After that he hunched motionless, drawing in great gusts of cigarette smoke to get rid of the smell that seemed to fill every pore of his body. Then Kogge and the two troopers were back and between them they supported the man who had been chained.

He had a blond beard down to his waist, Hubert saw, and a mass of filthied, snarled hair that brushed his shoulders. The face had a nightmare quality, even here in the sheer flame of the sun. But the features were long and fine, had once been handsome. A frightful scar from an old bullet wound disfigured the entire right jaw from the chin nearly to the ear. The eyes were sunken in the veined, deep sockets, passed over Hubert without expression or concentration. Over the gaunt body was a cotton *djellaba,* stained and torn, and the wrists and ankles were laced with open sores where the chains had chafed for months, perhaps for years.

IN THAT same voice, but now more quickly, he kept talking. "You understand him?" Hubert asked Kogge.

"Yes, Sergeant," Kogge said. His words were slow, and he did not look directly at Hubert. "He says a lot of things, but what he means is that he shouldn't be kept a prisoner down there."

"All right," Hubert said. He jerked a hand at the two troopers. "Take him over to Vankau at the wells. Tell Vankau to see he's cleaned up and fed."

Hubert finished his cigarette before he spoke again. He watched Kogge. The big corporal was uneasy. He shifted balance constantly and his glance was on the group of men about the wells. "You've heard the same old barroom stories, too," Hubert said suddenly. "Do you think that guy is really a former German officer?"

Kogge's heavy face pulled tight. "How can anybody be sure, Sergeant?" he said. "There's been a story going through the desert for years that out here somewhere a German officer was supposed to be leading *bico* clans on raids. But that guy must be dead. The fellow here, he's probably some poor lad from the Legion who got picked up by the Ait-Benou and stuck down in there. He's crazy; you can't believe anything he'll tell you."

"So," Hubert said. The suspicion and then the certainty and rage formed hard and bright in his brain, but he kept his tone level, ordinary. "Forget him for now. Get

the mounts in and set up picket lines. We'll be staying here for a couple of days until they're fit to ride. Snap it up. I'll be around to inspect in half an hour."

The camp fires burned with a scarlet radiance in the full, deep dark. About them the men sat quietly, relaxed in this hour of coolness and not yet willing to think of the ride back over the dangerous, arid miles to the post at Bou-Denib. Apart from the troopers, hunched against a palm trunk, the bearded man rested immobile. For a time Kogge and Vankau had stayed beside him, but now Kogge was gone.

HUBERT rose slowly and stretched. Vankau was watching him, he knew, and some of the men by the fires. They had been doing that ever since Kogge had walked out into the further dark. He moved at a regular pace as he left the firelight, going in the opposite direction Kogge had taken, but then swiftly doubling back. He was very close to that smashed bit of wall and the tunnel entrance before he heard the scrape and thud.

He did not enter the tunnel. He just knelt down and softly called Kogge's name. The corporal came crawling out on his knees and the bayonet he had been using to dig was still in his hand. "Drop that, stupid," Hubert said. "I've got you."

But Kogge kept the bayonet and took an inward step toward him. Hubert hit him hard over the head with his pistol barrel twice. The second blow sent the big man down and almost unconscious. Hubert kicked the bayonet beyond reach and put the pistol muzzle against Kogge's ear. "Turn around," he said, "and go ahead of me down below. Do it right or I'll blow out all that bone between your ears."

Kogge had freshened the wick in the palm oil. It burned with a steady flame. Across the floor beside it were four earth-stained pottery jars. Kogge had dug and pulled them from under the floor stones and they were still chill with a subterranean damp. "Open them," Hubert said, and motioned with the pistol.

There were many things in the jars. Kogge had to pile them at his feet; huge, hand-beaten gold arm and leg loops from the Sudan and Slave Coast, ivory and jade ornaments that were worked with the superb craftsmanship of the Ife-Benin, gold watches and identification tags, and in the bottom of the last jar, a rotting gray military tunic whose seams ripped with the weight of hundreds of pieces of gold coin.

It was the loot of a score of years of desert raiding, Hubert recognized, his breath drawn short and fast.. Here was the pick of the wealth of the caravans that had started from Timbuktu and Bou-Denib and Mauretania, to meet pillage and death at the hands of the Ait-Benou raiders. In the heap were watches and tags bearing the names of Camel Corps and Legion officers who had been missing since the days of the War. The tunic was German through, bore the buttons of the German Imperial Army and the badges and insignia of a senior lieutenant. Buttoned carefully inside an upper pocket were the Iron Cross of the First Class and the medal of the Order For Merit, the highest decoration of the German Empire. The coins that had been wrapped in the garment were gold German marks, minted before the War.

Hubert stared hard-eyed and taut at Kogge. "Our bearded pal," he said harshly, "is Lieutenant Count Adolf von Schall. He's the guy the Ait-Benou called El Alaman and the guy who led all their raids against the Legion. You want to admit it now?"

A dark light came into Kogge's eyes. He held out one hand in an odd, pleading gesture. "Let him go," he said. "The poor fool has suffered enough. He doesn't know what it's about any more. He's been off his head for years."

Rage gusted hot through Hubert again, snapped his controlled calm. "I should shoot you right here," he said. "You and Vankau and some of the other squareheads are planning mutiny. This afternoon, you knew this stuff was here. You knew who von Schall was. But you lied to me, figured you could outsmart me. Where did you plan to head for, Spanish territory?"

KOGGE stood for a moment in absolute silence. Sweat slid down his sunbeamed jaws into his neck scarf. Muscles trembled in his arms and back. He wanted

to leap, to strike, Hubert knew, but the Luger held him still, the Luger and thought of von Schall.

"Listen," Kogge said, his hands flat at his sides to keep them still. "Maybe I was wrong to come and get out this stuff. But I was in the old German Army when I was a boy. A man—a man like von Schall deserves a better fate than a Legion firing squad. All I hoped to do was get him out of here, bound for Spanish territory over in the Ifni. With some of this loot, he would be all right, and no serious questions asked. If you bring him back to the Legion, though, he'll go against a wall and that isn't right. He isn't sane; he's not responsible for what he's done."

Hubert grinned, but his eyes were still hard. "Make sense," he said. "If he's as crazy as you say, he couldn't head for the Ifni. He's sane enough to stand court-martial. Put that stuff back. It's going to the Legion, with von Schall."

Kogge worked with dull, mechanical motions refilling the jars. He did not seem to notice that Hubert kept out the tunic and the pair of medals. But when he was done he straightened and stared squarely at the sergeant. "You're doing a wrong thing," he said. "The outfit won't stand for it. Almost all the troopers are of German blood. They aren't the kind to take him back as prisoner to Bou-Denib."

"Shut up," Hubert said. "Get out. I'll handle them."

They walked side by side back to the fires, Hubert with his hand always near the pistol in its holster. But the men were singing.

It was as though the knowledge of von Schall's presence had brought back a deep nostalgia for their homeland. They sang marching songs, then the old, lovely *lieds* of Bavaria. Hubert went quietly past them to sit close by the bearded man.

His head was raised to the ruddy flicker of the firelight. There was a look of strain, of intense, terrible concentration on the ravished face. His eyes blinked rapidly open and shut and then were suddenly lucid, clear. As a *lied* chorus rose and sweetly fell, he smiled. He was sane now, Hubert recognized, completely sane.

Hubert jerked the gray tunic wide across the sand, flipped the medals with their faded ribbons onto it. "These are yours, von Schall," he said.

There was silence then, absolute and swift. Even the sentries pacing their beats beyond along the picket-line stopped. Kogge and Vankau were by the nearest fire, and Vankau held a carbine at his knee. But Hubert had the Luger free, the muzzle trained square on the center of the bearded man's chest.

"Yes, they are mine." The words came slow, quite distinct. "You—you found them?"

"My corporal, Kogge there, found them." It took all Hubert's will to keep from bringing his finger back about the Luger trigger. "He wants to get you out of here. But this is a Legion company and I command it and you're my prisoner. Have you got anything you want to say before I might have to shoot you?"

The sunken eyes swung gradually to Hubert's face. "Only this—I am Adolf von Schall. I was an officer in the Imperial German Army. In 1916 I was sent here to the Sahara by the High Command. One of our submarines brought me from the base at Cattaro, landed me on the Mauretanian coast. My job—"

VANKAU was starting forward, the carbine lifted. Kogge strode beside him, and a dozen of the troopers. With a swift, straight glance von Schall looked at them. "No," he said. "Don't do that. There is no reason. Let me talk with the sergeant. You move too fast."

"Thanks," Hubert said sharply. "That's smart. But they're just trying to lead me on. They know I can let you have it before they get me. Go ahead. Let's hear the rest of your opera."

Von Schall made a sign with his hand, at the medals and the tunic. "I landed wearing those, as an officer fighting the enemies of my country. I organized the Ait-Benou clans and led them against the Legion and any French force."

"But you kept on fighting," Hubert said with fierce, deliberate emphasis, "after the Armistice was signed. When there was sup-

posed to be peace between Germany and France."

Color flushed through the pale gash of the wound on von Schall's jaw. "Other German officers were supposed to come out and join me here. When after quite a time they didn't come, I thought perhaps peace had been made. But I had been wounded then, and my mind was not—very clear. The Ait-Benou told me they had heard no news of a peace. They still wished to keep fighting against the Legion."

"So you went on with your little private war."

"I cannot be certain—my wound bothered me badly. At times the pain made me—the way you found me. The Ait-Benou no longer trusted me to lead them. They put me down in that place under the ground. I had hidden my gold from them and they wanted it. They wanted more, though, thought somehow they could ransom me. You—"

"I'm taking you back for trial before a French military court as an outlaw and bandit," Hubert said. "That's all, unless I have to shoot you here or on the way."

Close to them on the trampled sand, Kogge and Vankau and the men had halted. They gazed with a fixed, tremendous attention at von Schall. The signal would come from von Schall before they struck at him, Hubert sensed. They thought of von Schall as their leader now, waited for him to decide his fate and their own.

"You are quite rash," von Schall said, his glance still upon him. "You make it very difficult. If your men should chose to disobey you, there is nothing I can do."

Hubert took time to answer. He was calm enough to smile. "You speak of yourself yet as an officer," he said. "You're proud of your medals and your tunic. So make it easy all around—save yourself from getting shot right here.

"Give me your word of honor as an officer that you'll go peaceably back as my prisoner to Bou-Denib. Against a court-martial, you might have a chance. Against me, you're licked. I'll kill you quick. I'm a Frenchman and a real Legionnaire. My father was killed at the Somme, and a lot of my comrades in the Legion have been knocked off by the Ait-Benou. So what do you say?"

THERE was a surge and scramble in the knot of khaki-clad men and Kogge broke forward. "Don't listen to him, *Herr Leutnant,*" he said. "Don't let him talk you into giving your word. He won't shoot you: he can't. He knows what we'd give him if he did."

"Quiet, soldier!" von Schall spoke in German, and it was a sharp command. Kogge's heels met and his hands flattened at his sides. Then he moved back, silent, among the other men.

"That's nice," Hubert said slow-voiced. "But now talk to me. You can understand those men will still be Legionnaires whether or not both of us are dead. Mutiny, in the Legion, is a serious charge; and that's what you're tempting them to now."

Von Schall's glance changed. His eyes were brighter, narrower, aflame with what Hubert recognized as a hopeless fury. "You force me to think of them," von Schall said. "You take advantage of them through me. They are real soldiers; I know that from what they have done to get here. And I cannot see them made outcasts and deserters because of me."

"Say the rest of it," Hubert insisted. "Get it out."

"So I give you my word," von Schall said distinctly. "My word of honor as an officer. I shall be your prisoner, fully obey your orders until you bring me before your superiors at Bou-Denib. But now I have said that, I shall say more. You are a young man and must be new to command, or you wouldn't force this from me and your men. It would be much easier if you just let me go here, forget you had ever seen me. Before you get to Bou-Denib I think you will understand what I mean."

"Save your glib talk," Hubert said flatly, "for the court-martial. I've heard all out of you I want." He rose then and strode forward out to the knot of rigidly resting men. "Get away from here," he snapped at them. "Get to sleep. We're heading for Bou-Denib before dawn."

They cursed him, but one by one they obeyed, turned to where their saddle-bags

and blankets lay. He watched them for a time and then relaxed, stretched out on his own blanket. They respected von Schall's word a lot more than he did, he realized. Once he had got the man to give it he was safe. Their admiration of von Schall protected him against their hate. He'd won again, and now the job was to bring them back over the desert reaches to Bou-Denib and real safety. He shut his eyes, turned on his side, the Luger in his hand, and slept.

THEY were six days on that route back to Bou-Denib when the trooper riding point found the trail of the Reguibat war party. A feeling of suspension, of complete remoteness from the world, had held them all as they marched. Here in the immense heat and the blinding, choking sun glare, Bou-Denib had become a place in a dream and even Ksar Brebiche no longer seemed real. They just rode, camped for a few brief night hours, then rode again, stupid with the sun and the shock of the jolting horses, their entire thought and effort given to keeping the beasts moving on.

But the point trooper's words awoke them from their lethargy, brought them swift realization that they were not alone in this vast and desolate limestone waste. For the first time since leaving Ksar Brebiche, Hubert was aware that von Schall stared at him with keenly appraising eyes. Still the man did not speak, make any sign or movement. *"Bon,"* Hubert told the trooper, kicking his horse into a trot. "Come on with me while I take a look."

He cursed as he studied the Reguibat track. Ten kilometers ahead on the lofty, jagged plateau called El Tarf were the only fresh water springs in this part of the desert. At El Tarf he had planned to refill the nearly empty canteens and water sacks. Now the Reguibat held the place; their course was straight for it. They were allies of the Ait-Benou, fiercer fighters and better shots. One reason had brought them to El Tarf—to hold the Legion outfit from the springs, trap and destroy it.

The Reguibat mounted at least fifty camels. Against them he had eighteen operative men, very little ammunition and no more than half a dozen grenades. There was no chance of retreat. The next water was back at Ksar Brebiche, or ahead at Bou-Denib. They could never reach either place. If they didn't get water here they were through. In a running fight of retreat the Reguibat would win easily, snipe them one by one as they reeled thirst-parched from their saddles. They had to go on, meet the tribesmen at El Tarf, attack while they still had the strength. "All right," he said to the point trooper. "Back to the outfit." He swung his shambling horse around, gathering himself, every bit of his strength and power, as he thought of Kogge and Vankau, and of von Schall.

They had all dismounted, were gathered around the horses when he and the trooper returned. "How about it?" Kogge asked harshly.

Hubert pointed up toward the bleak, wind-gouged mass of the plateau. "More than fifty Reguibat are sitting up there around the springs at El Tarf. They're waiting for us. We're going after them before we choke of thirst."

Kogge shook his head, and his little, blue eyes were the color of polished steel. "The Reguibat would tear hell out of us if we attacked them there. You're wrong again. The job for us is to head back to Ksar Brebiche. Let the *bicos* chase us if they want. We've got a bit of water left, and a good chance against them in a running fight."

Hubert suddenly felt very cold, as if a strange and chill wind had just blown across his sweaty, smarting body. Von Schall was smiling at him, and von Schall had not smiled since they'd left Ksar Brebiche. He thinks I'm beaten, Hubert told himself fiercely. He thinks I'm a stupid slob and walked right into this.

"You're a man with one idea, Kogge," Hubert said. He leaned forward in the saddle saying it, but his hand was still away from the Luger at his thigh. "You believe you can spirit the *Herr Leutnant* and that lot of gold out through Ksar Brebiche and then into Spanish territory. But you'll never see Ksar Brebiche again, and the *Herr Leutnant* won't. Our horses aren't any good. We can't retreat. The Reguibat would catch us easily with their camels. We'd die a slow and stupid death. The *Herr Leutnant* will

tell you I'm right. He's fought all through this country. How about it, von Schall?"

VON SCHALL was immobile, expressionless, "I'm sorry," he said levelly, "but I'm your prisoner, not your adviser. That is all I can tell you."

Hubert laughed harshly, deep in his throat. He flung down out of the saddle, stood very straight. "I get the idea," he said, his face and eyes wild. "You're gambling that I'll get knocked off by the Reguibat. Then you'll make a deal with them, pay them the gold to slip you out into Spanish country. So take this now. Forget your rotten word of honor. I'll start the show right here!"

Speaking, he pulled loose the belt and thigh lanyard that held his holstered pistol. He pitched it over at von Schall's feet. Then he swung to Kogge. "Here's your chance, you yellow swine," he told Kogge. "There's no more rules and regulations. You've wanted a blow at me—come and get it. I'll take on you and any five more of your square-head lot. Then maybe you'll know who's top man."

Kogge came swiftly forward, white-lipped with rage. But he had no chance to talk. Vankau and four strapping Prussian and Bavarian troopers followed him.

"So you really want it?" Hubert asked. "You think you're tough enough?"

Then Kogge jumped at him in a springing bound. Hubert dropped back a pace, pivoted and met him square. He bored straight in, ramming long uppercuts at Kogge's jutted jaw. One caught flush and Kogge went spinning to the sand, cursing his haste and clumsiness.

Hubert never let him get erect again. As soon as Kogge rose to one knee he struck him with vicious, down-slashing jabs. He cut Kogge's face and jaws to a bluish pulp, flattened his lips. But Kogge was very stubborn and quite brave. It was perhaps ten minutes before he lay still on the sand with his arms locked about his head.

Hubert stared at the other five, smiling through the spatter of Kogge's blood on his face. "You, Vankau?" he asked. "You want the next waltz?"

Vankau came out carefully. He was a methodical, patient man with a reputation in the squadron as a terrible fighter once he was aroused. Now his eyes glared and his knuckles showed pale in his tight-locked hands. For several minutes he let Hubert come after him, carry the fight. But Hubert fought with amazing fury and speed. He broke through Vankau's guard by sheer force, landed a pair of stinging head blows.

Vankau began to lose his calm. He lunged for Hubert with reaching, wide hooks. Hubert brought his guard down after a short-struck kidney punch, watched the man try to steady, regain his confidence. Then he hit again, for the base of the neck, and Vankau butted him in the face hard as his own blow caught.

They stumbled side by side down onto the sand, weak, unable to strike. But Vankau got up first, stood tottering. Hubert crawled over to him, grasped him by the knees to drag upright along his body. Vankau hit his head and neck, kicked his legs. Then, though Hubert was up, whirled back to rip an uppercut.

That blow took the strength and sense completely out of Vankau. His hooked fingers slid off Hubert's bloody torso. He lay coughing, retching blood.

"Next dance," Hubert mumbled. "A mazurka, you squareheads. Hubert's special mazurka."

Another man was advancing; Hubert saw him dimly. He was young, stocky, with a wrestler's shoulders and long, powerful arms. He's too strong for me now, Hubert thought. He'll get me unless I'm fast. Stumbling, he charged.

The trooper rocked him to his heels, sent him down four times. Hubert got up and came back. His lips were ripped, his nose and mouth full of blood. The desert swerved and swung, but in his brain were odd, clear visions. He saw again the living room of the farmhouse at home in Normandy and the photograph of his father in uniform on the wall over the mantel. Then he saw great, endless columns of marching men and they were the Legion and in his brain he heard the Legion trumpets, calling the attack.

Somehow, the visions and the trumpet sound kept him upright. His eyes cleared. He saw the trooper again, and marked the

careless way he held his guard. Rising to his toes, sure and swift, he struck.

As though tugged from behind by a rope, the trooper vaulted backward. Hubert blinked through the blood, moved his lips. "Next—" he began to say, and the effort took the final wave of his strength. His legs gave and he slung prone.

The two men left from that group of six swore in low, slow voices. They loosened their hands, breathing shrilly. Adolf von Schall was striding past them, stooping beside Hubert. "Don't move," he told Hubert. "There's nothing you can do. Now it's my turn. You—"

Hubert jerked, reaching blindly for him. But he could not rise and his hands flopped back empty. "Go ahead," he muttered, up out of the vortex of his pain. "Lead them to hell." Then he rolled over, face down and unconscious on the sand.

Von Schall slowly straightened and turned. His stern, grave gaze went to the men beyond. "You will follow me," he said to them. "Fall in. Stand to arms!"

There was the sure ring of command in his voice. They formed wordless and fast, swung in a solid column behind him. But a hundred yards away in the desert he halted them, went briefly back alone to where Hubert lay.

Darkness was over the desert and the stars were fine, high pale points in the sky. Hubert saw them as he emerged from the roaring depths that had held him. Memory returned bit by bit. He shunted himself up on his elbows, driven by an instinctive fear. No one was here. They had all gone. A dim trembling came over his body. He wanted to scream. Then, a few paces off, hidden in the shadow of a gully, he saw his horse. His eyes cleared. He looked around him in the sky.

Right at his side was a goatskin water sack. It was full, he realized. All the water the outfit had owned was in it. He pulled the sack toward him and the things that lay beside it were exposed. The Lebel rifle with the *tromblon* attachment was there, and the canvas grenade sack. Held secure to the sand by the rifle butt was a torn piece of paper and two medals with faded ribbons.

Hubert took the piece of paper and the medals in his shaking swollen hands. The medals were von Schall's, but the paper was a page ripped out of his own military notebook. In tall and firm characters von Schall had written:

> I leave these things with you. If we should not meet again, have the goodness to send the medals to the Countess Mariana von Schall, 19 Bierdestrasse, Berlin. You need not make any explanation of how you came to have them. The Lebel I have left you because I believe it is the only weapon you can use in your condition. You seem to have badly fractured the knuckles in both hands. Of course, you know that the nearest hospital is at Bou-Denib. Good luck, Legionnaire.

The signature was in full, gave von Schall's title and rank, the number of his former regiment of the Prussian Guard. Hubert read it and the Prussian several times. Then he laughed, at himself and the fate that had brought him and a man like von Schall here. He got up and painfully placed the medals deep in his upper tunic pocket. He walked with reeling strides over to his horse. Just as he reached the horse he heard the firing.

It was from the North, from El Tarf. There was the pounding crash of Mausers answered by the lighter crack of the Legion carbines. The Mauser vibrance heightened, swept to a furious and unbroken crest. That meant a charge, Hubert thought, the breath tight in his chest. The Legion was charging the Reguibat up at El Tarf, and von Schall must be leading the Legion.

HUBERT flexed his hands, as though they held a gun. "I understand you now, von Schall," he said whispering. "I know what you meant when you said here that it was your turn. I'd given you back your word of honor, but you didn't want it, not that way. So you took my men for me. You led them where I couldn't. You—you're a real soldier. You refused to see good troopers die stupidly. But in your note you called me a Legionnaire. I guess I did all right, then, against the men I fought here. I guess you figured I was a real sol-

dier, too, and the man to send your medals home if you got killed at El Tarf. But you're not going to get killed at El Tarf. Not if I—"

He turned, running back to get the Lebel, swing the grenade sack at his hip. He could handle a Lebel, he knew, although to grasp it made the pain jab and tear through his smashed hands, licked his brain with awful fire. To hell with pain. Now you want to reach von Schall and the Legion. Without this gun the Reguibat will whip them sure. But with it they can win. So step out, Legionnaire.

Where he halted and got down from the horse was high on the side of El Tarf. The way before him was a maze of gullies stamped black with shadow. Yet beyond was level ground and there the Legion and the tribesmen fought. He hunkered forward with the Lebel pendant from his shoulder on its strap. It seemed to him he went very slowly, that the movements he made got him nowhere, but suddenly he saw the flare and flash of rifle flame.

A Legion charge had just broken before the gathered volleys of the Reguibat fire. The troopers were trying to get back, reform. But the tribesmen followed them. running with huge, leaping bounds. Hubert stared, straining to hear the Legion's covering fire. It did not come. The stubby carbines were silent. There was only the clang of the Mausers and the tribesmen's high-throated yowling, then the vast and clear sound of von Schall's voice.

Von Schall stood straight. He called to the Legion to gather about him. He held a bayoneted carbine high in his hands. That gun was empty and all the Legion guns were empty, Hubert recognized with a chill, sharp shock. They had no ammunition left, faced the Reguibat with nothing but the bayonet. "Von Schall!" he yelled, "get them down!" Then, as he ran, he let go a grenade from the Lebel.

It stung the night red and green with a blaze of death. Rock and steel gouted up and out from its explosion, flailed the Reguibat in full stride. The warriors who still lived turned and saw him, swung their Mausers. He laughed, letting go another grenade.

After that there was a sort of silence. He heard his feet running over the shale and rocks and the bumping of the grenades in the sack. Then bullets flicked the air about him, coming closer. He kept on, not minding them, thinking of von Schall.

Von Schall swerved around to pull him flat. "You don't belong here," von Schall said. "You should be on your way to Bou-Denib."

"I belong with my outfit," Hubert said, staring into his eyes. "The outfit you saved for me. Let's go. Let's finish this."

They went side by side, the troopers keeping a ragged, loping line to the right and left of them. They skirted the grenade craters and the Reguibat dead and then they ran at the full charge.

Loose stone walls were heaped about the springs and the rest of the Reguibat held there. They drove a shrewd, swift fire at the Legion line. But Hubert put a grenade right in over their heads. They rose to run back toward their camels, and the Legion closed fast.

This was the end, Hubert thought. He'd done enough, been true to the soldier's code that was his as well as von Schall's. When he saw the big Reguibat warrior before him he was careless, did not try to draw aside.

He took the man's first knife blow on the Lebel barrel. Then the rifle was gone out of his hands. He poised, closing and lifting his useless fists. The Reguibat made an upward, rapid leap. He was off the ground, his knife singing for Hubert's throat, when von Schall killed him.

Von Schall thrust the corpse with his foot to clear the bayonet point. He looked over to where the Legion trapped and killed the last of the Reguibat. Then his gaze returned straight and searching to Hubert.

"*Fini,*" Hubert said. "Now get out of here. You've earned your ticket home. Take these back yourself." He reached up to fumble at the pocket that held the medals. But his fingers would not function, and von Schall said slowly:

"Keep them for me until we're in Bou-Denib. That's the way home for both of us. You proved it for me and for your outfit this afternoon, and here again tonight. I know now what the Legion means to you.

For you, it's everything, more than your life or any man's life. But how would you like to ride into Bou-Denib on a Reguibat camel;"

"Let us go," Hubert said.

THE colonel commanding at Bou-Denib was a sharp-spoken man. He let Hubert wait a full five minutes. Then he looked up from the desk and the sunlight fell across the hard lines of his jaw. "Some parts of military law," he said, "are as stupid as the stuff civilians make. It's impossible, anyhow, for a man to convict himself by his own word alone."

He was silent, having said that, and opening a drawer drew out two medals with faded ribbons. They made a small chinking noise as he tossed them within Hubert's reach. "You," he said, "are going north in the noon bus. Another man, an—unidentified German national—will be taking the same bus. The German consul is clearing him out of the country through Oran. But you're a soldier and you've just been decorated. You know what medals are to the man who's won them. So ask this German fellow if by any chance these are his."

"Yes, sir!" Hubert said and lifted his freshly healed hand in salute. "The colonel can trust me to take care of it."

"I have your word of honor, then," the colonel said, still unsmiling, "that you'll get them to the right man?"

"My word of honor, sir."

They smiled together then, each man holding his salute.

NO TRESPASS TRAPPING

(*Continued from page* 14)

bleed—wouldn't do any hurt for high blood pressure! Buckteeth whimpered and sobbed, doing as he was told.

"Now you boys get aboard your launch," Truslow ordered, and they went into the stern of a craft 25 feet long and 5 feet wide, which had served as a cargo carrier at night, and on whose jackstaff at the stern hung a black flag with bones from an old graveyard hung into the fabric which was stretched by a kind of picture frame arrangement.

Truslow sat in the bow, after casting off the painter. One of the pirates started the motor and the others sat in glum realization as they drove down Bearhide Bayou on their way to the river eddy.

"You understand, if we have an accident, like running aground or hitting a snag I'll have to shoot you on the charge of trying to escape," their captor explained, mildly, and the bridgework of the .22 slug in Buckteeth's nose left no faintest doubt in their minds that he meant exactly what he said. He sat with the .22 pistol in his hand, too, and they regarded its muzzle with painful dismay.

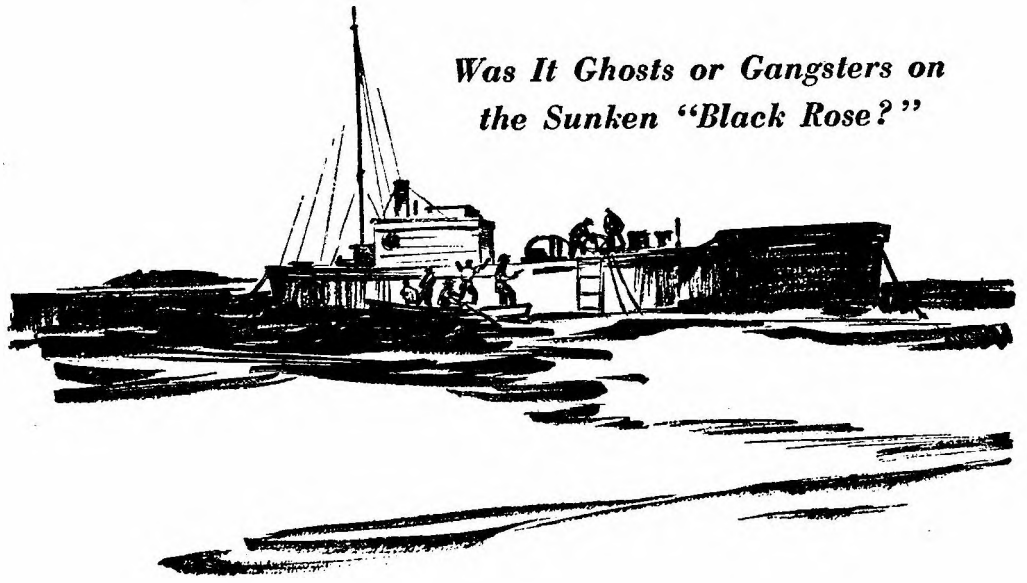
They crossed to Hearsay and landed at the fish dock where Truslow stepped out first. The others followed. Every spectator noticed particularly that the odds were four to one—but that they were very uneven, at that, the four being in a hopeless minority.

City Marshal Tawney heard the news and came scrambling. He marched the four in a six-man parade to the city lock up, and when the pirates were behind the bars of the chilled steel cage, telegrams and telephone messages were sent, and the local officer turned to the trapper, smiling.

"Yo' sho' made a good catch Mr. Trapper," he said. "Sho! Theh's four thousand comin' to yo'. Sho! Ain't that like a Yankee!"

"Not net," Truslow shook his head. "You got 25 per cent due you, of course. Why, you know yourself I'd never known about what big game there was over there up Bearhide Bayou, if you hadn't given me the way of it and the directions, along with the pictures of the animals!"

"Well—dog-gone, now!" the listeners chuckled. "That's right—I leave it to anybody, if that isn't right!" the city attorney exclaimed, being a judge of such things as right and wrong. "Now that's what I call genuine sport!"



Was It Ghosts or Gangsters on the Sunken "Black Rose?"

MAN ALIVE!

By FRANK J. LEAHY

CAPTAIN SELBY chewed at the ends of his mustache impatiently as he paced up and down the heaving fantail of the salvage tug, *Chagny*. At midnight, two hours before, he had driven his ship out through the Golden Gate onto a triangle of deep-sea moorings, five miles offshore and twenty-five fathoms above the ill-fated yacht, *Black Rose*. The yacht had rammed dead on into a big, lumber-laden steam schooner, and but eighteen men of the possible twenty-five on board had been rescued by the schooner, which stood by as a buoy marking the scene of disaster until the arrival of the *Chagny*. Of those lost, two were known to be firemen, one the owner, Tony Wardell; the four others were merely suspected as having been on board.

There was on the *Chagny's* fantail, besides the grim crew of air-pump men and handlers tending the deep diver now down, a shivering little group huddled deep in the upturned collars of their overcoats—detectives and newspaper men. For Tony Wardell was—had been—Public Enemy Number Thirteen; big shot of a narcotic-smuggling, counterfeiting, rum-running ring; a terrorist, racketeer and wholesale murderer.

"Four on Monte's line," reported a tender, and answered with four sharp jerks.

"What!" snapped Captain Selby, swerving upon the telephone tender. "Why's he coming up? Find out. He's only been down fifteen minutes."

"His exhaust valve's leaking," reported the man with the receiving set clamped over his ears.

The captain swore. "Well, give him slow decompression. I can't risk him getting the bends—not tonight."

The tenders—at the rail braced themselves against the bulwark and heaved hand over hand on the heavy load, starting Monte Ring up.

After several interminable minutes the skipper ordered, "Out stage!" A winch banged, out went a diving platform to be lowered to the twelve fathom level, and the telephone tender reported that Monte had climbed aboard.

"Up stage—slow!" bawled Selby.

The winch reeled in, stopped—reeled in,

stopped—and the captain, at the end of his patience, demanded, "All the way up now!"

IN A MOMENT the diver broke dripping through the surface, clinging to the bails as the stage swung in and was landed on deck. The dressers sprang into immediate action, slid a bench under Monte, stripped him of his shoes and weights, and twisted off his helmet.

Monte's face, in the white glow of diving lights, was strained as he stared about him, blinking. Then he rose, leaned far over and let a bucketful or so of water pour from the neck of his dress; sat down again.

"Well, Monte," spoke the captain, "what luck?"

"No luck," was the reply. Someone handed him a lighted cigarette.

"Make a full report," Selby said quietly.

"Well, when I went down I landed on the bottom, about fifty feet from the starboard beam of the wreck. Her whole bow's smashed in, and she's layin' a little over on her port keel. When I got onto her boat deck I saw that her mainmast is still standing, but the foremast's broken—smashed the bridge when it fell and poked its truck into the stack. But no bodies. Nor were there any down on the main deck. As reported by the rescued part of her crew, there were those two firemen down below, I knew that—so I decided I'd try and get them out, anyhow. All this time, though, my exhaust valve was sendin' a steady dribble o' water across my shoulders and down my back, and since my dress was gettin' full, I asked to be taken up."

He swayed a little on the bench, shivered, and added, "Better get me in the tank for a few minutes."

"Of course!" cried Selby. "What am I thinking of? But you know how worked up I am over this job, Monte. Quick, you men—hustle him into the tank. And, Mr. Larson, fetch that bottle of whiskey. And coffee. Feel all right, Monte? No pains, dizziness, nausea?"

"No, I'm okay," answered the diver, affecting a grin. "But get me out o' this punk suit."

In a moment the dressers had him stripped down to heavy diving underwear and socks, then he was seized by two of them, one on each side, and rushed for'ard into the recompression tank. The heavy steel door clanged behind them. The captain cracked open a valve, compressed air whistled into the chamber, and when the pressure needle pointed at sixty pounds, he shut down on the valve and stepped through the air lock into the recompression chamber. The dressers went out.

The mate came in and left the whiskey and steaming coffee, and departed. The captain mixed a stiff coffee-royal, and Monte fell to sipping it.

"YOU know, Cap'n," Monte spoke, "it's creepy down there on that *Black Rose,* somehow."

"Certainly," replied Selby. "Why shouldn't it be, with those dead men still in her? And it's up to you to get them out. You! One man! Think of it; a salvage ship the size of this *Chagny* with only one diver aboard! I am disgraced. One diver! Three others on shore; always on shore when anything important turns up. Hell and water, no wonder I'm grayheaded!" Then, in a modified voice, "But can you do it, Monte? Think! The eyes of the country'll be on the *Chagny,* Tony Wardell being who he was. Can you?"

Monte gulped the last of his drink.

"On a job like this," he said, "I could put up with the inconveniences of hell. Look what a shame it'd be if Tony Wardell didn't get buried in a five-grand casket."

Selby nodded thoughtfully, plucking at his mustache.

"Not only Tony," he said, "but those other four. His gang enemies."

"If they were aboard. Nobody knows for sure."

"The cops out on deck there say they had a tip-off. That's why they're hanging around; and those newspaper men."

"Tony was givin' the four a last ride, eh?"

"Yes. But if so, where are they, the five of them? They weren't rescued with the crew. And the crew, loyal to gang principles, won't talk, according to advice from the steam schooner before she hobbled into port with them. What happened then? You

tell me"—he shrugged emptily—"or show me. Yes, show me. I hope you can, Monte. It'll be a feather in our cap, and these days a feather would look good. How did Tony Wardell die; and did he murder four rivals before he died, or were the five of them trapped before he had a chance? There's a deep, dark mystery for you to solve."

"And it'll probably remain deep and dark," said Monte. "But I'll see what I can see—for old alma mater."

ON DECK, a cold, autumn wind swept down over the sea. The *Chagny* pitched heavily to her moorings, her flat counter smacking regularly into the troughs, her anchor cables paid out to the bitter ends. In the darkness beyond the glow of her diving lights lay two smaller tugs, standing by to give the *Chagny* aid if she started swinging down the wind and away from the wreck; farther off to windward were the lights of a Coast Guard cutter, as she cruised on her lonely patrol; closer aboard, to leeward, lurked a small, low craft, not to be identified.

Soaked with spray, weary, sleepless, the crew bent at once to clothing Monte again in diving dress. He sat on the equipment chest, legs outstretched, while they fussed around him; and when the telephone had been tested, the helmet came down over his head, the air pump was started, and he was pulled to his feet and walked to the rail.

Captain Selby picked his way through the tangle of hawsers, wires and shots of anchor cable hampering the deck and stood with his face close to Monte's open faceplate.

"Good luck, Monte," he called. "And here"—he took the diver's hand and pressed something into it—"here's a skeleton key that should open any cabin doors. Here's your torch, too. There's an extra line attached to your belt, and—that's all, I guess."

He heaved a sigh, stepped back. Monte's faceplate was slammed shut and screwed down; he felt of his exhaust valve and adjusted the air. Then he was on the diving stage, and in a moment his helmet disappeared once again under the surface, leaving in wake a foaming circle of white bubbles.

It was chill, dark, below; lonely with an emptiness that gripped Monte's heart, while the building pressure of deepening fathoms gripped his body as he sank toward the bottom. At the twelve fathom level the stage halted, and he jumped off. A jerk came on his lifeline. He answered it quickly —everything was okay. Then, suddenly, the lead soles of his shoes struck the bottom.

"Hold it!" he spoke into his transmitter.

He snapped on his electric torch, the light cutting feebly through the pitch-black water. A rush of the tide thudded against his body, lifted him off his feet, lowered him again gently, as if he were being toyed with by an invisible hand. Digging his coppered toes into the ocean's floor, he pressed forward, like a runner filmed in slow motion.

In a moment he pulled up short. A gloomy wall confronted him—the starboard keel of the *Black Rose*. He studied it with his torch, then made his dress sufficiently buoyant to blow himself up into the main deck, somewhere 'midships. With making his descending line fast to a stanchion, he reported to the topside.

"I'm aboard, and okay."

The words sounded flat and unnatural above the rustle of his incoming air. With his torch cutting only about three feet into the dark water, he released the rail and crossed down the listing deck to the superstructure.

He wiggled his light around at his feet when he had gone for'ard as far as the bridge, lightened his dress and climbed the ladder. He peered along under the dodgers, opened a door and peered into the smashed chart-house. But of dead men no sign. He retraced his weary steps, careful at all times to keep his lines clear. Arriving again at the point where he had boarded the wreck, he sank to his knees, with his shoulders and helmet against the bulkhead, to rest.

A SUDDEN sound, as of dull thumping, roused him out of his lethargy. But when he strained to listen, the sound had ceased. He laughed to himself; shook his head in his helmet, swallowed hard to clear his senses, and pulled himself to his feet. Imagination, that sound. The thumping was inside his head; must be. Already he had been down about a half hour on this dive,

and the pressure was closing down on his body to echo the thumping of his heart in his head. And still he had nothing to report.

He was conscious suddenly that he had that skeleton key clutched tightly in hand. He could think of no reason why any of the cabins should be locked; and still, why not? In the event Tony Wardell had taken four enemies for a last ride, perhaps he had locked himself in with them, and was gloating over them, telling them they had stepped on his toes and were about to be rubbed out for so doing, when the crash came—to somehow imprison them. It was a hope, a chance; but, if true, what, after all, would be the resultant advantage of all this anxiety and night diving to the *Chagny?* Captain Selby would receive his salvage fee, the cops would muscle in on the glory of bringing in the bodies of five wanted gangsters, and he, Monte Ring, would be sick for a week, what with handling a crop of stiffs and flirting with an attack of the bends.

But—he'd better snap into it and get it all over with.

Then, again, that far-away thumping! Funny about that sound; couldn't remember ever having heard one like it before in deep water. His arms and legs trembled a little, his heart seemed to be flopping disconnectedly around in his chest, but that chill running up and down his spine—why did it persist? Was it a new symptom of deep water sickness, or—or was there really another presence there aboard than his own?

HE CURSED. Summoning up scorn to drive imagination into the background of his wits, he laid a hand on the knob of the door in front of him and forced it open. Stepping into the cabin, he flaunted his torch about to pick out the overturned chairs, the empty settee and bunk; swept the floor, every foot of it and sighed with relief upon finding no bodies. No diver likes to handle dead men; above all, he, Monte Ring.

He tried the cabin immediately aft, and the ones aft of that. With the same result. Then he heard the skipper's voice above the burble of his air, felt a sharp tug at his lifeline.

"Monte! All right down there?"

"Yes," he answered.

"Well, report once in a while."

"Nothin' to report. Nothin'."

He snorted. The Old Man was like that—impatient; on this job, hot for a word of glory for the *Chagny.* Competition had been nosing him out; some sensational salvage—rescue—and shipping circles might snap into the fact that the *Chagny* was no fool's ship.

All cabins on the starboard side of the wreck had been entered; not once—although a few of the doors had given trouble—had the skeleton key been necessary. It now remained for Monte to cross to the port side to continue the search—the seemingly hopeless search. The thought of the weary steps ahead sickened him. He had a fuzzy taste in his mouth; his bared hands were numb with cold, but his body was sweating. He wondered how much longer he could stand the dizziness in his head; took several deep breaths to clear it, then jumped out of the covered main deck to the ocean's floor. From there, by lightening his dress, he blew himself up for the second time this night to the boat deck.

The broken foremast, ropes, guys and the wireless antenna were all snarled up together up there, and in his pale torchlight it was difficult for him to cross the deck without fouling his lines. He had to cut his way with his hooked knife through some of the tangle; and then at last he was jumping off to the port side of the wreck. Mounting again into the main deck, he paused for a moment to rest, perspiring freely from exertion, lungs gasping.

A sudden, faint rap—sharper now than that thumping he'd heard before—came to him. Despite himself, he started, amazed at the acuteness of his imagination. He swallowed hard to sharpen his hearing; listened intently. Silence. A little wave of self-pity swept through his brain. He was in bad shape, he decided, hearing things that couldn't possibly be, the noises sounded louder as the minutes of his lonely dive unraveled. What moment would he pass out? He reached to give the topside the signal to take him up, when again that rap, more imperative now, sounded from within the Black Rose.

"Damn me!" he snarled. "This son-of-a-buck of a wreck is haunted, that's all there is about it!"

He filled his lungs, fighting to clear his head, and a knife seemed to stab through his chest to prick at his throat and brain. The pain wore away, and he started for'ard, grimly.

DOGGEDLY pushing his way along the sloping deck, he halted suddenly and turned, his back against the rail, hoping he had advanced closer to the source of the rapping sound, but now again he heard only the immense silence of the undersea darkness. This angered him, and he turned again to continue for'ard a few paces, then thrust through an open door into a cabin.

Inside, he stopped, his flesh creeping; not at anything he saw there with his torch, but with the feeling that he had heard a human shriek.

He listened for the sound to be repeated, then, despite his weariness, his dizziness, and the chill that felt for the marrow of his bones, he laughed, trying to push the possibility of rappings and shrieks out of mind. But as a matter of fact, such things were possible, and that was the hell of it. If there had been an air pocket, now, formed on one of the cabins at the Black Rose went down—as his diving pal, Paddy Devine, had once found in a sunken liner, occupied—there was a chance, a hope, that there was someone in that pocket, and alive. Man alive! He wondered; and, wondering, he felt new strength in his creeping exhaustion; and with this strength he hurried out on deck again and clumped aft, opening each cabin door as he went.

Only now, he did not search the interiors for bodies. First of all to make sure about that air pocket—and to lose no time; not now, after four hours of shipwreck.

High hope dwindled within him as he opened one door after the other. Was it his imagination, after all? Probably so. Well, such a wreck as the *Black Rose* would play upon a diver's nerves. How many men had been taken for a last ride in her? Tony Wardell's yacht—a shambles. Lord, but he was getting woozy in the head! He was staggering.

He tried the second to last door, port side, aft. It was locked.

A sudden sound! That rapping again, sharp and close at hand, in spite of its far-away quality; and slowing down, weakening. Then a shriek—for help—as that of a man in mortal fear; so distant as to be almost a trick of the senses—but real! Terrifyingly real!

Monte's blood ran cold in his veins. Man alive! Beyond that locked door a man was alive. Alive after four hours in a sunken ship on the bottom of the ocean! It seemed improbable enough; but it was true. A man was in that cabin, rapping frantically on the bulkhead with some metal instrument. And—Monte saw him as he brought his torch into play—the man had his face pressed against the port glass, eyes wide, staring at him.

Tony Wardell! Even in that darkness of the deep, even though Tony Wardell's hair was known to be as black as a raven's wing, and now appeared to be ghastly white—even so, Monte knew it was he.

The imprisoned man voiced a new scream of appeal, then disappeared from the port. Perhaps he had crumpled, in lost consciousness, at last. The knob of the door waggled violently.

Monte inserted his skeleton key, turned it, took a firm grip on himself for receiving the man, and strained to open the door. But the door was stuck fast!

Again Tony Wardell appeared at the port, his face flattened against the glass, lips moving.

AT FIRST, Monte could catch no meaning in the volley of words shouted through that steel bulkhead. Then, gradually, with his helmet pressed against the port, he began to understand. Remorse and terror. The good God had at last lost patience with him, Tony Wardell. This night, lining them up against the bulkhead, he had riddled four men with bullets. And then had come the crash of shipwreck—the cracking of his head as he was hurled across the room—unconsciousness—and awakening to find the door jammed tight against his escape, with the ship going down—and this—

The stream of words grew wilder, more incoherent, as Monte listened; a story that spoke of those four dead men who had muscled in on the racket—the Tony Wardell racket. And those dead men were in that cabin with him now, as they had been through the long hours, centuries, since he had burnt them down. Pichetto and Gunner and Luigi Mongone and The Deacon—all staring at him now through the darkness from under waist-deep water that stunk of blood. He could stand it no longer. His guns were empty. There was the water, but he was afraid to die in that water. He didn't want to die—not there! God help him! Help! Open the door!

Monte shuddered; shook his wits together. Open the door! He tried again, but it held—warped fast. What next?

Above all, Tony Wardell must not die, not till he dropped through a hangman's trap. Since the door couldn't be opened without smashing it, bit by bit; since to do that would mean the man's inevitable drowning, there remained but one thing to do—send for an iron-lung.

He reached to his signal line, hesitated. Wardell was speaking again. Monte could barely hear.

"Open the door!" sounded the snarl. "Hurry! Air—foul. Gas! Damn it all—help!" He rapped on the glass with what appeared to be the butt of an automatic, his face contorted horribly in the eerie torchlight, his lips continuing to babble crazy, snarling appeals and blasphemies.

Monte, trembling on his legs, an electric tingle in his mouth, reached once more to his signal line. Could he stick it out through his building weariness to see this rescue effected? But he couldn't fail—now.

CAPTAIN SELBY, standing at the rail of the *Chagny,* staring glumly at the stream of bubbles that appeared on the surface of the choppy sea within the glow of the diving lights, suddenly tensed as the telephone tender spoke through his transmitter.

"What is it?" he snapped.

The tender listened a moment, started, lifted the receivers from his head and held them out toward the captain.

"Monte wants to talk to you."

The captain snatched the set, clamped it over his ears, listened intently to the distant, flat tones of the diver above the air roaring through his helmet.

"What?" he piped suddenly. "Man alive, you say? . . . Tony Wardell? Good! That's great! . . . What? . . . Four dead men in the cabin with him? . . . Good God! . . . Yes? . . . All right. And you, Monte? . . . You're sure? Very well, then, son. Stand by." And he ripped the set from his ears.

"An iron-lung!" he bawled. "Attach it to Monte's extra line. Bend a heaving line around it and keep a strain on it as Monte hauls down, so the thing won't snag on the wreck before he gets it in hand. Quick now! Tony Wardell's alive down there in an air pocket—four dead men with him."

Mumbles and gasps of excitement ran the rounds of the weary, brine-drenched men.

The iron-lung—a grotesque bag, wound with straps and tubes—was carefully attached to the end of the diver's extra line, as ordered. The captain spoke to the telephone tender, and the tender spoke into his transmitter. There was an instant of strained silence, then the lung began to move downward, disappear; a man at the rail let a supporting line run slowly out between his fingers as he held all slack.

Captain Selby took up his position by the telephone tender, pawing at his mustache nervously. Headlines in the morning papers —Salvage ship, *Chagny,* rescues Tony Wardell from twenty-five fathoms down! Admirable piece of salvage work! Competition would turn green with envy.

A tug at his sleeve disturbed him. He swerved to frown at one of the detectives as the man jerked his head indicating a boat that was lurking close off the *Chagny's* lee rail. It was the same craft—low in the water, with racy lines, and with lights extinguished—that had been observed lying to, earlier in the night, far out in the darkness. There was a low purr of her motor, scarcely to be heard, what with the grinding of the diving air-pump and the moaning of wind in the *Chagny's* funnel-stays.

The captain affected indifference. "Mr. Larson, there!" he bawled. "See what that thing alongside wants."

The mate nodded and crossed to the lee rail. Selby turned attention again to his work. He said something to the telephone tender, the tender spoke to the diver below, listened and nodded.

"Monte's got the lung," was the report.

"Good!" muttered Selby. "Now we're getting somewhere."

HE PAID no attention to the mate's voice bawling out into the darkness; fixed his eyes upon that circle of bubbles beyond the rail. Salvage ship *Chagny* saves Tony Wardell for the noose! A pleasant thought.

An excited voice at his shoulder interrupted. That same detective again. The captain scowled fiercely.

"What do you want now? Can't you see I'm—"

The other gestured him down. "I know you're busy, Cap'n. But that boat there. I don't like the looks of it."

Selby lifted his glance. He cocked his ear to catch a reply to the mate's bellowings; but there came no reply.

"You see?" spoke the detective. "She's up to no damn' good. If you ask me, there's a load of gunmen aboard her, and there may be trouble."

Selby looked at the other dumbly.

"Trouble? I don't see—"

"That boat's been easing alongside for a long time," cut in the detective. "And she was right where she lays now when you called out about Tony Wardell being still alive. I say that boat belongs to the mob whose four men Wardell bumped off tonight. Get the idea?"

Captain Selby nodded, but it was quite evident it was all very hazy to him.

"I'll find out," he snarled. "I'll stand for no interference in this night's work. I can't afford it."

He stumbled across to the lee rail and joined his mate. The low, dark craft was still purring, with her nose into the sea, about fifty feet away. There was a huddle of dark figures in her open cockpit, none distinguishable, all facing in silence toward the *Chagny*.

"You, out there!" yelled the captain. "I'm Cap'n Selby. Account for yourself or shove off. If you don't I'll signal those tugs to stand up and drive you off."

Now there came an answering voice, "Don't signal no one, Selby. Get that straight."

"Eh? What's that?"

"You heard me. Don't you bat an eye. We want Tony Wardell when you bring him up. Do we get him?"

"Do *you* get him? Why should you?"

"That's our business. He burnt down four men t'night. We heard your diver's report—and either you turn Tony Wardell over to us or we'll see 'at he don't get rescued at all. See?"

SELBY gasped, and mumbling spread abroad over the decks of the *Chagny*.

"What's your answer?" demanded the gangsters' spokesman.

"My answer?" snarled Selby. "This—go to hell!"

"Okay," snapped the voice. "It's your funeral then, not ours. Remember that diver of yours down under."

"We'll take care of him all right." The captain swerved upon his mate. "Larson, jump up and signal—"

A gun cracked out in the darkness, and a bullet hissed by Selby's head. Everybody who could crouched behind the bulwark; the mate started crawling for'ard to the bridge ladder, and the detectives began to answer the fire.

Then the speedboat's motor broke into a starting roar, but she made no attempt to retreat, continuing her ragged gunfire. Selby lunged across the fantail to join the telephone tender; snatched the receiving set and clamped it over his ears.

"Monte!" he called into the transmitter. "Can you hear this racket? If you can, don't get scared. We'll—"

The rattle of a machine gun spoke up. The captain screamed and pawed at his shoulder. Shouts filled the air, the captain, still on his feet, bawled a command, a man cut and ran up the weather deck to the bridge.

One of the men at the airpump yelped and slumped to his knees, blood spurting from his hand.

"Keep that pump going!" cried Selby.

More fire, to and from the *Chagny*.

Lights started to blink far up on her foremast. There was a spatter of bullets against the teak air-pump casing; the other pumper cursed and slapped at his ear—and two others leaped in to keep the grinding going. Once that machine stopped, Monte Ring, far down on the *Black Rose,* was lost!

Then the sudden cry from the mate on the bridge, "Here comes the Coast Guard cutter!"

The blaring of a siren grew upon the confusion about the *Chagny.* Captain Selby's voice rose above the din: "Monte! Come up when you're ready—and bring Wardell up!"

BUT in the pitch-black darkness that still lurked down under—although there was a creeping hint of daylight to eastward —Monte Ring was not yet ready to come up. Wtih the iron-lung received and ready in hand, he was still knifing away at the slinters of the door's lower panel which he had to kick in with his heavy shoes. And still from within the cabin came the calls of the imprisoned man, less frantic now, but impatient.

These appeals and the continued rappings angered Monte although he understood the reason for them. When he had kicked in the panel, the water had deepened inside, compressing the air, and rising—surely—from the man's waist to his neck.

Then he had the panel ready, and he rose to press his helmet against the port glass, calling to the man within; and, when Wardell came to listen, he added, "Put on the iron-lung. I'll hand it to you. Can you hear me?"

He caught a faint "Yes—hurry!"

"All right," he answered. "Listen. Strap on the bag—pinch the nose clip—take a good shot of oxygen—bite the mouthpiece. Understand? Good. When you've done that, duck your body and come out feet first through the panel—and I'll take you up. Ready?"

He dropped to one knee and shoved the bladder-shaped bag into the created opening; felt it snatched away from him.

For a long moment—a full minute—he waited. Then a grotesquely hooded figure crawled clumsily through the aperture. Monte immediately seized him, pulled him erect, and held him tightly with one arm as he trudged with him down the listing dcek to where his lines extended up surfaceward. Then he gave four jerks on his lifeline.

In an instant they were taken off their feet. They rose rapidly, Monte conscious of the other clutching him almost in a death-grip. Then they reached the stage, at twelve fathoms, and Monte struggled aboard with his burden.

"On the stage," he reported to the topside. "Take us right—on up."

AND the next thing he knew he was in the Iron Doctor, under heavy pressure. There were several figures around him, all watching him anxiously; one of them handed him a lighted cigarette. He puffed at it, inhaled deeply—and grinned. And the anxiety wore out of the faces. The old cigarette test never failed.

"You're okay," pronounced Captain Selby, who seemed to have a lot of blood spattered on him. "Better off than some of the boys who got bullet-creased. Yes, I'll say you're okay, Monte. In fact, you're great. Rescued—captured Tony Wardell alive."

"Where is he?" asked Monte.

"The cops have him in a sick bay under lock and key—in a Coast Guard cutter that showed up just in time for a lot of things. To capture about a dozen thugs of a rival gang, for example. Man alive, what a night! But we're made, sailor, we're made. The *Chagny's* in the who's what now."

OPEN AND SHUT

By WILLIAM PATTERSON WHITE

I

I THINK the general manager suspects something," said Lafe Merseymere, the superintendent of Mines of Yarrow.

"Blah, bluh, and a couple of hoots," rejoined Counsellor Tom Deeside. "Try woollen socks."

"No, but I think he does," protested Merseymere. "We'd better not, I think."

"You think too much," said the counsellor easily, and poured himself a short two fingers. "Dangerous—with your brain. Stop it. I'll do the thinking. Hasn't our enterprise panned out prettily, so far?"

"Yes, but—"

"But me no buts. That's Shakespeare. Sound fellow. Knew his way about. Short on morals too—like you."

"Why not include yourself?"

"Because I have none whatever. You have—a few. Enough to make you headshy.

"Here, let me fill up your glass. Down it. That's right. Even Dutch courage is better than none. Listen, Lafe, the boss may suspect something, fool if he didn't, but he doesn't suspect us, and you can lay to that. If he did, would he plan to have you bring in the next payroll from Soledad? Not he."

"I don't like it," insisted Lafe. "I think I'll quit."

"Think so, do you?" The counsellor's voice and manner were as bland as cream on apple pie, even when he added, "I don't think so. You will continue to do precisely, exactly and so forth as I suggest. I put it to you, won't you?"

"Damn it, yes," said Lafe, paying the penalty of the lesser villain the wide world over.

Counsellor Deeside smiled like a large, friendly cat and remarked, "Really, your fetching the money from Soledad makes it all the simpler."

"How?"

"I'll tell you," said the counsellor, and did so in detail to the increasing horror and affright of Lafe Merseymere.

"My God!" breathed the mine superintendent, glancing over his shoulder at the closed door quite as though he expected the Law to enter on spurred boots. "My God!" he repeated, scared eyes coming back to the heavy countenance of the counsellor. "We—we haven't come to that yet."

"We have now," the lawyer told him.

What With Lawmen Trying to Outguess Road Agents Who Were Trying to Outguess Each Other!

"You may take that as an incontrovertible fact." He smiled again upon his coadjutor. "You'll go through with it, won't you?"

"He'll go through with it," said Bill Deeside, the counsellor's brother, and owner of the Rocking D, speaking for the first time. "He'd better."

"But—but murder!" babbled Merseymere.

"But fiddlesticks! Dear, oh dear, I wouldn't have your tender conscience for a pretty penny. Now, now, don't argue. It's useless. Have another drink, you need it."

II

FIRST DEPUTY GEORGE TYNE riding west through Ren Canyon in the Lunas, stopped to water the Balk horse at Tulare Stour's water pen. Tulare and his son, Sam, were sitting on the top rail of the water pen fence. The fence needed repairs and the clothing of the two Stours needed patching. They were poor as poor, and the adobe house beyond the water pen reflected their ownership from every angle.

The Stours gave George grunted greeting.

"'Lo," returned the first deputy cheerfully, and looked west through the wide portal of the canyon. "Clouds bankin' up yonder, and—"

"I'll say it for you," said Tulare, and uttered the Southwestern ranchman's forbidden remark, "It may rain."

"Bad luck to say that," remonstrated the deputy. "I wasn't going to."

"Ah-h bad luck!" snarled Sam. "What else is there in this country?"

"Yeah, what else?" His father fixed George with a malignant eye. "Why don't you drop the sock and hand over your damn notice?"

George opened his eyes wide in puzzlement. "Notice? What notice?"

"The notice of foreclosure, what do you guess?" snapped Tulare.

"I never guess," George rejoined equably, "and I've no notice for you."

"Then you will have," grumbled Tulare. "Bad luck! Oh, hell! Here I've got plenty horses to satisfy that mortgage of the Limitar bank's, gimme time to sell 'em. Good horses, too. Like there is in the corral here." He jerked his thumb toward the corral behind him, in which stood ten or twelve horses. "But they won't wait. Demand their cash. So they'll nicely foreclose, sell me up and glom the lot."

"Pap's always paid his interest promptly too," struck in Sam, glowering. "Seems like they could give you a little time," said George.

"Hold your breath while they do," Tulare spat on the ground, passed his sleeve across his mouth and remembered his manners. "Light and look at your saddle, George. We've eaten, but it's no trouble to warm up the beans and make coffee." He made as though to slide down from his perch.

"Don't you bother. I ate a small snack in the saddle and I drank at Deer Spring." George's eyes strayed to a couple of canteens hanging from a post beside Tulare. On the frayed and tattered felt covering of each the Stour brand, a Lazy S, had been painted in red. Done long ago, the paint was chipped and faded, but the brand was still plain to read. "But I'll be thirsty before I reach Soledad. You might lend me one of those canteens to take across with me."

"They're played out like everything around here, George." Tulare lifted both canteens, held them horizontal. "Only ones we've got. I've been meaning to solder on patches, but I haven't any solder."

George noted the large holes in the bottoms of both canteens and swung down. Then I'll get me a drink now, and drift along."

"Going to be tough to lose all that," said Tulare, jerking his head toward the horse-pasture, as George wiped his mouth on his sleeve.

THE Stour horse pasture was a tremendous horseshoe-shaped *rincon,* scooped from the rim-rocked mass of Horseshoe Mountain, largest of the Lunas, opening on Red Canyon, directly south of the Stour domicile. George agreed with Tulare. It would be tough. From where he stood beside his horse he could see past the corner of the water pen to a gate fifty yards away,

set in a barbed-wire fence strung across an open flat between the heels of Horseshoe Mountain. The flat was nearly a half-mile in width, and the fence ran on either hand to the lowest of the rims, four-layered like the filling of a gigantic cake, that blocked egress from the pasture except by the gate, more effectually than any fence could have done.

Beyond the fence and the inward curving heels of the mountain was fine, rolling land, brushy and bare in many places, but covered in the main with the grass that gave life to the horses that roved it. George saw some of them here and there. Not many. Most of them would be in the upper half of the pasture, where there were three waters, each with its guarding stand of cottonwoods.

Yes, it was tough. But George said no sympathetic word. It was not etiquette to do that. Indeed, George felt that Tulare was transgressing good taste in broaching the matter. According to the code, a man must either pay his bets, or refuse to pay them. Whichever he did, he must not complain. Tulare was complaining.

So George merely said "So long" to the Stours and went his way.

It was not far, hardly three-quarters of a mile from the Stour ranchhouse to the portal of Red Canyon, the pillars of which were Herradura's western heel on the south, and a knob of red granite, called the Red Sister, on the north. Where the ranch trail turned south to climb the low point at the base of Herradura's heel, George left it, heading southwest for a certain wagon road that ran to Soledad.

Less than a hundred steps beyond the portal the surface of the ground changed from rock and brown earth to sand and gray 'dobe; soapweed and sage replaced desert willows and sotol, the Southwestern sun took full charge, and the breath of the long and rolling loneliness that the Spaniard in his wisdom named Lo Soledad Larga, smote George Tyne in the face as pleasantly as the blast from a furnace.

FIVE miles of brush-popping, and George's Balky horse turned his small neat hoofs into the wagon road. Many parallel deep ruts and high centers in the 'dobe, two shallow ruts and a low center in the sand, that was the thoroughfare known as the Soledad road. Those living at the eastern terminus, the town of Yarrow, beyond the Lunas, called it the Yarrow road. But they were miners mostly. It is said that the continued handling of dynamite tends to make folk irresponsible. To those running stock, it was always the Soledad road.

Three hours and eighteen miles out of Red Canyon an approaching dust that the first deputy had seen for the past sixty minutes became a bay horse and Lafe Merseymere, Superintendent of Mines of Yarrow. Meetings mean more where folk are few. Both men pulled up for a chat.

"Howdy, Lafe. You picked a cool day." George's grin was wide.

Merseymere's answering smile was the usual ghost. He always smiled economically. It was words he wasted. "Yeah, I know it's hot, but I had to. Going through tonight."

"You must like to ride."

"It's not that. I'm in a hurry to reach Yarrow. I'm"—he hesitated, a slight twitch and flicker in the eyelids below which looked out a pair of rather close-set gray eyes—"I'm carrying the payroll." He patted the bulging coat tied behind the cantle of his saddle.

George cocked an eyebrow. "I thought that payroll always came in east from Severn."

"It did used to—but those two holdups taught us caution. The paymaster and his guard will make the regular trip in tomorrow from the railroad on the east side but they won't be carrying any money. Nobody will suspect me of carrying it."

George's eye was sardonic. "You must think they're all fools around here, Lafe. Four days before payday you call at Soledad P. O. for a registered package. They know you there, but you don't get your mail there. P. O.'s in the general store—always full of loafers. Shucks, all Soledad knows you're carrying the payroll. News travels. Gun loaded?" The sardonic eye rested on the pearl-handled six-shooter in Lafe's holster.

Merseymere laughed. "Don't worry about my gun, George, or anybody in Soledad

knowing either. Wells Fargo brought the package from the big city. I told the agent it contained valuable mining data and books sent to Soledad by mistake. So that's all right."

The eyebrow above the sardonic eye slid higher. "Is it?"

The laugh again. "Why not?"

"Well, to some folks ten thousand dollars for one cartridge would seem like a fair trade."

"I tell you nobody knows I'm carrying the payroll except us two and the general manager."

George's tone was dubious. "I wonder. Keeping to the road?"

"No, I'm taking the short cut through Red Canyon. I'll stop at Stour's for a bait and a bite."

"Listen," said George seriously, "it's none of my business, and Tulare and Sam are good as wheat, but you don't know who might be stopping there tonight. These are hard times here and right now. People need the money. You're known to carry cash of your own. Somebody might hold you up on your own account, and find the payroll. If I were you I'd stick to the Soledad road and I'd shun the company of my fellowmen until I locked the door of the office safe on that payroll. If I didn't have to report in Soledad tonight I'd go back with you."

"You undertaker!" chuckled Lafe, but his eyelids were not quite steady. "I'm leaving before you scare me to death. So-o long, I'm a-goin'."

"Take care of yourself and your ten thousand," said George Tyne, and lifted his bridle hand and jogged on toward Soledad. When several hundred yards of desert divided him from Lafe Merseymere George addressed the Balky horse. "Trying to outguess the road-agents sometimes comes high. Lafe acted like he knows it too."

The balky horse merely twiddled his fine-drawn ears. What fools men were! They talked.

Said the sheriff, when George reported late in the evening: "Notice of foreclosure. —Stour ranch and brand, George. I wish you'd take her across to Tulare's *mañana.*"

III

THE Lunas were black under the gold and the blue when George faced the Soledad, for the sun was still under the world's rim. The first deputy bestrode the Chinkapin horse, a long-legged blue roan, with bottom, a Roman nose, and nerves steady in time of stress. With George went an extra gun, a forty-four with a five and a half inch barrel. It lay under his vest, between the waistband of his trousers and a blue denim shirt, the short barrel just clearing the point of his left hip bone. George was not one to borrow trouble, but it is ill arguing with the poor in purse, and a year and a half in the sheriff's office had taught George that one never knows.

As he rode he wondered whether Lafe Merseymere had made it through. Stopping at Stour's, if he had followed out his stated intention, was a piece of plain tomfoolishness. The Stours were honest enough, at least they'd never been suspected of anything untoward, but, as he'd told Lafe, somebody else might have drifted in. Other people's money. A man couldn't be too careful how he handled it.

By the tracks Lafe and himself had been the last travelers on the Soledad road. Briskly, eastward, George followed the hoofmarks of Lafe Merseymere's horse. The sun was up-and-down when George reached the place where the east-bound tracks of his Balky horse issued from the brush and turned into the road. Overlaying these tracks were the hoofmarks of Lafe's bay. George did not recall telling Lafe of his own ride through Red Canyon, but Lafe evidently had guessed as much and had obeyed suggestion.

So it was that George, following the two sets of tracks, came to the low point at the base of Herradura's western heel, and there lost the tracks in a mess of other tracks made by a big herd of unshod horses that had come from the direction of Stour's and poured over the point toward the south. George glanced south where the Black Monks marched solemnly across the horizon. Those lowering dark mountains were in Old Mexico, and their foothills fringed the Border forty miles away. Down along the

Lunas between the Black Monks and Red Canyon all was desert—sand, mesquite, sage and soapweed, without a ranch or well or spring to break the loneliness until one reached the Rocking D, a small ranch two miles north of the Border, owned by Bill Deeside, brother of Counsellor Tom Deeside, a legal gentleman of Yarrow.

Thoughtfully George ran the tracks heel. Considerably more than two hundred horses had made the tracks. The Stours had some three hundred head, he recollected having heard. He discovered that the horses had been driven from the pasture, the gate of which had been left open, into the space between the corrals and the house, where they had been headed and turned west across the flat toward the portal.

Horse thieves or the Stours?

GEORGE hailed the house as he rode past. The kitchen door stood open, but there was no reply. No smoke drifted from the leaning stove pipe that was the chimney. The lack of smoke had no significance. It was past time for dinner. He rode on to the water pen. While the Chinkapin horse watered George looked about him. Vaguely he sensed that there was something missing in the water pen. Not the Stours, although they were certainly missing. There was something else that should have been in the water pen that wasn't.

When the Chinkapin horse had drunk eight swallows and a snatch, for the water was cold and the horse was hot, George crowded him close to the fence and looked over into the corrals. Not a horse was in, and no saddles lay against the fence. He looked at the house and the open kitchen door. People in that country invariably closed all their house doors when they left home for even an hour or two. No telling what might be moved to enter.

George hailed the house again. No answer. He dismounted, tied Chinkapin to the fence and walked without haste across a maze of hoofmarks to the kitchen. There was no more disorder than is usual in a kitchen kept by menfolks, but there was something missing. This time George had no difficulty in fathoming what it was. The coffee pot was gone from the stove.

Inspired by more than mere curiosity, George went through the Stour residence, and found that a couple of Winchesters he knew the Stours to possess, were missing, as were the blankets from the two beds. A certain amount of food was in the storeroom, but sugar and salt had been spilled, and dropped coffee beans crunched underfoot. Apparently the Stours had gone traveling. It had already occurred to George, in view of the Stours' expectations as to the mortgage, and the hoofmarks heading west and south, that father and son might have been moved to transfer their livestock to Old Mexico, in which country's progressive atmosphere an American bank would get fat trying to make a foreclosure stick. The ranch itself wasn't valuable. Hardly worth while to pay taxes on it. What mattered was the horses. They were so much cash on the hoof.

"Ol' Limitar bank's going to be very sick if those horses are all gone," said George philosophically, as it wasn't his mortgage. He served the foreclosure notice by spreading it flat on the tattered oilcloth of the kitchen table and weighting it with a chili bottle.

THE case was clear enough in George's mind. The Stours had fallen from grace and removed their assets. But he, George, had no intention of madly pursuing the removers. They must have started the previous evening, a night of full moon, and undoubtedly would be many miles south of the Border by now. The Border was the dead line for such minor issues as diversion of assets, as far as the sheriff's office was concerned. Of which Border more presently. Besides, the blue roan, with forty miles behind his heels, was in no shape for a hard ride. The Stours might have overlooked a horse or two in the pasture, but even with a fresh horse he could do no more than ride south and establish the fact that the Border had been crossed by the Stours and their horses. So much George would have to do because banks are fussy creatures, and the one holding the mortgage would wish to know the extent of its bereavement. It was just too bad for the bank.

Philosophic George rustled a tin can

for boiling water for coffee, a frying pan without a handle for potatoes—there was ample of each left—and then looked in the woodbox. It was empty. Lazy scoundrels, those Stours. George went out to the wood-pile. But there was no wood cut and in common with all lazy households the vicinity of the wood-pile was thoroughly gleaned of chips. Remained the axe. The helve was sticking up from between two big mesquite roots. George took hold of the helve and heeled one of the roots aside preparatory to chopping off an end. The blade of the axe came into view. He stood transfixed. The blade was dark red with dried blood.

George lost his appetite and his philosophy and got busy.

Within five minutes he located Lafe Merseymere under the wood-pile. George identified him primarily by his clothing. The coat that had bulged behind Lafe's cantle the previous day now was wrapped snugly around Lafe's head. It was pretty damp. With Lafe were his saddle, his bridle, his saddle blankets, and all that was externally his except his hat. Of a package that might have contained a payroll there was no sign.

WITH careful fingers George removed the damp coat enveloping Lafe's head, and promptly wished he hadn't had to. He rewrapped the coat and went to the watering trough for a drink.

Then he untied Chinkapin and, the horse having cooled, let him drink his fill before he stripped off saddle and bridle and turned him into the night-trap to roll and graze until such time as he had finished what he had to do here. The discovery of the murder had considerably altered George's plans. Until he discovered evidence to the contrary he would have to assume that one of the Stours was a murderer and the other one accessory after the fact. Which assumption involved a hard ride to the Border, with a one-man invasion of Old Mexico to follow. The invasion would be strictly unofficial. For Papa Porfirio, the bullet-headed soldier with the mole on his chin, who ruled in Mexico City, looked stiffly askance at any traipsing within his borders of American

sheriffs, their deputies and posses; and Papa's *rurales,* in stiff looks, were no whit behind Papa. In fact they endeavored to keep a look or two ahead of him. It was healthier.

Consequently George Tyne, the first deputy, would stop short at the line, and Jorge Tenorio, a Mexican puncher, would cross it and proceed to follow the trail. George's hair was black, and he spoke Mexican Spanish like a native. He would not be able to bring back the horses, of course, but he hoped to play even-steven for the murder.

By five o'clock George had completed a most careful search and examination both of Lafe's clothing and the premises. He had found nothing to controvert the assumption as to the Stours' blood guilt. Nowhere in the vicinity had he discovered more than four sets of boot-tracks—his own, a set to which he had been able to fit Lafe Merseymere's boot-soles, and two other sets made by boots with run-over heels—he'd noticed the previous day that the boots of both Stours had badly run-over heels. These latter two sets corresponded in every particular with other footprints, some days and some weeks old, in and around the corrals and at the watering-trough.

His own footprints were the only ones at the woodpile. Whatever tracks had been made during the process of concealing the body and possessions of Lafe were padded out by scurrying hoofs. He had not even been able to fix the place where Lafe had been killed.

The absence of Lafe's hat appeared to indicate that it had been taken to replace another. Both of the Stours' hats were dilapidated, George recalled. Since there was no water between Red Canyon and the Rocking D ranch near the Border, it followed that, if the horses had been run off to Mexico, a halt at the Rocking D troughs would have been imperative. George had every hope of picking up a definite clue at the Rocking D. That he had not found the hat that presumably had been replaced by Lafe's, was only to be expected. A killer may leave clues, but he certainly does not leave visiting cards.

IV

GEORGE led the saddled blue roan to the trough for a drink before going up into the pasture in quest of a possible overlooked horse. When George had had his own he took down the canteen he'd hung on the horn before starting across the Soledad. As he unscrewed the cap, it came to him with a jerk what was missing from the water pen. The two played-out canteens that had hung from the top rail on which Tulare had been sitting were gone from that place. They should have hung there still because who, contemplating flight, would burden themselves with useless articles?

Soberly George filled his canteen and hung it on the horn. Then he mounted and swung out of the water pen, across the flat and into the horse-pasture. The gate he was careful to close behind him. There wasn't a horse in sight, but if any had been left behind the likeliest place to search was the vicinity of the waters at the upper end.

Near the middle of the pasture was a notch between the ends of twin rocky ridges running east and west. Each ridge was possibly a quarter-mile in length. These ridges afforded foothold for a thick growth of greasewood and formed, in consequence of both rock and brush, natural barriers. Horses driven toward the ridges would naturally head into the notch. Hundreds of diverging hoofmarks on the north or Red Canyon side of the notch showed that many horses had poured through it and fanned out immediately on emergence, only to be bunched again and driven toward the gate. Nor had the bunching been easy. The riders —two in number and riding unshod horses —had had to ride.

From a horseman's viewpoint, George could not understand why the riders had choused the animals through the bottleneck of the notch, when they must have known that, once through, they'd spread all over the place. It would have been much simpler and easier to have swung them in one bunch either east or west of the ridges, thus keeping them together all the way to the gate. Had this course been followed the work would have been considerably lessened and

time saved. Yet the riders had wasted time. George pressed on thoughtfully through the notch. No grass grew in the bottom of it. There was bare and dusty ground, cut and trampled and packed by the hundreds of hoofs that had passed over it.

Beyond the two ridges was a long, broad flat, scored by hoofmarks all tending toward the notch. It was becoming clear to George that not one bunch of horses but several bunches had been herded into the notch from as many different directions. This made the error of the riders more glaring. Even had they been guilty of bad judgment for once, the spreading after passage of the first bunch should have taught them wisdom. But apparently not. They had continued to haze bunch after bunch through the notch, thus continuing to waste time. Which was odd. Taken in conjunction with the other solecism, that of the played-out canteens, it was odd to a superlative degree —provided the same men were responsible for both solecisms.

After visiting in turn the three waters and finding not a horse at any of them, George turned back to the gate. Forty miles to the Border.

But Chinkapin could manage it at a pinch. He'd have to.

V

"PLANT both heels on the ground and admire that good-lookin' saddle," Bill Deeside, the lean ranchman, bawled cheerily from the kitchen doorway in response to the hail of the first deputy. "You're just in time for a late breakfast. We're loafers today."

"What good wind blows you here, Goerge?" Counsellor Tom Deeside, the brother of Bill, called over his relative's shoulder before George could reply.

"Business," replied George, his voice thick with thirst, for he had given all the water in his canteen to worn-out Chinkapin. "See where a horse-band stopped here to water yesterday."

"Why, yes," said Bill. "Early yesterday morning the Stours watered a big jag of horses here on their way across into Mexico."

"Tulare and Sam Stour, huh? Either of 'em wearing a good, almost new gray hat?"

"Tulare was."

"That settles it." Stiffly and heavily George dismounted. "They're wanted for murder and robbery."

"Huh? What! You're joking!" Thus the counsellor, properly horrified.

"No joke. Facts. Lafe Merseymere's dead and the mine payroll's gone."

VI

"THEY take Lafe's horse?" asked the counsellor.

"Guess so," replied George, spooning out a second helping of beans. "I found his four shoes where they'd been chucked over the fence into a corral. All circumstantial evidence, but that good gray hat Tulare was wearing seems to clinch it."

"You know, George," said the counsellor, "I wondered if it wasn't diversion of assets. I knew of the mortgage, and it occurred to me they might have been moved to stumble from the straight and narrow. But of course not knowing the rest, you understand—" he broke off to utter commiserating clucks.

"Murder didn't occur to us," chipped in Bill. "They acted natural, didn't seem worried or excited a-tall. Like I told you, they said they had a chance to sell their ponies down in Sonora and were in a hurry to get there. Why, just to show you, they left half a dozen played-out ones here. Said they'd pick 'em up on their way back. On their way back!" He laughed harshly. "Fooled us plenty. Well, I'll keep the half-dozen on the bank's call. Oh, yeah, and several more drifted back here during the day. I put 'em in the pasture with the others."

"Yeah," said dull-eyed George, plying a weary fork. "I'm goin' across after I get a little sleep. They've got a long start, but they'll have to stop sometime. I'm leaving my star here, and I'll need a fresh horse and a rifle."

"Sure, anything I've got and can do," said the accommodating Bill.

"You can help out by sending word to Yarrow and Soledad. Your punchers—"

"Both of 'em are over west hunting strays," said Bill. "They won't be back for another week. But Tom and I'll go for you. Glad to."

"You bet," said the counsellor heartily. "Humph, those Stours must have gone witless to kick the bridge over complete like that. Any more coffee in the pot, Bill? Thanks."

He spaded sugar into his refilled cup and stirred thoughtfully. "Ol' Lafe Merseymere. I can hardly believe it yet. A good fellow if there ever was one. Always ready to help out when folks were in *borrasca.* A right popular man, Lafe. His death is a distinct loss to the community."

"That's life," contributed Bill, with frontier philosophy. "Here today and gone tomorrow. Bed, George?"

George completed his yawn. "Not yet. Got to make out my report for you to take to Soledad, Bill, that is if you're the one going there."

"Sure, I'll go to Soledad. Yarrow is Tom's home town."

"Fair enough." The first deputy flapped open a notebook and licked the business end of a stubby pencil. "Tulare and Sam Stour," he continued in a mutter, scribbling rapidly. "Father and son, aged forty-five and twenty-two respectively. Full beard, and needed a shave, *respectively,* or had Sam shaved, either of you notice? You saw 'em a good thirty-six hours after I did."

"Sam needed a shave, all right," said Bill.

George set it down, an earnest tongue distending his left cheek. "Other distinguishing marks—let that go. Oh, Tulare was wearing a good gray hat. Lessee now—blankets and—uh—Winchesters on their saddles—in scabbards or tied on?"

"Scabbards," replied the counsellor. "Near side."

"Now—uh—now—anything else on their saddles beside the blankets—slickers, for instance?"

"No, neither of 'em had a slicker," said Bill.

"They had canteens though," supplied the counsellor. "I recall the canteens especially, because they had a Lazy S in red paint on each one, and they filled 'em at the trough."

VII

"THAT certainly went off nicely," said Bill Deeside, riding north with his brother.

The counsellor smiled. "Our perennial luck—in spite of the unexpected. I didn't expect that the body would be found immediately. Dear, oh dear, suppose George had been a day earlier. One shudders." The jolly counsellor laughed merrily. "As everything turns out, it's just as well. I can cut short my visit to you and return to my lucrative practice at Yarrow. I must get in touch with Lafe's executor. The estate will be a fat plum for an attorney."

"Well, by Gawd!" Bill exclaimed in some admiration.

"I rarely overlook any bets," said the counsellor modestly. "Can't afford to."

"You overlooked one when you picked Lafe Merseymere for a partner."

"Not at all. I knew he was safe only up

to a point. Once that point was passed—so long, Lafe. Let this be a lesson to you, Bill—if you're scared, don't show it. Even the devil hates a coward. Lafe also must have been plain simple."

"He was—both those things. Still, the more I think of it, the more I wonder if we were wise in leaving him to be found."

"Oh, Lord—harping on that again!" The counsellor stared keenly at his brother. "Not beginning to lose *your* nerve, are you?"

"You know me!" snarled Bill. "I'll gallop where you're afraid to walk. I'm just wondering whether—"

"Stop wondering. Man, I tell you we don't *want* a mystery. We want an open and shut affair with an obvious body, an obvious robbery, and an obvious decamping on the part of those responsible. We have all those things—complete. Now don't say we didn't push those horses far enough south and that George will run into 'em. I know he will. I expect him to. He'll think the Stours saw him coming and lit out, and oh dear, won't he ride himself bowlegged trying to cut sign in that rocky country." He chuckled richly. "And to think I carried the payroll out of the house right under his snoring nose."

BILL glanced at the bulging coat tied behind the counsellor's saddle. "We'll divide it soon as I can meet you in Yarrow."

"We'll do nothing of the sort," denied the counsellor. "We won't even open the package. We'll keep her as is for a month or two—that is, I will. I know you, William. When you have money, you spend it, and your half of Lafe's roll is burning your pocket right now. So we'll wait until you sell a bunch of steers, when there'll be an excuse for your blowing yourself. Then we'll declare our dividend. By the way, I think you'd better start northwest for Soledad right now. If it should transpire that we'd ridden together all the way to the wagon road, you might be taxed with lack of zeal, and that would never do. My regards to our sheriff, *amigo. Vaya con Dios.*"

The sheriff was suitably shocked at the news brought by Bill Deeside, and wouldn't hear of Bill's going to the hotel.

"After that long ride you deserve the best in the house," said the sheriff warmly. "The

second deputy's off just now, and you can have his room in the jail. Jailer's a good cook, and he'll look after you until it's time for you to go across for the inquest. That'll be in a day or two, I guess. Huh? Oh, yes, you and Tom will have to testify as to seeing the Stours and all. George's report is only hearsay, you know. Come along, you look all played out."

VIII

"SHERIFF tells me their trail petered out, George," called the counsellor sympathetically from where he sat on his heels beside his brother Bill outside the Stour adobe.

"It did," replied the first deputy, halting before the pair. "How"—he nodded toward the kitchen's open door—"is the inquest coming?"

"Took a recess for a few minutes after we testified," replied Bill, who was playing one-handed mumblety-peg with a pocketknife.

"Waiting for me, I guess. There's Slim now. Hey, Coroner, when you want me?"

"Not just yet." Followed by the sheriff, Coroner Slim Fay walked toward the trio. "But I'm telling you, George, next time you move a body without permission you're due for trouble."

"Yeah?" Tolerantly George watched the coroner squat beside Bill. "Have you noticed the weather outdoors lately? Sure, I put him in the storeroom. Why not?"

"You're too fussy-feathered, Slim," chimed in the sheriff, easing down at the counsellor's elbow.

"That's Slim," sighed the counsellor. "You heard him making us testify to every last stitch the Stours had on. Hell's bells, what on earth does it really matter whether there was a red Lazy S on their canteens or not? What I hear from George, they didn't kill Lafe with any canteen, Slimoleum."

"Law's law," said the coroner succinctly. "Lemme try my hand with that knife, Bill. I used to be a dabster at mumblety-peg."

"Yeah," continued George, his calm eye dwelling on the counsellor and his brother, "law sure is law, and that's what makes plenty work for the sheriff's office. It has been busy. Up in the horse pasture. Lot of horse tracks I couldn't reason out at first. Several bunches of horses, one after another, had been choused through a notch between two ridges when it would have been a lot easier to drive all together around either end. Don't move, Bill."

Bill stared fascinated into the muzzle of the short-barreled forty-four that had miraculously appeared from the neighborhood of George's waistband. "All set, Coroner. Sheriff's got Tom's gun."

"Thanks, George," said the coroner gratefully, "it was a leetle on the wrong side for me to snatch. You set steady, Bill. If George misses you, I won't."

"This is plain idiocy," announced the

counsellor, coldly furious. "What are you trying to do, you fellows?"

"We've done it," said George. "You see, Tom, those canteens you and Bill swore the Stours filled at Bill's trough, couldn't be filled. Big holes in the bottoms. You didn't notice that when you took 'em off the water-pen fence. So after you two left I got me a couple of horses and rode 'em turn-about to Soledad and got there ahead of Bill."

"I expect you must have got pretty tired," remarked Bill with unexpected aplomb. "Too bad it was all for nothing."

"Since you choose to become personal and call our words into question, George," sneered the counsellor, "I fear I must ask you to produce those canteens."

"Your lying about those canteens," George continued with phlegm, "cleared the Stours and showed me there could be only one reason for all those horses being hazed through the notch—to hide something, the way the emigrants used to do when they came across the plains in forty-nine and anybody died. They'd bury 'em in the trail and then drive their bull-wagons over the grave, so the Indians couldn't locate it and dig in. Boys, the sheriff and I and four good men dug that notch from end to end, and sure enough there were the two Stours and their hats and their saddles and blankets and Winchesters and the grub and the canteens, and—those canteens can't be filled."

"I ONLY got in an hour ago, George," said the general manager of the Mines of Yarrow. "I've been away for a few days. Yes, the assistant super told me the news. Too bad." Nonchalantly the G.M. began to fill a black cutty. "And the Deesides aren't saying anything, huh? Don't blame 'em." The G.M.'s smile was grim. "You see, George, after those other two holdups I became a little suspicious that Lafe was in cahoots with the road-agents—no, I didn't suspect anyone else in particular—so I fixed it up with the bank in the city to send up a package of newspaper for Lafe to lug to Soledad. The paymaster brought the real payroll across from Severn same as usual."

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Brand New! Best selling CO_2 (Carbon Dioxide Gas) Pistol, 22 caliber, powered by cheap CO_2 Cylinder obtainable everywhere. Complete with a good big supply of extra CO_2 cylinders and 22 caliber lead pellets. Write for FREE Schimel literature.
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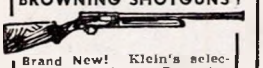

Brand New! Klein's selection of Belgian Browning Automatic Shotguns is America's largest! Get yours early! 12 or 16 Gauge, Standard **$119.90.** Lt. 12 or Sweet 16 **$129.85.** (Add $13.10 for Raised Rib. Add $21.80 for Ventilated Rib. Over and Unders also available in 12 or 20 Gauge at $224.50 and up.

$27.00 GEP ROD AND SOUTH BEND REEL

Both For **$17.95**

The "GEP" $16 Value Model 380 PISTOL GRIP Actionized Solid Glass Fiber Casting Rod. STAINLESS STEEL GUIDES, selected cork patented "Gep" pistol grip, 5, 5½ or 6 ft. lengths, medium or light action (state choice). Plus the **South Bend** sturdy, lightweight, aluminum PERFECTORENO level wind and anti-backlash reel. Anodized, rich maroon aluminum—weighs only 6 oz. Phosphor bronze bearings and bushings. Has famous Perfectoreno spool control mechanism, capacity 100 yds. 18 lb. line (New 1950 disc. model #760—$11.00 value).
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SCOOP! $39.95 BERNARDELLI $29.95

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Given! Extra clip, cleaning rod and oiler with every gun.

Brand new! Six shot. Blued finish. **Double safety.** Vest pocket size, 4⅛" long overall, height 2½", 2" barrel, weight 9 oz. **Made in Italy** by the famous **Bernardelli** Arms Company. **Parts available.** Diamond checkered bakelite grips. Simple button release permits easy removal of firing pin assembly. This powerful little **Bernardelli** meets the demand for a 25 caliber (6.35mm) Auto Pistol of slight weight and very small size, yet durable, practical, easy and efficient in operation. Shoots six shots as fast as you can pull the trigger. Complete with **extra clip,** cleaning rod, oiler and certificate of **Official Italian Government** proof test. The Bernardelli sells everywhere for $39.95 and more! **$29.95**
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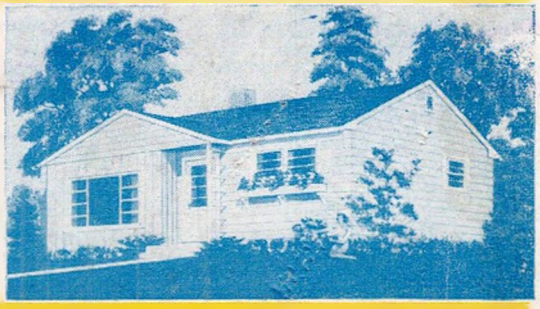

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Every hour you can put in on the construction of your Aladdin home means a saving to you of from $2.00 to $3.00 per hour on its cost. That means a SAVING of from $15.00 to $18.00 for every day you work on it! . . . Depending on the size of the house, the carpenter work sums up to from three hundred hours to twelve hundred hours. . . . WITH MOST OF THE SKILLED LABOR ALREADY PERFORMED when you receive your Aladdin Readi-Cut, what an opportunity you have to bring down the cost of your new home to practically a pre-war level. Our drawings and instructions cover everything from the foundation up, so you can save any part, or even all labor costs.

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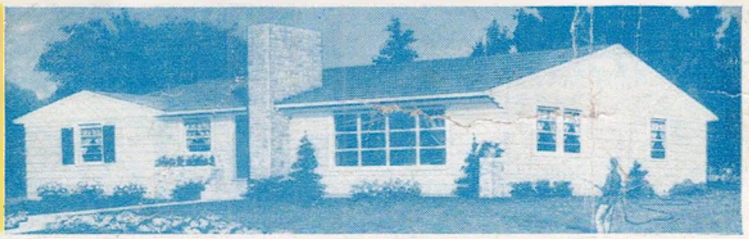

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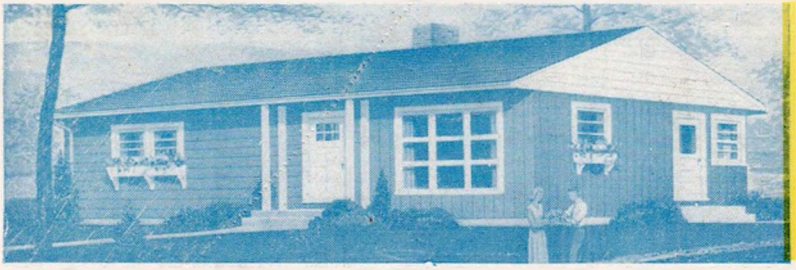

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