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Twice A Month

August 10th

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"If you lose face, you lose everything!"

THE DUTCHMAN LAUGHS LAST

by

R. V. Gery

Aug. 10th, 1939 SHORT STORIES 176 Pages

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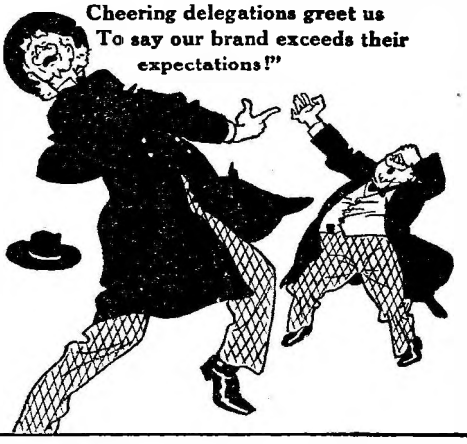

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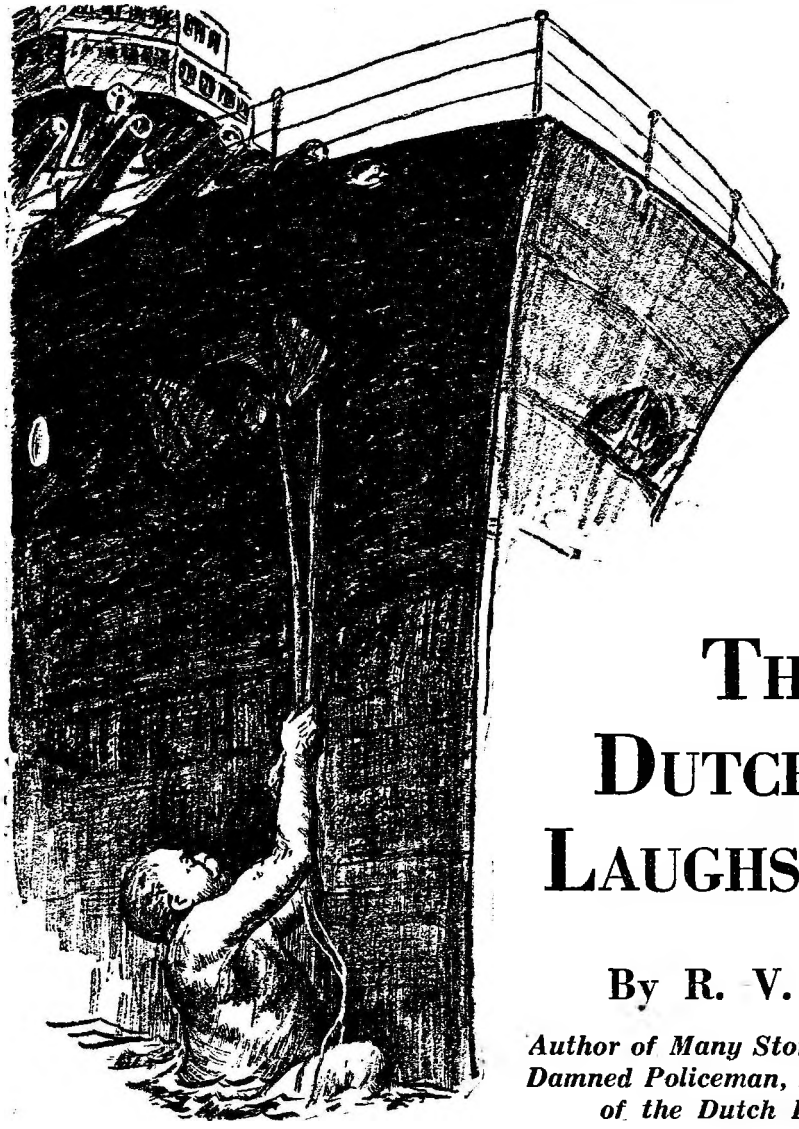


THE DUTCHMAN LAUGHS LAST

By R. V. GERY

Author of Many Stories of that Very Damned Policeman, Kappie De Vries of the Dutch East Indies

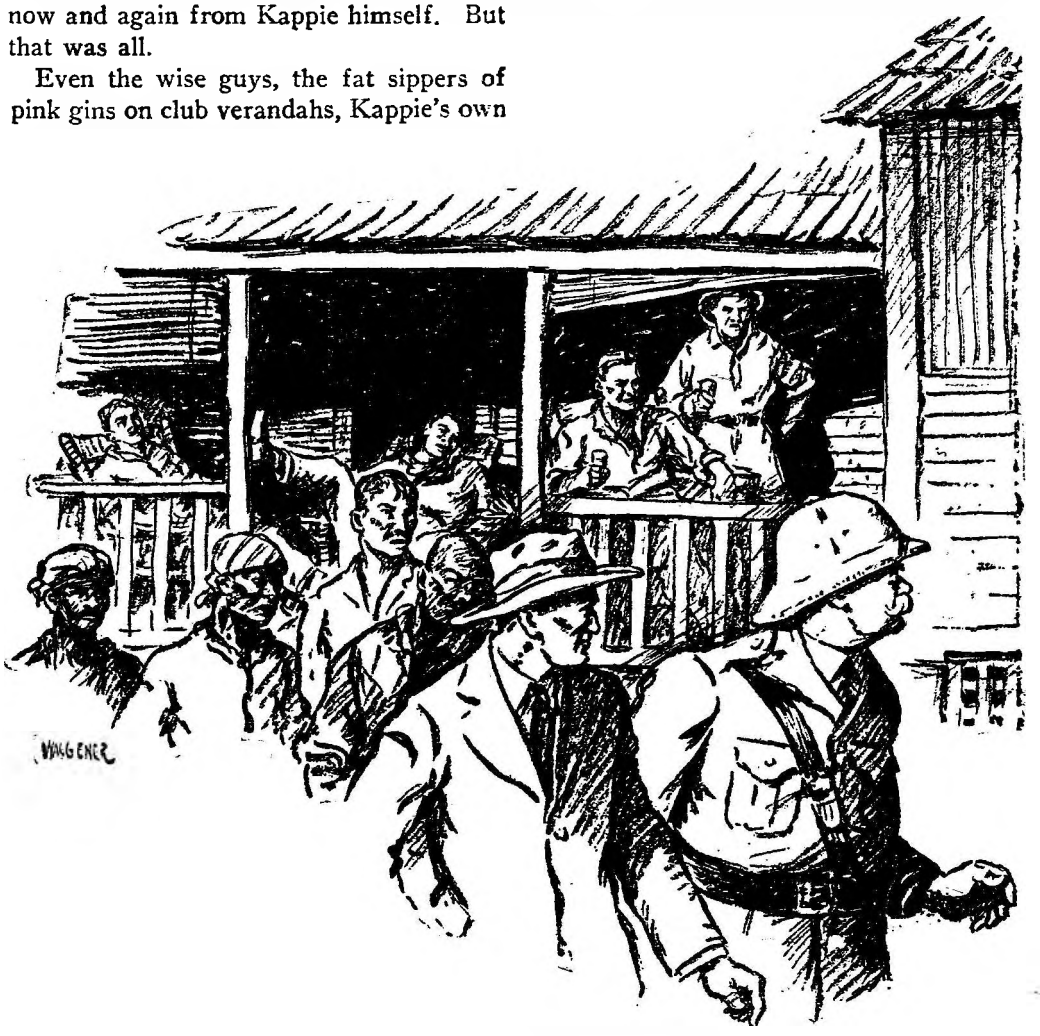
I

THEY said about Kappie De Vries that he ate his young, that he had knobs on his sweetbreads and a heart carved out of a piece of old shoe-leather, and that refrigerator-fluid ran chill in his veins in place of the good red blood. They —that is to say, the bad boys of his district, the *schellums*, the malefactors—were wont to devote considerable time in such lurid word-pictures of their Inspector; but it is not on record that any of them, in their wildest moments, ever made him out to be funny.

From their viewpoint there was a total lack of humor in that businesslike outfit, De Vries with his iron jaw and edged-sapphire eye, Sergeant Jan with the ready noose, the stout constables and all the panoply of Dutch justice. It was machine-

precise, remorseless, fatal—anything you would, but not on any account a matter for mirth. A spell of the very dry grins, maybe, between the tripping curses; and no doubt, said the bad boys, a grim chuckle now and again from Kappie himself. But that was all.

Even the wise guys, the fat sippers of pink gins on club verandahs, Kappie's own drinking-cronies, closed the other eye on being put the question.



"Na," they said. "He is perhaps a little crazy, this animal, but funny, no. One does not laugh at him to his face—much!"

They wagged their plump chins, and that seemed to be the general concensus of opinion on all hands about Kappie De Vries. Even Micaela, his young wife, who could and did bully and tease the Inspector very abominably on occasion, never permitted the tiny lashes of her wit to touch him in his official capacity. At home he might be fat, he might be a shameless guzzler, he might be anything she chose to ride him with—but once outside that little bungalow in the side-street, he was Mynheer Inspector Kappie De Vries of the Makassar division, and no one was a bigger stickler for the proprieties than his wife.

She knew, coming from a line of hearty sea-pirates herself, that this was the East, and that there was a certain thing called face. It might possibly have been better in the long run if a number of other people had pasted that little word inside their hats, here and there around the Indies.

BECAUSE it happened one day that Kappie De Vries got himself into a feud with a party—a highly normal, routine, run-of-mine feud over the party's activities in the city of Makassar and elsewhere.

It was a spot of quite second-class espionage apparently, and the party—to look at—was a totally insignificant little runt; so that Kappie, who was used to dealing with the real highpower wizards in the spy line, was frankly bored with him.

"Almighty!" he said to Jan. "What is this—a very-damned milliner they send looking for secrets? *Ja,* a whippersnapper, by the Lord!"

He glowered at the captive, standing under guard before his office desk. Certainly there was not much impressive about him; he was pink and white and small-statured, with thin hands and a wisp of a dinky yellow mustache. Kappie regarded this latter with an air of profound disgust.

"Your name?" he snarled intimidatingly —and the man grinned.

"John Smith," he said. "For the tenth time, and take it or leave it. It's all you'll get, anyway."

Kappie might have been warned, maybe, by the general unlikeliness of that comeback. It was as if a rabbit had reared up suddenly and sassed a rattlesnake, and even Jan blinked at the picture. But Kappie was in one of his truculent moods and not in a temper to bandy words.

"Very good, mynheer," he said. "Very good, Mynheer John Smith. We shall see what the judge says to you, my friend —and after that perhaps a few years of our *tronk* here, behind bars, will wipe some of that smile off your face, *goedverdom!* Take him away, Jan!"

SO THEY took him away, this so-called John Smith, and that was a mistake. Kappie ought to have knocked him on the head then and there, or had him drowned; because John Smith, whose real name was Coleby, possessed brains, and a following, and a temper as well—a nasty vindictive little temper that suggested all manner of things that might be done to this blaring and red-faced Dutchman with the eye.

He wasn't a particle afraid of that eye either, this Smith-Coleby person. In fact, he was afraid of nobody at all, he boasted privately. And just to prove it to his own and the world's satisfaction he proceeded to escape from Makassar's *tronk,* within three days after his being put there, That, in itself, was an achievement —but he also left a couple of the guards much the worse for wear, and a note addressed to Kappie personally that was a masterpiece of its kind.

Kappie glared at it when Jan laid it before him. A little vein, upright in his seamed forehead, began to go pump-pump-pump—a danger-signal as Jan knew very well—and his wide mouth tightened into a thin line. He read the missive over a couple of times thus, and then he shrugged.

"So?" he muttered. "A clever one, eh? It seems we have misjudged him, this mynheer, after all. Well, see that he is caught, Jan, and then bring him to me. I have some words, *ja,* I would say to this John Smith."

With that, he dismissed the subject, confident that his network of spies and agents would in due course come up with their captive. In this, Kappie De Vries made another error, and one that was to have consequences. Because the frail little fellow with the trick mustache wriggled himself clear, not only of Makassar jail, but of the Dutch Indies as well. And about the time Kappie was beginning to fume and boil over his case, he was sitting a thousand miles away, in the wardroom of a businesslike-looking cruiser up in the Sulu Sea, talking earnestly to some very polite, very intent little brown men in sack suits and spectacles.

They seemed to be listening to him with deference, too, although a trifle doubtfully.

"You'll have to get rid of him," Coleby

was saying. "That's certain, anyway. He's just about the mainspring of their organization down there, and until he goes you're at a dead end." He stroked his chin and grinned again, palely. "That's a pretty damned competent piece of goods, gentlemen, if you ask me."

They were not asking him, it appeared —they knew all about that already. But they were worried a good deal, these little patriots, because of certain angles to the matter.

"It is difficult," they said. "He must be removed, this Dutchman—and yet how? We desire no international trouble, now. And if he is liquidated——"

THEY shrugged and hissed and made despairful, vexed noises, and Coleby considered them out of the corner of his eye. He was a professional rounder, a high-grade crook on the outer fringes of diplomacy, a man without a nation, and worth a pot of money to anyone looking for just that type of thing. The brown men had sent him down to the Dutch islands for reasons of their own—he could always be indignantly disavowed if he got caught — and now they were expecting some concrete suggestions about dealing with Kappie De Vries. They got them.

"No," Coleby said. "You can't very well knock him off, I suppose—not without getting yourselves asked questions about it.

And I won't do it for you. I'm not that kind of a dealer, gentlemen. But I might work it, all the same—I've got an idea here." He tapped his forehead and winked knowingly. "Yes, I rather imagine it's possible to make it pretty interesting for that fat idiot—"

They were all leaning toward him now, with a great display of gold bridgework.

"And this plan, please, Coleby-*san?*" breathed their leader ingratiatingly. "Let us hear it—quickly!"

Coleby laid a slim finger to the side of his nose and chuckled.

"Oh, no!" he said. "Not like that, my friends — not like that. It's something special, this one, and we'll just go into the question of my compensation first, if you don't mind. Fair's fair, and all that, eh? This isn't any of your nursery spy-stuff —it's genius, gentlemen, and you've got to pay for that!"

Anyone else, addressing the vehement little brown men so, might have found himself on the wrong end of an argument, and quite probably overside among the Sulu Sea sharks as well. But there was something about Harold Coleby that got him attention—a species of queer, cold-steel nerve, perhaps—and they listened to him.

An hour later he was leaning over the rail, hugging a piece of paper in his inside pocket. The paper bore signatures, very high and exalted and solvent signatures, and it undertook to pay Harold Coleby a sum of money that satisfied even his ambitions.

But Coleby was not thinking so much about that lovely piece of paper. He was looking southward across the heaving sea, past Borneo to Celebes, with Makassar down on the tip of it.

"All right!" he was saying. "All right, Van Dunk—here's looking at you, my fat friend!"

A persevering, ingenious little rat, this Harold Coleby, sometime of London, England; and Kappie De Vries might have done excellently well to have watched out, with a weather-eye lifting for squalls.

II

AS a matter of fact, Kappie de Vries had other matters to occupy his official attention just then.

The Indies were getting hot—hotter every day as it grew increasingly obvious what those polite little brown men might very well be after—and their cities and strategic values were becoming front-page news with increasing regularity. Visitors arrived, untidy men with forceful manners and much-bestamped permits, asking questions, seeking interviews, prying and ferreting—and every one of them, notebook, credentials and all, had to pass Kappie's desk and be submitted to the disgusted scrutiny of his chill blue eyes. It kept him busy, this task, and it also kept him pretty consistently annoyed, for Kappie De Vries and newspapermen did not mix as a rule. There were plenty of scenes in that varnished, formal office, and Sergeant Jan grew used to the spectacle of first-chop correspondents getting themselves in wrong with his fiery superior.

So that it was with feelings of resignation that he ushered another of them in one morning—a lean, fine-drawn fellow with a hawk's face and hair prematurely gray about the temples. A practical-looking mynheer enough, Jan mused; one that could look after himself in most situations, it appeared. He stood back from the door, awaiting the usual explosion.

It did not come. There was a little silence, and then Kappie said, *"Goedverdom!"* under his breath and got up. Jan took a hasty glance round the door, and saw that the two men were staring at each other incredulously, as if doubtful of what they saw. Then the newcomer laughed.

"Well, I'm damned!" he observed. "So it was you, after all! Last time I saw that mug was a mighty long way from here."

"And a mighty long time since!" Kappie

exploded. "Twenty years, Mynheer Tim —and in that New York of yours. A pair of young fools, eh—on the loose! Twenty years, almighty—"

He was out from behind his desk, grasping the tall man's hand and positively bubbling with excitement, while Jan gaped open-mouthed. Kappie had been in the States in his young days, he knew, and always had a weakness for its citizens, but this was the first time one of the ghosts out of that past had come back thus dramatically. It was a startling reversal of form, anyhow, for Kappie to so much as shake hands with a member of the press.

But that is what he was doing, and moreover he was showing him to a chair, and producing from its locked cabinet the sacred bottle of ancient Cape brandy he kept for his most special guests.

"Jan," he said to the thunderstruck noncom, "I am engaged, you comprehend. If any of these," he permitted himself a wink that was almost an explosion, "if any of these very-damned mynheers with notebooks inquire for me, direct them to the harbor, Jan, and tell them to jump. And shut the door—Mynheer Hogan and I are busy!"

HE DROPPED back into his chair and stared at Tim Hogan curiously. Despite his assumed indifference to such matters, there were few of the important facts about the newspaper game Kappie did not know—and Tim Hogan of the New York *Record* was an important fact, all right. His by-lines flamed on front pages, his date-lines were anywhere from China to Peru, his friendships were enormous and startling. Dictators slapped him on the back, generalissimos and transparencies served him cocktails and ingenious flattery, even royalties took notice of him—careful notice. Because Tim Hogan was just one of those new phenomena in a changing world, the kings of publicity, and—although not by a whisper would he have owned to it—the making and breaking of causes were in his hands. Kappie knew plenty about him and his work, and that was why he still gaped at him across the desk and swore bemusedly.

"To think!" he rumbled. "Twenty years ago—Almighty, Tim, you travel far since then!"

Tim Hogan smiled, and he had a smile to charm a bird out of a tree. "Maybe," he said briefly. "You don't seem to have done so badly yourself, my friend. I've heard a lot about you here and there. They don't make better policemen, it seems."

Kappie, for once in his blatant life, had the grace to blush. Flattery slid off him, normally, like water off an oilskin coat, but this was more than flattery. Tim Hogan meant what he said, and Tim Hogan would know, if anyone did.

"I thank you," he said awkwardly. "I thank you, Tim—it is nice, *ja,* to hear such things. But tell me, what do you hear? The usual, eh—this Japanese business? Do not say you require this information and that permit and all the devil's rigmarole the others—almighty, those others!—have been giving me. Somehow I do not see you as a listener at keyholes!"

Tim Hogan flashed the smile again, sipped his Vanderhum, and shook his head.

"No," he said. "That's a bit out of my line, Kappie. Matter of fact, I came down here looking for a guy, if you want to know. A guy that's pretty interesting, in his way. He's been maneuvering around these parts lately, the tale was. Name of Coleby, and he's a curiosity—a clever devil of an Englishman gone wrong. Got anything on him?"

KAPPIE screwed up his face into an agonizing expression of thought, and rang for Jan.

"Coleby," he said curtly. "*Schellum* Englishman—we have any particulars of such a one?"

Jan, who kept all the complicated figures and details of that office neatly

charted in his adding-machine of a brain, saluted deferentially.

"*Na*, mynheer," he said. "We have no Coleby—"

Kappie turned to Tim Hogan. "Let us hear some more of this fellow," he said. "A curiosity, you say? I do not like curiosities—they are annoying. No, Jan, stay here. You had better listen."

So Makassar's pair of sleuths sat back while Tim Hogan let himself go on the subject of the little man with the dinky mustache. He knew a very great deal about Harold Coleby, it seemed, and he desired urgently to know more. Kappie squinted at him.

"Why?" he demanded. "You do not propose to write of him—that is not a newspaper story. You have some other mission, Tim. Not so, eh?"

HOGAN was silent for a moment, and then he nodded. "I guess so," he admitted. "One of those things. One runs into them now and again on the job. Coleby's a skunk, and he's due to be eliminated from more or less decent society. Some good lads out yonder—yeah, they're pretty high up in one or two governments—asked me to take a look around for him. I like the language those boys talk, somehow. So I took it on."

Kappie was grinning now. "Almighty!" he said. "So that is it, eh? You become a policeman too—"

"No," said Tim Hogan soberly. "I figure I'm more like an exterminating outfit. Rats, lice, and vermin positively removed. Coleby's all three, Kappie—that's all."

Kappie nodded thoughtfully. "It seems so," he observed. "Well, if I hear anything of him, Tim, I'll let you know, eh? That is what you require— Eh? What is it, Jan? You are unwell?"

Sergeant Jan had been standing by the door, stiff at attention and lost in thought. But now, all at once, he was making a series of extraordinary noises deep inside him, as if some cataclysm were taking place there.

"John Smith!" he said. "Mynheer—John Smith—"

Kappie sat bolt upright suddenly, and

the placid, thoughtful expression had gone from his face.

"Eh?" he said again. "What was that, Jan? John Smith—that little animal?"

Jan blinked in his best gooseberry-eyed fashion. "He was a little man, mynheer," he said simply. "And an Englishman—and a *schellum*—and John Smith was not his name."

Kappie whirled on Tim Hogan. "Describe this Coleby," he said, and his voice was no longer lazily benevolent. "Carefully, if you please, Tim."

But Tim Hogan had not to do more than drop a couple of sentences. Kappie bounded clear out of his chair, with a scorching oath that made even the hardened Jan jump.

"Ten million red devils in hell!" he roared. "And we had him—and I thought he was a fool. Tim, I thought, do you hear, he was a fool!"

"Well, he's not," said Tim Hogan drily. "Where is he now?"

Kappie exploded into another torrent of scarlet speech, and Hogan listened to his tale, frowning. Finally he shrugged.

"Okay," he said. "Can't be helped, Kappie. You weren't to know—and he's a deceptive devil, anyway. So he got away from you, eh?"

Kappie ripped open one of his desk

drawers and produced the scrawled note Harold Coleby had left with his dead jailors. Tim Hogan read it, frowning.

"Yes," he said, handing it back. "If it was anyone else, that might be bravado. But the way it is, you've made a lovely enemy, Kappie. I wouldn't underrate him if I were you. He's a little drink of poison, that beauty!"

III

KAPPIE DE VRIES certainly did not underrate Harold Coleby in the days that followed. He was ceaselessly thinking about him, developing new and ingenious theories of his whereabouts, in constant touch with other police districts and commands all over the East; it seemed to Sergeant Jan, carrying out his orders, that the excellent Inspector had become morbid, ridden with the little scamp and his yellow mustache.

Tim Hogan, too, intrigued Jan no little. He was staying on in Makassar, sending out his picturesque, authoritative articles almost daily over the wires. But there were other messages from him that went over the wireless, Jan knew, to cryptic addresses and in code. Jan had the very strong notion that the hawk-nosed, gray-haired mynheer from America was a trouble-snuffer—that where he was, things were exceedingly liable to break, and break fast.

But neither Jan, nor Kappie, nor Tim Hogan had any idea just then of what Harold Coleby had suggested to the little brown men, or why they had so eagerly undertaken to pay him good solid coin. It took time for that business to come into the light of day, and when it did, it came slowly.

It began one evening, two weeks after Tim Hogan's appearance. Kappie De Vries and he were walking back from headquarters toward Kappie's bungalow, where Micaela awaited them with the little drinks and tray of snacks dear to a Dutchman's heart. The streets were crowded with people, many-colored and shifting; it was the ordinary scene Kappie had been part of for twenty years. He moved among the throng, tight-faced, formal, and impressive, conscious of his own importance and quite content with himself.

All at once there was a laugh. It was an odd kind of a laugh, this one, entirely different to the light mirth of the strolling Malays. It had intention and direction—a raucous, sardonic cackle—and it brought Kappie De Vries up all standing.

"In the devil's name—" Tim Hogan heard him mutter.

He was staring furiously across at a window opposite, and there were faces framed there. Three of them, narrow yellow visages, split across by the most unaffected of grins. A long finger shot out and pointed directly at the Inspector—and then the laughter broke out again, barbed, insufferable, obscene. People glanced up, and then across the road at the Inspector. A little crowd began to gather.

Kappie had gone a swift purple in the face, and for an instant Hogan thought he would break loose from his dignity and hurl himself bodily at the house. The three faces vanished, as if removed by a string, and the crowd watched curiously. Kappie stood perfectly still for an instant, and then pulled a whistle out of his pocket. At its shrill blast a couple of his constables dropped their impassive traffic control and came running. Kappie snapped a couple of curt orders, and they dived into an alleyway leading to the back of the offending premises, club in hand. The crowd thickened, expectantly.

Tim Hogan touched Kappie quietly on the arm. He had been watching events warily, with an odd, speculative look in his very civilized eyes.

"Easy!" he muttered. "Easy, Kappie—it's no business of mine, but——"

Kappie relaxed abruptly, and the high color died from his face. He glanced at Tim Hogan, and then around him at the

curious, many-colored crowd, and pulled himself together. Stiffly, and with dignity in every line of his square shoulders, he marched away, and it was a full hundred yards before he spoke, in a throttled, dried-out voice.

"Almighty!" he said. "You—you saw that, Tim?"

Hogan nodded. "I saw," he said. "Sort of unusual, wasn't it?"

Kappie swallowed. "Twenty years!" he said. "In twenty years, *goedverdom*, I have not seen the like. By God, they laughed—at *me!*"

He was positively trembling with fury, but Tim Hogan had seen angry men before. "Okay," he said quietly. "Going to do anything about it, Inspector?"

The tone and the cool query acted once more like a powerful sedative on Kappie. He blinked, and made a noise that might, just, have been a laugh.

"Do?" he said. "What should I do? I —I take no notice, to be sure. *Na*, De Vries of the police is not to be troubled by yapping curs, friend Tim!"

Tim Hogan said nothing. He was very thoughtful as he followed the strutting Kappie into his house. It might have been said that he was just a little worried.

He might well have been, for that evening's affair was only a beginning. There were some extremely peculiar occurrences in the city of Makassar thereafter—the kind of occurrences that defied reasonable explanation by anybody.

People began to whisper, in the oddest fashion, about Mynheer Inspector Kappie De Vries.

It started, seemingly, with that incident in the Leidenstraat, which was all over the bazaar in ten minutes. The three humorists in the window were never laid by the heels—they vanished into thin air, which was itself a matter for comment. And there was more to come.

Twice, in the next days, a sweating glaring Kappie entered his office dripping profanity and with murder in every line of his face. Sergeant Jan, knowing perfectly well what had caused those ominous signals, was for once at a loss, for there was never a definite word out of his fiery chief. But it had been that mocking cackle of laughter that had touched him off—laughter elusive as the wind, floating out of some crowded rabbit-warren or off a flat roof; that, and the way certain folk were suddenly looking at him. In all his career in Makassar, Kappie De Vries had been used to deference, the dropped glance; and he was sensitive as any thermometer to the change in temperature.

"In God's name!" he confided to Tim Hogan. "There is something here I do not understand—"

HOGAN fidgeted. He had been notably silent all the while, busy with his code-wireless and answering no questions —but now he shot a quick look at the fuming Inspector.

"Yeah?" he said. "I wonder— Ever strike you it's pretty damned well organized, this, whatever it is?"

Kappie swore. He had just been closeted with a couple of his spies, and they had told him some highly uncomfortable news from the bazaar—news that made him squirm, of talk, talk, talk, a quickly spreading wave of bad publicity, of comment and criticism. Criticism, from bazaar riff-raff! He lost his temper.

"Damnation!" he roared. "And now you, too! What are you hinting at? Out with it—speak, or I think I shall kill you!"

Tim Hogan cocked his head on one side and pulled a grimace.

"Coleby," was all he said—and Kappie jumped.

"Eh?" he queried, calm all at once. "That animal? And what makes you think that he—?"

Hogan grinned. "I don't think, Kappie," he said. "I'm as near as possible sure.

"He's trying to make a fool of you, publicly—and I'll gamble better than a

plugged nickel I know who's behind him. They're a mighty slick lot, these lads."

Kappie was staring at him with the blank expression that told he was thoroughly startled.

"Almighty!" he said softly. "But why, Tim? Tell me why. To be sure these very-damned yellow devils desire to see me removed from here. I am not such a fool as to dream otherwise. But they surely do not think that I go because I am grinned at by a pack of *schellums!*" He broke off all at once and sat drumming with his fingers on the desk-top. "Or—or do they, by the Lord?"

He was very uncomfortable, and Tim Hogan had small consolation for him.

"Isn't worth arguing, Kappie," he said. "Of course they do—they're smart as all hell, I tell you."

He proceeded to unfold for the Inspector pretty much the identical chain of reasoning that had sold the Japanese civilians on the cruiser, while Kappie continued to glower at him, and Jan stood impassive, but drinking in every word. It was to Jan, at length, that Kappie addressed himself.

"Well?" he said, almost plaintively. "And what do you make of this, eh?"

Jan was frowning, and he hesitated a moment before his reply, but there was no doubt of his seriousness when he spoke.

"Mynheer," he said slowly, "it is truth. You cannot be laughed at, mynheer—"

Kappie blew up. "I will not be!" he fumed. "It ceases, this foolery—you hear me? It ceases, or by heaven I know the reason why!"

IV

BUT Mynheer Inspector Kappie De Vries was for once wrong. It did not cease; it got worse, this intangible, disconcerting attack upon his self-esteem and importance. Harold Coleby, sitting across in French Saigon, pulled at his wires—and a lot of people in the Dutch Indies danced accordingly. There were some pretty potent and widespread affairs, secret societies and the like, on whose controls the little man had his fingers, directly or indirectly; and they fell for this new game with enthusiasm. Applied publicity was a novelty in the East, and it was a subject Coleby had down to an art.

The bazaar-talk and the whisperings went on for days, and Tim Hogan grew more and more thoughtful and preoccupied. He foresaw the next moves, it appeared—and when he came in one morning, to discover Kappie speechless and purple, with a smudged and ill-printed copy of Makassar's native news-sheet before him, he was not a whit surprised.

"Ah?" he said, after listening to Kappie's furious diatribe. "I'd been expecting something like that. Well, what's your plan now, Inspector?"

Kappie slammed his fist on the paper, which carried in what might have been termed the masthead position an article—an undreamt-of, impossible article — in Malay.

"Plan?" he jerked out. "What do you suppose is my plan, Mynheer? Arrest this seditious swine, clap him behind the bars, hang him if I can, burn his printing office!"

He stopped, scowling, because Tim Hogan was looking at him with a shake of the head.

"Don't you be a damned fool, Kappie," the newspaperman said. "If you want to give Coleby just what he'd love, try that line, that's all. You buck the press—any press—and you've a proposition on your

hands. Dammit, I ought to know. You'll have a crop of martyrs, and they'll print just the same—underground. No, you'll have to think up something else, my boy, get that!"

Kappie sat back in his chair, dragged out a long cheroot, and stuck it in his mouth obstinately.

"I will see you and everyone else further first—" he began in a savage undertone, when there was a tap at the door. Sergeant Jan entered with a wire.

"From Batavia, Mynheer," he said concernedly. "The Governor."

KAPPIE snatched at the flimsy and scanned it. He was normally on the best of terms with the courtly old administrator who sat at the capital, but there seemed to be something in this communication that set his hair on fire. He gulped, speechless for a moment.

"A million devils!" he gasped. "Tim, in the name of God what is this fellow? A magician? L-look at that—"

He threw the decoded cable across to Tim. It was curt and business-like enough, to be sure; it wished to know, without beating around the bush, what might be the meaning of certain reports and comments that had come to the ears of authority—of a relaxation of discipline in Makassar, and queer, very queer doings on the part of Mynheer Inspector Kappie De Vries. It was a communication that held plenty dynamite, even to an outsider such as Tim Hogan. There was the unexpressed hint that Kappie De Vries had taken leave of his senses, might very well be on the skids.

Tim shrugged. "All right," he said. "He's done some more phenagling, that's all. I'd heard this was coming, matter of fact—"

Kappie made an extraordinary choking sound. "You!" he managed to get out. "Wh-what do you know about it, Mynheer the American?"

Tim Hogan grinned amicably. "Quite a bit, Kappie," he said. "I'm interested in this guy Coleby, as I told you, and I haven't been altogether idle while I've been around here. I know where the son-of-a-gun is, for instance—and I've a good notion how he's working as well."

Kappie had suddenly developed a horrible, devastating sneer. *"Ja,* Mynheer!" he said. "You know a great deal, it appears—you know too much, altogether. You will permit me to remind you——"

He was in an astounding temper, but Tim Hogan was beyond being affected by such things.

"Lay off, Kappie!" he said. "There's no sense in getting mad at me. I'm running my line and not interfering with you. Better think what you're going to do with this damned rat—you've got to get him, my boy, or he'll get you, sure's shooting, I know, believe you me!"

But Kappie was for once beyond reason. He jumped out of his chair, pointing a shaky finger.

"Outside!" he rasped. "Outside, Mynheer—I will have no very-damned Americans teaching me. Outside, if you please! Jan, the door!"

SO Tim Hogan and Kappie De Vries fell out, and it was bad business for both of them, Kappie particularly. In those days he needed all the cheer and consolation he could get, for Makassar was turning into no place for him to live in. Even the fat fellows with the pink gins looked sideways at him and whispered behind their hands; and the spies brought nothing but the same tale of chatter, monkey-chatter from the bazaar. Sergeant Jan, that stout non-com, had fallen into a fixed gloom, and skulked in headquarters over his records and files, avoiding Kappie as far as possible. It was certainly a bad business.

Kappie himself grew morose, ugly, even in the placid comfort of his home. Micaela, watching him, felt a kind of dread—for the first time she saw her man, the iron-

faced, iron-willed servant of justice she had married, at a loss, puzzled, defeated. She said nothing to him, never referred to the matter; but by and by it grew unbearable. She cornered Tim Hogan, privately.

"Help him, Mynheer," she whispered "More of this, and I—I think he goes mad."

Tim smiled and shook his head. He had seen little of Kappie since their run-in in his office, but he had been unobtrusively busy after his own fashion.

"No," he said. "He won't go mad—not Kappie. He's just not built that way. Let him alone, and he'll find his way out of this, you'll see. Don't worry, that's all."

Poor comfort, and Micaela had tears in her eyes as she left him. Tim Hogan looked after her doubtfully for a moment. Then he strode away, back to his hotel room, where he sat down to compose some very remarkable cipher documents indeed.

THEY went off by wireless that day, and certain gentlemen—official gentlemen—in various parts of the world received them with varied emotions. As for instances a stout and bearded Frenchman in a neat room not so far from the Quai D'Orsay, Paris, France, who said *"Sacrebleu!"* a number of times and himself fell to exercises in cipher. They flashed across the airwaves, these last, clear back to Saigon, where another son of Gaul—the shriveled, cadaverous type this time—blinked at reading them. In about five minutes a posse of truculent-looking, khaki-clad fellows in charge of a *sous-lieutenant* were battering at Harold Coleby's door.

But the bird had flown. Coleby knew all about Tim Hogan, and his messages in cipher.

He had got word of them three hours since, via some well-camouflaged short-wave installation, put two and two together, and gone. By this time he was making use of one of his outs, and ten miles at sea.

"Damn!" said Tim Hogan heartily, and there were plenty of others to echo that sentiment. The official gentlemen back in the chancelleries were getting hot over Harold Coleby—he had a lot of things tagged on to him, anyway, besides the annoyance of Kappie De Vries. As Tim Hogan of the *Record* knew far better than most.

He sat in the hotel stoep, idly looking over the day's newspapers. Outside it was late evening, and Makassar was beginning to drift into its night's quiet—Tim Hogan found himself wondering just what Kappie De Vries might be doing now. It was a million pities, he figured, that the police could not come in on this pretty little scheme for the undoing of Harold Coleby, but that was the way it was. The gentlemen in the chancelleries figured the way to get that elusive and annoying person was not by anything so obvious and departmental as a policeman.

STILL, Tim Hogan disliked having Kappie De Vries go through it. Although, he said to himself grimly, it would not be long now. They had stirred their game in Saigon and the chase had begun. Soon, Tim Hogan told the world, it would end—in one magnificent, glorious beat for the *Record.*

A bell-boy, turbaned and salaaming, stood by his chair.

"Tuan, a *chit,"* he said, extending a note. Tim Hogan took it and ripped it open. It was from the editor of Makassar's Dutch paper, a plump and genial Hollander, Tim Hogan drunk many cocktails with. It invited Tim to come on down to the office then and there, "on a matter of urgency."

In New York City, Tim reflected, they would not have done things so, but over the phone. This however was Makassar, and when in Rome—— He was still smiling to himself at the formality of the

summons as he got his hat and went out into the soft darkness.

"Funny ducks!" he said to himself, turning into the side street.

And that was strictly the last thing Tim Hogan, eminent correspondent and smart guy, did say for some little time—because in the smudgy shadows underneath a wall somebody clunked him scientifically on the head, and there was the faint, shuffling pad-pad of feet. Then silence fell once again over Makassar and the big island of Celebes—a strained, tense silence, as if something was banking up to happen, and happen soon.

V

KAPPIE DE VRIES put down the telephone. He had a most extraordinary look on his face, and it had grown there in the past few minutes, while he had been talking to a hysterical hotel manager and a very puzzled editor. The time was noon next day, and Tim Hogan had suddenly news—bad news, at that.

"Almighty!" Kappie slammed down the instrument. "And now what, Jan—tell me that! You heard, eh?"

Jan assented without enthusiasm. "That mynheer interfered overly much," he opined gloomily. "They do not understand the East, these Americans."

Kappie was muttering sulkily under his breath. *"Ja,"* he said. "It is true, that—but it gets us nowhere. They have got Mynheer Tim, whoever they may be, and now we have every very-damned newspaper in the world asking questions, to be sure. He is no hole-and-corner scribbler, this Tim, remember. And there will be Batavia as well; I can imagine what the old boy up there will say."

He fell silent, glowering, and Sergeant Jan considered him with deep concern. Something certainly had overtaken the doughty Inspector in these times—a month ago, and he would have been out of his chair and that office long since, raving on the trail of the offenders. But now he was doubtful, hesitating—

"Mynheer," Jan ventured, "it is this Coleby once more, I think. The Mynheer Hogan was investigating him, and——"

Kappie abolished him with a wave of the hand. "I know, I know," he said irritably. "You do not need to tell me. It is Coleby this and Coleby the other, until I am—I am sick of hearing the name, *goedverdom!* I think sometimes that devil has been sent here to drive me insane!"

He put his head in his hands and his elbows on the desk-top, a picture such as Jan in all his long experience had not encountered. Kappie De Vries—defeated!

Sergeant Jan felt considerably inclined to follow his superior's example, and let his hair down for a good long cry.

Not being exactly built that way, however, he retired into the cubby-hole which served him for a private sanctum and sat down, lost in thought. The hot noon minutes passed, the scraping pens of the

clerks in the outer office continued their monotonous song, insects droned on the window-pane. But Kappie De Vries still remained where he was, moody and secluded—and Sergeant Jan stared in front of him intently, motionlessly, the picture of concentrated, unremitting meditation.

It was a long while before he moved, but when he did it was with a start, a most dramatic and unlikely start for him. A queer, surprised look slid across his red

features, and he snapped his fingers automatically, as a man does whose problem is all at once solved. A shadowy, half-mischievous grin slackened his mouth—but it vanished as Kappie came to the door.

"Well," he said wearily. "Let us go. Let us look into this very-damned business of Tim Hogan, and all the rest of it. It seems we shall suffer more of their accursed talk, whatever comes."

It was so totally unlike Kappie, so foreign to his fiery nature, that Jan merely blinked, and he was still blinking an hour later. For Kappie's plan of campaign to rescue Tim Hogan was ordinary, routine, flat—it might have been the search for a missing coolie—and Jan was not the only one that knew it. Makassar itself commented, freely and profanely; the other foreign correspondents said things, nasty, sultry things, under their breath; and the bazaar giggled. Also, just as Kappie had foretold, Batavia was busy—very busy, with that courtly old Governor on the wire, for once anything but courtly.

THAT was a sweet afternoon for the Makassar police. A doubly sweet one, too, for the bad boys. They had seen their hated tyrant in fixes before, but never in one like this. It was common property by dusk—Kappie De Vries had folded, a way had at last been found to neutralize him. The bad boys licked their wicked lips—and certain small brown men at a certain legation took occasion to gloat, restrainedly after the manner of their kind, but with enthusiasm all the same.

They said it was very nice, these little fellows, very satisfactory—and Harold Coleby's stock soared with them accordingly. As for him, he was still on his junk, pale and collected; but there was a short-range radio-set on that particular craft, and long before noon he had heard all about Tim Hogan. Coleby stroked his comic mustache and nodded to himself. Things were working out, ever so nicely, he reflected with pardonable pride.

But there was one person in the Indies, besides Kappie himself, to whom all this was bitter, dust and ashes, intolerable—and more intolerable because unexplained—and that was Kappie's lady wife, the Micaela Van Rhyn that had been. Micaela was no more than twenty, but all her life she had been up against the mysterious East and its doubts and dangers. She knew plenty, about men and things, and she knew, with a sinking sensation, that hour by moving hour Kappie De Vries was losing face in Makassar.

But for once she did not know what to do about it. Kappie, at home, had been impossible for days, a glum, silent creature entirely unlike the jovial Dutchman she knew. There was no getting anything out of him but a surly grunt, and since he had squabbled with Tim Hogan he had been if anything worse. So that Micaela, going about her household chores as the shadows fell over the city, was blue, more than a little blue.

She dusted and swept and straightened dishes, and there was no light in her eye or song on her lips at all.

And then something stirred at the window, a shadowy form, noiseless and stealthy. Micaela froze, her glance drifting toward the drawer where Kappie made her keep a neat little automatic. The window was quietly thrust open, however, and her gasp at the face she saw was one of relief.

"Jan!" she said. "Wh-what is this?"

The non-com grinned sheepishly, and beckoned. He was not in the least used to invading the sanctity of ladies' kitchens thus, but he had an errand—and he had a doglike fidelity to Micaela anyway. He beckoned, and began straightaway to talk in a hoarse whisper, while Kappie De Vries' wife stared at him. At first the stare was one of incredulity, but then it changed to understanding and illumination. But it was a full five minutes before she nodded, gravely, seriously.

"Yes, Jan," she said. "I—will do it!"

THE figure at the window said something unintelligible, that might have been anything from a grunt to a sigh, and vanished as it had come. Micaela stood in her kitchen looking at the place where it had been. Her brow was wrinkled and she bit her lip—but she was trim and smiling again when Kappie came in fifteen minutes later, although a very close observer might have noted that there was something of an edge to the smile.

Kappie, as usual in these times, was in a sour bad temper. He flung his helmet into one chair and himself into another, looking sulky and defiant. Micaela brought him a drink and he gulped it, with nothing but a nod by way of thanks. Micaela, behind him, drew a long breath.

"Well, Mynheer," she began quietly, "and so matters do not go so well, eh? This poor Tim Hogan—it is a shame and a scandal, that, to be sure. You have any news of him, no?"

Kappie put his glass down all at once and twisted his head round to look at his wife. His expression was a strange one.

"Eh?" he said. "What was that, Micaela? You ask questions, do you, about my business? Now let me tell you—"

Micaela waved him down. "In heaven's name, no!" she said. "Have I not listened to enough big talk and grumbling about this business of yours lately? It is bad enough, to be sure, to hear other folk talk of you, Kappie, without having to endure a cry-baby in a uniform, guzzling liquors—"

Kappie's jaw dropped with a click. A swift tide of crimson flooded his brow, and then he went dead white, so that Micaela wondered if he were going to have a fit there and then. He heaved himself out of his chair and whirled on her.

"Ten billion devils!" he said in a whisper. "Wh-what was that you said, Micaela?"

His wife braced herself; it was now or never. "I said," she observed in a voice that shook a little, "that I am a little tired of listening to people laugh, Kappie—and to you, wailing and—and sucking your thumbs like little Piet in the cradle there with a lost bottle. I can stand just so much, my friend, but this is nearly enough. Do you hear me—enough!"

She threw a half-scream into her voice on the last sentence, and Kappie positively recoiled as if someone had hit him in the face. He made gurgling sounds in his throat, and Micaela, almost enjoying herself, let him have it—full-choke, both barrels.

"Yes," she shrilled, "it is not amusing, Mynheer, to be married to a person who is—who is giggled at. To have fat *mevrouws* in the market look at me sideways, pityingly, and talk in whispers behind my back. To see Inspector De Vries, the excellent Inspector De Vries, mocked at by the bazaar— But I could pass all this over, if it were not for you in the house here. You are impossible, Mynheer, a fat booby with neither sense, nor decency, nor—nor brains!" She paused, for the final broadside. "Do you know what is the matter with you, my friend? You are growing old—old, you hear me, old and silly and—and doddering!"

She stopped, panting for breath, and there was a tremendous silence. Kappie De Vries and his wife stood facing each other for perhaps ten seconds—and then Kappie suddenly spun on his heel and was gone. Hatless and gasping, he fled into the dark; and Micaela, after a second's hesitation, flung herself down on a chintz-upholstered couch and cried as if her heart would break.

VI

TIM HOGAN was in the dark, a very smelly and stuffy dark that heaved, and was recognizable as the hold of some species of craft or other at sea.

The blow on his head had been hard enough to keep him unconscious for hours, and when he had come to, had been sick, shaken, and weak, and with his memory

clouded into a blur. Someone who smelt violently of onions had come in with a lantern, looked him over with a grunt, and departed again—and slowly, very slowly Tim began to piece together the shattered fragments of his recollection. The last of them was receiving that note, in the stoep of the hotel.

"Yeah?" he said to himself. "Forgery, huh?" and after a further long period of mental dredging: "Oh, yeah—the damned son!"

Tim Hogan appreciated all at once that in Harold Coleby he was stacked up against something even smarter than he had imagined. He was also uncomfortably aware that a gambler upon his own continued existence was likely to get a very nice price indeed.

He was considering this angle without enthusiasm, when there came the soft pad-pad of feet outside, and the door opened. The man with the lantern appeared again—and after him a personage that made Tim stare. He was used to unlikely people in unlikely places, but this trig, dapper fellow in the naval whites and gold-rimmed glasses was unexpected. Also ominous, Tim Hogans' recent work taken into account.

But the Japanese was cordial enough. He hissed and bowed and showed his teeth enormously, and inquired with bland composure after Tim's health. Tim told him crisply where he could go, and the Jap sighed and shrugged.

"So sorry," he said. "You come with me, please—"

There was little to be said to that request, seeing that the maker of it carried a sweet little flat pistol at his belt, so Tim Hogan staggered to his feet. His head almost touched the deck-beams above him.

"Lead on," he said. "There's going to be hell over this, guy, but don't mind me. I'm just anyone's push-around."

The officer murmured, "So sorry!" again and led the way up a ladder on deck. Tim Hogan discovered that he was on some kind of a fishing boat, wallowing gently in the long swells—but that there was a smart galley alongside, and the lights of a bigger craft shining a quarter-mile away. Tim whistled.

"Visit of state, eh?" he said. "All right, sir, if you're going to get formal about it. Suits me—Washington just eats this sort of thing up. There'll be another international incident in a week—"

HE SPOKE more confidently than he felt, for there was a hint in the presence of this warship hereabouts that could not be disregarded. But for the time being matters were smooth enough; he was conducted aboard the gray-painted, efficient vessel, and a cabin allotted him. A genial navy doctor dressed the cut on his skull, grinning amiably, and slipped a needle in his arm. Tim drifted into profound slumber, and the Jap cruiser headed elsewhere at full speed. A pair of little men in business suits and the inevitable spectacles peered into the cabin, murmured doubtfully, and withdrew into the alleyway, talking in whispers.

"Difficult—" said one. "A big fish."

The other frowned. "He knows too much," he observed, and fell silent.

They went away from there, discussing Harold Coleby and the actions of Inspector De Vries, a subject that seemed to give them a great deal of toothy satisfaction. The cruiser fled north through the night, its radio busy, sparks trailing from its funnels.

Right then, away to the north-eastward Harold Coleby was enjoying himself. He

had just left the crazy-looking junk, and was sitting in the rear-cockpit of a fast seaplane, four thousand feet aloft in the darkness. A pair of earphones were clamped to his head, and he was listening intently to some stuff that was coming out of the ether. Whatever it was, it seemed to please him immensely, for he slapped his knee under the flying-suit and pursed his lips into a little whistle that twisted the dinky mustache to a perky angle. The pilot, hunched forward over the controls, gave the pursuit ship the gun, and at four miles every minute Harold Coleby was transported under the stars.

He had a singular amount of pull, this renegade Britisher, and he knew how to use it. He knew, too, that after the whisper that had just trickled into his ears, his stock was soaring with those polite little men in the sack suits, and that his reward—the comfortable, financial end of it—was safe as the Bank of Japan. There was the gratifying sensation of having his own back, too, over that blustering Dutchman. Coleby snuggled down in the cockpit and went to sleep happily, to awake somewhere in the early hours as the seaplane dipped toward a searchlight's pencil, stabbing upward from the dark water.

In ten minutes he was aboard the cruiser, all smiles and bows with the Japs, and fairly bubbling with the news the radio had sung.

VII

THAT night had been a lurid one in Makassar.

Sergeant Jan, sitting in his tiny office, nervously awaiting the result of his stratagem, heard a sound outside, the gust of hoarse breathing and the thud of hurried feet. He was only half out of his chair when Kappie De Vries entered those premises.

He came in with the impact of a tornado, stopped with a jerk on the threshold, took a single red glance at Jan, and pounced at him. For the first time in their mutual acquaintance Kappie De Vries laid violent hands on his sergeant; he took him by the bull's throat and shook him, while the lamplight gleamed upon his bald-shaven, dome-like head, and his blue eyes, the hard sapphires criminals had learned to dread, glittered with a maniac light.

"God!" he hissed. "I am going to kill you, I think."

Jan was a powerful fellow, as powerful as Kappie himself, and he wrenched himself free and staggered back. He figured this was the pay-off, the end, that Kappie had somehow surprised his secret out of Micaela.

"Na," he gasped. "You do not act so with me, Mynheer. I have been in error, maybe, but there is no one living touches Jan Cornelis thus. Enough is enough."

Kappie De Vries had fallen back, too, and was staring at him with the expression of a sleepwalker suddenly aroused from his coma. A look of complete bafflement and horror took possession of his livid features.

"Jan!" he said in a cracked whisper. "Almighty, Jan! I—I struck you!"

FOR a moment Jan thought his superior was going mad, right there on the office floor. Kappie certainly looked like it, with his blazing eyes and tense, keyed-up muscles. He goggled at Jan for another instant—and then he had flung away, into his own inner compartment, and was tearing the telephone from its hook.

Jan, open-mouthed, heard him howling instructions at the long-distance operator, to get him Batavia and the Governor of the Indies in person, instantly, or die the death.

There was a certain familiarity about the action, somehow, and Jan's taut visage relaxed into the shadow of a smile.

It seemed to him, almost, as if his—and Micaela's—plan might have worked.

Two minutes later, and he was sure of it. Kappie bawled for him.

"Listen to me," he rasped. "I waste no words over—over what has happened, Jan. Afterward we shall settle that matter between us. But now," his voice jumped a clear octave into the old, resonant, blaring tone, "I have work on hand. They laugh at me, it appears—at me, do you hear? They take my friends out of hotels, and almighty, talk to my wife," he gulped and went crimson again, "and they say Kappie De Vries is done, on the way out.

"Very good, Jan—very good indeed. We show them, you and I. We show them who laughs. Stand by for orders, old friend—I have been weak, maybe, foolish, even; but now attend to me, and we shall see who laughs last!"

He spat the words out, thickly and in haste, and tore a cigar from his pocket. With it cocked at an angle between his teeth he began to snap out orders and instructions right and left, to snatch the telephone, to talk torridly to men he had dragged from their homes, from dinner-parties, from anywhere. The military commandant, the naval captain in charge of the base, the port officer—he had a dozen of them one after the other, while Jan stood at attention, drinking it all in. This was the old Kappie again, only more so—something had touched him off, and Sergeant Jan knew extremely well what it was.

Then the phone rang again, and the operator gave him Batavia. Kappie threw his cigar away, winked at Jan, and applied himself to the mouthpiece.

What he said to the Governor took maybe ten minutes, and by all appearances the old gentleman at the other end commenced by throwing a conniption fit. Kappie grew eloquent, persuasive, crisp, short, testy, and finally fairly blasphemous. He was not apologizing, nor asking permission, nor even stating what he was about to do. He was telling His Excellency the Governor what *he* had to do, and do immediately. and he might have been addressing the youngest police recruit out from home. And then the Governor appeared to weaken, to ask a question. Kappie blasted his reply.

"Do I think it necessary? Excellency, I beg you do not talk like a cheese—a very-damned Edam cheese! It is necessary, and it must be done at once, now, immediately, tonight. You comprehend, Excellency? It will be done? You will do it yourself? Within an hour? Very good, Excellency, and I bid you good-by. I report to you when this is over—"

HE SLAMMED the instrument down and turned to the stricken Jan.

"There!" he said. "That is the way to treat them, these pompous old ducks in the silk breeches. Now, listen again! A while ago I lost my temper with some folks hereabouts and resigned—you remember? It was a little foolish, that, maybe; but now there is something else. I am tonight being dismissed from the service for incompetency, by the Governor himself. He is writing the dismissal now, and in no time it is public. By midnight, it is all over town—Kappie De Vries is disgraced, thrown out, ruined. His nerve is gone, he is an old man, and hopeless, pitiful." He bit at his cheroot again and fixed Jan with a basilisk eye. "Now what, my friend, does Kappie De Vries do, in such a case? This poor, crazy, defeated Inspector of Police? He does not live, to be sure! *Na,* he does not live at all."

Jan made an odd sound, as of objection, but Kappie obliterated him with a thick forefinger.

"Go you now," he said in a low voice, "and find me a corpse. A good, stout, well-nourished corpse—by the grace of God there is that *schellum* from Australia, the one that died from too much schnapps and too many women, in the morgue this moment. Go get him, and a suit of my uniform. Attend to his face, and blow

his brains out with a pistol. Throw him in the harbor."

He went on for a full minute, dropping his tone to a whisper, while Jan nodded. Then he glanced at the clock, jumped up, stuck a pistol and a roll of notes in his pocket, and started for the door. Jan stopped him, actually grasping his arm.

"Where do you go, Mynheer?" he demanded without ceremony.

Kappie reared back like a gigantic snake. "Where do I go?" he snarled. "I go to settle this matter, to release Tim Hogan, to kill Coleby."

"I go with you, Mynheer," said Jan firmly, but Kappie tore his arm away.

"You will do what you are told!" he roared. *"Goedverdom,* do I have to argue with—with underlings? Remain in here, and look after matters. I am dead, remember, and there will have to be some excellent lying done upon that subject. I am depending on you for that, Jan, remember. By dawn, everyone must know that this Kappie De Vries has made away with himself—the poor fool! See to it, see to it—"

And he was gone, with a slam of the door. Jan stood looking after him for a moment, as if irresolute, and with a curious, contented grin spreading over his leathery chops. Then he grunted, and went to the telephone. The number he called was that of Makassar's morgue.

FOR the next hours, there were some very peculiar developments in the sleeping city. As for instance, a stirring, a quiet movement up in the barracks; the military commandant paraded his monstrous nose, got his officers together, and gave certain instructions. The navy men down at the base, stout Dutch sailors, were summoned to their headquarters, and arms unobtrusively served out. A tough-looking young pilot came out of an inner office, went down to the slip, and stood watching mechanics working over his ship, the latest in low-wing scouting planes. And in Kappie's bungalow, Micaela, oddly, was awake and watchful by three in the morning. Somebody—Kappie's pet spy, Ali, she thought—had flicked a folded paper in the door at midnight, and vanished; and Micaela, reading it, had brightened and nodded happily to herself. All was well again on the Makassar front. Her incredible man was hitting on all six, and it spelt trouble for someone.

In that inner office down by the harbor, Kappie De Vries was conferring with his colleagues. As usual, he was doing most of the talking, and the military commandant, the port captain, and a queer, beetle-browed civilian listened. Kappie held a flimsy that had just come over the navy's wireless.

"Ja!" he said. "Here it is—the old boy at Batavia has done himself well, too. Kappie De Vries is unstuck, poof, just like that. Jan has this as well, Mynheers, and by now it is in the bazaar—"

The commandant reached out a long arm and opened the window behind him. "Listen!" he said, cocking his head on one side.

The four men strained their ears. They were all of them experts at night-noises, and pretty much psychic when it came to mobs. The faint, almost inaudible murmur that came from the crowded rabbit-warrens of the bazaar had jumped a tone or two; a yell came clear across the harbor water. Kappie looked round and chuckled.

"In half an hour," he said, "they find me, floating down by the coal-dock. It is a pity, to be sure, that some steamer's screw has interfered with my face a little, but there is enough there to identify me, eh? Oh, certainly, there will be enough!"

He broke off, for the commandant had risen, buckling on his belt.

"I must go," he said. "Once more we shall have another of your explosions, Kappie. It is a crazy business, this—but we can look after it, I imagine. And in the meantime," he held out a lean hand,

and his eyes were glowing, "I do not know what lunacies you are about to commit, old friend, but good fortune! And remember, kill one of the devils for me!"

HE STALKED out, and Kappie turned to the dark civilian. This gentleman was something of a curio in himself, being the head of the Dutchmen's hush-hush department, a sort of human clearing-house for miscellaneous information, a sitter in darkness, a listener to whispers out of the air. He was the opposite number to that bearded Frenchman up in Saigon there, and he knew things which in any other day would have been credited to witchcraft—

He knew, for instance, all about those brown little gentlemen in the business suits on the cruiser. Knew the cruiser's name, and approximately where she was at that hour. He knew that Harold Coleby had fled from Saigon in a junk—and that he was no longer on that junk. He was waiting, as a matter of fact, to hear what a hurtling French destroyer was getting out of the junk's paralyzed skipper, by methods French, ingenious, and painful. The radio in the corner of the room buzzed softly, and he jotted down its strings of incomprehensible letters. Then he leant back and smiled.

"So!" he said to Kappie. "Taken off by a Japanese plane, six hours ago. I am willing to bet you a guilder, Mynheer Inspector, that he is there, or thereabouts." He stabbed at the big map on the table before him. "And another guilder, too, that you will find the Mynheer Hogan there as well. If he is alive—"

He added the last words with his pale, stiff, smile, as if mirth hurt him; but Kappie De Vries was not watching him. He had picked up a flying helmet from the desk, crammed it down over his ears, and was at the door.

"I thank you, Schultz," he said curtly. "I thank you heartily—"

And with a wave of the hand he was gone. Down at the other end of the harbor, a prowling police boat fished something grisly out of the water. Jan was in the stern-sheets, and the two oarsmen said nothing, by way of surprise or otherwise. They sculled rapidly to shore, and laid their treasure out in full view on a wharf.

Jan cut loose then — from the uproar he made, it might have been his own brother lying there in the soaked khaki uniform. He raved to the skies, and a couple of slinking dock-rats peered out from between the buildings. They stared at the corpse, jabbered excitedly, and vanished—

A plane thundered down the smooth water and heaved itself aloft, invisible against the night sky. Jan stood gazing after it, whispering to himself Mark Antony's "Mischief, thou art afoot—take thou what course thou wilt!" or some Dutch version of the same.

He swung round suddenly and glanced at the dark city. Hubbub had broken loose within a hundred yards of him; shouts and squalls and triumphant hootings. There was the clear, reverberating echo of a shot. Jan grinned. He was beginning to come alive again, and to enjoy himself immensely. Mischief was afoot, all right.

VIII

AT five o'clock in the morning, just as the dawn-wind began to blow over the Sulu Sea, the Japanese operator high up in the cruiser's radio-room took in a message. It was short, concise, and dramatic, and for a change, in clear. The Jap regarded it open-mouthed for an instant—he was a very intelligent young fellow—and then rushed it below.

In the wardroom, Harold Coleby was still exchanging congratulations with the toothy little men over that previous message.

"Told you so, gentlemen!" he chuckled.

"Told you I'd make it interesting for him—"

"Indeed yes, Coleby-*san*," they said, with gratified hissings and grins. "It is very nice that he is dismissed, and there are no international troubles, eh? Very nice."

The radio-man laid his few words before them, and they stopped. Coleby scratched his head and swore quietly, and the Japanese chattered among themselves.

"Well," Coleby said, "you certainly got results for your money, anyway. I never undertook to wipe the fat slob out altogether—wish I had now, and charged you double!"

They continued to discuss the death of Kappie De Vries, and to speculate what manner of man the Dutch might send down to Makassar to replace him. And behind several steel bulkheads, down in the cruiser's innards, Tim Hogan, newspaperman, went on wondering just what was going to be his fate.

He was awake and clear-headed now after his slumber, although the drug was still thick about his mouth. The cabin in which he was locked was comfortable enough, after a matting-and-kalsomine fashion, but it was nevertheless locked, and Tim Hogan had the notion he could hear a sentry pacing the alleyway outside.

He rolled off the couch, shook himself, and began moodily to investigate his surroundings. For once in his life he was uncertain—more than a little uncertain—about what came next. The power of the press was a mighty one, and its arm long; but he knew these bland, grinning, hissing captors of his, and the knowledge was no comfortable possession.

And then there were voices outside, and the lock clicked. Harold Coleby slipped into the cabin.

He was smiling under the toothbrush mustache, and he left the door ajar with the Jap marine in full view.

"Damned shame, old man," he said airily. "But you rather asked for it, y'know. Old nose got too long and all that."

Tim Hogan grinned at him. "I wouldn't worry about my nose, fellow," he replied. "You'll have plenty of other little troubles in a bit. They're wise to you, down yonder."

COLEBY leant against that bulkhead. "I'm not losing any sleep over the Dutchmen, if that's what you mean," he said. "Look at that, won't you?"

He held out the radio message and Tim Hogan ran an eye over it. "Ah!" was all he said as his brain reached out and handled the scrap of news expertly. Then he sat down abruptly on the couch and stroked his chin.

"Good Lord!" he muttered. "Kappie—dead? I—I don't believe it."

He was acting, but Harold Coleby failed to observe that. "Oh, it's all right," he announced. "He's identified, and so on—his own wife says it's him. We checked that, ten minutes ago. So that's what happens to fools that try and buck me, Hogan, d'ye see? He got fired by his own crowd and blew his silly brains out. Now, there's just you."

He rubbed his hands briskly, the long white fingers interlacing. Tim Hogan knew right well that he was looking at one of those mental freaks to whom a killing more or less was nothing, a little matter like lighting a cigarette. He knew that the slim rat with the pale-blue eyes and the absurd mustache on his lip was dangerous as any five-hundred-pound gorilla; more, that his mind was already made up beyond any talk or arguing. But Tim Hogan had not got where he was without essential guts. He shrugged.

"Sure," he said. "There's just me. What about it?"

It seemed to annoy Coleby, somehow, that piece of bravado, for he dropped his light manner. A flush crept up his cheek.

"You'll find out," he said shortly. "And I don't think you'll like it, either, Hogan.

They've ways of making it unpleasant for a chap, our little friends have—and they haven't much more use for nosy Yanks than I have. Turn that over in your mind for awhile. I'm going to have a chin with them now—and we'll be seeing you!"

He went out, past the impassive, watchful marine, and the lock snapped again. Tim Hogan remained seated where he was, thinking furiously. His trained news-sense told him instinctively that there was something phony about his report of Kappie's suicide — and anyway, the big Dutchman was the last person in the world to go out that way. Even if he had been considerably disgruntled the last time Tim had heard of him.

No, he reflected, it didn't render, it didn't render at all. But in the meantime, there was a situation here that was not to be neglected. Harold Coleby was a four-flusher in plenty of ways, but this time, no. Tim could imagine the views of those slant-eyed men upon his case.

He glanced at the watch on his wrist. It was six o'clock in the morning, and daylight, he observed with a kind of surprise, was streaming dully through the heavy greenish glass of his porthole. Tim Hogan wondered, almost idly, whether he was going to see that daylight fade.

UP ABOVE, high, very high in the sunlit air, Kappie De Vries spoke into his telephone, his voice hoarse with fifteen thousand feet of altitude.

"Port!" he called suddenly. "Port ninety—"

The tough-looking young pilot nodded, and the plane's nose swung. Kappie peered through glasses into the pearly slather that carpeted the sea far below. He could see something there, something that looked like a tiny toy vessel, with a streamer of white wake threadwise behind it. The glass made out the superstructure, the thin matchsticks of guns—

"Down!" said Kappie. "Slowly."

Twenty minutes later the seaplane rocked on the oily swell, a lonely speck in the middle of infinity. Kappie had cautiously scrambled forward, and was poring over a chart with the pilot.

"Ja," he said after a while. "She runs northeast—and there is no land she can touch before, let us see, midnight. Very good, Hans—very good. And now, if you please, we breakfast. You have the supplies, eh?"

Hans grinned and drew from under the pilot's seat a capacious box, containing an assortment of the ferocious tidbits and refections Dutchmen build into a meal. There was a large black bottle as well, and the Sulu Sea witnessed the novel spectacle of a couple of men on a flimsy contraption, eating and drinking as if they had not a care in the world. Finally Kappie lit one of his terrific cigars.

"Now," he said, "we make a plan, eh?"

The pilot stared at him. "But I thought —I thought, Mynheer," he stammered, "that you had a plan already—um, prepared."

Kappie chuckled, his hard eyes glittering like a seagull's.

"Then you thought wrong, Hans my friend," he observed. "How in the name of ten billion devils do I get on that very-damned cruiser, eh? Tell me that—"

He fell silent, chewing savagely at his cigar and watching the waves slip past. Hans said a number of things to himself on the general subject of crazy men.

SOMEBODY else was also thus engaged, and that was the Governor of the Indies, far away in Batavia. He was just in receipt of a report of the early morning's happenings in Makassar city, and his comments, instead of being suppressed, were loud and lurid. Once again, the bad boys had figured that now was the time for a little amusement and general licence. There was a body in the morgue—behind locked doors, true, but there were plenty that had caught a glimpse of it—and the policemen had sul-

len, shocked faces. The great Sergeant Jan was actually distraught, it appeared, jolted clean off his grim composure. Surely, said the bad boys, this time there would be no slip-up, no error.

They were mistaken. They found the police in the background, to be sure, withdrawn to posts around Headquarters, armed and touchy as hornets. But they also found themselves taken in hand by the military—with a mahogany-nosed old jungle-fighter in charge—and a business-like detachment of sailors, with cutlass, pistol, and hard, hard fist. It was all very puzzling to the bad boys in the bazaar, running and scurrying for cover. It was not funny; decidedly it was not funny, this business.

The commandant, taking an early breather, passed a lean hand across his brow and looked up into the skies.

"Now I wonder," he remarked to Schultz the intelligence man, "I wonder what that crazy old animal may be up to at this moment."

It was a wistful remark, with almost a note of prayer in it; and Micaela, sleepless in her house, and playing the game of a tragic widow for all it was worth, echoed it heartily. They went to a lot of trouble about him, these friends of Kappie De Vries.

IX

THE sun rose into the zenith over the empty Sulu Sea, and slipped westward toward its decline. The gray-painted cruiser continued to proceed on her course at easy speed—and Harold Coleby and the Japanese gentlemen debated furiously what to do with Tim Hogan.

They were beginning to grow a trifle circumspect about him, these little diplomats. It was borne in on them, thinking it over, that to buck the Dutchmen was one thing, but to buck the press of the world was very much another. They remembered, a little anxiously, that Tim was after all a world-figure, in his way.

"It was an error," they began to hint. "Release him in the Philippines, with an apology."

Harold Coleby scoffed. "Rot!" he said. "Rot, gentlemen, and you know it. Washington might swallow a mouthful of pretty words, maybe—but Times Square certainly wouldn't. Hogan wouldn't, either, and between them they'd make you look damned foolish, let me assure you. It's a question of face, and I'm sure you understand that."

They did. They looked at one another, and twiddled their fingers and wriggled, and there was no more hissing and the display of teeth. Coleby drove his point home.

"Question is, d'you want a stink or not? If you don't, you know what to do. *Spurlos versenkt,* eh? It's still as expressive as it was twenty years ago, that; sunk without trace, and dead men tell no tales, and so forth. It's strictly up to you, though. I'm not dealing in that kind of thing, myself."

He fell silent, watching them, but they were still hesitant, doubtful. Finally, they sent him away, politely, and fell to mulling the affair over in their own tongue. They had a well-marked dose of cold feet on the subject of Tim Hogan and his liquidation, and Tim would have been supremely tickled to hear them.

Harold Coleby went topside, and leant on the rail, gnawing his knuckles. He had the best of all reasons for wanting Tim Hogan out of the way, for he knew well enough that Tim was plenty more than a mere reporter hereabouts. That lean Yankee knew things—far too many things—and Coleby came shrewdly near the truth as to his relations with the men in those European chancelleries.

But it was a fact, and Coleby admitted it ruefully, that killing was not his meat. He had, in truth, a sort of feminine shrinking from the committal of violence. He got other people to attend to that department—always.

So he paced the deck and fretted, while the Japanese, after their fashion, kept maddeningly silent and polite; and all the afternoon the cruiser proceeded on her way. Tim Hogan, in the cabin below, was lost in thought. He was considering Kappie, and wondering, like the commandant, just what that singular individual might be up to at the time. He did not believe one word of the tale of Kappie's suicide. It rang phony as hell, that yarn, Tim told himself.

Day slipped by, into afternoon, and then into evening. Harold Coleby, bit by bit, discovered that the Japanese were avoiding him. He had the uncomfortable notion that they had come to a decision, and that he was not to share it. They were distressingly genial still, to be sure, but merely shrugged and looked awkward when he strove to suggest direct action. And finally, for the first time in his life, Coleby formed a murderous resolution.

It had him twittering and wet-handed, but it was formed, none the less. He went to his quarters, took a flat automatic pistol from his scanty belongings, and stood looking down at it in his palms. He was still engaged thus when something made him glance up, listening.

The steady thrill of the cruiser's engines was slowing. It stopped, and from the deck above came the running of feet and shrill orders. Coleby put the gun in his pocket and ran out.

Dusk had fallen on the sea. A group of the ship's officers stood on the bridge, glasses at their eyes, peering ahead into the gloom. On the starboard side, a brisk petty officer was in command of a boat's crew, standing by. As Coleby watched, the davits were swung out—and there was an exclamation from above. Far out in the evening mist, something glimmered, faded, and then broke out in a crimson burst of fire. It was low down on the water, and even Coleby placed it for what it was. A distress-signal, and the Japs were answering it. The stocky little first lieutenant took an order from the captain and ran down the ladder. The boat dropped noiselessly into the water, its oars spraddling.

"A plane," said someone. "One of ours, it may be."

THE ship hummed with disciplined excitement—and a cold feeling suddenly took possession of Harold Coleby. Every eye was on the boat and the flare, a few hundred yards distant now. He hesitated for a second, and then dived below again, his teeth set in a mirthless grin.

Hans the pilot was sitting in his cockpit when the boat closed. He looked suitably annoyed, and explained with a deal of volubility and profane swearing that these very-damned, so-and-so new engines were the devil, and that the mechanics back at his Borneo base—he lied with fluency, this Hans, having been rehearsed all afternoon—were the devil's children. *Ja*, he would have to ask these so-fortunately-appearing mynheers for a little assistance.

They understood some of it, and threw him a line. Hans secured it, with a neat half-hitch, and slowly the boat towed him toward the cruiser. A searchlight played on the scene, and every man-jack of both watches lined the rail, pop-eyed. And on the lee side of the ship, in the deep shadow, something half-arose from the water, and flung a rope. It had a weight on the end of it, this rope, and it twisted around the projection of the anchor-fluke in the bows. Nobody saw it, or heard it, or the grunt and heave that followed.

Below, Harold Coleby was in the alleyway, arguing patiently with the sentry outside Tim's door. He had his orders, and was dubious for a while, so that Coleby nearly took a chance on putting a bullet in him as a persuader. But finally he grunted acquiescence, and unlocked the door. Harold Coleby entered on tip-toe.

Tim Hogan rose at sight of him—rose quickly, because there was no doubt about the expression on his narrow, pallid face.

"Huh?" he said. "Now what, fellow? Funny business, eh?"

Coleby snarled at him, a mere wordless jumble of noises in his throat. He whipped the gun out of his pocket, mouthing—and Tim Hogan dived, blindly at his knees. The shot echoed in the steel-walled cabin, and the pair rolled over and over on the floor, with Coleby frantically maneuvering for another attempt, and Tim cursing in good honest New York. The sentry, after a second's dumfounded staring, ran in; and something hit him tremendously from behind, so that he dropped, a limp heap, on top of the struggling figures.

Coleby tore a hand free, with the pistol in it, and there was another reverberating report. But it did not come from the little automatic. It came from the heavy blued weapon in the grip of the figure, the naked, greased figure in the doorway—and that, to be precise, was the end of Harold Coleby. He died then and there, before Tim Hogan had time to do more than get to his knees and gape.

Kappie De Vries gave him no opportunity for gaping. He slammed the steel door behind him and darted for the porthole.

"Almighty!" he said, and Tim swore afterwards that there was a chuckle in his voice. "Little man, can you swim?"

He wrenched the porthole open with one hand, and the other closed on Tim Hogan's shoulder. An instant, and Tim found himself thrust bodily through the aperture. He dropped with a splash into cold water, and came up, choking and gasping.

Kappie had him by the arm again. He fairly dragged him, moving like a torpedo, through the lapping waves under the cruiser's side. Tim had a hazy notion of blinding lights and chattering, suddenly panic-stricken little men running and tumbling over one another on a gangway, and of Hans the pilot, upright in his cockpit, slashing at a rope. Somebody squibbed off another pistol shot somewhere, and the chattering altered to a yell; but it was all drowned out by the mighty roar of Hans' engines, as Kappie clambered on a wing, hauling Tim by the scruff after him.

"Enough!" he gasped. "Let us go!"

Hans slammed his throttle wide, and the seaplane fled away from the ship's side into the dark. For a moment there was a paralyzed silence on that Japanese man-of-war — and that one moment was enough. By the time its agonized officers had got an anti-aircraft gun loose and manned, the plane was three miles away in the night, and rising easily. The Japs looked at one another as their gun banged futilely; and then they gave it up, and went down to investigate that cabin, and what lay there on the floor.

Tim Hogan, packed in the rear cockpit with the dripping Kappie, was silent and spell-bound. But he caught a glimpse of Kappie's face, illuminated by the faint light from the instrument-board — and Kappie had his head flung back, and his mouth was open, and Tim knew with a species of shudder that Kappie De Vries was laughing; roaring with Homeric, uncontrollable laughter, two thousand feet over the Sulu Sea.

X

MAKASSAR slept—some of it, uneasily, and as if awaiting what might be coming next.

Down in the bazaar, the troops patrolled still, routing out cowering figures from dark corners and holes. In the morgue, carefully guarded, that figure in the stained and crumpled uniform still lay on its slab passively, incurious of the part it played Here and there, people still talked behind closed shutters, in whispers; but all the laughter was gone. It had been swiftly and competently kicked out of the humorists, whether Kappie De Vries was still extant or not. Makassar was not snickering now—much.

There were half a dozen people, in all that crowded port, who were tense with

anxiety, that early morning. Micaela, in her bungalow, had been left alone at last, free from the consolations and condolences that had been so hard to take. The military commandant, thin and gnarled as a tree-trunk, and the port-captain fidgeted together down by the harbor. Sergeant Jan, strain written all over him, crouched under the lee of a warehouse, unseen, but not twenty yards from them. And they all looked upwards at the dark sky, thirsty for a sound.

It came at length, the faintest whisper. Jan heard it first, and leapt to his feet with a stifled oath. He ran out on the stringer of the dock, and the commandant and captain ran with him. They gaped open-mouthed upwards, and the sound grew louder. A searchlight snapped on from the air-base, illuminating the cleared stretch of smooth water. And Micaela left young Piet her son to his own devices, and fled headlong toward the scene.

Like a great gleaming insect the sea-plane swooped down, turned, touched the surface, and came bumping and skittering along to the anchorage. There was a boat out by now, with the three men tumbling over one another in it. They saw the ship drift to a stop, and a broad, tight-mouthed face looking at them from the rear cockpit. The commandant let out a yell that might have been heard in Singapore.

"Almighty! The very-damned old crocodile!"

They fairly dragged Kappie out of his seat, and Tim Hogan with him. They sculled ashore, in some manner known only to themselves. There was a figure, tip-toe on the wharf, and Kappie De Vries flung himself ashore to get at it. He was bubbling all over with satisfaction as he led Micaela to them a few minutes later.

"And now," he said, "Mynheers, a little news, eh? It is in good order, this town? I do not hear any noise—"

The commandant laughed. *"Na,"* he said. "You do not hear any noise, Kappie. They are good, these little *schellums*—now that we have attended to them a little. They are quiet as mice, *goedverdom!*"

He glared around him, twirling his mustaches. In fact, Makassar was still, still as the grave. But as the six figures walked from the dock and into the silent streets, there was a sound. It came from the throats that belonged to a hundred pairs of eyes, and it was a sigh; a sigh of pure terror. There are plenty of ghosts in the Malay scheme of things—and Makassar saw one that night, a ghost that strode, erect and triumphant, along its familiar walks.

They looked, and gasped, and withdrew hastily. Because there was after all something about this ghost that gave them food for thought, for intense and foreboding thought. This ghost was laughing—laughing until the walls and alleys rang again—and there was a note in the laughter Makassar could have done very well without. Kappie De Vries was laughing last, and that was a shocking and an ominous sound.

ONE GOOD TURN DESERVES ANOTHER

By JAMES B. HENDRYX

Author of
"Bear Paws," "Back of Beyond," etc.

A BURST of laughter from a stud table across the room attracted the attention of the little group of sourdoughs who stood at the Tivoli bar, in Dawson. Deck in hand, the dealer had halted the distribution of the cards with three up and a pot in the center of the table to relate a doubtful story to which the half-dozen chechakos who were playing listened in wrapt attention. At its conclusion all roared with laughter, and the deal proceeded.

"Huh," grunted Swiftwater Bill, "ain't that jest like a bunch of damn chechakos! Lookin' at 'em a man would think a stud game was a social event instead of a business enterprise.

Moosehide Charlie grinned. "That's Tom Stiles—him that's dealin'. He's a chechako, all right, an' he seems to stand ace-high with all the other chechakos. But they tell me he takes 'em reg'lar at stud an' draw poker. They say he'd ruther play than eat. Seems to have plenty of dust, too."

"Yeah," agreed Camillo Bill, "but how'd he git it?"

"He ain't so damn pop'lar down on the Porcupine," supplemented Old Bettles, dean of the sourdoughs. "Me an' Camillo was talkin' to Dan Cadzow, the trader at Rampart House, not long ago down to Fortymile, an' he kind of spilt us an earful."

Burr MacShane nodded. "I heard, up to Circle City, that he'd doublecrossed Cadzow on a grubstake deal, an' likewise that he'd beat Old Pop Rooney out of his claim."

Some People Has All the Luck—But You Want to Remember There's a Damn Sight of Difference in Luck.

"Yeah," agreed Camillo Bill, "an' accordin' to Cadzow, that ain't the half of it. There was an old-timer named Paddy Dorgan located up the Porcupine jest above where the Crow runs in, that had done pretty good fer himself snipin' the bars an' scoopin' out shallow shafts fer years. Cadzow figgers he must of had somewheres around thirty er forty thousan' in dust cached somewheres. This Spring Dorgan disappeared, an' not long after he was missed this here Tom Stiles an' his pardner, a Dutchman name of Dietz, busted up an' Stiles pulled out of the Porcupine country. An' he's be'n spendin' plenty of dust ever sence."

"It might be the dust he got out of the claims he beat Cadzow an' Rooney out of," reminded MacShane.

"No, they never worked the one Cadzow claims they beat him out of," replied Camillo. "An' Dietz is still on Pop Rooney's claim. They didn't have time to take no hell of a lot of dust out of it before Stiles come away."

"Accordin' to Cadzow," Bettles said, "everyone on the Porcupine figgers Stiles an' Dietz knocked Dorgan off an' robbed his cache. Cadzow stopped in at the Forty-mile detachment an' told the inspector about it, an' he sent a constable back with him to look around up there."

"H-u-u-m, thirty er forty thousan', eh?" said Black John Smith, who was in Dawson on one of his periodic trips to exchange gold dust from Halfaday Creek for bills. "The amount is worth contemplatin'. It would be a damn shame if a venture like that was got away with. It savors strongly of underhandedness. Does Stiles know the police is investigatin' the incident?"

"YEAH, he knows it," replied Camillo Bill. "It was three, four weeks ago Cadzow an' the constable hit back fer the Porcupine country, an' a couple of days later I was standin' here at the bar, an' Stiles an' some other chechako was here, too, an' Jake Simms come in an' told me he jest come upriver from Eagle an' he met Cadzow an' the constable goin' down river to check up on a fella named Dutch Dietz who was suspected of knowin' somethin' about a murder up there. I seen that Stiles was listenin' an' watched him out of the tail of my eye. He went kind of white, at first, an' then throw'd three, four drinks into him without lettin' on he'd heard anything. He's still here, so I guess he figgers Dietz won't squawk, an' the constable won't be able to locate Dorgan's corpse. Anyhow, he don't seem to be worried none," he added as, following a fresh burst of laughter from the stud players, Stiles rapped on the table and loudly ordered a round of drinks.

"He shore makes a good fella of himself amongst them damn chechakos, even if he does rake their chips acrost the table," opined Moosehide.

"Wonder what kind of a fella this Dietz is?" speculated Black John.

"Jest another damn chechako," Bettles replied. "Accordin' to Cadzow he ain't got neither the brains nor the guts that Stiles has. He can't even write writin'. Draws his letters with a lead pencil, like kids does. An' Cadzow says damn near every word is spelt wrong. He knows, 'cause sometimes Dietz fetches a list of supplies to the tradin' post. He figgers if Dorgan was knocked off it would be Stiles done it—with Dietz jest trailin' along."

"The hell of it is it ain't only the damn chechakos he's makin' a good fella of himself with," observed Burr MacShane. "He shore is playin' up to Old Bill Rodney's gal."

"Yeah—she's .a scatter-brain!" exclaimed Camillo Bill. "She ain't got the sense Old Bill had—by a damn sight! Er she'd never fall fer a rank chechako like Stiles—'specially after she'd got a look at them eyes. I never seen a man yet with them cold, pale, fishy eyes that I'd trust around the first bend of a crick."

"Well, you gotta remember, Camillo, she ain't as old as Bill was," reminded Bettles.

"This here Stiles ain't a bad lookin' fella, barrin' mebbe his eyes. An' he's got plenty of dust, an' spends it free. Margy's young yet. She's damn good lookin', too—an' she likes a good time."

"It ain't her looks Stiles gives a damn about," growled Swiftwater Bill. It's Old Bill's dust—you kin bet on that! Margy'll come twenty-one next week, an' the bank's guardeenship'll expire an 'they'll turn over Bill's dust to her. Stiles knows all about that; don't never think he don't. An' he knows that what she'll have then'll make what he got out of Dorgan's cache look like chicken feed! That's what's holdin' him here in the face of that investigation. He's takin' a chanct that that constable won't turn up nothin' on the Porcupine till after Margy gits her money."

"Yeah," Camillo agreed, "an' the way he's rushin' her, I'm expectin' any day to hear they're married."

"An' when they are," seconded Bettles, "he'll hit fer the outside as fast as God'll let him—an' take her an' Old Bill's money along with him!"

"An'," added Burr MacShane, "take it, with a girl like Margy that ain't never lived nowheres but here, without no friends down in the States, an' everything strange to her—it ain't hard to figger what'll happen. An' the hell of it is she'll be twenty-one by then, an' there ain't a damn thing anyone kin do about it. Ain't that so, John?"

BLACK JOHN nodded. "Yeah," he replied thoughtfully. "Anyone is in a hell of a fix when they ain't got no friends. I was thinkin' about a fella, one time, down on Birch Crick."

"I figgered," said Moosehide Charlie, "that Margy aimed to marry young Joe Emerson. He's a good kid, an' more her own age. But it looks like this damn Stiles had beat his time."

"Yeah, an' it's too bad," opined Camillo Bill. "If he'd git Margy they could put in a flume an' git water onto that inland claim of Joe's on Quartz Crick. That would be a damn good proposition if they could git water to it. An' that's the way Old Bill would liked to had his money used. By God, Bill was a minin' man!"

"Joe, he'll prob'ly git his flume whether he gits Margy er not," said MacShane. "Trouble is, the financin' 'll come mighty high."

"If he don't git Margy, the chances is he won't give a damn about no flume," opined Bettles. "She's all he thinks about."

Black John ordered a round of drinks. "I rec'lect," he said, "when Old Bill's wife died. It was back in ninety-five—on Birch Crick."

"Ninety-six," corrected Bettles. "It was right after that snow-slide buried them Siwashes on Peabody. The slide come in December, an' Bill's wife died in January, about a month after."

"Guess yer right," Black John admitted. "Anyway, it was that winter. Old Bill, he shore done me a good turn, onct—him an' his wife. It was in the matter of a U. S. marshal that come snoopin' along Birch Crick on the trail of someone he claimed had held up a major an' three common soldiers down around Fort Gibbon, er somewheres like that, an' robbed 'em of the army payroll."

"Did he ketch the damn miscreant?"

grinned Bettles, as the other sourdoughs chuckled.

"Not if I remember right, he didn't," Black John replied gravely. "As I rec'lect the incident, this fella had be'n travelin' fast an' light to keep ahead of this marshal, an' he come to Old Bill's an' stopped in fer a rest, an' a bite to eat. Bill's wife was doin' a washin' that day, an' Bill goes out fer a couple more pails of water when he

seen this marshal comin' up the crick. He hustles back an' tells the fella to curl up on the floor at the corner of the bunk, an' grabs up a big armful of dirty clothes an' throws on top of him. The marshal comes along an' Bill invites him in, cordial. It's pretty steamy in the cabin, what with a tub of water b'ilin' on the stove, an' Bill's wife up to her elbows in suds in another one. The marshal he stands jest inside the door an' asks a lot of questions to which Bill gives him certain answers. There's a young girl there—Bill's girl—an' seems like she's jest a-bustin' to blat out evidence sort of contrary to what Bill's be'n tellin'. But every time she opens her mouth her ma starts talkin' fast, an' sets her to work at somethin'.

"Pretty quick Bill, he offers to guide the marshal up the crick, an 'on west, where this here fella he was huntin' might of gone.

"An' after they'd be'n gone a short time, the fella crawls out from in under the clothes, sweatin' like a nigger—not so much on account of the heat, as on account of what that mouthy young-un might of said if she'd got the jump on her ma.

"It so happened that I was in funds, at the time, havin' right around forty thousan' in U. S. money on me, an' feelin' a sort of a personal interest in this fella the marshal was huntin', I offered Bill's wife a lib'ral cut out of it. But she wouldn't touch it. Claimed that what they done wasn't done on no cash basis, an' couldn't be paid fer. Claimed she'd ruther not have nothin' to do with money like that, nohow, meanin' I take it, that she preferred dust to bills. So I left there, headin' down the crick, an' east, at a pace commensurate with the len'th of my legs—an' eventually crossed onto the Yukon.

"I never seen Old Bill agin, an' never got the chanct to return the favor he done to that friendless fella on Birch Crick, that day. I heard he'd struck it lucky after that—an' later, I shore was sorry to hear he'd died."

"Yeah," agreed Bettles, "they didn't make 'em no better'n Old Bill."

"TOO damn bad Margy'd take up with any one like Stiles," said MacShane.

"That's the only trouble with women—they ain't got no sense," opined Swiftwater.

"Well," grinned Bettles, "I wouldn't hardly go so fer as to say it was the *only* trouble with 'em—but it's one of the main ones."

"Why'n hell don't one of us go right to Margy an' tell her Stiles is no good?" asked Moosehide Charlie.

"The suggestion," grinned Black John. "is a forthright one' an' at first blush, would seem to have much to commend it. But considered in its broader aspect, it savors slightly of bluntness—seems somehow lackin' in finesse, as a diplomat would say."

"I don't know nothin' about that," said Swiftwater, "but I know damn well it wouldn't work. If you tell a woman anythin' agin a man, bein' nach'ly contrary to start out with, she'll stick up fer him. An' if you start augerin' about it, she'll git plumb stubborn—an' then all hell couldn't change her."

"They're like a mule," opined Burr MacShane. "It takes a damn good man to handle one."

"This here Dorgan that disappeared on the Porcupine—has he got any heirs, I wonder?" asked Black John.

"Hell, no!" Bettles replied. "He come into the country when the Yukon wasn't nothin' but a crick! I wintered with Old Paddy on the Koyukuk, way back in ninety. He don't even know if his name is Dorgan. He thinks he kin rec'lect bein' in some kind of a home where there was a hell of a lot of other kids in London. An' he rec'lects livin' with some folks named Dorgan, an' skippin' out because they was mean to him, an' from then on he follored the sea on 'til he was wrecked on a whaler somewheres along the coast in the eighties,

an' he's be'n knockin' around, here an' there, ever sence. What did you want to know about him fer?"

"Oh, jest by way of conversation," replied Black John. I was really thinkin' about that good turn old Bill Rodney done me—an' how I'd never got no chanct to pay him back. His wife claimed it was a thing that couldn't be paid fer. I don't s'pose she ever heard of a deferred payment."

"What the hell you divin' at?"

"Oh, jest sort of ramblin' on. Guess this licker's kind of loosened my tongue. Let's have another, an' then I'm goin' to supper."

II

BLACK JOHN took a seat near a window in the dining-room of the hotel, and a few minutes later Stiles entered, accompanied by a young woman who glanced in his direction and, after being seated at a nearby table, leaned forward and spoke in an undertone to the man who looked his way with a smile as she talked.

"Undoubtless purveyin' a bit of ancient hist'ry," grinned the big man, to himself, as he caught the words "Birch Creek" and "outlaw." "Beats hell how a young woman's looks kin change in a few years. Cripes, back there on Birch Crick that time, she was freckled faced an' leggy—kind of ganglin' lookin'. She looks like a girl on a calendar, now."

A waitress brought his supper and, noticing that his glance strayed toward the other table, she volunteered information. "That's Tom Stiles. He's rich. Good mixer, too. Everyone likes him. That's Margy Rodney with him. She's rich, too—or will be when the bank pays over the money her old man left. They gotta give it to her next week. She'll be twenty-one, then. They jest give her so much a month now. Tom's rushin' her awful hard. She's all caked in on him, too, by the looks. She throw'd down young Joe Emerson fer him. You can't blame her. Joe's a nice kid, but he's kinda slow. Wouldn't never show her the good times Stiles will. But it's too bad some poor girl can't get him, instead of one that's rich, already. Some girls has all the luck."

Black John nodded slowly. "Yeah, some pore girl might git him, at that. But you want to remember, sister—there's a damn sight of difference in luck."

Late that evening Stiles entered the Tivoli and stepping to the bar, ordered a drink. Farther along the bar, surrounded by the little group of sourdoughs, Black John loudly ordered another round.

"Yes, sir!" he roared, apparently feeling his liquor. "It's gittin' along towards Saint One Eye's Day agin—an' you boys'll have to come on up to Halfaday an' help us celebrate!"

"Cripes—I shore had a head on me after that last celebration!" exclaimed Swiftwater Bill. "I never did remember leavin' Cush's."

"I'll say we done old Saint One Eye proud," grinned Bettles.

"Seems like I rec'lect someone gittin' p'izned," said Camillo.

"It must of be'n me," opined Moosehide. "I couldn't git nothin' to set on my stummick fer a week."

"I wasn't in on that one," said Burr MacShane. "But from what I heard when the boys got back, it must of be'n a paloozer! I shore missed somethin'."

"You missed damn near dyin', if that's what you mean," grinned Moosehide.

"Yeah," MacShane laughed, "I hear the boys are pretty free with their hangin's, on Halfaday."

"You bet we are!" cried Black John, slanting a swift glance that assured him Stiles was listening. "What any man done before he come to Halfaday ain't none of our business. But onct he gits there he's got to refrain from murder, larceny, claim-jumpin', an all forms of skullduggery, er a miners' meetin' 'll see to it that he's provided with a damn good practical hangin'.

"As long as a man uses us right, we'll

use him right. There's forty, fifty of us up there, an' I don't mind sayin' that most, if not all of us, is outlawed, one way er another. But we ain't loosin' no sleep over it. No, sir! Layin' as we do, right up agin the Alasky line, we don't live in no fear of the police of either country. If a Mounted shows up the Yukon wanteds slip acrost the line an' hole up in the Alasky Country Club till he goes back—an' vicy vercy, like if a U. S. marshal should show up on the Alasky side.

"There's plenty good claims on the crick, if a man's minded to work. An' Old Cush is right there to look after our needs an' requirements in the matter of licker an' supplies. An' on top of all that, we have a lot of fun, what with a stud game every night, an' all. I couldn't see where a man would want no better place to live than Halfaday Crick!"

"Cripes, John," grinned Bettles, "anyone would think you'd staked out a townsite up there an' was down here sellin' lots!"

"Nope. There ain't no townsites on Halfaday, an' there ain't goin' to be none. An' I ain't got nothin' to sell, nor no commercial interest in the community whatever, outside of my claim. I'm jest extollin' the virtues of Halfaday so them of you that ain't be'n there to see fer yerselves would feel free to come up an' help us celebrate Saint One Eye's Day without fear of gittin' hung, er bein' bored to death."

STILES crossed the room and joined half a dozen checkakos in a stud game, and shortly thereafter Black John sought his room in the hotel and busied himself with a lead pencil and a piece of wrapping paper. When he had finished, he folded the paper, slipped it beneath the door of Stiles' room which was next his own, and went to bed.

Long after midnight he heard the sound of footsteps in the hallway and the opening and closing of a door. A few minutes of silence was followed by a full hour of restless pacing back and forth in the next room, and again silence.

As he was eating breakfast, the following morning, Stiles entered the dining-room and paused beside his table.

"Mind if I sit here," he asked. "It's rather lonesome eating by one's self."

"Set right down," Black John invited heartily. "I was jest thinkin' the same thing."

"Stiles is my name," began the man, by way of introduction, "I happened to be in the Tivoli last evening and, quite by accident, I overheard you speaking of Halfaday Creek."

"Yeah, I've got a claim up there, an' I was sort of invitin' the boys up to help us celebrate Saint One Eye's day."

"I don't seem to place this Saint One Eye."

"We did," grinned the big man. "Right where he belongs. In a grave. He's a fella we hung a while back. Of course, the saint part is what you might say more er less synthetical, bein' a post mortum honor conferred on the spur of the moment. I doubt if it's accepted where he's at now. Fact is, some of the boys happened to drop in on us, onetime an' bein' as we're all serious minded citizens, we didn't like to pull off no drunk right out of a clear sky. So we cast about fer a reasonable excuse, like a holiday er some time like that, when a man of ordinary intelligence is s'posed to git drunk on general principles. But accordin' to Cush's calendar there wasn't no red letter day within a month er so of us. Bettles, he rec'lected how the Mexicans is hell to celebrate a saint's day every time they feel a drunk comin' on. But none of us was up on our saints an' we didn't have no list of 'em an' couldn't think up none whose day come that time a year, ontil I happened to rec'lect that it was about a year back when we hung One Eyed John Smith."

"What did you hang him for?"

"Oh, damn if I remember. It was

prob'ly somethin' he done, er looked like he was goin' to do. But bein' as it was the approximate anniversary of his hangin', I proclaimed him a saint—an' we went ahead an' celebrated his day without our conscience prickin' us, or losin' our self respect by gittin' drunk without no reasonable excuse. What I claim, when a man begins pullin' off trivial an 'aimless drunks—right then's when he begins slippin'."

"I believe you mentioned that there are claims on the creek. Would it be possible for anyone—me, for instance—to stake a location up there? Or is the whole creek staked?"

"Hell, man Halfaday ain't even been scratched yet! Most any location a man's a mind to stake will pay bettern' wages."

THE man cleared his throat nervously and continued. "The fact is, I'm a bit fed up on Dawson. The creeks hereabouts are all staked. I did pretty well farther down the river, but my claim finally petered out and I came to Dawson, hoping to stake a new location."

"Couldn't of come to a worse place. The sourdoughs, them that was in the country before the rush, got most of the good locations. An' sence then, all the damn chechakos that could rustle the price to git here has come pourin' into Dawson with the result that they won't one in ten git their passage money back."

"That's right. That's the reason I'd like to go someplace where I'd stand a reasonable chance of making a strike, and at the same time be able to make expenses."

"Halfaday's yer crick, then!" exclaimed Black John. "Anyone kin make expenses—an' some of us is doin' quite a bit better'n that."

"I believe you mentioned, last evening, that—er—some of the men on Halfaday are—er—outlaws. I still have a little dust left from my downriver claim—only a few ounces, but I—er—wouldn't like to lose it."

"It's a more er less deplorable fact," explained Black John, "that the bulk of us is outlawed, one way er another, but I'm right here to tell you that there's more damn honesty, per capita, on Halfaday than on any other crick in the Yukon! An' you don't have to take my word fer it. Ask Corporal Downey er any other policeman. If a man refrains from crime er skullduggery, he's safer on Halfaday than he is right here in Dawson. I don't know a place in the world where a man gits what's comin' to him quicker'n he does on Halfaday!"

"I believe you mentioned that a man could procure supplies there—and that he could find an occasional stud game. I rather enjoy stud now and then, as a diversion."

"A man kin git anything he wants in the way of supplies an' diversion at Cushing's Fort—barrin' women. Women contaminates an' contankerates a crick sometin' scandulous. One shows up now an' then, but she ain't never encouraged to stay. Our main diversion is stud. We play stiff; but we play honest. We keep the game honest by accordin' a prompt an' hearty hangin' to anyone who tries to bolster up his luck with sech subterfuges as second dealin', holdin' out cards, er runnin' in a cold deck."

"Halfaday sounds like an ideal place to locate," opined Stiles, after a brief pause. "I believe I'll go there, if you can tell me how to reach it."

"Won't need to. I'll be pullin' out myself in the mornin'. You kin go along with me."

THE other shifted uneasily "I believe," he said, "that I'd rather pull out today. You see—er—quite a number of chechakos as you call them—men whose acquaintance I have made since I reached Dawson—know that I had a good claim downriver—and—er—they might jump to the conclusion, if they should see two of us pulling out together, that we were going upon a

prospecting trip, they might follow us, believing that because I had made one strike, I would probably make another. It might create a stampede, and I am sure that neither you nor I would care to have a stampede of chechakos pouring in onto Halfaday."

"Hell no!" grinned Black John. "They'd be worse than them locusts that come buz-

zin' in on old Pharaoh, that the Good Book tells about. You go ahead whenever yer ready an' I'll overtake you on the White. Cross over an' paddle upstream on the far side of the Yukon till you come to a sizable river that runs in from the west about eighty miles up. That's the White, an' you kin head up it a ways an' wait fer me. No one'll see us from there on. When we git to Halfaday you kin throw yer stuff into One Eyed John's cabin till you git a chanct to look around fer a location of yer own. Er you might go ahead an' work One Eyed's claim. Funny thing about that claim.

"One Eyed must of took considerable dust out of it—me an' Cush figgers right around thirty, forty thousan' dollars—but after we hung him we never found a damn ounce of it. No sir, not a damn ounce! And, we shore as hell tore up every likely lookin' place where he could of cached it. But he was too smart fer us. He shore done a good job of cachin'. Well, I'll be stirrin' around, now," the big man concluded, pushing back from the table. "So long. Be seein' you in a couple of days on the White."

III

TEN days later Black John strode into the barroom at Cushing's Fort closely followed by a smooth shaven man who swung a small but obviously heavy pack to the floor at his feet as he ranged himself beside the other at the bar.

"Hello, Cush!" he greeted. "Meet Tom Stiles. Tom, he got kind of bored by the hectic inactivity of Dawson an' its environs, so he decided to try his luck on Halfaday."

Old Cush carefully inserted a soiled playing card between the leaves of the Bible he had been reading, shoved the square-framed steel spectacles from nose to forehead, closed the book and returned it to the back bar from which he removed a bottle and three glasses.

"This un's on the house," he said. "Yukon wanted?"

"What?" asked Stiles.

Black John grinned. "Jest a formality, by way of openin' the conversation—like you'd say, 'It's a pleasant day,' er vicy vercy. You see, located as we are in close proximity to the international boundry, many of the itinerants who sojourn amongst us are fugitives from justice. Speakin' academically, it ain't none of our business what a man's past was. Nevertheless it has frequently militated to the malefactor's advantage to inform us whether it is the United States or the Canadian authorities he's dodgin' so, in the event that some minion of the law should show up, he could be advised of the fact an' govern himself accordin'. Cush's question was actuated, not by way of gratifying an idle curiosity, but purely in the spirit of helpful cooperation."

Cush scowled at Black John, and shifted his glance to the bottle that stood before Stiles. "Fill up an' shove it," he said. "All I says was was you a Yukon wanted? So in case Downey'd show up someone could slip you the word. Fer's I kin see, it didn't

call fer no oration. But if John sees a chanct to make a couple hundred long words do the work of two short ones, he shore grabs it. It's fellas like him made 'em print dictionaries—so folks could find out what they was tryin' to say, if anyone would give a damn of would listen."

Stiles laughed, filled his glass and pushed away the bottle. "It's rather refreshing to find an educated man in this environment, though."

Cush's scowl of disapproval deepened. "So yer another of 'em, eh? What I claim eggication is made fer lawyers an' preachers, which their game is to ring in all the long words they kin lay their tongue to fer the confusal of good straight thinkin'."

"There's more truth than poetry in that," laughed Stiles, glancing about the room. "Nice place you've got here."

"It does."

"What?"

"Cush means," explained Black John, "that it admirably answers the purposes for which it was designed and constructed."

CUSH shook his head in sombre resignation, and eyed Stiles fishily. "Yer worst even than John. Leastwise, he does know what the little words means."

"Which reminds me," grinned Black John that you have not answered Cush's question. Our etymological discussion havin' momentarily diverted—"

"I would ruther stand around an' listen to a Chinee!" interrupted Cush, swallowing his liquor. "So you might's well dry up an' buy a drink."

"Fill 'em up," Stiles invited. "I'm buying this one. To return to your question, I am not wanted by any police. I'm just a prospector."

Cush shrugged. "It's all the same to me. "It ain't nothin' agin a man if he ain't wanted somewheres. I was jest askin'—in case."

"I told Stiles he could throw his stuff into One Eyed John's cabin," said Black John, cramming tobacco into the bowl of his pipe and holding a match to it. A moment later he tossed the match to the floor in disgust. "Damn this pipe—it's plugged up! I'll step over to my cabin an' git another one. Got a couple of chores to do, too. Be back in half an hour an' take you over to One Eyed's place," he said to Stiles. "You kin be gittin' what you want in the way of grub from Cush. You'll be wantin' to git settled, an' yer supper out of the way so's to meet the boys when they come driftin' in fer the stud game this evenin'."

Proceeding straight to his cabin, Black John tossed his pack onto his bunk, busied himself for a few moments with pencil and paper, thrust the resultant memorandum into his pocket, stepped to the spring and removed two fruit jars filled with gold dust from the muck in the bottom and, avoiding Cush's, made his way swiftly toward One Eyed John's cabin. Just before reaching it he paused at a bend in the creek to remove a stone that completely concealed the mouth of a crevice at the base of a huge rock, placed the two jars within the aperture, and replaced the stone.

Entering the cabin he stepped to the opposite wall, removed a section of log by pulling upon a short thong that protruded from the wall close beside one of a row of pegs obviously placed for convenience in hanging up clothing. Into the disclosed aperture he dropped the memorandum he had written, and replaced the section of log, being careful to leave the thong protruding just enough to be noticeable to one approaching the wall to hang up a garment.

RETURNING to the Fort, he found Stiles and Cush in the trading room crowding supplies into a packsack. A few minutes later he accompanied Stiles to One Eyed John's cabin and left him, returning to the saloon where Cush greeted him with a frown, as he set out bottle and glasses.

"I wouldn't know why you'd be fetchin'

someone like this here Stiles to Halfaday—onlest it would be so's you'd have someone here that could onderstand all them big words you say."

"Merely for friendship's sake, Cush—merely for friendship's sake."

"Huh. It's the first time I ever know'd you to kick up sech a hell of a friendship with some damn chechako!"

"The friendship," explained Black John, filling his glass, "was with Old Bill Rodney."

"Bill Rodney! You mean Bill Rodney that used to be down on Birch Crick? Him that hid you in under his woman's dirty worshin' the time that marshal was on yer tail fer holdin' up them soldiers?"

"The same. One good turn deserves another, as the Good Book says."

"Cripes—he's dead! Downey was tellin' about it the last time he was up here. Claimed he struck it lucky 'fore he died, an' left right around a million to his daughter. Er mebbe it was half a million. Anyways, it was a hell of a lot. But she won't git it till she's twenty-one."

The big man nodded. "Yeah," he said, "an' that was last week. It was on her account that I deemed it wise to remove Stiles from Dawson."

Cush sniffed audibly. "I smelt a woman in the woodpile somewheres, as the Good Book says! I s'pose she's a damn good looker, an' this here Stiles is a friend of hern that she wants hid out fer awhile! Damn if a woman can't git anthin' she wants outa you!"

"She's good lookin' all right. An' Stiles was a friend of hers. But the hidin' out idea is my own. In fact, I believe that if she knew I was responsible for his disappearance, she'd hate me. I don't like her. She's a brat. If it hadn't be'n fer her ma, that time on Birch Crick, she'd of run off at the head till that marshal would of been up to his ears in them dirty clothes, huntin' me. An' the other evenin' in the hotel dinin' room I overheard her tellin' Stiles I wasn't nothin' but an outlaw. You see, I suspect that Stiles knew she was about to come into a fortune an' was makin' a play fer it."

"Huh!" snorted Cush. "What's it any of your business if he did git it—if that's the way she done you? If some woman done me like that damn if I'd go out of my way to do her a good turn!"

"The good turn is fer Old Bill. I know he wouldn't want neither his daughter er his dust to fall into the hands of a damn skunk like Stiles. An' after all, whether I like her er not—she's Old Bill's daughter. She's young, yet, an' ain't got no sense. An' fer Bill's sake I'm givin' her a break."

"That's different," Cush opined. "This here Stiles, he claimed he didn't have but a few ounces of dust when he was buyin' them supplies. But I took notice that when his pack hit the floor in front of the bar, it thumped damn heavy fer the size of it. He was askin' me about the stud game, an' when I told him the stakes sometimes run pretty high, he never batted an eye—jest said he'd be over tonight an' set in. He's one of them cold-eyed liars that looks right at a man when he lies."

"HE TOOK good care that I never got a chance to handle that pack on a portage, comin' up," grinned Black John. "But from observin' the apparent amount of effort he expended in handlin' it, I jedge it to weigh somewheres between a hundred an' a hundrd an' twenty-five pounds—say thirty thousan' dollars, roughly speakin'."

"Where would a damn chechako git thirty thousan' in dust?"

"Accordin' to what I heard in Dawson, Stiles an' his pardner, one Dutch Dietz, had a claim on the Porcupine. Rumor has it that an old timer by the name of Paddy Dorgan, who was s'posed to have had somewhere around thirty er forty thousan' in dust cached, disappeared suddenly, an' shortly thereafter Stiles an' Dietz parted company, an' Stiles went to Dawson. It was common knowledge around Dawson that Old Bill's daughter was about

to come into her money, so Stiles decided to stick around an' make a play fer it—an' it looked to me like he was havin' good luck."

"Didn't the police do nothin' about this Dorgan?"

"Yeah, the inspector at Fortymile sent a constable down to investigate the case. Stiles knew that, but it didn't seem to worry him none."

"Then what did he come away from Dawson fer, before the girl got her money?"

"I have reason to believe," grinned Black John, "that Stiles, in some manner, received disquietin' information concernin' the progress of that investigation on the Porcupine—information that made a hasty departure from Dawson seem advisable, if not actually imperative."

"You mean someone tipped him to lam out?"

"Paraphrasin' it succinctly, an' in the vernacular—yes."

"You couldn't of jest said 'yes,' I s'pose—like anyone else would?" scowled Cush.

"I merely strove to call attention to the crudity of your style. I deem it my duty to attempt to broaden your vocabulary."

"You do, eh? Well, listen—I ain't got no vocabularies, whatever they be, if I had, they would be broad enough as they was without you sayin' all them big words. About Stiles—if the police wants him, an' Downey can't find him around Dawson, he'll figger he hit fer Halfaday, an' he'll come up here after him. What I claim, it's a damn shame if some chechako would murder a sourdough an' git away with his dust."

Black John nodded gravely. "The same thought has occurred to me."

"An' when Downey gits here," continued Cush, "Stiles would either hit out acrost the line with the dust, er else Downey would arrest him an' take him an' the dust back to Dawson. Them old timers don't hardly ever have no heirs that anyone could locate.

"It seems like a damn pity if Downey would turn over all that dust to the public administrator—an' him not able to locate no one to divide it up amongst."

Black John fixed Cush with a disapproving frown. "Are you hintin', perchance, that we should, in some questionable or underhanded manner, obtain possession of this dust an' convert it to our own use?"

"Well—no. That is—I wouldn't want we should rob his cache, er run in no markers on him, without we ketched him cheatin' first nor nothin' like that. All I says was that it's a pity if that dust gits off'n Halfaday, an' no rightful owner to claim it. What I was gittin' at—a man with eyes like Stiles' is bound to cheat—give him time. An' then we could run in the markers on him, fair an' square."

"No!" thundered Black John, smiting the bar with his fist. "Here on Halfaday we have builded an' unassailable reputation for pristine rectitude that is a precious heritage which we must jealously guard—"

"Can that crap!" Cush growled. "I wouldn't know what it means, even if I would listen. "An' besides, I've know'd you to run in markers before now."

"Only when I deemed the end justified the means. I'm tellin' you that if Stiles leaves Halfaday without takin' that dust with him, it'll be entirely of his own choice an' volition. We've got to watch our ethics!"

Cush shrugged. "What with all them big words—an' you doin' all the deemin', Stiles'll be lucky to git off'n Halfaday with his hide. Here comes Pot Gutted John. It's your turn to buy a drink."

IV

AS DARKNESS gathered the men of Halfaday drifted into the saloon for an evening's entertainment. Stiles appeared and was introduced by Black John. A stud game was organized that ran into the wee sma' hours, after which the men

drifted back to their cabins, Cush locked the saloon, and Halfaday slept.

Early the following morning Black John arose and, proceeding to the rock beneath which he had cached his two jars of dust, pried away the stone, and stared into the empty aperture. He made a clicking sound with his tongue, as he shook his head slowly from side to side. "Tch, tch, tch—don't it beat hell what a damn chechako will stoop to?"

Rising to his feet he strode to One Eyed John's cabin and rapped sharply upon the door. Presently a sleepy voice bade him enter and he stepped into the room to see Stiles sitting on the edge of his bunk in his underwear, regarding him sleepily.

"What's up?" the man asked. "It seems like I just got to bed."

Seating himself Black John drummed on the table top with his finger tips. "You know," he began hesitatingly, "the boys kind of took me last night in the stud game."

The other nodded, frowning. "I noticed that your luck wasn't running so hot. But I didn't get it all. If this is a touch—there's nothing doing. You know I told you I only had a few ounces—"

"It ain't that," the big man interrupted reassuringly. "The fact is, I've got plenty of dust cached—couple of fruit jars full. My name is wrote on the inside of the covers." He noted that the man's hands tightened their grip on the edge of the bunk, and that he moistened his lips with his tongue.

"That's good," he said, in a voice that sounded a bit hollow.

"Yeah. I gen'lly keep some dust cached where it's handy. But the trouble with me is I'm so damn fergitful I can't never rec'lect where I cached it."

"What! You mean you've forgotten where you cached your dust?"

"Yeah. It's a failin' I've got. A nurse dropped me on my head one time when I was a baby, an' I ain't be'n able to remember much ever sence. That is, ma ketched her at it onct. She might of dropped me more times—we don't know. It's right unhandy—not rememberin' things. But I always write down where I've got my dust cached so I kin go an' git it when I want it."

"That's a good idea," approved Stiles weakly.

"Yeah. I don't carry this paper around with me on account I might lose it out of my pocket, er git it wet so the writin' would rub off er somethin', so I cache the paper, too."

"Oh."

"Yeah. But the trouble is I can't remember where I cached it."

"You mean you can't remember where you cached the paper that tells where you cached your dust?" the man asked, his voice stiffening perceptibly."

"Yeah. That's right."

"That's tough luck. I'm sorry. But why come to me about it? I can't do you any good. I haven't got that paper."

"It's like this," explained Black John. "Knowin' my failin', I always write out on another paper where I cached that first paper, an' I keep this last paper on my shelf in under my clock. So this mornin' when I wanted to go to my cache an' git some dust, I read the paper that's under the clock, an' it says I cached the paper that tells where my dust cache is, here in One Eyed John's cabin. It says it's in his cache over there in the wall. There's a piece of thong sticks out beside one of them pegs where yer coat an' slicker's hangin'. If you give a pull on the thong a section of log comes out. So I guess I'll git my paper an' go to my cache."

AS HE rose from the chair Stiles leaped from the bunk, barring the way to the opposite wall. "Stay right where you are!" he commanded. "You can't go into that cache! I have some dust cached there! I examined the hole thoroughly last evening when I found it, and there was no paper in it!"

"Wasn't, eh?" asked Black John, uncertainly. "That's funny. That's where the paper said it was. Mebbe I better take a look. You might of missed it."

"Stand back!" cried the man, reaching for his rifle that stood in a nearby corner. "This is my home temporarily. And a man's home is his castle. He can defend it with his life. That's the law!"

"It is, eh?" asked Black John, as the other jacked a shell into the chamber of the gun. "Well, here on Halfaday we figger Old Man Colt is pretty good law. If I was you, I'd drop that rifle before you git hurt. Unlest you really want to prove yer p'int by defendin' the cabin with yer life."

The man's eyes widened in sudden terror as they fixed upon the blue-black six-gun in the big man's hand—a six-gun whose muzzle centered exactly upon his midriff, at a distance of some eight feet. "Don't shoot!" he cried as the rifle clattered to the floor.

"All right. Stand over there in the corner where I kin keep an eye on you while I hunt fer my paper."

"You told me back in Dawson," quavered the man," that you never found One Eyed John's cache! That you all figured he must have left a lot of dust—but you never could find it!"

"Did I? It's that damn nurse's fault, fer droppin' me that time. I must of fergot. What I claim, folks should pick out nurses which wouldn't go about the house droppin' babies on their head." He tugged at the thong, removed the section of log, thrust his hand within the aperture, and drew out a fruit jar full of dust. A moment later he drew out another and turned to Stiles, who stood in the corner, white and shaking. "So you keep yer dust in fruit jars, too, eh?"

"No," faltered the man, "those jars—I—I—they must be yours."

"Mine! Wait till I look!" Unscrewing the cap the big man glanced at the inside of it. "Why—damn if they ain't!" he exclaimed. "There's my name. How in hell did they git here?"

"I—I can explain that," said the other. "When I saw that thong sticking out as I went there to hang up my slicker, I pulled at it and a section of the log came out. I felt within and found a paper on which were directions to the cache beneath the big rock—"

"I thought you claimed you didn't find no paper?"

"I—I'll have to admit I—I lied about that. I did find it. And I found the two jars of dust and carried them back and placed them together with my own dust in the cache. I supposed, of course, that those jars contained the dust that One Eyed John had cached and which you never found."

AS THE men talked Black John removed twenty-three eighty-ounce caribou hide sacks of dust from the cache and placed them on the table beside the fruit jars. "Is these the few ounces of dust you claimed was all you had?" he asked.

"Yes. I—I didn't think it was anyone's business how much dust I had."

Black John nodded. "Yer right. It wasn't. But if a man's prone to lie, he ought to lie reasonable. I had yer pack gauged almost to the ounce. However, the boys won't be holdin' them lies agin you when they hang you this afternoon fer cache-robbin'."

"Hang me! Good God—man—you can't hang me!"

"Think not?"

"I mean—you can't hang a man for taking the dust from a dead man's cache!

That's not robbery. You can't rob a dead man!"

"What the hell's that got to do with it? I ain't dead. You robbed me."

"I mean—when I took that dust, I believed it had belonged to a dead man!"

"The case will be interestin' to try before miners' meetin'," admitted Black John. "Near's I kin rec'lect the p'int ain't never be'n adjudicated on Halfaday—whether a robber who inadvertantly mixed up his robees is guilty, er not guilty? Off hand, I'd hazard the guess that the p'int is far an' away beyond the legal erudition of most of the residents of the crick, who'll undoubtless vote 'Guilty' on the broad theory that any damn skunk that would rob a cache had ought to be hung—no matter whose cache it was. In fact, the odds in favor of an acquittal is far too infinitesimal to be figgered by any known system of mathematics."

"But I tell you the law considers the intent! I had no intent, whatever of committing a robbery when I took that dust."

"How about yer intent when you told me, a while back, that you didn't find no paper in the cache, an' couldn't do me no good in findin' my dust—when you thought I'd fergot where I'd cached it?"

"I—I'd have turned over the dust. I was only having some fun with you."

"Our ideas of humor is dissimilar. But we'll pass that over."

"The crime, if any," persisted Stiles, "was consummated when I committed the overt act of removing the dust from the cache. And I maintain that, at that time, I had no intent of robbing any living man."

BLACK JOHN grinned. "Cush ought to be around to hear that. But I realize that there's a modicum of truth in the assumption. It constitutes what might be deemed a mitigatin' an' extenuatin' circumstance—not mitigatin' or extenuatin' enough to carry any weight with a miners' meetin', but by an unprejudiced an' unbiased judge, the argument might be considered. I hesitate to be a party to hangin' any man who claims he hadn't done nothin' contrary to the dictates of his own conscience, if any. So rather than subject you to trial by miners' meetin' which would amount to certain death, I'm constrained to let you go back to Dawson—if you'll start right now. We don't want no such hair-splittin' character on Halfaday."

"But," faltered the man, "I—I can't go back to Dawson."

"Shore you kin. It's easy—jest foller Halfaday down to the White, an' the White down to the Yukon, an' then down the Yukon."

"I mean—I don't dare show up in Dawson."

"Why not? Hell, you was there till you come up here!"

"I know. But I have reason to believe that the police suspect me of being implicated in a—a—a murder and robbery on the Porcupine."

Black John shrugged. "It ain't none of our business what a man done before he come to Halfaday. Are you guilty?"

"Well—in a way—I—I suppose I am implicated. The fact is, my partner did kill this man and took his dust."

"If it was yer pardner done it, what are you afraid of?"

"The police would involve me—guilty knowledge, or accessory after the fact, or something."

"Might even prove you was an accessory durin' the fact," suggested Black John. "That is, if yer pardner should squawk."

"And he's going to do just that! He'll lie like the devil to put the crime onto me. I found a note under my door the night before I joined you at the breakfast table—the night before I left Dawson. It was from Dietz, my partner. He wrote that a constable had found the body and had arrested him, and that he was going to squawk to save his own neck. He said the constable was bringing him upriver and

that they would reach Fortymile the next day. Said he'd managed to slip the note to an Indian he had bribed to deliver it to me so I'd have a chance to skip out."

"Mebbe it wasn't yer pardner wrote it," suggested Black John. "It might of be'n someone with a sense of humor like yourn, that done it fer a joke."

"It would be a hell of a joke! But it wasn't a joke. Dietz couldn't write. He printed out his words, and misspelled most of 'em. It was from him, all right. I could tell that at a glance."

"Well, in that case I guess you can't go back to Dawson," admitted the big man. "This here dust in them pokes couldn't, by no chanct, be part of what yer pardner got out of the dead man's cache, could it? I mean the man that was murdered an' robbed."

Stiles winced at the words. "Yes—that's part of it."

"How much did you git?"

"There were thirty-five sacks. I took twenty-seven of them. Dietz is a dumb Dutchman. I let him keep eight sacks. I spent four sacks in Dawson—making a play for a million."

Black John nodded grimly. "Yeah, I seen that. The Rodney girl is the daughter of an old friend of mine."

"She told me you were an outlaw."

"That's right. A lot of us is on Halfaday, Stiles."

"I—I suppose I'm an' outlaw, too—now."

"Yeah. An' as long as you can't go back to Dawson, the only thing fer you to do is cross over into Alasky, an' hit fer the Tanana country."

"But—how far is it?"

"It's a hell of a ways. But you won't be the first that's tried it."

"Those others—did they get through?"

"I wouldn't know about that. It would be owin' to their luck."

"But—I couldn't possibly make it! Why, that dust alone weighs a hundred and fifteen pounds!"

BLACK JOHN shrugged. "It's a long trip—an' a rough country. Of course, it ain't none of my business what you take in yer pack. But if it was me, I wouldn't tackle it without a good hundred an' fifty pounds of solid grub."

"But—the dust!" cried the man, his eyes on the little caribou sacks. "That would make two hundred and sixty-five pounds! I can't even lift that much—let alone carry it! What can I do?"

Again the big man shrugged. "It's your problem—not mine."

"It's a hold-up," cried Stiles, his voice breaking shrilly. "I'll be damned if I'll stand for it! You're forcing me to leave the dust behind!"

"I ain't forcin' you to do nothin'. There's the pack of grub you fetched from Cush's. An' there's the dust. Take yer pick—either one—er both."

"Suppose I refuse to leave Halfaday?"

"In that case, we'll be goin' on over to Cush's an' I'll call a miners' meetin', an' we'll try you fer robbin' my cache."

"Listen!" cried the man, in a panicky voice. "You're all outlaws, up here, I'm an outlaw—why not let me stay here with you?"

"What you don't seem to grasp, Stiles, is the fact that there's a hell of a lot of difference in outlaws. There's been quite a few of your kind show'd up on Halfaday from time to time. The bulk of 'em is buried there in the graveyard back of the saloon. A few moved on—but not many. I'm givin' you yer choice—you kin remain here an' jine the vast majority. Er you kin pack yer sack an' take yer chances with the few. An'—you've got jest five minutes to make up yer mind."

"I—I've heard how you hang men on Halfaday. I wouldn't have a show, if I stayed." Hastily he began stowing the supplies into his packsack. "Which way is the line?" he asked jerkily as he swung the pack to his back. Black John pointed to a gulch that led upward into the hills, and with a last longing glance at the little pile

of sacks, Stiles stepped from the room and headed up the gulch.

When he had gone, Black John picked up the jars and the little sacks and proceeding to his own cabin, slipped them under his bunk. Then he removed his packs and threw himself down on his blankets to make up for lost sleep.

V

ONE day a month later, Corporal Downey stepped through the doorway of Cushing's saloon to find the proprietor and Black John shaking dice for the drinks. As the officer approached the bar, Cush spun a glass toward him, and Black John shoved the bottle. "Chasin some damn miscreant, no doubt," he grinned.

"Yeah," replied the officer, filling his glass. "Fellow by the name of Stiles. You may have noticed him, John, when you were in Dawson a few weeks ago. He was runnin' around with Margy Rodney quite a bit."

Black John nodded. "Yeah, I rec'lect him. What do you want him fer?"

"Murder an' robbery down on the Porcupine. Him an' his pardner murdered a prospector name of Dorgan. A constable from Fortymile brought in the pardner, a dumb Dutchman named Dietz, an' he puts the blame on Stiles. Stiles hung around Dawson about a month after he knew the constable had gone to the Porcupine. Then suddenly he disappeared. He must have got wind, somehow, that the constable had broke the case."

"Yeah, he must of, at that," agreed Black John. "He showed up here about a month ago, an' hung around fer a night an' a day, an' then pulled out."

"Pulled out! Where to?"

"Alasky, I s'pose. That's where most of 'em goes that don't stay here on the crick."

"Did he have any dust with him?"

"Claimed he didn't have only a few ounces. Couldn't of had no hell of a lot, an' back-packed enough grub to take him to the Tanana country."

"I doubt if a man can back-pack enough grub to take him to the Tanana—if he didn't pack an ounce of dust."

"It seems like a reasonable doubt, at that," Black John admitted. "It's a hell of a big country—an' no trails."

"Accordin' to the man, Dietz, that the constable brought in from the Porcupine, Stiles took the bulk of Dorgan's dust—right around thirty thousan' dollars worth. That would run better than a hundred pounds. He prob'ly cached it somewheres. Not that it makes much difference. Dorgan didn't have any heirs."

"Any news in Dawson sence I was there?" asked Black John.

"No, nothin' I kin think of," Downey replied. "Oh, yes—you know Margy Rodney, don't you, Old Bill's girl? Well, she come into her money, five, six weeks ago, an' last week she an' young Joe Emerson over on Quartz Crick got married. That was jest a day er so after the news got out that Stiles was wanted fer murder. Joe's a good kid, an' with Margy's money back of him he can run a flume in to his claim. They say he'll clean up big. It's a mighty good thing she didn't marry that damn Stiles! It looked fer a while like she was goin' to. She sure is lucky!"

Black John nodded thoughtfully. "Yeah," he agreed, "she shore is. I thought a lot of Old Bill. He done me a good turn onct. I'm glad no harm come to his girl an' his money. Seem like, mebbe, Old Bill kin kind of rest easier in his grave.

BAIT FOR A LAW DOG

By HARRY SINCLAIR DRAGO

Author of "The Forked Trail," "The Drifting Kid Moves On," etc.

EVEN the Montana sunshine seemed to hang thin over the brush. The Assineboine River was a slow-coiling serpent, snaking its way through the prairie land that stretched flat and lonely all the way to the snow-tipped Cascades in the distant west. It was a drab and brooding land. Amidst this desolation, two tired, ground-anchored broncs browsed wearily while their owners quartered the flat beside the river on foot.

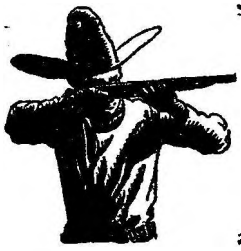
They were looking for tracks—the fading sign of Bill Mundy's gang of long riders, lost half-an-hour ago. It was not the first time. On several occasions during the last two days the cunningly-laid trail had been broken. Only Kize Meeker's shrewd, experienced eyes had picked it up again. Kiz Meeker—gray, leathery and lean-shanked; the sheriff of Chinook. But now even Meeker's superior tracking ability appeared at a loss.

The other, Dave Gordon, was young, cynical, hard of face. He was Meeker's deputy. Just now he appeared to have something on his mind, shooting a wary glance in the direction of the sheriff, a dozen yards away, as he stepped to the stream's edge for a look around.

In the mud at the water's edge was the unmistakable print of a horse-shoe, half obliterated, perhaps three hours old. Dave stared at it. His discontented mouth drew into a thin line. But he did not call out. Instead, knifing another look in Meeker's direction, he frowned while he thought it over.

Casually but deliberately, then, Gordon's boot thrust out—finished the obliteration of the print, stamping it out of existence. It was the third time within an hour that Dave had gone out of his way to baffle the sheriff and put all his efforts at nought. A few minutes later he accosted Meeker angrily:

"Dang it, Kize; we're wastin' our time at this game, I tell yuh! Mundy's crowd never come this way—they're probably a hundred miles to the west, and foggin' it



Hell in a Hand-Basket Among the Owlhoots and Range Wolves

for fair! Once more yuh guessed wrong—as usual," he wound up bitterly.

Kize lifted a mildly quizzical pair of wise, faded eyes. No longer as young as he had been on the day the law badge had been pinned to his vest, he showed unmistakable signs of age in the sober folds about his mouth. But he was too knowing an old beagle to jump at conclusions, or to ask outright for the trouble which had been coming his way all too regularly of its own accord of late.

"Yuh may be right, Dave," he said heavily. "Still, I'm follerin' my best judgment—and this is where it brought us. We'll hunt around a bit more before we give up."

Mild as his tone was, his intention was unmistakable. Dave muttered under his breath, and turned back along the water's edge to make sure there were no more remaining hoofprints to undo his work.

AN HOUR later even Meeker was satisfied that the quarry had eluded them.

"Wal," he said wearily, "looks like there ain't nothin' here to keep us any longer. We'll be gittin' back."

Gordon almost rasped, "Not that you'll be any more use in Chinook, you damned old fogy!" He bit back the scornful retort just in time. But blazing contempt for the man he had deceived colored his tone as he responded accusingly:

"Another useless ride! My God, what a waste of good energy in a man! Mark my words, Kize; we'll never bring Bill Mundy's crowd to book by foggin' them this way! If you'll only say the word, I'll go ahead and dope out some kind of a trap for them wolves—"

"And shoot 'em down in cold blood?" Meeker caught him up. "Unh-uh! Not while there's a chance we can snag 'em and see they land in the pen!"

"Naw, yuh wouldn't shoot a man if yuh could push him over the edge of hell instead," Dave blasted him venomously. "But how many chances do yuh want? If I ain't mistaken," he ran on sarcastically, "this is the third time for Mundy—"

"I know." Kize passed over his free choice of words, laying it to youthful impatience to produce results. "Things have gone against us, an' no mistake."

"And meanwhile, here we are, killin' horses and havin' a large look at the scenery. And how have things been in Chinook, while we've been away?" he demanded. "God knows!" he answered himself, as if his absence had more to do with it than Meeker's. "Likely the town's plumb blowed off the lid."

Kize Meeker's chin came up with a jerk at that, but his tone was reasonable. "Chinook stays in bounds while I'm around, Dave; yuh know that. A man can't be in but one place at a time—"

"He wouldn't need to be, if he picked his place right to commence," was the dry answer. "This ain't the first time I've suggested that yuh stick in Chinook and let me wrangle Bill Mundy's crew in my own way. But no—yo're doin' things yore own way, or not at all. And this is how much good it does any of us!" he wound up disgustedly.

KIZE let the conversation languish, rather than reply to these thin accusations. They didn't need answering, he told himself. Hadn't he been Chinook's sheriff for eighteen years? Wasn't he good for a dozen more?

It was little use trying to make Dave Gordon see that it was his young impatience that was talking. He didn't see the whole thing clear; if he did, he'd put a curb on his tongue. Nevertheless, Kize was conscious of the thin probing blade of doubt which had been stabbing him ever since it had sunk home that once more he had lost Bill Mundy's sign.

If Dave thought he liked it any better than he did himself, he was mistaken. But

over and beyond that, Kize wasn't forgetting that his deputy wasn't the man he was called on to please, one way or another. It was the county commissioners he was supposed to do that for. He was wondering now what they would think about it when he rode in with the same old story—Bill Mundy got away.

There had been a time, he reminded himself, when he would have made short work of Bill Mundy and his kind. He ought to be doing it now, unless—

Unless he was getting too old. The thought came hard, and Kize swallowed with difficulty, stiffening his gaunt frame in the hull. Old? Shucks; he still had many a season's hard work in him yet. He was sure of it.

However, that certainty did not prevent him from asking himself, as he and Dave drew near to Chinook in the late afternoon, whether he could persuade the political set-up of his community to the same effect next election time. His thin, stern mouth drew into harder lines at the thought. He'd never asked himself what he would do with the rest of his life, if the sheriff's star were ever taken away from him; and he wouldn't ask now.

They were drawing into the edge of town, two forlorn figures on beaten broncs, when Dave Gordon reined aside before the First Chance.

"I'm gettin' a drink," he said shortly, without asking whether Kize wanted to join him or not. "I'll be followin' along in a half-hour or so—"

Kize stared at his back in amazement. It was the first time Dave had ever acted this way with him. Taking charge, he was—or thought he was. Instead of speaking his mind in short order, Meeker shrugged and went on. There were questions that interested him more right now than Gordon's bullheaded insubordination.

ENTERING the lower end of Chinook's main street, he found it almost depressingly quiet. No uproar here, he reflected with unconscious gratification. The Rail 8 crowd, who'd arrived in town an hour before Kize had pulled out the other day, had had their fun and gone.

Turning the worn-out roan gelding into the corral behind his office and feeding it, Meeker knew he ought to be trailing down to Chang's hash house himself for a bite—but he didn't want anything to eat. A moment later he forgot even that he ought to as his friend Kin Peck came around the corner of the little building.

Gaunt and gray, almost as lean as himself, Kin moved forward with a friendly waggle of his hand. "Got back quick, didn't yuh?" he queried. Kin Peck was Justice of the Peace and county commissioner; he knew precisely how matters stood.

Kize shrugged his answer. "No luck, Kin," he murmured in his tired voice. "Mundy got in the clear again. We lost his trail up along the Assineboine—not even a busted sage-clump to go by." He hesitated. "How much did they get away with this time?"

"Wal, word come that it was thirty some odd thousand dollars," Peck answered. "We won't know fer shore till the Rose Bud cashier's checked up thorough. Mundy's shore makin' a clean sweep of the banks in this country," he pursued. "Only forty miles away this time. He'll be hittin' Chinook next, Kize."

Meeker sighed. "Wal, until he does, I ain't got that on my shoulders"—and was immediately sorry for the manner in which he had expressed himself. Dammit all! Must be the way his unconscious thoughts were running.

"No," Kin agreed woodenly; and then, as if struck by a new thought, "Where's Dave? Don't tell me he's out roundin' up Mundy's bunch all by himself?" There was a touch of satire in the query.

"Dave's up-street havin' himself a drink," Kize answered. "He'll be along in a little." His tone said that too harsh criticism wouldn't get anyone hereabout anywheres.

"You an' yore Dave!" Peck snorted good-humoredly. "A body'd think yuh was his guardeen, Kize. I'm tellin' yuh he's after yore job—an' you think he's all right."

"Wal, Dave's got his full growth," was the mild reply. "I reckon he kin look out for himself. I'll do the same."

Kin's nod was grim. "Yuh'd do better if yuh made friends with Ed Heffron the way Dave has," he observed thinly.

HEFFRON, a stout, red-faced German, was another of the commissioners. The lawman had never been sure of just where he stood with the man; but Heffron was stiff-necked, pompous, just according to his lights.

"Dave," said Kize shortly, "can cut his own halter, Kin. I ain't complainin'."

Peck thought his own thoughts. "Ever watch a bunch of wolves close in on a deer, Kize?" he demanded. Meeker cut him off with a sharp gesture.

"This kind o' talk ain't gettin' us nowheres," he grunted. Nor would he discuss the subject further. The talk turned to Bill Mundy, the outlaw. Mundy was a bad one. Wanted in half a dozen states for murder, train robbery, bank stick-ups, he was supposed to be holing up somewhere in this part of Montana while Wyoming, Utah, and other portions of the Outlaw Trail cooled off enough to hold him.

"Looks like it's up to you, Kize," Peck declared. "Folks expect yuh to either run Mundy out, or pick him up. Heffron told me he'd mention it to yuh in the mornin'. Said to tell yuh he wanted to see yuh. Yuh huntin' him up?" he broke off.

"Ed knows where to find me," was the tart rejoinder. "I'll just wait till he gets around to it himself."

Peck showed by his manner that he approved the sheriff's course with Heffron. Dab McNally, the third commissioner, was unpredictable but fair-minded. Evidence of toadying was unlikely to influence him favorably. And it was on Peck, Heffron and McNally that Kize must depend for his re-nomination.

Town men dropped into the sheriff's office during the evening to say a word about Bill Mundy's latest exploit. Gradually Kize got a picture of what had actually happened during the bank robbery in Rose Bud. Marshal killed, bank president wounded—all the available currency in large denominations got away with.

It was Ed Heffron who wanted to know about the chase. "Vell, Meeker; you didn't gatch your man, ya?" he opened up pompously, with a hint of patronage. "Vot's the reason for dot?" Middle-aged, looking not unlike a self-satisfied walrus, he eyed Kize with a fishy stare.

Kize gave a brief account of his ride. He was still smarting from Kin Peck's implied censure, piled atop Dave Gordon's open criticism; it all made him cagey. Heffron got little more than a skeleton impression of the chase and the fact that Bill Mundy's sign had faded out.

HEFFRON nodded as if every word was expected. "No results," he puffed loudly, for the benefit of listeners; "und gone just long enough for bad luck to sneak into town behind you, py George!"

"Huh?" Kize was startled. If something had happened in Chinook after all, Kin Peck had neglected to mention it. "What yuh mean, bad luck?"

Almost with evident relish Heffron explained how the Rail 8 crowd had put on

a saloon fight even wilder than usual. Trick Shafter, a gambler, had been gravely wounded, and Nick Savona, who owned the saloon, was in a heat over the smashing of his fixtures.

"You got to do somedings about dis, Meeker!" Heffron exclaimed forcefully. "It ain'dt as if you vas doing goot out of town. But Dave Gordon tells me you do noddings to catch Bill Mundy—he says you don't efen try—"

"I done all a man could," Kize defended stoutly. "Mundy robbed the Rose Bud bank, Hoffron, not ours—"

"But it be ours nexd—vait und see!" the other flung at him testily, red jowls quivering. Heffron would have driven on, but he interrupted himself as exclamations sounded near at hand. He and Kize whirled. The sight that met their eyes was wholly unexpected.

Down the middle of the street, toward the group before the sheriff's office, Dave Gordon was herding two manacled captives at the point of a gun. Meeker's gaze narrowed. Kootenai Craig he recognized —a down-and-out drifter and saloon-bum, with a hard face. The other, a tall, wide-shouldered gent with level, quiet eyes, was a stranger.

Gordon ignored the questions hurled at him from every side, pushing his captives forward. Jerking a nod to Heffron, he said, "Just step inside a minute, Kize—"

Meeker, Heffron and Kin Peck followed him inside. Dave turned to the sheriff.

"I picked this pair up, saddlin' their broncs at Baker's stables. They was mixed up in this shootin' at Savona's place—if you heard about it. They come runnin' out of Nick's hell for leather. I nailed 'em before they got their saddles cinched."

"Yo're a dang liar!" Kootenai Craig jerked out venomously. "We wasn't doin' nothin' like that—"

"Shut up!"

Plainly Ed Heffron approved of what the deputy had done—and of his brusqueness as well. It had been whispered in Chinook that Kootenai was one of Bill Mundy's pack of wolves—perhaps a spy. It mattered little, what charge he was picked up on. Heffron evidently expected the lawman to order Craig and his companion thrown into a cell without delay.

BUT old Kize showed no signs of doing the obvious as he studied the prisoners narrowly. His gaze lingered on the stranger.

"Don't believe I know you," he said.

"Nothin' strange in that," was the easy answer.

"Yuh mean yuh never had any dealin's with the law—is that it?"

Either the evasion was smooth, or it was unconscious. The stranger said, "This man is not tellin' the truth." He indicated Gordon. "I'll admit I was in Savona's place this afternoon. I had nothin' to do with a fight there. Neither did—" he hesitated—"my friend."

Weighing that firm, even tone, and studying the steady eyes, Meeker found no reason to doubt the other. He gave no sign of it, however, as he continued.

"What I said," he repeated pointedly, "was that I don't seem to know you."

"Brick Jackson's the name—"

"I see. An' did you know there'd been a fight, Jackson?"

Heffron broke in impatiently before Jackson could answer. "Dis vos all damned foolishness!" the commissioner rapped harshly. Dave Gordon was likewise contemptuous. But Kize lifted a hand, and in the pause which fell, Jackson gave his answer.

"Sure, we knew about it. I reckon there were few men in town who didn't!"

"Where were you when it was goin' on?"

"We were shufflin' the cards in Baker's office." There was a forthright honesty in Jackson's replies which would have been unmistakable to any but prejudiced

men. As for Kootenai, Kize wasn't so sure. He knew all the stories about the other. But up to the present, Craig hadn't been caught in anything that would warrant his apprehension.

There was a contemptuous snort from Gordon at Jackson's words, however. He had seen the pair run into Baker's barn—and not from the office. But Meeker turned to Kin Peck, at the door.

"Tell somebody out there to bring Baker down here right away," he directed.

"What's the idea, Kize?" Gordon protested, indignant that his shrewdness in picking up this pair should be questioned for a minute. "Don't try to pretend there ain't plenty of reason for tossin' this pair in a cell right off—"

"I'll do the badge-totin', Dave," Meeker cut him off with quiet decision. And to the prisoners, "Happen to know Bill Mundy?"

Kootenai hesitated, a funny look appearing on his face. It was Jackson who answered smoothly, "By name, Sheriff. Why do you ask?"

That answer brought a mirthless laugh from Ed Heffron. Even Dave Gordon essayed a pale echo of it. It didn't bother Kize in the least. He hadn't succeeded in prying anything out of either Kootenai or Jackson by the time Baker, the liveryman, came hurrying in.

"Know this pair, Baker?" Kize shot at him.

Baker turned for a careful look. For a second his glance rested on a curiously carved charm hanging on Brick Jackson's watchfob. It was ivory, and represented a minute but perfectly fashioned horseman.

Baker let his glance linger there—then met Meeker's watchful glance. Something flickered between them; and Baker knew the old law dog had seen what he had seen.

"Sure I know 'em," the liveryman replied.

"Know what they been up to, the last hour or two?"

"They been playin' poker with me since four o'clock—"

"Don't give us that!" Gordon burst out angrily. "Why, I saw two gents duck out of Savona's place the back way and head for yore barn. When I got there, Jackson and Craig here, were saddlin' up in a hell of a sweat!"

"Mebbe they was," the liveryman nodded coolly. "But they never come out of Savona's place. Yuh must've made a mistake, Dave."

Gordon's strained visage showed the pressure of rage he was under. He knew well enough that Baker was prevaricating for some reason of his own. He whirled to Kize.

"What difference does it make what these two were doin'?" he ripped out hotly. "There's no more doubt in yore mind than there is in mine that they're a part of Bill Mundy's crowd! If yuh let either one of 'em get away, yo're more of a fool than I think—" He broke off, his breath rasping.

"Just give us the rest of that, Dave," Kize proposed with dangerous softness.

DAVE knew he had overstepped himself. His lips moved, but no words came. Kize gave him a straight look of warning and reprimand, and turned to the two captives.

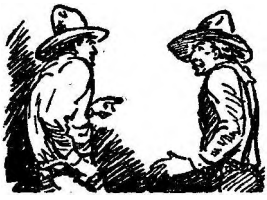
"We've got nothin' on you," he said gruffly. "Reckon I'll have to turn yuh loose." He unlocked the handcuffs on Kootenai Craig and Brick Jackson's wrists, jerked a thumb toward the door. "There she is, boys. Hop to it."

Craig returned his innocent regard with sullen dislike, muttering something about making trouble for damned fools, but Jackson took it all in better part.

"Much obliged, Meeker," he said. "It's a fact you've got nothin' on us—but you could make it mighty unpleasant if you decided to hold us to make sure."

Kize waved him away. It was Ed Heffron who moved out in front of the pair as they turned toward the door. "Now, Kize," he rasped in heavy chest tones, "vot you make dis mistake for? I von't let you turn dese men loose!"

"Yes, you will, Ed," Kize told him coolly. "I'll take the responsibility, if it proves to be a mistake."



Heffron blustered and blew, but it was mostly words. In the midst of his blast, Craig and the stranger pushed outside and walked away. Kize listened without impatience until the fat German had had his say. No one knew better than Meeker that there was something in all this complaint. But he declared he was doing all any man could, and he'd just have to be left alone to work things out his own way. If it was possible to nail Bill Mundy, he aimed to do it—but not by jailing men on the strength of a vague story.

When everyone had left, even Dave Gordon storming away like a man with a just grievance, Baker lingered for a word with the sheriff. "There was nothin' I could say right out without tippin' yore hand, Kize," he explained. "I reckoned you'd recognize that watch-fob he was wearin'. Unless it was stole—"

"I recognized it, Jim," Kize cut him off. "And thanks for callin' it to my attention."

Baker's grin was broad. "Thought you'd have to hogtie Gordon to shut up his trap," he went on. "You'll have to play yore cards close to yore vest, from here out—"

"I'll do that," was the terse reply.

Baker had scarcely gone back to his barns before Dave Gordon pushed in. He was scowling darkly. "This is the worst boner yuh ever pulled!" he threw at Kize flatly. "If it looks like Baker had give that pair an alibi, we ain't none of us fooled any! What's yore first move, Kize?"

There was something demanding, blunt, in his manner. Kize ignored it. "Wal, I'll think things over, fust off—"

"You mean yuh won't nab that pair in a hurry? I know yuh couldn't hardly put the screws to 'em in front of two commissioners; but—"

"Suppose yuh let me take care of things, Dave," was his reward, in a tone which precluded argument. "I ain't so far gone but what I kin still do my own thinkin'."

Gordon snorted wrathfully. He continued to press the other for some immediate action, but Meeker put him off. Finally he went home to bed to be by himself. But the gloomy thoughts did not desert him. He was still rolling them over in the morning, when he stepped into Chang's for breakfast.

Men there were almost solicitous in their regard for him. One took his hat off a chair, another moved over to give the sheriff elbow-room. Kize thought their friendship altogether too warm, and he was inclined to be testy about it till he caught himself.

"No use bein' foolish about this," he told himself, with thin-pressed lips. But he could not avoid the knowledge that they were sorry for him. And that was bad; worse than he'd thought.

But he forgot all that a few minutes later, when, soon after he reached the office, Dave Gordon came hurrying in, excitement in his manner and a paper fluttering in his hand.

"It's a telegram for yuh," he panted. "The stage-station at Frenchman's Creek was stuck up an' half a dozen horses stolen. It looks like Mundy's outfit again! I'll saddle up and take a run out there—"

"Hold on, here!" Kize took over the reins without a jar. "Give me that wire."

He read it and grunted, under Gordon's resentful eyes. Then, "Reckon yo're right" —unemotionally. "I'll take care o' this myself."

Strangely enough, Dave voiced no very vigorous protest at being left behind. This, however, old Kize failed to note. He jogged out of town a few minutes later, straight as a rail in the hull and with the light of challenge in his eyes.

IT WAS late afternoon before he returned; and now the challenge in his pale eyes had changed to smoking wrath. No hold-up had occurred at Frenchman's Creek or anywhere else, nor had he run across any fresh report of Bill Mundy's movements. He had been decoyed out of Chinook as badly as though he were a child. To the first man he met as he entered the lower end of town, he snapped a curt question: "Where's Dave Gordon?"

"Dave? He's gone some'eres, Kize. Picked up a hot tip on Mundy's crowd a couple hours ago, and fogged it."

"Like that, eh?" Kize nodded stonily. Dave had not very craftily side-tracked him, knowing he would be within his rights in acting on his own judgment during the sheriff's absence. To himself, Meeker growled, "He did better'n I would've expected from him, at that; waitin' till two hours ago! Who's to prove to Heffron and the others that he didn't have a hot tip?"

But the hot tip which wormed in Dave Gordon's brain was nothing that another might have overlooked. The deputy knew there had been something phony in the means by which Kootenai Craig and that other smooth hombre had been turned loose; he had missed the by-play between the liveryman and the sheriff, but not its results. Now Gordon was out for a killing.

He had had no other reason for covering the sign which indicated the passage of the lone riders, hiding it from Kize Meeker. Kize was so old and slow, he reflected sourly, that all he would ever do would be to scare the quarry two states away, without even once coming up close.

"Well, I'll get up close!" Dave announced. "I'll make Mundy damned sorry he ever laid eyes on this range!"

He had no slightest doubt that Craig and Jackson would be making for the owlhoot's hideout. They had wasted no time in leaving town. Gordon had taken the precaution of going down to Baker's for a look at the dusty corral in which their ponies had been held. One wore a shoe with a break in the sidewall—Kootenai's, that was. So it must be the other's bronc that showed the print of shoe-bars.

Pulling away from Chinook on a fresh mount, Gordon cast up his chances. "I can hit for the Assineboine and follow up that old sign," he thought, "or stay with Kootenai's and his playmate's trail. They'll break it, of course. But at that—"

THE two had struck west from Chinook by an old cattle trail. Their sign was still plain late that evening. But darkness drew down with Gordon still in an apparently empty expanse of brushy plains. He had brought food with him. He bedded down, brooding on his chances a long time.

Morning found him in the saddle again. He pushed on at a brisk pace. In midmorning the men he followed struck away from the old trail; after that the way led up long ridges and along the edges of plateaus. Dave knew he was drawing up. Now the pair were breaking trail, circling, employing every dodge. The horse with the shoe-bars always led. Gordon raked over everything he knew about its rider. It was not much.

"Brick Jackson!" he growled the name scornfully. "If that's his handle, I'm a Chinaman!"

He was firmly resolved to lay Jackson by the heels and prove him an outlaw. At the same time, Gordon meant to humble

Kize Meeker—yes, and smash him, if need be.

The indubitable proof that Kize had turned loose two of Bill Mundy's crowd would be more than enough to finish the old law dog.

"And about time," Dave gritted. "Why don't the old fool have sense enough to step down and give a younger man his chance?" Well, he'd make his own chance; he wasn't leaving it to anyone else.

That night he again lay out, deep in wild country. No grazing steers dotted the rolling miles of brush around the headwaters of the Assineboine. The water-shed ridges provided excellent cover for such quarry as he was hunting.

The next day, Gordon spotted a sentinel perched on a grassy knoll, just as the other lifted his head for a sweeping look around. Ducking quickly from sight, Dave grinned.

"I'm not far from Mundy's camp," he told himself. "I had Craig and his pard right, and no mistake!"

With Indian stealth he dismounted and pushed forward on foot. It was not so difficult as he had imagined to approach the outlaw camp. But he had heard of traps which failed to snap until their victim turned back. He advanced so cautiously that it was nearing sunset by the time he took a wary look through the brush and found Bill Mundy's hide-out spread before him.

IT WAS on a little grassy flat beside the creek. Two graceful cottonwoods stood here—at their base, piled camp materials, bed rolls, and the like. A man at the fire was cooking the evening meal; two others were getting ready to eat. Then Gordon snapped suddenly taut. That gent on the spread blanket, a little to one side, was Brick Jackson! Kootenai Craig was with him. The pair were murmuring together in undertones.

"Come an' git it, you two," the cook growled to them. "This ain't no caffy-teary, but yuh help yoreselves all the same."

Kootenai got to his feet. Jackson rose and followed him to the fire. All fell to eating. When they were done, Jackson got up from his heels, on which he had been squatting, and remarked, "I'll spell the lookout while he eats—"

Nobody said anything. Jackson strolled off in the direction of the knoll. Gordon watched him, a gleam in his eye.

"It'd be a cinch to nab him now," he reflected. He wanted to get it over with. And yet, something held him rooted where he was; the question of which of the others was Bill Mundy.

A creased and dirty reward dodger in Dave's pocket showed Mundy to be a lank, craggy, lantern-jawed individual. There was no one even remotely like that here. But the words which drifted to Dave's ears soon explained that. The men were discussing a proposed move of the camp, arguing warmly.

"We better be here when Bill shows up!" one declared. "He won't think much of havin' to traipse around follerin' us—"

"What of it?" another growled. "We got our own hides to look out for, ain't we?"

"Dang it, Baldy, yo're gettin' worse'n an ole woman," a third rasped. "We're safe enough right here! Bill said he'd be back by tomorrer some time—" The talk dropped into a muttering drone, and Gordon caught no more.

The lines of Dave's face drew tight with satisfaction. If Mundy was away for a day, that would give him plenty of time to map his plan of action. He wanted nothing better just now.

The relieved sentinel came in for his supper. The others sat around the fire, smoking or arguing amongst themselves. In the glow of the flame, Kootenai got up to check his rifle. He said, "Wal, reckon I'll put in my stretch on the hill—"

Watching him move away in the dark-

ness, Gordon suddenly found his plans fully matured. "I'll be able to get the lowdown on Jackson out of Kootenai," he muttered. "I'll sneak up and jump him—choke it out of him." Swiftly his thoughts ran ahead. He'd have to hogtie Craig and get him back to Chinook with him for evidence. It would spell the finish for Kize Meeker all right. But what about Jackson? Could Dave hope to take him in too?

NOT even his uneasiness could hold him back now. Like a shadow he stole toward the knoll. His boots filled when he forded the creek and he cursed silently—they squished at every step. It took only a matter of seconds to empty them. Then he was nearing the knoll.

Only the stars gave any light; the breeze brought a vague hint of surrounding wildness and space. Creeping up the slope, Dave probed the darkness warily, his heart hammering. Keenly he watched for some sign of Kootenai—a cigarette's glow, a rustle of the grass.

But there was nothing. The night seemed empty, lifeless. Snake-like, Dave wormed forward.

Suddenly something came down across his back with sickening heaviness. He thrashed sidewise, caught a pair of shoulders in his terror-stricken grasp. But he was already too late; iron fingers crawled up his arms, buried themselves in his throat.

Gasping wildly, Gordon struggled like a cougar. With his adversary he rolled over and over, locked in mortal combat. The next moment he found himself battling for possession of a broad-bladed knife. Already he had received a slash on his ribs. It was either him or the other!

With a lurch, Dave succeeded in getting on top. All the strength of naked fear poured into his arms. Desperation made him savagely relentless. Slowly the knife, threatening his face, his throat, began to turn. When it was pointed the other way, Gordon fell forward on it. Its handle-butt bruised his chest. The blade sank into yielding flesh; there was a groan and a convulsive shudder under him. Kootenai's mad struggling ceased.

Dave fell away, trembling. Rage burst over him. "Damn him! He made me do that! Now I did raise hell with things!"

Never would information about Brick Jackson come out of Kootenai Craig's lips. Nor would he ever serve as state's evidence. Dave cursed the man luridly in a whisper, only partly relieved by the fact of his own narrow escape. All the time, his thoughts were traveling fast. He had to get Kootenai's body away from here in a hurry, or his own presence would be guessed.

Feverishly he felt under Craig's body for the blood he was afraid he would find pooled there. But the knife was still in the wound—not until morning at least, would anything be suspected from that direction. Sighing his relief, Dave knelt to get his arms under the blocky, rawhide body.

Just as he was on the point of lifting, there came a sudden brush-rustle—a murmur of approaching voices. Dropping Kootenai, Dave whirled, his breath caught. Jackson and the owlhoot called Baldy were coming. Gordon knew it meant a quick run for him, or else be cornered here. Like a hawk-dodging cottontail he dived into the brush, scuttled away.

MAKING sure that Kootenai could hear their approach, Jackson and Baldy swung up the knoll. There was no answer to their low calls. Suddenly and without warning, Jackson stumbled over

something which lay in the grass.

"Huh! That ain't Kootenai, is it?" Baldy rasped.

"It's him, all right," Jackson grunted. "No rattler bite, either—here's a knife stuck in his ribs." Level-voiced, emotional, he finished curtly, "Get hold of his legs, Baldy. We're carryin' him down below."

They lost no time in doing so, the brush raking Craig's swinging body. The owlhoots around the fire scrambled up, their eyes popping. Kootenai was laid beside the fire; Baldy silently made sure he was dead. He sank back on his heels, his visage sober.

"What d'you know about this, Jackson?"

The latter evinced surprise at the question. "Why, it's pretty plain there's somebody around here who'll do the same for the rest of us—"

One of the outlaws snorted, his voice like a rasping file, "Was you an' Koot followed out from Chinook?"

Jackson's brows lifted. "Must've been that, of course," he said musingly. "Although I thought I'd made sure—" He broke off to examine Kootenai more closely. "No Indian did this," he pointed out the position of the knife-thrust. "It's the law, I'd say—a single man, or a pair of 'em."

The others nodded. Baldy ordered, "Scatter, boys, an' nail the skunks!" He added, "This shore ain't goin' to set well with Bill!"

They grabbed up their rifles, started to glide into the shadows. Jackson halted them. "No need of botherin'," he told them grimly. "I'll bring in the gent who finished Kootenai, or I won't be back myself—"

"Don't delay on our account," grunted one of the others.

Jackson took no heed of the tone of this, turning on his heel. A moment later the darkness swallowed him up. None of the owlhoots saw or heard him again; but toward dawn he found a spot where a single bronc had been tethered in the brush. It was browsed off, and the dust was chopped up. Jackson nodded to some thought of his own.

Ten minutes later he was in his own saddle and swinging away. The sign he followed was plain reading, for whoever had made it was thinking of nothing but putting distance behind him. Nevertheless, during the morning Jackson drew up steadily. The manner of Kootenai's death had told him that Kize Meeker was not responsible; and for that reason he was not surprised when he spotted Dave Gordon racing across the brush, half a mile in the lead.

DAVE disappeared behind a ridge, and slipping out of the saddle, Jackson stole forward on foot. He seemed to know exactly what he was doing. Nor had he made a mistake; for by the time Dave showed his head warily from the ridge-top as he scanned his surroundings, Jackson found the place where Gordon had tethered his bronc. He sank into the brush nearby, a six-gun in his hand.

He was still there when Dave stole back to remount and shove on. Dave went a ghastly white when Jackson's gun poked him in the back and the slow, cool drawl said:

"Stand right still."

Dave obeyed, except for the shudder which ran over him. He seemed scarcely aware of it when the other relieved him of his arms. Then he whirled.

"What yuh want with me, J-jackson?"

The latter neglected any sort of a reply. When he jerked a thumb toward Gordon's horse, Dave clambered aboard hurriedly. He submitted while he was tied firmly into the saddle. Then Jackson led the bronc back to where he had left his own.

"Wh—what'll yuh do with me?" Dave quavered again.

Still no reply. Dave's scalp prickled,

and he did not speak again. There was mingled relief and horror in the knowledge that Jackson was heading, not back toward the owlhoot hide-out, but in the direction of Chinook.

They reached town in late afternoon. Dave's heart shrivelled to the size of a pea when he realized he was being taken through the street tied up this way. His sole relief was the fact that nobody realized the terrible irony in his position; but he got little comfort from it when people glared as if he couldn't believe his eyes.

Jackson made straight for the sheriff's office, and once there, released Dave's cramped legs and pulled him off the horse and shoved him through the door.

"Better take charge of this coyote, Meeker," said Jackson dryly, "before somebody shoots him for a wolf—"

"Reckon I kin do that," Kize nodded grimly, his hard eyes boring Gordon balefully. Dave burst into a wild spate of revelations. Jackson was an owlhoot, fresh from Bill Mundy's hide-out!

"Take a back seat!" Jackson shoved him into a chair with violence. He turned to Kize. "I almost had a hold on Bill Mundy's collar when this fool busted into things. I don't know whether he's wrecked the works or not."

Dave demanded hoarsely, "Who are you, Jackson?"

The latter favored him with a glance. "Wakin' up, are yuh? Blaze Corbin's the handle."

It was the name of a United States marshal known throughout the Northwest for daring and resourcefulness. Dave Gordon melted down like a candle beside a hot stove.

"You mean—you—" It was all he could do to get words out. "You're—Blaze Corbin?" There was disbelief in the hoarse whisper; then chagrin, and a terrible dismay. He whirled on Meeker. "And, Kize, you knew him all the time?"

"Reckon I did," was the curt answer. Kize said to the marshal, "This is hell in a hand-basket, all right. Anythin' that kin be done about it—any help I kin give yuh, Blaze?" He had dropped the "Jackson."

Corbin nodded. "Plenty, Meeker. We'll pull away from here right away."

"Shall I swear in a posse?"

Corbin hesitated. "No—your lightnin'-brained deputy here, will do."

Dave swallowed hard; but he was in no position to retort. Somehow he gathered how insignificant he was to this war-tempered pair of law dogs. He had nothing to say while Corbin related the killing of Kootenai Craig and its outcome.

"We better be on our way," Blaze concluded, rising. Dave came to life at that. He started to speak, checked himself. There wasn't anything adequate to say.

Chinook buzzed with speculation when, a few minutes later, the trio set off into the west. The tale of Gordon's arrival, tied up like an obstreperous calf, had already spread. He squirmed at the thought of the conversations that would occur on the subject, the snickering guffaws. Not even the present trip cheered him up, somehow; but Corbin and Kize Meeker weren't consulting him in the matter.

They rode side by side, thrashing out the situation and laying their plans. Dave didn't even know what these were, or what his part in them might be; riding behind, a sullen frown on his face, and rage in his heart.

IT WAS late in the evening before Corbin and Kize pulled up. Dave got out of the hull stiffly and caring for his bronc, rolled up in his blanket like a dead man. He had had no sleep for hours on end. Yet it was still dark when Blaze jolted him back to wakefulness, saying they would push on.

That was three in the morning. The first faint flush of dawn found them threading the headwaters of the Assineboine. A mile from the site of the outlaw camp Corbin again drew up. After a word with Kize, he slipped away.

"What's he doin'?" Dave queried nervously.

"He's seein' whether yuh ruined everything or not," was the unfeeling reply. Far from vindictive by nature, Meeker believed in an occasional sharp lesson where it was needed.

A few minutes later Corbin stepped back out of the brush. He shrugged in answer to Kize's inquiring look. "They're gone," he murmured. "I expected as much."

"Mebby," Dave offered diffidently, "Mundy decided on a move when he got back—they was talkin' about it, before."

Blaze shook a negative. "Mundy wasn't with 'em here at all, accordin' to the tracks. He may be now," he added. "We'll have to find that out."

"But how—?"

"There's another camp, deeper in the brush." This was a fact which Gordon hadn't learned. "Kootenai Craig mentioned it to me," Corbin explained to the sheriff.

At Kize's nod, they pushed on without further words. Two hours later, sweaty, harassed by switching brush, they halted again at a sign from Corbin. For some minutes the latter had been thoughtful, glancing at Dave again and again calculatingly.

"Blaze," Kize said to him, "from what yuh say, it won't be no cinch to walk into that camp now. Yuh said things when yuh left. How'll yuh cover yoreself?"

CORBIN'S smile was crooked. "I told them I'd bring back the man who finished Kootenai," he said simply, "or I wouldn't come back at all. I reckon I'll have to do just that."

Dave snapped taut in a flash. "What the hell, Corbin!" he rasped, his throat constricting. He saw the other's plan in a twinkling. "Yuh can't take me back there! They'll kill me!"

"Don't yuh worry," Meeker advised tersely. "Blaze knows what he's doin'."

And Corbin added, "If anyone is killed, it'll be both of us."

"Yuh mean all three of us," Kize corrected. The slant the talk was taking didn't make Dave feel any better. He protested vehemently, but without result. Corbin bound his arms again; the deputy's guns he handed over to Kize. "You know what you're supposed to do," he told the sheriff, referring to some previously made plan. "I'll try to give you as much time as you need to get ready."

Dave tested his tone and found it confident. But he was far from feeling the same way when Corbin said they would push on, and thrust Dave into the brush ahead of him.

The latter knew they were not far from the second outlaw camp. He could feel the presence of those men; knew with a fatal certainty what would happen the instant he stepped amongst them. His glance darted about desperately. He had a last glimpse of the sheriff holding half a dozen guns, a stout ball of twine in his other hand.

Gordon was so distracted that he missed the significance of these things.

STUMBLING through the brush at Corbin's heels, Dave felt his soul go sour in him. He scarcely noticed when they broke out on a faint trail on which horses had passed. The next moment he stumbled into Corbin, and halted, as a voice came to them from ahead:

"How 'bout a little arm exercise, boys?" it proposed with deadly ease.

Corbin took hold easily. "Howdy, Baldy," he made answer carelessly. He started to push on, only to stop as a slug droned through the air near his head. But it was closer yet to Dave, and the latter shrank.

"That's better," Baldy announced. And then, as curiosity got the better of him, "Who is that yuh got there, Jackson?"

"It's the gent who stuck Kootenai—"

"Oh. Him, huh?" Baldy's tone changed.

"Reckon Bill'll be pleased to talk matters over with that hombre."

Dave shivered. Baldy smiled his appreciation and murmured, "Right on ahead, Jackson—nice an' slow an' easy, if it's all the same to you."

Following Corbin, Dave Gordon soon found himself in the midst of a camp very similar to the first, except that it was even more thickly surrounded by brush, and the atmosphere of watchfulness here was even more tense, if anything.

Five men on the other side of the little open space jerked to attention at sight of them. Their leader raked the newcomers with a hard inspection and pushed forward.

"Yo're the occasion for the shootin', I take it," he rasped to Corbin. "Jackson, the boys said the name was? Maybe I could find a better name for yuh, at that."

Corbin ignored the thin challenge in Bill Mundy's voice. He had measured wits with this kind of range wolf before; now he met the other's look, eye to eye.

THE other owlhoots gathered around, a hard-looking crew. They fastened bleak looks on Dave Gordon, who felt his very bones turn to water; after a strained silence, each man turned away and spat. Mundy was gauging Dave too.

"This the man yuh went after?" he grunted.

Corbin said calmly, "Picked up his sign near the other camp. Runnin' for home, he was. He didn't make it."

Dave's veins felt wrung dry of blood. The very quietness of this talk warned him of its deadly seriousness. He tried his hardest to avoid the stares of the outlaws, but he couldn't keep his eyes away from them.

What would the first move be? Whatever it was, he knew that every breath he drew from now on depended on Blaze Corbin, and on nothing else.

Mundy was gauging the latter shrewdly. "You look okay—and you sound okay," he rumbled. "But ain't it kinda strange, Kootenai kickin' off just at this time?"

"A man's time comes," Corbin shrugged.

Mundy wasn't done with him yet. "How come yuh knew just where to find this camp?" he snapped.

Blaze evinced surprise at the question. "Kootenai told me," he replied. "In fact, he and I have holed up here in the past." He knew he was safe in saying that much; Craig had admitted to him that he occasionally worked alone. But it didn't matter how the talk went now, so long as Mundy's crowd believed what it heard. Time was going by—and time was what old Kize needed.

"Wal—" Bill Mundy nodded deliberately to himself. "Yuh sound like the real article to me, Jackson, bringin' this star-toter in. If we kin get it out of him why he stuck Kootenai—"

"Oh, he's your man," Corbin declared coolly. Dave was infuriated by his assurance. Was the man deliberately tossing his life away? Fear knifed him through and through.

Mundy nodded again. "I'm inclined to believe yuh, Jackson. If yuh didn't spot anybody around on the way in, I reckon we'll go back to the other camp."

Dave didn't miss the significance of this. There were no handy trees at this camp. Corbin appeared not to care much what

was done. He was certainly skirting the ragged edge!

"I know what you're figurin' on, Mundy," Corbin was saying. "But we won't do it that way—"

"Why not?" The outlaw leader was sharp.

"I," Corbin pointed out, "didn't have to bring this gent in. I *could've* knocked him over on the wing—but I didn't. It struck me there was a better way of usin' him."

That got to them. They waited, gazing at Blaze. "Yeah? What way's that?" Mundy grunted.

CORBIN unfolded a scheme for using the deputy as kidnap bait while the gang pulled off, at a distant point, a bank robbery which Kootenai Craig had told him was being considered by Mundy. As he talked, Corbin let his eye run over the brush surrounding the camp. His whole purpose was to give Kize Meeker time in which to carry out their plans—but Dave Gordon shuddered at the reflection that all his talk of being Blaze Corbin might indeed be a ruse. If that was true, his doom was sealed as surely as if he were dead right now.

"Let me get the straight of this," Mundy broke in. "Are you in this with the rest of us, Jackson?"

"You better count me in," Corbin retorted thinly. "I ain't in the habit of workin' for nothin'—"

"Wal—that's so. But we can't plan nothin' without all of us bein' here. Red," he turned to a man beside him, "go an' call Baldy in. Tell him we need him."

"Stand right where yuh are, Red," a new voice broke in grimly, near at hand.

A bomb exploding in their midst would scarcely have surprised the outlaws any more.

They whirled. There was a slap of hands on leather; then everyone froze in his tracks as the battery of eyes picked out old Kize, standing in a break in the brush on the bank. A gun in his hand was trained on them all. His other arm was concealed from view.

"Stay jest the way yuh are?" he warned harshly. And tossing words over his shoulder as though to a posse, "Wing the first that makes a move, boys. But don't hit Dave—" His raking glance avoided Corbin, settling on Bill Mundy. "Wal, Mundy?"

It was so cool that it took the wind out of the outlaw chief with a rush. Dave Gordon found himself praying that the gang would fold without putting up a fight; but he neglected to take Mundy's reputation for daredevil tactics into consideration.

"So it's you, Meeker?" In the split-second of his words, his hand flashed to his hip. His gun crashed and the muzzle-burst licked toward Kize.

In the same instant, the outlaws scattered outward. More shots cracked. A fusillade broke out along the bank as Kize yanked his carefully strung cords. Gordon felt himself knocked flat; he lay motionless, bewildered.

THE surprise shots from the brush demoralized the outlaws. One yelled shrilly; another cursed. Blaze Corbin had his gun out. He ran the way most of them were going. He hit one with his gun-barrel and the man sprawled headlong.

Another went down with Meeker's slug in his hip. Bill Mundy sprang to his side—attempted to lift him. It was brave, but no more than to be expected of him. Corbin was beyond him now. Right and left the owlhoots went down as he slashed at them.

The last was a tough proposition. Corbin jammed a fist into his midriff. Down the man went.

In a flash, then, Corbin whirled and plunged toward Bill Mundy. He shoved his gun into the outlaw leader's back and sang out:

"Call it a day, Mundy!"

Mundy jerked a look over his shoulder and his eyes widened. "So that's it, eh?"

slid from between his iron lips. He said no more.

The sheriff snapped a slug at a man trying to struggle up and steal away. The outlaw slipped down again, crying for quarter. Kize came through the brush dangling a handful of manacles. "I'll jest make shore of you first, Mundy," he grunted.

He snapped the cuffs on the outlaw, and then did the same for the others, while Dave Gordon sat up to stare around dazedly. Corbin had whirled and started for the point where Baldy, the lookout, had been stationed. He came back a moment later, shaking his head.

"Baldy did a sneak on us," he announced.

DAVE got up and stared at this man of iron as if he'd never seen him before. He was still dazed. Kize grinned at him. "Wal, how do yuh like law work now, Dave?" he queried, dryly.

"If this is a sample, I'm gettin' done with it right off!" Gordon told him sourly. Without being told, he rounded up the outlaws' broncs and brought them in—helped to tie Mundy and the others on. Corbin brought his and Kize's mounts. They all swung up, ready to start off.

"Well, Kize," Corbin grinned, "I expect you'll get these coyotes into Chinook okay—with the able assistance of Mr. Gordon."

Kize stared his surprise. "Yuh mean yuh ain't goin' in with us?"

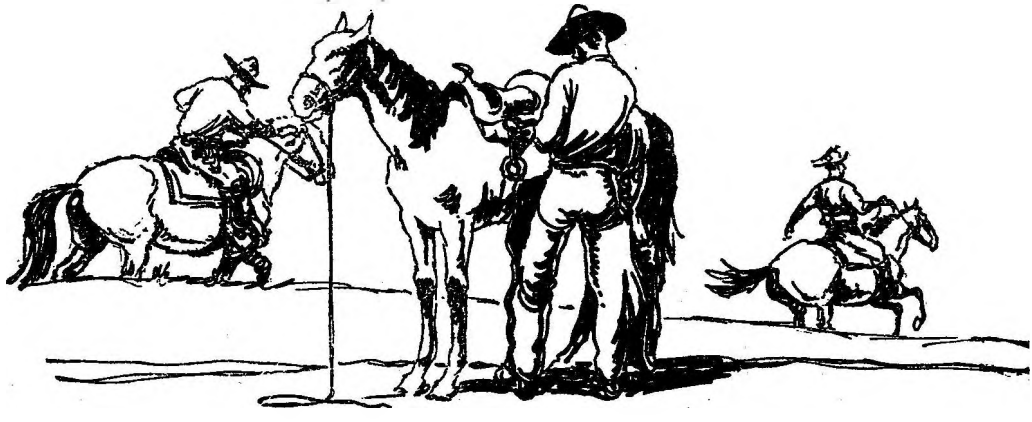
The answer was a headshake. "I've still got work to do—"

"Wal, yo're lettin' me give yuh the credit for nabbin' Mundy an' his crowd, ain't yuh?" Kize was still puzzled. "I didn't do nothin' much—an' Dave did even less," he ended wryly.

Corbin shook his head again. "The jackpot's all yours, Kize. You had it comin' to yuh. I'm still workin' under cover. Baldy," he added in explanation, "is wanted in several states for just about as many things as Mundy's got against him."

Dave was thinking hard and fast as he saw how things were turning out. "Say," he struck in; "where do I get off in this? I'll be the laughin' stock of Chinook if I ain't got a good story to tell! This is a hell of a note! What am I goin' to do?"

Corbin looked at him quizzically. "You'll have to figure that out for yourself," was his quiet reply. "Tell 'em you was obeyin' orders and you won't be far from the truth. There's just one piece of advice I'll add to that, Gordon—the next time you decide to play bait for an old law dog, just be sure you keep out of reach of the bitin' end!"



ST. PETER'S PUP

By EATON K. GOLDTHWAITE

Author of "Resurrection River," "The Old Man's Boy," etc.

Capitalizing Luck—There's a Business for You

EVEN at midnight it can be hot when you're only four degrees below the Equator. Especially in a river town like Iquitos with its mud walls and corrugated iron roofs, its *cholas* and *caucheros* and Indians. Especially in a little two-by-four room on the second floor of an adobe saloon where the river's damp breath hung beneath a smoking lamp. Especially in a poker game where you were hoping to push your little pile into a sizeable prospecting stake. And very especially if, like William Kelly, you knew that Big Felipe, the Peruvian in the green visor, was a shark and a welcher, and his friend Alfredo was an unknown quantity. And then if you added the blond young fellow in the sailor's clothes and wondered how long his luck was going to last.

Maybe if you wandered down the one long street with its noisy cantinas and its indescribable stench of rotting fruits and sweating humanity you would hesitate; perhaps, as you peered down the lazy, crawling side streets at the thatched, bam-

boo shacks you would finger the hundred bucks in your pocket and decide to make a deal with the skipper of the freighter, *Alvord Wechten,* lying there at anchor, to take you back to Brooklyn. But you wouldn't if you were William Kelly. Not if you knew that Big Felipe was in town with money from a rubber shipment, looking for a poker game. Not if you knew where the game was, and more important, where the alluvial gold deposits of the Incas were if you had money enough to finance an expedition to get there.

No, you'd probably do as Kelly had done. You would walk down that street and duck under the galvanized awning and turn left at the faded, paint-peeled green door, watching out of the corner of your eye the hard-looking gang of sailors just casually lounging there. And you'd climb the worn, rickety stairs——

"Well, what for you wait? An earthquake? *Madre de Dios!*"

Big Felipe chewed at the ends of his mustache as he glared at the tall, stiff redhead across the green baize cloth. Felipe's tobacco-stained fingers played restlessly with his slim stack, and the great diamond on his fourth finger threw back gleaming points to the low-hung lamp. The unshaded portion of his lean jaw, visible beneath the visor at his narrow forehead, was pale. And it had reason to be; losing steadily since four o'clock!

At Felipe's right, the slender blond boy in the sailor's clothes flipped his unsmoked cigarette neatly through a hole in the window screen and also watched William Kelly from a flushed, half-smiling face. The boy's cards were pressed flat against his chest, and his right hand crept to his lap, gauging the thickness of the pile of banknotes beneath his thigh.

KELLY moved. He covered his cards and squinted at the collection of cash in the center. About thirty dollars. Not big enough yet, for beneath the callouses of the Irishman's big palm rested the two, three, four, five and six of diamonds. All pink, glowing and lusty, quietly waiting to hand somebody an awful jolt. Kelly turned his wide-set, expressionless blue eyes to Alfredo, the sleepy-faced *cauchero.*

"I'll take a free ride," Kelly said. "I'll check."

Big Felipe snorted. "So?" he asked Alfredo impatiently.

Alfredo lifted a fat lid, shrugged and segregated a portion of his comfortable pile. *"Cinco duros,"* he mumbled.

"So?" Felipe's loose mouth grinned. "Two cards you took. Maybe you bluff? I make the bet five more."

The flush-faced boy dug into the cards at his chest, drew them minutely apart, pushed them together. His hand hesitated over the mound of dollars before him.

"Cost you ten to see, fifteen to raise," Felipe growled, edging forward until his arms half-obscured the money on the table.

Stiff-necked, Kelly reached out a boney forefinger and tapped Felipe's wrist. "Keep your hands off the money," he ordered calmly.

Felipe backed up with a roar. "You accuse me that I cheat?" he yelled. "I, Felipe Botega?"

Kelly's blue eyes were cold shadows of unconcern. His thin lips grinned mirthlessly. "Nope. But when I play cards for money, I like everybody to obey the rules. And you, kid, take that pile of banknotes from under your knee and put it on the table. Nobody'll steal it. Keep your hands above board and you'll live longer. Right?" he turned to the sleepy-eyed Alfredo.

"Si," Alfredo hissed with exhaling breath and kept his eyes on his cards.

Felipe's mouth showed ugly lines and his shoulders twitched. Angrily he settled down in his chair, eyes glaring at Alfredo, disdaining to watch as the boy tossed another unlighted cigarette through the window and reluctantly brought his banknotes into view.

"I'll raise," the boy said nervously.

Kelly shot him a quick, veiled glance. "Okay," he shrugged. "Me too. The ante's twenty-five now, Alfredo."

Big Felipe swore angrily and glared at his hand. Alfredo blinked vacant eyes and tossed his cards to the table. The boy breathed in noisily, an unlighted cigarette bobbing in his lips.

"Sangría serpiente de cascabel!" Felipe shouted. "Either you bluff or you have the luck of *Diabolo!* I call!" Recklessly, he thrust his remaining stack to the center.

THE stiff, thin-lipped Irishman watched him calmly. "You're four dollars light on your call," he said. "And you were two dollars light on your raise. This is a cash game."

Big Felipe's loose mouth sagged. "You accuse me?" he gasped, his hand darting toward his belt.

"You can make anything out of it you like," Kelly grinned. "You're short six dollars. Keep your hands on the table!"

Felipe's enraged eyes, gleaming black points behind pale slits, surveyed the smiling, wide-shouldered Kelly. His hand hovered near his belt and his arched back remained poised.

Alfredo, yawning sleepily, muttered, "Sit down, Felipe. I loan you fifty dollars. Now you owe me one hundred."

Through the rotting screen of the window at the blond boy's back the night sounds and smells of Iquitos drifted in to envelope the absorbed players. Down the street a piano jangled and voices were raised in raucous medley. From the river sounded the sudden, penetrating hiss of escaping steam, growing into the throbbing note of a freighter's whistle.

When the noise had died from the room, the blond boy flushed to the tips of his ears. "My last hand," he said apologetically. "That's my boat."

Kelly shrugged. "Everybody check?" he asked, and laying his diamond flush fanwise, reached for the money. "All pink," he chuckled, "and in a row."

Big Felipe cursed and threw his cards across the room. *"Madre de Dios!* Such luck as I have—"

The blond boy reached over Kelly's outstretched arms and arrested the progress of the money. "Mine are all black," he said calmly "and in a row too. But they start at the ten."

Kelly swallowed hard. The surprised expression of his face changed Felipe's anger to sudden mirth, and Alfredo blinked sleepy eyes. "He has the luck of the angels," Alfredo said, crossing himself.

"I am pretty lucky," the boy said as he straightened out the notes and stacked the silver dollars. "In Manaos they called me the "Lucky Dog of St. Peter." It seems that I just can't lose. Sorry that I must go."

Big Felipe moved. "And where you

think you go?" he asked unpleasantly, his tobacco-stained fingers on the boy's pile, his dark eyes staring insolently.

The blond boy paled. "Take your hands off my money," he snapped.

"Yeah," Kelly drawled, slumping down fractionally. "Let the kid alone."

Felipe's loose mouth twisted to a grin. "Who says?" he challenged. His right arm appeared suddenly from his belt, holding a flat, broad-bladed knife. Balancing the knife on his palm Felipe ordered, "He stays. Or he gives back my money. He cheats. He has been bringing the cards up from his lap."

ALFREDO watched the tableau with blank, expressionless eyes, his fat face a greasy mask. Kelly slumped lower

until his neck rested on the back of his chair, his wide blue eyes smiling unconcernedly.

"He didn't cheat, and it ain't your money. Let 'im go," the Irishman said.

Felipe's grin vanished. His knife arm moved swiftly backwards and his other hand clutched at the boy's money.

From his nearly horizontal position, Kelly lashed out with his foot, jabbing a heel into Felipe's shin. The big man let out a howl of pain and lost his balance, the knife describing a futile arc through empty air. The boy's money scattered like leaves in a fall wind.

Kelly recovered his sitting position, narrow eyes on the scrambling Felipe. The blond boy gathered money. From the other side of the table, miraculously, a heavy, blued-steel revolver appeared in Alfredo's lazy hand.

"Señors," Alfredo mumbled yawningly, "the game will resume."

Two sharp, angry blasts from the freighter had filled the room and died away. Rivers of sweat coursed down the flushed face of the blond boy as, hand after hand, his pile continued to grow. Some of Alfredo's sleepiness had departed with his money; the fat *cauchero* watched fascinated as the cards fell, kept his eyes glued to the boy's wrists, arms and hands at his turn with the deal. There was no trick about it; Lady Luck stood at the boy's shoulder and St. Peter held him by the leash.

"I'm about cleaned," Kelly grunted as Big Felipe, hollow eyes wild in his starch-like face, attempted to borrow.

"También," Alfredo mumbled, the blued-steel revolver at his elbow. "If the señor permit, I go down to my friend Pedro for a loan. Felipe, the ring," his beady eyes resting smoulderingly on the fire flashing from the big man's finger. "Pedro will give you a thousand on it."

"No," Felipe snarled. "You think I sell this ring? Hah! A thousand indeed! No. Our friend, the Dog of St. Peter, will advance me a loan. He will loan to all of us, and the game will continue."

The flush went out of the blond boy's face. Fractionally he pushed his chair back. "I don't think so," he announced coolly. "You said this was a cash game. You can't win from me. I can't win if I loan you my winnings. No, I don't think so."

Big Felipe scowled, half raised himself from his chair.

"Sit down," Kelly grunted. "You make me tired, bouncin' up all the time. The kid's right. If we're broke, the game is over."

ALFREDO stirred. "But the game is not over," he said blandly. "I am not broke. Not so long as I have my *cauchouc* in the warehouse awaiting shipment. Pedro will lend me on it. The *señor* will wait, *también.*" He thrust the revolver in his waistband and stood up. "I return quickly," he said.

"Get some for me," Felipe ordered. "Pedro knows me. But the ring . . ." He shook his head.

Alfredo crossed to the door and opened it. Instantly he slammed it shut again and threw the bolt. The revolver jumped from nowhere into his hand. *"Maldito!"* he whispered. "On the stairs, men—six or more! No doubt the robbers who were at Pedro's last week!"

"Highjackers!" Kelly roared, pushing back his chair and thrusting it under the doorknob. "You blond boy——"

Simultaneous with Kelly's words came action from within and without. The door staggered under a heavy blow, and as Alfredo fired into it, Big Felipe scooped up the currency from the table, straight-armed the Dog of St. Peter and leaped through the screen of the window.

"Don't let that guy get away!" Kelly yelled. "There's more'n a thousand bucks in that pile he got!"

Alfredo, his fat face emotionless, whipped about and sent a shot through the

window. He dashed the table aside, scattering silver dollars about the room. Leaping over the dazed blond boy he leaned from the window and fired into the darkness.

There was plenty of trouble at Kelly's end.

The last crashing assault on the door had burst the top hinge. Kelly, torn between the desire for a fight and the realization that, since most of the money was gone, a fight was senseless, stopped trying to hold the door in place and looked to the window.

The blond boy sat, his legs curled under him, grinning. A gaping hole in the screen showed where Felipe had gone and where Alfredo had been.

"Alfredo—?" Kelly gasped.

St. Peter's Pup grinned, made a sweeping, suggestive movement with his hands. "I pulled his feet from under him," he said. "Let 'em in."

THROUGH the kindling wood of door and chair poured hard-eyed, grim-faced men. Not highjackers, these; they looked clean, and mad. First in line a bulky fellow in dungarees, throwing a wild right in the general direction of William Kelly.

"Hold your punches, Charley," the blond boy said quietly. "Kelly's okay. Big Felipe scrammed through the window, and I just helped the fellow with the gun after him."

"You're all right, Pup?"

The fellow called Charley growled it, but the men behind him asked it in their faces and the quick, anxious looks of their eyes.

St. Peter's Pup got to his feet. He grinned. "Bill Kelly, of Brooklyn and points south, shake hands with Charley Rawson, 'Mister' to everybody but me; Hank Noble, Cookie Wilson, Moosie Romano, the lad with the bedroom eyes. My gang. The works of the *Alvord Wechten.*"

"Glad to know you," Kelly stuck out a big paw.

Mister Charley Rawson blew on his knuckles. "'Sa pleasure," he acknowledged. "That damn door was hard. What the hell's all the ruckus, Pup?"

The blond boy shuffled forward. "Moosie," he said "you better pick up the silver that's left. Some of it belongs to Kelly, but most of it's ours. Maybe, for Kelly's benefit, I ought to explain. You see, I'm pretty lucky."

"So I noticed," Kelly grinned.

"Yes. Well, we've got a little system all rigged out. When I'm ahead; comfortable, that is, not too far, I give the boys a signal.

"In this case it was a cigarette through the window. Then Moosie relays the information to the ship and Charley blows the whistle. That's my excuse for leaving. Usually it works."

"Yeah," Charley scowled and rumpled his bulky shoulders. "We all got shares in the Pup, see. A percentage. So we're interested in seein' him come back okay."

Kelly manipulated makings and licked the edge of the paper. "I wondered why you was tossin' all the good smokes out the window. How's the Old Man feel about you usin' up steam on the whistle?"

Charley laughed, hard. "He's used to it. Hell, we ain't been paid for so long he's glad to keep us quiet. Things ain't so hot with the *Alvord Wechten.* The Pup's the best asset we got."

Kelly's lean face was grim. "Look's like the Pup's luck has run out. When Big Felipe went through the window he took more'n a thousand with him."

Hank Noble, the square-jawed seaman behind the First Mate, choked. "A thousan'?" he sputtered. "Where's this guy live? I'll tear th' place down, board by board. I'll bust him—I'll——"

"It's a long walk," Kelly said soberly. "He's got a room here in Iquitos, but most likely he'll head for his *chacra* up the *Yacu Huacamayo.* It's a reg'lar stockade, and

he's got a couple dozen Indians that're handy with their machetes."

Charley Rawson dug his hands into his pockets. "Pup, this guy with the cannon. Friend of Felipe's?"

"Alfredo? Might be. He was on his way to borrow some money from a man named Pedro when you arrived. Said he had a rubber shipment laying in the warehouse."

Charley Rawson and Hank Noble looked at each other. "Cargo? Well, now——"

"How about our thousand bucks?" Cookie Wilson, the fellow with the split ear wanted to know.

"Yeah," Charley scowled. "How far's it to this Felipe's fort?"

"Three, four days," Kelly replied laconically. "But we might be able to catch him on the way."

"Yeah." Charley balanced on the balls of his feet. The bucko mate stuck out all over him, now, and he crackled into action. Crisp orders fell from his lips: "Moosie, give Pup the silver so's he can figure Kelly's share. You, Cookie, get aboard and fix us up some grub. Hank, break out the rifles and don't forget my shotgun. I'm gonna tour around town tonight and sign up this Alfredo. Tomorrow we'll start for Felipe. You say he's only got a couple dozen measly Indians? What the hell!"

"You shoulda heard the Old Man holler," chuckled Mister Rawson to Kelly and the Pup. "Sounded like a busted cylinder head. Would've been a lot better if I coulda found this Alfredo. The push through the window must've scared the daylights out of 'im."

"More'n likely it sent him to the hospital," Kelly returned. He lapsed into silence, eyeing the outfit with inward approval.

Three boats, manned with clear-eyed, reckless sons of the sea, all hell-bent for Felipe and the thousand dollars. Armed to the teeth, and well-stocked with provisions conjured up by Cookie Wilson. A tough gang, hard to reckon with. Well, they needed to be. Felipe, if he had any sense at all, would be ready and waiting.

THE luck of St. Peter's Pup seemed to be holding. There was no rain. The sameness of the jungle along the banks of the *Huacamayo* slid by smoothly. Under the sweeping, muscular strokes of the seamen they made fast time, but not too fast. Each man knew he had a distance to go, and a job to do when he got there. They were a good crowd, happy-go-lucky but tempered with brains. Kelly liked them and exulted. And in his exultation was wistfulness too. If he could have a crew like this in the oft-planned and long delayed trip to the Andes gold deposits.

Kelly raised his hand, and the flotilla rested. The Irishman's eyes had spotted something in the water. Just a speck, but telltale. Paddling carefully he reached over and picked from the river a soggy object. The butt of a *cigarillo*. They were close.

Wordless, and hawkeyed, the men swept onward, keeping the same powerful stroke. Nearness brought caution; any bend in the river could reveal their quarry. Big Felipe might be alone in flight, or he might be surrounded by his henchmen. No need taking chances.

The river straightened, revealing a blank broad surface separated by a small island. Kelly signaled, pointing to the clean *playa*.

"We'll camp here," he ordered.

They accepted his authority without question. The jungle game of hare and hounds might be new to them, but because they were men of training, experienced in danger and accustomed to battle, they were patient.

Two,possibly three days of travel lay ahead, and if Big Felipe chose to wear himself out with uninterrupted paddling, the end would be quicker.

So, it was to be a siege. For three days the bends in the *Huacamayo* had uncovered no sign of Felipe. The man

had paddled, burning the water behind him.

"Think he might've scrammed into the brush?" Charley Rawson put the question of the *Alvord Wechten's* crew into words.

"Nope," Kelly replied tersely. "Too dangerous. He's in his place now, waitin'. Well, we'll see."

"How far?" St. Peter's Pup wanted to know. His fair skin was burned to a painful red and his lips were cracked, but confidence in his luck kept his eyes steady and his head erect.

"Couple hours," Kelly replied. "We'll stop some place and figure out a plan." He scowled, "Somethin' puzzles me, though."

"For instance?" Rawson challenged.

"The water's full o' charcoal," Kelly answered quietly. "Can't make it out."

"Hunh!" grunted the Mate, looking with new interest at the river "damned if it ain't. What do you figure?"

"I'm hopin' for the best," Kelly said grimly.

The Pup wrinkled his blistered nose. "I think I smell smoke," he announced. "Or something burnt. Are we running into a forest fire?"

Kelly moved his head impatiently. "Most of this jungle wouldn't burn if you poured gasoline on it. I been tryin' to tell myself for the last half hour that I didn't smell nothin', but I guess it's no use."

Rawson's face was puzzled. "I don't getcha. If it ain't a forest fire, what is it?"

Kelly's eyes were expressionless, his countenance wooden. "I don't like to think," he said. "We won't need to stop to figure any plans. Either we're runnin' into a bloody standup fight or a blank wall. Tell your boys to get the artillery ready."

Charley Rawson issued rapid, low-voiced orders. "You, Moosie, take the cover off the automatic. Hank, fill them clips. Cookie and Pup, handle the paddles. Kelly, ease my double-barrel up out o' that duffel."

No words were spoken in response; just the sound of satisfied grunts; the clicking of breech mechanisms, the scrape of shifting paraphernalia. A few moments, and "Decks all clear," was the quiet assurance from behind.

Charley Rawson grinned. "Okay. We're ready. How do we look?"

Kelly shook his head grimly. "Pretty good, but somethin's wrong."

"Wrong?" the Mate asked quickly, scanning his men, returning questioning eyes to Kelly.

"Not with us. With Felipe. If we was runnin' into a fight, Felipe'd have sharpshooters posted along here to pick us off. Nope. Either he's dumber'n I think, or else somethin's happened."

"Maybe he don't know we're after 'im," Rawson said hopefully.

In answer, Kelly pointed to the river ahead. Where previously smoke had been noticeable only to the nostrils, it was now visible to the eye. A low bank of it eddied lazily above the waters of the *Huacamayo*.

"All right," was Kelly's brisk command. "Around the next bend is it. We're too late, but no use takin' chances. We'll stick to this shore, paddlin' fast, and as we go by, watch the port bank but don't shoot unless shot at. If anybody's there, we'll damn soon find out."

THE acrid smoke drifted lazily, well above the water. On the left bank appeared an opening, the confluence of a stream. A hundred yards beyond lay a broad clearing in whose center stood a smouldering, level ruin. There was no re-

maining vestige of a stockade; no single hut, no sign of human life in that grim *chacra.*

Charley Rawson and the men from the *Alvord Wechten* saw, but did not comprehend. "Why, that dirty louse!" Charley exploded. "Afraid to fight! Burnt his damn fort down and beat it! We'll get him, if we got to go to Colombia!"

"Yeah?" Kelly grunted. "Beach the canoes while we figure things."

Into the lee of the smoke swearing, disappointed men turned their paddles. Charley Rawson, first aground, leaped out, clutching his shotgun. He ran swiftly up the *playa* and into the bare *chacra.*

Moosie Romano stepped ashore gingerly, stretching his legs, eyeing the antics of the Mate while he lighted a cigarette. Hank Noble sat stiff as a poker, his rifle across his knees. St. Peter's Pup looked at Kelly.

"What's it all about?" he asked quietly.

Kelly shrugged and pointed to Charley Rawson.

The Mate had stooped over to examine something in the ruin. Now he was running back, an expression of horror on his face.

"My God," Rawson gasped. There's bodies there, without no heads!"

"Uh huh," Kelly nodded grimly. "The Jivaros beat us to it."

A dejected group huddled about the hard-eyed, hard-thinking Kelly. The men from the *Alvord Wechten* had seen enough. They were licked, ready to start back.

"Looks like your luck has run out at last, Pup," Charley Rawson said. "God, I never seen nothin' like this. One or two wouldn't be so bad, but there's at least twenty——"

Hank Noble came up. His heavy jaw was blue. "One of 'em was white," he mumbled. "Big Felipe, I guess. Looks as if we're done." He placed his rifle carefully in the boat, and bit sadly into a dog-eared piece of cut plug.

"We ain't licked," Kelly announced suddenly. "Not yet."

Charley Rawson looked at him hard. "Meanin'?"

"This is Jivaro work," the big Irishman returned. "And from what I know about the Jivaros they ain't more'n two hours from here, shrinkin' heads and holdin' a religious meetin'. They'll be all charged up and they'll be dangerous. But tired, too, bein's they always dance all night before they attack. They might even be half-full o' *giamanchi,* which'll help us some. But there's at least fifty of 'em to six of us."

"What kind of arms have they got?" Charley Rawson asked.

"Machetes, spears, and rifles," Kelly said grimly.

"Rifles—unh!" Rawson didn't look so happy about that last. In a stand-off, surprise attack machetes and spears weren't much to worry about. But rifles——

"They got our thousand bucks, ain't they?" Cookie Wilson demanded.

"Yep."

"Well, what in hell're we waitin' for?" he snorted. "Okay, Kelly. Let's go."

KELLY squinted hard at the right bank and raised his hand abruptly. The silent, sweating men stopped paddling and looked. Nothing there, apparently, save *bejuco* vines trailing the water, and a dense jungle behind.

"At least thirty canoes, sunk," Kelly said in a low, scarcely audible voice. "Okay. We'll go up river and attack 'em from the north. Pup, you an' Hank hit 'em from center. Moosie and Cookie, take it from here. When you see us land, start in and start shootin'. Never mind what at, and yell at the top o' your lungs."

"Right," St. Peter's Pup grunted.

Swiftly, without a sound, Kelly and the Mate moved upstream. With cold, unafraid eyes they surveyed the bank. Through a break in the brush, suddenly, they saw bending, black-dyed figures about

a smokeless fire. Beyond the break, Kelly thrust the canoe ashore.

"Now!" the hatless, red-haired giant shouted and leaped from the boat, his Winchester roaring.

Downstream a chorus of yells split the air. Shots barked out and ricocheting bullets whined through the jungle. A new, deathly note resounded, the steady thump of the automatic rifle. At Kelly's left, deafeningly, the Mate's double-barrel poured a volley of slugs.

The surprised, frightened Jivaros screamed and raced crazily about their clearing. Before Kelly suddenly arose a file-toothed, heavy chested savage with wildly swinging machete. A .38 steel-jacket passed clean through his body and he sank to his knees. Behind him, a spear-armed black-dyed Jivaro leaped in the air and fell, his chest riddled with pellets from Rawson's smoking gun.

All hell tore loose. The half-dozen yelling, shooting white men sounded like a full company of charging Marines. Moosie, in the clear with the automatic rifle, cleaved a neat, sickening hole in the phalanx behind the fire. Hank Noble, a reckless light on his square grinning face, pumped death from the Winchester. Cookie Wilson, out of ammunition, was cracking heads with the rifle butt. Pup, both hands full of pistols, was calmer, singling out the riflemen among the bewildered, scrambling Jivaros.

Then, abruptly, it was over. Two score of bodies lay, eyes unseeing, piled grotesquely as they had fallen. The balance, scattered, scared and completely licked, had fled pell mell.

Kelly wiped his streaming face and grinned. "Okay, boys," he ordered. "Don't try to follow 'em. Look around, take what's ours and beat it before they round up their relations."

At the edge of the fire, ready for division, lay an assortment of spoils. Every movable object that had occupied Big Felipe's stockade and the huts in the *chacra* was there. Steel machetes, guns, cooking utensils, clothing, household wares, tools, trinkets; no item that could be carried away had been overlooked. Moosie, digging in the pile, yelped joyfully. In triumph he held aloft a pair of pants and from the pocket extracted a fat, leather wallet.

"Okay," Charley Rawson shouted gleefully. "I take it back. Pup, your luck is still good!"

KELLY, near the fringe of the jungle, moved swiftly through the fallen warriors. All dead. The job had been well done, infinitely complete. Here lay the medicine man, his hideous face softened, the necklace of *paña* teeth loose against his shoulders. Beyond him, the chief, old, wizened and shrunken, his head not unlike the hundreds of *tsantsas* that his hands had prepared in life. His thin hands were still now, and from his thumb gleamed Big Felipe's priceless bauble.

Again at the first day's camp on the up-trip, vigilance was relaxed. Exultingly, Charley Rawson signed for the shore. "Okay, lads," he yelled "we'll put in now. Cookie, rassel us some food while Moosie an' the Pup figures out our winnin's. We'll make it a reg'lar party. I'll be the Master o' Ceremonies, an' Kelly c'n give us a dance!"

They were hard, clean, happy-go-lucky and joyful again. Gone now, two days behind them, was the gruesome sight of Big Felipe's mustachios extending from his grapefruit-sized head atop a *chonta*-wood spear. Cookie Wilson whistled as he dug into the stores, and Charley Rawson danced like a kid as he ushered Moosie and St. Peter's Pup, each by an elbow, to the flat rock near the palm *armariari*.

"The king and queen o' Luck," he chortled. "Right now we're gonna have a crownin'—"

The three stopped in their tracks and the laughter choked out of their lungs. From the interior of the palm shelter had stepped

a fat-faced, sleepy-eyed *cauchero,* followed by two scowling, slump-shouldered counterparts.

ALFREDO'S lazy hand held a blued-steel revolver. Behind him, more revolvers swayed. The stocky *cauchero* blinked and showed his teeth in a sleepy grin.

"Ah, Señors, for a time we thought we had lost you."

St. Peter's Pup glared, but he kept his hands in the air. "It's a damned shame you didn't crack your skull when I pushed you out of the window," he said bitterly.

Alfredo smiled. "The galvanized awning, *amigo.* It saved me as it did Felipe, but for a better fate," he philosophised. "Now, Señors, you will please to line up over here and stay away from the rifles. You, Jose, will relieve the Lucky Dog of St. Peter of that so-heavy pocketbook. And you, Señor Kelly, please to keep the hands in the air. *Muchas gracias.* Now, Pablo, the rope."

"I'll get you for this, you sneakin' louse!" Charley Rawson yelled from a convulsed face. "You damned thievin' rat!"

With methodical swiftness Jose and Pablo did their work while Alfredo watched sleepily, the blued-steel revolvers sagging in his hands. At length, Kelly and the crew of the *Alvord Wechten* lay on the clean sand, thoroughly and faultlessly tied. Uninterrupted was the round of cursing and dire threats from the seamen; Kelly alone maintained a stolid silence.

"Each has been searched, Alfredo," Jose reported. "None has a knife. We are done."

Alfredo smiled pleasantly. "Good. Now, Señors, we go. But I, Alfredo, am a gentleman of substance and perception. It is not without honor that I own a large *chacra* with many *cauchou* trees. This money was stolen from me; rightfully it is mine. The Lucky Dog of St. Peter cheated at the cards."

"The hell I did," the Pup returned hotly.

Alfredo waved a fat hand. "It is no matter. The money is now mine. But, as I have said, I, Alfredo, am a gentleman. It is not my wish that you should die of starvation. I shall leave you everything, the boats, the food, everything but the rifles and pistols. *Buenos días, Señors!*"

From the water beyond the *armariari,* Alfredo's men raised a sunken *piragua* and bailed it out. Carefully they transferred the rifles and pistols; swiftly they shoved off.

COOKIE'S jubilant yell raised above the tired muttering. Exultingly he lifted a free, raw-scraped hand. "Yeow!" he roared. "No spig louse kin hold me down! Take your time, boys. I'll have you loose in a minute!"

And moments later a group of angry men stamped about, restoring circulation, hurling threats of vengeance at the blank *Huacamayo.*

"Wish the hell I had my Winchester," Hank Noble yelped. "I'd go after them babies."

Charley Rawson grinned. Running

swiftly he searched in the duffel and brought up a canvas case. "Damn good thing I love this old cannon," he chuckled affectionately, fitting the stock to his double barrel. "They ain't got away from us yet. Come on, boys!"

The pockety blackness of the night was complete, and only the faint phosphorescent shimmer of the *Huacamayo* defined the course of the surging canoes. Like paddling through a fog-bound ocean it was, and only the slight upriver breeze bearing the faint sounds of Kelly's paddle

kept the following boats in line. Black, and still, the encroaching jungle was a darker blot along the shore. No cries of pursuing monkeys, no calls of night birds floated out. In the forward boat, Charley Rawson fingered his double-barrel and strained his eyes to watch Kelly's bending back.

"Think this guy Alfredo'll camp?" Charley whispered.

"Nope," was Kelly's low-voiced response. "He knows the river. He and his men rested while they was waitin' for us. They won't stop till they get to——"

Kelly paused. Paddle in air, he listened. "I hear 'em!" he called excitedly.

Motion was suspended. Borne on the wings of the light breeze the steady scraping sound of sweeping paddles drifted up.

"Okay!" Charley Rawson ordered tersely. "Spread out, and drive!"

"Before you start shootin'," Kelly suggested coolly, "suppose you change places with me. I ain't aimin' to be in the way."

Charley Rawson grumbled and moved forward. Carefully he slid past the crouching Kelly, and as he gained the bow, his heavy boot clattered against a pan.

The sound carried to Alfredo's boat. There was a swift, pregnant silence followed by confused muttering. Then, a guttural voice, "Halt, or we shoot!"

"Yeah?" Charley Rawson yelled. "You guys halt yourselves! You gotta aim; all I gotta do is pull the trigger!"

Alfredo's answer was sudden and conclusive. A finger of flame stabbed the dark scant yards ahead and a rifle bullet whined as it struck the water and ricocheted.

"Boom!" The charge from Charley Rawson's double-barrel tore a gaping hole in the night and the canoe swayed dizzily. Downstream a chorus of frightened yelps filled the air, and groaning curses told that someone had been hit.

"Want the other one?" Charley roared "or do we get our dough?"

Alfredo's voice was a gasping whine. *"Amigo!* There has been some mistake—surely, we can talk this over—put down the gun!"

Sweeping powerfully, the three boats converged. White, startled faces appeared out of the darkness. One of Alfredo's *caucheros* was slumped unnaturally, his left arm useless. Charley Rawson leveled the shotgun across the bow and grinned.

"All I gotta do is pull the trigger," Rawson growled. "You'll get enough buckshot in you so's you'll sink to the bottom and never steal from nobody again."

Alfredo held the wallet aloft in a shaking hand. "The money, *amigo,*" he chattered. "It is nothing—take it."

"You're damned right we'll take it," Cookie Wilson chimed in. "Now, say your prayers, bud. You've reached port."

Alfredo's mouth quivered. "Señors," he whispered "to you I am worth nothing dead, no? But alive—"

Charley Rawson leveled the double-barrel. "What's your proposition?" he growled.

"I have much *cauchouc,* in the warehouse, awaiting shipment," Alfredo responded eagerly. "If you will permit——"

ST. PETER'S PUP wrinkled his nose at the smells drifting past the paint-peeled green door and laid another bill on the table. "Two more of the same," he commanded the fat, perspiring bartender. His fingers drummed on the table top and he looked quizzically at the tall, stiff redhead who was rolling a cigarette.

"You know, Kelly," the Pup said, "it just occurred to me that you're the only one who didn't make out on this deal. I still got my luck, the boys got their money back, the *Alvord Wechten* got a cargo, but you're just where you were when the poker game broke up."

Kelly licked the edge of the paper, smoothed it, and struck a match. Exhaling a cloud of fragrant smoke he grinned.

"Know anybody that wants to buy a diamond ring?" Kelly asked.

A Chapter from the Thrilling History of Cattleland

Riders Of The Rim Rocks

By WILLIAM MacLEOD RAINE

Author of Many Thrilling Stories of the West

PART III

SOMETHING ABOUT THE STORY AND WHAT HAS HAPPENED BEFORE

THE scene is Wyoming and the days of the free range are passing. On the one side is the law, largely elected and supported by the small ranchers and the nesters. On the other are the cattlemen, the huge ranchers who have been kings of the range for a decade and a half. Between them is Calhoun Terry, now numbered among the larger ranchers, but himself so lately a small one that it is difficult for him to align himself with the big outfits. Some of the smaller ranchers are pretty openly tied up with rustling gangs and the days of the big ranches would seem to be numbered unless this alliance ceases and the bad men rounded up.

Two men are shot down from among the lawless element, and Terry, although not accused, is thought to know too much. Ellen Carey, herself the daughter of a small rancher, defends him, although she declares she doesn't like his dominating personality. Then the owners and managers of the big outfits—the No, By Joe; the Two Star; the Flying V C; the Antelope Creek Spread—get together and draw up a plan which will virtually mean a range war. Clint Ellison puts the plan up to Cal Terry, who declines to go in with them. He says they'll ruin the country, yet at the same time Terry is mistrusted by the small ranchers, who are gathering about them a lawless element. Most reckless rider among these is Jeff Brand, and for him Ellen Carey feels a strange attraction. A rider for one of the big ranchers is shot, and Ellen says to Brand, "Where were you yesterday afternoon? What were you doing? But no—don't tell me! I don't want to know."

To Risk Your Life and Then Find You've Tried to Help An Enemy—A Queer Spot to Be In

XVIII

CLINT ELLISON read the note a second time. He frowned, his gray powder marked face set rigidly. He was a dominating man, and he did not like to have his plans disarranged.

> I hope you are satisfied [so the note said]. Well, you can't drag me into trouble with you. I am sticking by what I told you the other day. Count me out of the whole business. I'm through before you start on any plans you have.

The name signed at the bottom was Calhoun Terry.

Ellison helped himself to a drink, paced the floor, and returned to his desk. He picked up a pen and wrote. The burden of his message was told in two lines.

> Since I am going down to Jim Creek station tomorrow I will drop in at the ranch and have a talk with you.

He sealed the note and took it out to Slim, who was waiting at the bunkhouse for an answer.

After the cowboy had ridden away he

went back into his office and walked the floor again. Irritably, he admitted to himself that he had made a mistake. His gunman had moved too fast for him. Before he could get to the fellow and call him off he had destroyed Black Yeager. Ellison cared nothing about that, except for its repercussions. Black was a rustler, and he had got what was coming to him. But it looked now as if the price for his death would be too high. The rustlers had retaliated by shooting Jim McFaddin. If Terry walked out on the invasion that would be another blow. Perhaps it would have been better to have waited for the wholesale clean-up without first picking off individual offenders.

But with or without Terry he meant to carry on. The No, By Joe lay in a country peculiarly favorable for thieves. The percentage of loss was so great of late that the margin of profit had been completely wiped out. The Bartlett Land & Cattle Company must either stop the rustling of its stock or fold up. Ellison was not the type to give up without a fight.

When he dropped in to see Terry he defended what he had done, on the ground that it was a necessity. He made the further point that in wiping out the thieves the big ranches would be doing a service to the territory. It would be a place where honest men could live and feel their property was safe.

Terry shook his head. "I've been thinking this over, and I have changed my mind about some things."

"Wait a minute," Ellison interrupted. "You think I haven't played fair with you. I want to say that I couldn't have prevented the killing of Black Yeager. It happened on your way home, right after our talk."

"I understand that," the manager of the Diamond Reverse B agreed stiffly. "We'll leave Yeager out of this. Point is, I don't enjoy being shot at myself. If Yeager had fired a hair's breadth straighter I would be where Jim McFaddin is now. To think that you can ambush rustlers wholesale without having them play the same game is criminally foolish. There is no stopping that kind of business. It is like those Kentucky feuds. They go on forever."

"So will this thieving, if we don't do something about it," the Bartlett manager said curtly.

"I'll do what I can about it," Terry answered. "If we catch a man stealing our stuff, or if we find it in his possession, I'll hang him to a tree. That's as far as I'll go. I won't join in an organized drive to wipe out suspicious characters."

"Then the Diamond Reverse B outfit is through, unless it changes its manager."

"It's through, whether it does or not. There's no other answer, Ellison. The day of the big ranch is past. Settlers have homesteaded along the creeks and on choice bits of range. More are coming in every year. We can't buck the law. Some of the large outfits are fencing land that isn't owned by them. They can't get away with it. They are licked before they start. Like it or not, the cattle empires are going to vanish. I've tried not to believe this, but it stands out as plain as Old Baldy there."

"So you're quitting," Ellison said, scorn in his voice.

"I have advised my people to sell at a profit while there is still time."

"Sell to whom?"

"To settlers. My idea is to break up the ranch into twenty or more smaller ones. It can be divided so that the land will sell like hot cakes."

FROM Ellison's gray face the color seemed to drain. "By God, you take the cake, Terry," he said, restrained anger riding in his voice. "First you are with the small fry. Then you throw them over and join us. Now when we have a fight on our hands you are deserting us to go back to them."

Terry felt the rage boiling up in him. "You're too bullheaded, Ellison, and too smooth in your work. We were supposed

to be allies, and you double-crossed me by ordering these men drygulched. Do you think you are God Almighty, with the power of life and death in your hands? These Texas gunmen can't be trusted not to run wild, with you giving them their orders. I'll have none of it."

"I suppose you'll fix yourself up with your new-old friends by warning them," Ellison jeered, bitterness in his voice.

The superintendent of the Diamond Reverse B restrained himself, with difficulty. "I ought not to take that from you," he said quietly. "But I will. It's time you went, Mr. Ellison."

White spots pinched into the nose of the visitor. He too was holding his temper in by sheer will. "It's one way or the other," he flung back contemptuously. "Either you rat on us, or you keep your mouth shut and get the benefits of our drive without taking any of the risk. You may have your choice, sir."

Ellison picked up his wide Stetson and walked out of the room, his flat back as stiff as that of a drum major.

Calhoun Terry stood at his desk, salient jaw clamped tight. What Ellison had said was true. He had either to warn the rustlers or let the drive go on. There was no middle ground.

In any case he was now a man without a party. The rustlers and small cowmen hated him and would continue to do so. As soon as they heard his decision he would be detested by the big outfits. He would be held a traitor to both sides, and he would have to walk alone.

XIX

JOHN Q. POWERS descended from the train at Round Top and was met by Calhoun Terry. The two men walked to the Holden House, where the ranch foreman had taken rooms. Powers was a heavy-set middle-aged man of a precise habit of mind. He wore square-toed shoes, a double-breasted coat, and a silk hat. His home was in Philadelphia, and he had never before been farther west than Chicago.

The Powers family had bought for themselves and some business associates the Diamond Reverse B ranch at a time when capital was being poured into the cattle industry. So far it had been a good investment. There had been bonanza years when the ranch had returned more than thirty percent on the original cost. But those boom days were past. The profits had dwindled, and the books showed for two years a balance in the red. A letter from the foreman had brought him out here in person. A shrewd investor, John Q. was moving to the opinion that it might be time to sell out.

As they walked to the hotel, Powers noticed that Terry did not exchange greetings with the men he met. The glances that fell on the Philadelphian were merely curious, but when they shifted to the foreman they held unconcealed hostility. There was a tensity in the atmosphere that John Q. did not like. His ideas of the West were vague. He thought of it as a wild country where there were possibilities of making money in spite of Indians, rustlers, droughts, and blizzards. Bad men, cowboys, and cattle filled the foreground of the picture.

They talked casually about the trip from Chicago until the door of the hotel room closed behind them. Then, without waste of time, Powers came to the business that had brought him here.

"You think we ought to close out the ranch?"

"I feel sure we ought," Terry replied. "An outfit as large as ours can't be run profitably under present conditions."

"We can get a good price?"

"I think so. If the property is cut up wisely into small ranches. There would be no difficulty in disposing of the land."

"I'd like to go out and look the situation over. You have made arrangements, I presume, to get me out to the ranch."

"Yes. We can drive out. But I ought

to tell you that there will be some danger."

"Danger! What do you mean?"

"I have been shot at several times in the past three weeks, once as I was riding out of Round Top. A few days ago one of the owners of the Flying V C, James McFaddin, was killed while he was rounding up a bunch of stock."

Powers stared at his foreman. "Good God! Isn't there any law in this country?"

Terry smiled grimly. "Plenty of it, and all on the side of the rustlers. Our enemies elect the sheriff and the judge, who try thieves before a friendly jury which acquits them."

"As bad as that?"

"Just that bad, no matter how convincing the evidence we offer."

"Then there is no way of stopping cattle stealing?"

"Yes. There are ways." The steel-barred eyes of Terry held to those of the Easterner. "If we catch a rustler we stop him—permanently."

The Philadelphian did not ask the question almost on his lips. He guessed the answer, and he did not want to get it in plain English. This method of justice was too stark for him.

"Do you catch many?"

"No. The ranch covers hundreds of miles of brush country. The thieves are smart and careful. Often they operate at night."

"So we are really at the mercy of these rustlers. There is nothing to do about it. This seems incredible, in the United States."

THE superintendent of the Diamond Reverse B decided not to spare the feelings of his boss. He had to know the truth before he could make an intelligent appraisal of the situation.

"It has been the law of Cattleland ever since the early Texas days that a horse or a cow thief forfeits his life if caught," Calhoun explained. "That was necessary then, because the law hadn't reached the brush country. It is necessary now, because the law has been taken over by the thieves. You are shocked because I have been shot at and McFaddin killed. These attacks were reprisals. Inside of a month four men suspected of rustling have been shot down from ambush."

"But—but—"

"I don't know who killed them, but I can guess who ordered it done. You need not let this worry your conscience, Mr. Powers. The Diamond Reverse B is not guilty. I wasn't consulted, because those who did it were afraid I would oppose it."

"But this is terrible. A suspected man has a right to his day in court. Maybe some of these men were innocent."

"No. They were all outlaws, some of them killers. They deserved what they got. That is not the point. It was bad medicine. When we punish a thief it ought to be done openly before the world."

John Q. Powers felt himself surprisingly helpless. He was a hard business man, and more than once he had driven a rival to the wall, but he now found himself in a world altogether too ruhtless for him.

"Dear me!" he exclaimed. "I didn't realize it was like this. Of course you have written me about the rustlers, but I supposed you put them in the penitentiary when you caught them."

"We would if we could. But we can't." Terry judged it was time to let the Pennsylvania man have the other barrel of the gun. "The worst is ahead of us, and coming very soon. I cannot go into particulars, or tell you how I know it. But there

are plans for action soon that will make headlines in every New York paper."

"I don't know what you mean, Mr. Terry. Please be more explicit." The city man watched this hard brown Westerner, in fascinated alarm. "Do you mean more —bloodshed?"

"Yes. Plans to rub out scores of men. In spite of ourselves we shall be dragged into it, unless we move fast. That's why I asked you to come at once."

"How can we be dragged into it, if we refuse to be a party?"

"Because this country is in two camps. Everybody in this town is for the small fry against the big ranches. The rustlers and nesters and most of the little cattlemen are pooled against us, the honest men and the thieves alike. The Diamond Reverse B is one of the large outfits. If we say we are out of this fight nobody will believe us. We'll suffer just the same. The only way to be out of it is to let it be known we are going out of business, to offer the ranch for sale in small blocks."

REPORTS from Terry had kept Powers informed of increasing troubles in the Buck River country, but the Easterner had not realized how serious they were. Even the last urgent wire had not mentioned particulars. He could still hardly believe the foreman was not exaggerating the situation.

"Wouldn't it put us in the clear if I went on record publicly pledging the Diamond Reverse B to join in no lawlessness whatsoever?" he asked.

"No." The manager took out of his pocket clippings from a newspaper. "Read these, Mr. Powers. They are from the Logan County *Gazette,* edited by Horace Garvey. He's against us and for the small settler. But he is an honest man, a first class citizen. I cut the stories out so that you may see what the feeling of the average man here is in this fight."

Powers settled himself back in his chair to read. The stories covered the five killings and the attempts on the life of Terry. Among the clippings were also editorials dealing with conditions in the district. Though Garvey tried to be fair, he was very plainly on the side of the plain rancher and homesteader and opposed to the big outfits. His editorial on the killing of McFaddin was entitled, "They have sown the wind, and they shall reap the whirlwind." It did not condone the shooting of the Flying V C man, but it stressed the point that the policy of the "cattle kings" had made such crimes inevitable.

"He makes out a case for our opponents," Powers said thoughtfully after he had finished reading. "I don't think he is right, but he seems to be honest."

"No doubt of that. I thought you might like to meet him and asked him to call here. Not that I agree with what he thinks."

Half an hour later Garvey arrived. After preliminary greetings the Philadelphian said dryly, "I have been reading your editorials, Mr. Garvey."

The near-sighted little editor peered over his spectacles and twisted his parchment-like face into a wry smile. "And haven't liked them, I'm afraid, Mr. Powers."

"It doesn't matter whether I like them or not," the capitalist retorted. "Question is, how true are they?" Powers waved aside the answer on the lips of the newspaper man. "I don't care about your opinions, and I take it for granted that the facts of these stories are approximately correct. What I want to know is how closely you represent the majority feeling out here. Is this trouble likely to grow worse instead of better?"

Garvey said he thought he shared the views of nine-tenths of the people in the district. It was his opinion the bitter feeling was likely to continue as long as the big ranches dominated the range industrially.

"I understand that your friends control the county politically," Powers said.

"Yes."

"A combination of townsfolk, small ranchers, and rustlers," the Easterner snapped. "Is that right?"

"Politics make strange bedfellows," Garvey answered. "The rustler vote supports our candidates, because the outlaw is naturally opposed to the large outfits."

"Quite so. Opposed to the men they rob. Mr. Terry tells me we can't get justice in the courts when we present a case against a rustler."

"That is correct," the editor admitted. "I am sorry it is so, but there is a very strong feeling against the big cattle outfits."

"Which you help to propogate."

Garvey did not like the newcomer's manner. He hit back in self-defense. "I am against a few non-resident cattle owners monopolizing the range, if that is what you mean, to the exclusion of thousands of homesteaders."

"The big ranches are here lawfully, aren't they?"

"That is debatable. Their cowboys homesteaded thousands of acres and turned the land over to their employers, quite contrary to the spirit of the law. All over the territory you find large tracts fenced by the cattle kings to which they haven't the slightest claim."

POWERS turned silently to his manager for verification.

"That is true of some ranches," Terry admitted. "Not of ours."

"No," assented the editor of the *Gazette*. "But I have heard plenty of stories of Diamond Reverse B riders driving the stock of small owners from open range you wanted to use."

"You'll hear anything, Horace," his friend answered, neither assenting nor denying.

Powers leaned forward, tugging at his grizzled imperial. "What would you think is the chance of disposing of the Diamond Reverse B at a good price, Mr. Garvey?"

"I don't know. Not very good, I should think. It would take a lot of money to buy it, and I don't suppose large interests are looking for investments in the cattle country these days." He added, as a rider, "But I am not in touch with moneyed people. You should know much better than I do."

Powers gave the editor the surprise of a year. "I am not talking of large interests. We are thinking of dividing the property into small ranches and selling to individuals of moderate means. We would accept down payments for part and take a mortgage for the balance."

Into Horace Garvey's dried-up face there came a curious expression of amazed delight. "If you mean that you will be doing a fine stroke of business for yourself and a great service to the territory, Mr. Powers," the little man cried, his voice hopping up and down with excitement.

"We can find purchasers, you think?"

"No doubt of it, if your price is reasonable."

"It will be." Powers rose briskly. "I'm ready to leave for the ranch whenever you are, Terry."

"May I announce in the paper that you are going to divide the ranch and sell it?" Garvey asked.

"You may, sir. The sooner the better."

"This is great news," Garvey beamed. "I believe it will be the beginning of better days than we have had for a long time."

He left hurriedly, to write a front page story.

XX

CALHOUN TERRY took no unnecessary chances with the safety of his passenger. He had brought to town with him three Diamond Reverse B riders. One of these he sent to the corral to hitch a horse to the buckboard. Another one took care of the horses. The third was a lad named Larry Richards.

At a nod from the ranch manager Larry bowlegged along the plaza past Pegleg Jim's pool room, the Crystal Palace, and

the Evans store. He crossed the dusty road, spurs trailing, and strolled down a street leading from the square. Through the swing doors of the Red Triangle Saloon he passed, drawing up to the bar.

There were half a dozen men in the room, and the quick eyes of the cowpuncher passed from one to another. Several of those present were inoffensive loafers. The two upon whom his gaze fastened were Lee Hart and Jack Turley. They were playing a game of seven-up.

Hank, the bartender, said, "What'll you have, Larry?"

He was surprised to see a Diamond Reverse B man in the Red Triangle, a place largely patronized by those hostile to the ranch.

Larry did not want a drink, but he ordered one. He was here only to make sure that nobody made a hole in another pane of glass while the boss and his guest were passing.

Hart glanced up and stiffened. "Important customers patronizing you these days, Hank," he said offensively. "Better get out yore best."

Young Richards was a cool daring man, with more than a streak of recklessness. He was a close personal friend of his boss.

"If it isn't Lee Hart," he drawled, enthusiasm in his voice. "How's everything with you? Good calf crop this year?"

The rustler started to jump to his feet but thought better of it. He recognized an insult when it was addressed to him. But he knew too that Larry Richards was always ready to accommodate anybody who wanted to pick a fight with him.

He said, "I'm not lookin' for trouble."

"That's fine," Larry answered. "Neither am I. You had me scared for a moment, Lee."

The rustler glared at him, an ugly look on his face. But it was Turley who answered.

"Did you come here to get a drink, Richards?" he growled. "If so, there's your whiskey waiting for you."

"Why so it is," Larry agreed in mock surprise. "Much obliged to you for telling me, Jack."

"You can't come in here and hurrah us, if that's your idea."

"Don't you know I wouldn't try to get funny with the great Turley?" the Diamond Reverse B cowpuncher said reproachfully.

Hank polished the top of the bar with a towel. "Now, gents," he pleaded. "Let's not have any difficulty."

"Better tell this young squirt to finish his drink and get out," Turley advised the bartender.

"On account of me having the smallpox?" Larry inquired.

"Men from your outfit are not welcome at Round Top," Hart growled.

Richards recalled his instructions. He was posted here as a guard, with definite orders not to get into a fight. It would be better for him to sing small, but not small enough to encourage these men to jump him.

"I just dropped in for a last-chance drink on my way out of town," he mentioned in a placatory voice. "No offense meant, gents. I didn't know there was a dead line on our riders here."

"Not exactly a dead line, Larry." Hank polished vigorously. "But you know how things are."

"Sure—sure."

Larry grinned down into his drink and refrained from further amenities. His fool tongue would get him into serious trouble one of these days if he didn't look out. Why had he made that unnecessary crack about Lee Hart's calf crop? It was not supposed to be safe to monkey with that surly gent, though Larry was of private opinion it would be more healthy to tangle with him than with his quieter brother Nate, the sheriff.

THE swing doors opened, to let in Slim. "Dog my cats! Where did you drop from, Slim?"

Larry's expression of pleased surprise did credit to his ability as an actor, considering the fact that the arrival of the other Diamond Reverse B man was according to program.

"I been around," Slim said. "On my way back to the range now. How about you keeping me company?"

"I reckon I'll have to do that. Never saw it fail. When a fellow gets with a bunch of nice friendly guys someone comes along and drags him away. Well, *adios,* gents! Been nice to meet you."

Larry flashed a derisive smile at the seven-up players and turned his back to them. He rolled and lit a cigarette, then treated them to an amended snatch of a popular song.

"Oh, see the boat go round the bend,
All loaded down with Diamond men,
Good-by, my lover, good-by."

The legs of a chair in the back part of the room scraped against the floor. Somebody was getting to his feet hurriedly. Larry did not look round. His guess was that he had annoyed a seven-up player. He heard Turley's voice order harshly, "Sit down, Lee, you damn fool!"

Blandly he said to his friend, "Yeah, I reckon we better be hittin' the trail, Slim."

The cowboys sauntered out of the Red Triangle, mounted the two horses at the hitch rack, and cantered up the street. They caught up with the buckboard before it reached the cattle chutes by the railroad tracks. From the driver's seat Terry slanted an inquiring glance at Larry.

"Everything all right?" he asked.

"Fine as silk."

"See anybody you know at the Red Triangle?"

"Lee Hart and Jack Turley were there."

"Either of them say anything?"

"Nothing important. Lee mentioned he wasn't lookin' for trouble."

The foreman looked at Larry suspiciously. "How did he come to say that?"

Larry was a picture of innocence. "Just declaring peace intentions, I reckon."

"Did Turley declare any?"

"He asked me if I came in to get a drink, and I said 'Sure'!"

TERRY asked no more questions. They were out in the outskirts of town now, and the gray-green sage stretched away on either side of the long ribbon road. Calhoun guessed that there had been an exchange of verbal fireworks, but since there had been no casualties it did not matter. Larry had done what he had been sent to do—make sure that nobody from the Red Triangle would draw a bead on those in the buckboard.

"Do you always take a cavalcade of armed riders with you to town?" Powers wanted to know.

"Never before this trip," the foreman answered, with a dry smile. "This is an escort of honor for a distinguished guest."

"To make sure he reaches the ranch safely?"

"Well, yes. I didn't want him to get a rustler's welcome."

The party ate lunch at the Box 55 restaurant. Terry introduced Powers to Lane Carey and his daughter.

"They don't approve of me or of the ranch," he explained to the Easterner. "But since you are only the owner and not responsible for the way it is run perhaps you will escape criticism."

Powers had come West to find out all he could about local conditions. "Why don't you approve of the Diamond Reverse B, Mr. Carey?" he asked bluntly.

"I think it is one of the finest ranches in the West," the cattleman answered. He was a little embarrassed at their directness.

"But you don't like the way it is managed."

"I don't think you can find in the territory a young man who can handle stock better than Mr. Terry."

"He's dodging," the manager said to Ellen, a gleam of laughter in his eyes. "But

it won't do him any good. Mr. Powers will keep asking questions till he finds out what he wants to know."

They adjourned to the porch of the house. Carey talked plainly, as soon as he discovered that to do so would not be offensive to this stranger. Powers listened, fired more questions, learned the point of view of the small settler. It was not one with which he agreed, since he had been associated with big business all his life. But he was a man who faced facts. What Carey said confirmed the wisdom of the decision he had made, to sell out as soon as it could be done.

Ellen sat in silence, taking no part in what was said. Powers turned to her.

"What do the women think about this trouble?" he asked.

"They think it is terrible," she said. "What else can they think, Mr. Powers, when they see such awful things going on. Some of them are frightened to death for fear their sons or their husbands may never come back to them alive."

"Because their men are thieves?" he went on, an edge of irony in his dry voice.

"I suppose they are." Ellen carried on, impulsively. "But what of that? The women aren't to blame. Some of them try to hold back their husbands and their sons, but they can't. If they lose them, it doesn't make them any happier to know that they brought it on themselves."

"With the law in the hands of the thieves, honest men are not likely to have much chance." Powers added, a satiric smile on his thin lips, "If there are any honest men here. Your father seems to put us all in the same category."

"My father is honest," Ellen said stoutly. "And there are plenty of others. Some of those who once in a while brand a calf not their own are good men in a way—good to their families, kind neighbors, generous to those in need."

"Generous with other people's property," the Philadelphian suggested. "Well, no need threshing that out. I am going to step out of this feud before we get into it any deeper."

A moment of silence followed his announcement. Lane and his daughter were puzzling out its meaning. The postmaster

was not one to push into another man's business, but some answer seemed expected of him.

"I don't quite see how," he said.

"You and Miss Ellen will have to transfer your disapproval to some other ranch and some other manager. We are going to cut up the Diamond Reverse B into small tracts and offer them for sale at attractive prices."

Ellen felt a glow of joy beating up into her breast. If the Diamond Reverse B was broken up into smaller units, it was because under present conditions so large a ranch could not be made to pay. The No, By Joe and the other big outfits would have to follow the same course. The bitter feeling in the country would automatically disappear.

"I'm so glad," she cried.

Her eyes were on Calhoun Terry. She was speaking to *him,* perhaps asking him to forget the hot anger with which she had turned away from him at their last meeting. He understood her words as an apology.

XXI

AS TERRY and Powers were leaving Lane Carey noticed a newspaper sticking out of the Easterner's pocket.

"Is that a Denver paper, Mr. Powers?" he asked.

"The Denver *Republican*. Like to have a look at it?"

"At the cattle quotations, if you don't mind. I'm shipping next week."

Carey took the paper, but he never got from it the information he was seeking. A front page story caught and held his eye. The headline was:

RUSTLER WAR IN WYOMING

The body of the story was not so definite as the headline, but it was alarming enough to Carey. The lead said that forty Texans had just reached the city and expected to leave within a day or two for some unknown point in the northwest. The Texans, the story stated, were rough looking customers armed with revolvers and .45-70 Winchester rifles. Most of them had been sheriffs or deputy United States marshals in Texas or Oklahoma. None of them knew exactly where they were going, and there was an air of mystery about their arrival heightened by the rumors to be heard around the railroad yards. The famous Sunday Brown was in charge of them, a man celebrated as a man-hunter in frontier days when the Indian Territory was a sink into which sifted most of the bad men of the Southwest. It appeared that Brown had been seen talking with Clinton Ellison, secretary of the Wyoming Stock Association, but Ellison in an interview denied any knowledge of the Texans. He had heard a Wild West show was being organized. As to this, he had no positive information. One of the Texans, who asked not to have his name given, had admitted to the reporter that they were heading for the cattle country to clean up the rustlers who had been stealing so flagrantly.

Carey passed the newspaper to Terry, pointing to the story.

Calhoun read it, not a flicker of expression on his face. It disturbed him even more than it did Carey, since he knew and the Box 55 man could only guess.

"Maybe a reporter's yarn to fill space," he said evenly.

From their manner Ellen judged that what they had read was serious. "What is it, Father?" she asked.

"I don't know as it is anything important, honey," he answered. "The *Republican* has a story about a bunch of Texas gunmen arriving in Denver, but likely that doesn't mean a thing to us."

"May I see the paper, please?" she said.

Swiftly her eyes ran across and down the column. She pumped a question at Terry. "Do you think they are coming to the Buck River country?"

"There's something in the story about a Wild West show," the foreman evaded.

"That doesn't mean anything," Ellen replied impatiently. "That's just something Mr. Ellison told the reporter. If they are coming here, what do they intend to do? One of the Texans said they were going to clean up the rustlers. Did he mean—kill them all?"

Carey watched Terry, the old-timer's narrowed eyes a network of wrinkles at the corners. He waited to hear what the Diamond Reverse B man would say.

"I had a disagreement with Mr. Ellison," replied Terry. "When I told him I was urging Mr. Powers to cut up and sell the ranch. He felt I was deserting the big outfit group. I am no longer in the confidence of the association. Naturally they wouldn't tell me their plans."

"But what do you think?" Ellen insisted. "You must have an opinion."

"I think that if I were a rustler I would be hitting the trail for parts unknown," Calhoun answered, looking directly at her.

ELLEN thought of the poor settlers she knew, some of them men with large families of small children. Perhaps some of them killed an unbranded calf when the little ones were hungry. Surely that was not a very serious crime. There were outlaws too, bad men who had drifted in to prey on the cattle barons. Between

these classes the girl drew a sharp line in her mind.

She worried about what she had read in the *Republican,* even after the superintendent and Mr. Powers had left for the ranch. When Jeff Brand dropped in to the crossroads stage station she lost no time in telling him the news. It was Ellen's opinion that the less she saw of Jeff the better. He was too good looking, too insouciant and debonair and reckless, and his gayety was too contagious. When a girl was with him she was likely to forget that he walked the wild and dangerous paths of an outlaw. So she had been avoiding him. But she thought he ought to know that the Diamond Reverse B was going out of business and that the Texas gunmen were gathered in Denver on some mysterious mission.

The second bit of information he dismissed lightly. He would not believe that they were heading for the Buck River country, and if they came the invaders would find the district too hot for them. The news about the Diamond Reverse B interested him more.

"It's the beginning of the break-up of the big ranches," he told her exultingly. "I'll say for Terry that he is smart. He sees that the large outfits are through. They can't buck the homesteader. The Diamond Reverse B will get out in time and save its hide. Some of the others are so stubborn that they won't."

"Yes, they are stubborn," she agreed. "I'm glad Mr. Terry has broken with them. I never did believe he had anything to do with the killings."

Brand slanted a quick look at her. "Did he ever give you any hint who he thought the drygulcher was?"

"No. I'm sure he doesn't know, and if he did he wouldn't tell me. We're not friendly."

HE FROWNED down at the ground, drawing a line in the sand with his boot. "I've spent a lot of time milling that over, girl," he said. "It's someone who knows our habits mighty well. He must have known Buck was going to be where he was the morning he shot him. The same goes for Tetlow and Yeager. Not many men would know that. I've been over the list in my mind forty times, but none of them seem to fit. Some of them are guys I would trust with my life. I have a specimen of his writing in my pocket now."

"Let me see it," she suggested. "I've seen the writing of lots of people. When they send mail out, you know."

He showed her the slip. Ellen read, "This is what happens to rustlers."

"Notice how the tail of his s's flies away," Jeff said.

"Yes. I've seen the writing. At least I think so." She looked up at him, the light in her eyes quick. "I'm not sure, but—"

Silently, his gaze on her, Brand waited.

"Did you ever suspect that man Turley?" she asked.

"Yes, and knew it couldn't be Jack. He's too bitter against the big ranches."

"That would be the play he would make, to protect himself." She added, "I believe this is his writing. I'm not sure, but it looks like it."

He put the slip in his pocket, his eyes diamond hard and bright.

"I'll have a talk with Mr. Turley," he said, his voice low.

"You won't—get into trouble with him," Ellen said, repenting of what she had said.

"Of course not." His laugh was brittle. He changed the subject. "About those warriors in Denver. I don't believe they are looking for us."

"I asked Mr. Terry what he thought about these Texas gunmen," she said. "I mean, whether they were coming here. He said he had quarreled with Mr. Ellison and wouldn't know about any plans. But he looked straight at me, Jeff, and said that if he were a rustler he would light out and keep going."

"He'd like to throw a scare into some

of us he thinks are his enemies," Jeff replied derisively. "I don't scare that easy."

"I'm telling you this so that you will let others know about this," Ellen told him. "Some of them may feel different from you about leaving."

"I'll pass the word for those without nerve to light a shuck," he answered lightly. "Personally, I hope the Texas gents come. We'll try to be waiting at the gate for them."

Ellen did not know whether she had been wise to warn him. It might only make more trouble. She wished too she had not mentioned Turley.

XXII

IT WAS a special train consisting of two day coaches and three box cars. Light was beginning to seep faintly into the eastern sky. For hours the click of the wheels had lasted without a stop. Most of the men in the seats were asleep, slumped awkwardly in the confined space allowed them. Their booted legs sprawled out into the aisle.

They were a rough-looking lot, these Texans. Some were bearded, and a good many of the others wore long drooping mustaches. Seasoned manhunters, they were cool hard specimens who had ridden hard and far into the brush after the men on the dodge wanted by the law. Many a desperado they had dragged out of the chaparral to justice. Others they had left there in shallow graves, later to turn in the report, "Killed while resisting arrest." Their leader, Sunday Brown, had been a noted Deputy United States Marshal in the days when train and stage robbers lived in the bosque and emerged only on nefarious errands.

At Jim Creek the engineer ran the train on a siding. Sunday Brown passed through the cars, waking up his men and shouting "All out—all out." Sleepily the Texans came to life. They gathered up their baggage and their weapons, then filed down the aisle and dropped from the steps of the coach. Eight or ten men in chaps waited them there. They were cattlemen and foremen of various outfits. Others would join them as the invaders moved deeper into the territory they meant to comb.

Sunday Brown was a big broad shouldered man moving on toward fifty. He stood six foot in his shoes and weighed two hundred pounds of solid bone, gristle, and muscle. His weather-beaten face was hard and yet wary, as if years in the brush had dried out sympathy and sharpened suspicions.

He superintended the unloading of the box cars. From one the men took out blankets, saddles, bridles, food supplies, and ammunition. The mounts were led out of the other two, reaching the ground by a gangplank of heavy timbers.

Out of the brush three wagons emerged, Studebakers recently bought to carry the supplies. Into these the provisions, bedding, and ammunition were loaded.

Clint Ellison and John McFaddin led the cavalcade. They were familiar with the terrain, which was part of the country covered by their spring and fall round-ups. The party followed a winding narrow road through the sage to a ford on the North Fork. Through this the riders splashed to the bank beyond. One of the wagons, swinging too far to the left, went deep into the swirling water and almost overturned. Unable to get good footing among the slippery rocks, the horses could not budge the load. Riders looped the tongue with their ropes, the other ends attached to their saddle horns, and dragged the wagon from its precarious position.

The sun was beginning to show over the horizon edge and far away its rays slanted on the blades of a windmill lower down in the valley. Startled antelope, moving down to water, bounded away as if on ball-bearing feet. A coyote crept its furtive way through the brush. On the side of a hill the riders caught a glimpse of startled cattle.

Reminded of Calhoun Terry by the brand, Clint Ellison made bitter comment to his companion. "We're risking our lives for that turncoat as much as for our own stuff. He sits tight and says he won't have any part in this, but his outfit shares the profits with us."

"If any," McFaddin amended. "Too bad, Clint. You must of rubbed him the wrong way considerable when you had yore rookus with him. Thought you weren't going to tell him about the five hundred a head you were paying yore killer for gents designated. How come you to make that mistake?"

"He knew it had to be some of us. I didn't think he would go crazy and upset the apple cart."

"Cal is a queer combination," McFaddin said. "Hard as nails, but with a soft streak runnin' through him. I was comin' up the street when that trouble blew up between him and the two bad men from Cheyenne. You never saw the beat of his coolness. They had their guns out first. It didn't last more'n six or eight seconds. They were whangin' away at him when his forty-five got going. They plugged a hole in his arm. Well, sir, he shifted his six-gun and got them both, as you know. That's one side of him. Then there's the soft streak. He can't be thorough. My idea, rustlers are like wolves. Rub 'em out. But Cal thinks you got to give them a fair break like you would a white man. They done taken a couple of cracks at him from cover, but he is too stubborn to fight back their way."

Ellison's gray face was set obstinately. "The trouble with him is that he has too many friends among the rustlers. He used to be one of that crowd."

"No, sir," denied McFaddin promptly. "He came of good clean stock. His father, Barton Terry, was a fine citizen. Cal is all right, for that matter. Plenty of the small cattlemen are square-shooters, Clint. They don't like rustlers any more than we do. I'm disappointed in Cal. But that's the way he is made." He added, after a moment, "By the way, who is the bird that bumped off Buck Hart and his friends? Seeing it's all over now, you might as well tell me. I've got a guess, and I'm wonderin' if I'm right."

The No, By Joe manager took his time to answer. "You paid your share, John, and I reckon you have a right to know," he said at last. "The fellow's name is Jack Turley. Do you know him?"

"I've met him. That's all. I don't want to know him any better. Fact is, Clint, we have to employ scalawags like him sometimes, but we don't have to like them any more than we would a sidewinder."

"I'm expecting him to meet us somewhere in Box Canyon before we get to Johnson's Prong. Turley has been thick with the rustlers for some time. He knows where they roost and he is to guide us to them."

"Damned spy!" the owner of the Flying V C spat out.

"We couldn't get along without inspectors," Ellison said.

"He's no inspector, but a double-crossing son-of-a-gun. I'm not blaming you for using him, but don't you blame me for despising the rotten skunk."

They passed the spot where Tetlow had been ambushed and rode up the draw leading to Box Canyon. Here the wagon road swung sharply to the right and followed the edge of the hills to find a way to the uplands. Ellison halted his little army to give instructions.

"We separate here," he said. "The wagons can't go up the canyon, of course. They'll follow the road past Renaud's homestead. If anybody makes inquiries, you are hauling supplies to the Becker coal mines. Don't get excited. The tarps cover the wagons and nobody will suspect anything unusual. We'll meet tonight at Packer's Fork. The rest of us have some clean-up jobs to do today. We're going up the gulch, and when we reach the Prong are cutting across the hills. If anybody sees

us they have to be stopped, no matter whether they are honest settlers or thieves. In case they try to run, shoot down their horses. Be careful not to hit them. We could easily make a serious mistake by getting the wrong men. We are hunting certain individuals known to us. It has to be made clear by us that decent citizens have nothing to fear. Is that clear?"

There was a murmur of assent.

McFaddin cut in to stress this. "Get this right, men. If we should kill just one wrong man the jig would be up for us. We are rounding up thieves and outlaws, and nobody else."

"It's easier to hit a horse than a man," Sunday Brown contributed. "But if any of you boys are standing where you can't be sure don't take a snap shot. Let some other fellow stop the horse."

"That's the idea," Ellison said. "If everybody is ready we'll take off."

He led the way through the aspen grove and up the steep crooked trail beyond. The path twisted among the boulders and then climbed to the stunted pines above. It brought them to a long spur, at the upper end of the gorge, which ran out from Johnson's Prong.

Here Gaines, Collins, and several other stockmen joined the party. Two of them were small cowmen who felt they would be ruined if rustling was not stopped. One was a foreman of an outfit running cattle fifty miles away. Turley was not with them.

The leaders consulted together. They decided it would be better to wait for Turley. Without him as a guide it would be difficult to find the hide-outs of the outlaws. If he did not arrive in half an hour they could start anyhow. They knew the general region they had to comb.

XXIII

AS Jeff Brand rode back into the hills his mind brooded over the suggestion let fall by Ellen. He never had liked Turley. The man was ugly and mean. There was no generosity in him, and Jeff would not have bet two bits on his loyalty. But the fellow's animosity toward the big ranches had shielded him from suspicion. Yet his bitterness might be, as Ellen had said, merely a protective maneuver to cover his treachery.

Jeff tried to think back to the times when the killings were done, in an attempt to see if he could find an alibi for the crook nosed man. His memory could not fasten on one. He was sure that Turley had not been with him at any of the periods when the assassinations must have taken place. Little things began to fit together. Jack owned a .45-70 Winchester, the weapon used by the killer. That in itself was nothing. Brand could name a dozen men who had one. It only showed he had the weapon handy. Turley had a habit of occasional absence. The boys had joshed him about it, hinting at an unknown woman, and he had smiled wisely, in effect pleading guilty to the indictment. Moreover, he was a comparatively new settler in the district. He could easily have been planted by the big outfits as a detective.

Brand drew off the trail for a few minutes to examine his gun. He was carrying the hammer on an empty chamber for safety, and he slipped in another cartridge. It was not likely he would need it, but if he did he would be needing it very badly. He made sure the weapon could be drawn from the holster without a hitch. Once he had seen a man wiped out because his revolver caught on a flap in the draw.

When Jeff rode up to the cabin on Tur-

ley's claim he found two other men there with the homesteader. One was Dave Morgan and the other Bill Herriott. Morgan had spent the night there, but Herriott had dropped in a few minutes earlier.

"What's new?" Bill asked after the first greetings.

Jeff dropped the bridle reins to the ground. "A heap of things," he drawled. "You'll be surprised. First off, the Diamond Reverse B is quittin' business. Sellin' out lock, stock, and barrel."

"Who to?" Herriott inquired.

"To Tom, Dick, and Harry. The big boss is on from Boston or somewhere. He was at the Box 55 with Terry, and he told the Careys they were cutting it up into small tracts to be offered for sale."

They talked that over for a few minutes before Brand spilled his next piece of news.

"This guy from Boston had a copy of the Denver *Republican* with him. There was a piece in it about a big bunch of Texas warriors all garnished with guns ready to take off somewheres to clean out rustlers. Clint Ellison was seen with them. Chew on that a while, gents."

Jeff's eyes had not lifted from Turley as he told this bit of news. He thought the man's surprise was a little too pronounced to be genuine. But he was not sure of it. All three of them were excited by the possibilities.

"You think they are headin' this way?" Morgan asked.

Dave Morgan was a dark youth with a brittle manner and a face upon which time had etched the evidence of a fierce and uncontrolled temper. A twisted scar disfigured his forehead, souvenir of a brawl in a Mexican tendejon where knives had flashed.

"I wouldn't know. Do yore own figurin'." Brand's hard shallow eyes still held fast to Turley. "What would you say, Jack?"

Turley was disturbed by the steadiness of that regard. "Why, I wouldn't know, Jeff. Chances are there's nothin' to it. It doesn't sound anyways reasonable. But maybe I'm wrong. What's your idea?"

"I haven't made up my mind for sure. Thought I'd wait till I'd heard from you."

"From me?" Turley's startled face showed more than astonishment. "Why, how would I know?"

"I expect you know a lot we don't, know, Jack," Jeff answered, his voice ominously gentle. He pulled a piece of paper from his pocket and handed it to Herriott. "Take a look at that, Bill, and pass it on to Dave. It was found pinned on Black Yeager's coat. The gent who killed him left a sample of his handwriting. I don't reckon you recognize it."

HERRIOTT frowned down at the paper, shook his head, and passed it to Morgan. He did not understand what Jeff was driving at, nor how it fitted into the present situation.

Morgan said, "Can't prove a thing by me," and passed the slip to Turley.

As Turley looked at it, a gray-green pallor spread over his swarthy face. He knew his day of judgment was at hand. Snatches of thought raced through his mind, but he could not organize them because of the rising fear in him. Brand could not know for certain. How could he? And yet——

"I—don't know—who wrote it," he mumbled, and looked at Brand, despair in his eyes.

"I do." Jeff's voice rang out crisp and hard. "We've found the killer, boys. He's standing there with the paper in his hand that he left on Yeager's coat."

"No—no! It's not true." Turley gulped down his terror, to fight back. "He can't prove it. Everybody knows how I hate the big ranches."

"Everybody knows you have kept saying so," Jeff replied coldly. "The game's up, Turley. You've come to the end of yore crooked trail."

Watching the trapped man's fear-filled face, Morgan realized that Jeff had found the guilty man. He did not know what his

evidence was, but the completeness of Turley's collapse betrayed him.

"Better talk, Turley," he advised ominously. "Talk fast, if you don't want us to believe Jeff."

"While he is talking you and Bill search the cabin, Dave. You might find money. A lot of it. He's been playing poor. Let's get wise about that."

From a chalk-dry throat Turley offered an explanation. "My folks sent me some money, boys."

The two men walked into the cabin and began rummaging among its contents. They tossed out of the door boots, chaps, shirts, a coat and vest, and various other things. In a straw tick they found a rip, through which their exploring hands brought a canvas sack. In the sack were four packages of greenbacks.

"Count 'em," Jeff said.

Not for an instant did he move his gaze from the face of the killer. The man's shock of terror, sweeping over him in the first surprise of the crisis that had leaped at him, was giving way to a cold desperation.

Soon now, when he knew for certain that he could not dodge or twist out of the trap, Turley would reach for his gun. Brand meant to be ready for that moment.

"Must be nearly two thousand dollars here," Herriott said.

"Five hundred apiece." Jeff's voice was cold as a mountain stream fresh from a glacier. "They pay fine, don't they, Turley?"

"You've got it wrong, Jeff," the killer croaked hoarsely. "I wouldn't do that to boys I had bunked with. Don't you know I wouldn't?"

"Come clean," Morgan snarled. "Who hired you?"

"Nobody. That money came from my folks, like I said. Boys, I been your friend. You wouldn't—"

His voice died away in a quaver.

"You're bucked out," Jeff said evenly. "You're going on a long journey. Starting right damn now."

THE man looked round from one to another. His glance slid back to Jeff. "Thing to do is—talk this over," Turley began, and stuck. There was no mercy in these implacable eyes.

"You didn't give Buck or Black or the other boys a show for their white alleys," Jeff told him. "You don't deserve one either. But I'm giving you one. Bill and Dave will keep out of this 'til I'm through. It will be one of us at a time. Don't keep me waiting, you—"

The guns came out together. The roar of them was almost simultaneous. But not quite. Jeff was the quicker by a fraction of a second.

Turley spun round, from the shock of the bullet, clutched at his heart, and pitched forward full length. His finger twitched, and a bullet plowed into the ground. A shiver went through his body. He lay still.

After a silence, Morgan said, "That will be all for Mr. Turley."

Herriott looked at Jeff, admiringly. On the frontier, when occasion came, a man had to be thorough. Good or bad, he had to stand on his own feet and carry on with no law to back him except that he found in his holster.

"One shot was enough, Jeff," said Bill. "He's done gone on that long journey you mentioned."

"Yes," agreed Brand quietly, watching the prone figure. His arm had dropped so that the revolver pointed to the ground. From the end of the barrel a thin trickle of smoke came.

Morgan too looked down at the body of the man caught in his treachery and snatched so swiftly from life. On his thin fierce face there was a rancorous satisfaction. "I wish I had done it instead of you, Jeff."

"Two-three times I thought it might be Turley," Brand said. "But it didn't look reasonable. I reckon nothing could be

lower than for a human to murder his friends for money. He must of known punishment might jump out at him, but some fools will do anything for profit. Well, he'll never spend his pay."

"No." Herriott looked at the greenbacks in his hand. "What will we do with this blood money? I wouldn't want to spend a nickel of it."

"Jim Tetlow left a wife and three children," Brand said. "Take it up Fisher Creek to her, Bill, when you head for home. Part of it is the price of her husband's death. The other boys weren't married. It will come in handy to feed the kids."

"That satisfactory to you, Dave?" asked Herriott.

"Sure. It's coming to her."

"Tell her to put it in the bank where it will be safe." Jeff thrust the revolver back into its holster. "I noticed some Flying V C horses down the trail a way as I came up. We'll rope one, tie the body on its back, and send it home with this carrion on its back."

"Fine." Morgan ripped out a malevolent oath. "Telling them their killer has come back to report."

BILL HERRIOTT left for Fisher Creek on his errand to Mrs. Tetlow. The other two rounded up the bunch of Flying V C horses, roped one, and brought it back to the cabin. They found a cross-buck pack saddle in the barn and cinched it to the animal. The body was made secure to the cross-buck by a lash-rope interlaced about the load. Jeff threw the diamond hitch expertly so as to absorb any slackness that might arise. Meanwhile Morgan penciled a note, printing it in capital letters to make identification of the writing impossible.

They had to drive the pack horse many miles, to be sure it would reach its destination. To these men, who felt themselves instruments of vengeance, it was important that their enemies should know why Turley had come to his death. Both of them knew this country. They had ridden it by day and night, on business legitimate and nefarious. Roads meant nothing to them when they were in the saddle, and for obvious reasons they did not care to meet travelers.

Through a stretch of pine forest they ascended, crossed a stream, and rode down along the skirt of a grove of quaking-asps into a park green with natural grass. The horse carrying the load had been running wild for months. At first it resented this infringement on its liberty. Two or three times it bolted, but the riders easily headed it back to the course they were following. After a few attempts to escape it gave up and took guidance tamely.

A man came down a hillside to meet them, a tall thin man wearing leather chaps shiny from much use. The shirt, wide open at the bony throat, was torn and faded. There were gaping holes in the aged boots.

"'Lo, Jeff—Dave," he said. "What you fellows packing?"

A tarp covered the load.

"'Lo, Alec," Brand answered. "Just a wolf we killed."

Alec was an old-timer. He had a little ranch in the mountains not too far from the Diamond Reverse B to have a good yearly increase in calves. He knew no reason why anybody should be hauling a dead wolf across the country. The palm of his hand scraped a lank unshaven chin.

"Doggone it, what for?" he asked.

"This is a particular kind of wolf," Morgan said grimly. "You lookin' for strays?"

"Yep. A brindle cow I'm expectin' to come fresh."

"Whose cow?" Jeff asked innocently, with intent to divert the mind of the nester from the wolf story.

ALEC glared at him. "Dad gum yore hide, Jeff Brand," he sputtered, and pulled up abruptly, the flare of temper dying in him.

Jeff had turned his amiable whitetoothed

grin on him. Even Morgan was smiling, if a little thinly. Alec threw up his head and laughed. He was among friends. Why resent a little joke founded on a fact well known to them all?

"I bought this cow, doggone you," Alec explained.

They left him still chuckling. A little amusement had to go a long way in his drab life.

Brand and Morgan swung around Black Butte, leaving it far to their left. On Sage Hen Flats they met a cowboy. He rested in the saddle, his weight on one foot and on the thigh of the other leg.

"Where you headin' for?" he asked.

"Just maverickin' around," Jeff told him. "Know anything new?"

"Not a thing. Little while ago I saw John McFaddin and Tod Collins of the Antelope Creek Ranch close to Johnson's Prong."

"What were they doing there?"

"I dunno. Kinda loafin' around, looked like. Well, so long."

After the cowboy was out of hearing Brand made a suggestion. "What say we drift down in the general direction of the Prong? Might as well deliver our freight there as anywhere else."

They crossed the tableland into a hilly country where they gradually wound down toward Johnson's Prong. The two men moved cautiously now, their eyes searching the spread in front of them. When at last they came suddenly on three horsemen at the foot of a little draw Brand noticed instantly that they were strangers. Swiftly he said to his companion, "Don't start anything."

The strangers were watching them, their horses motionless.

"Some freight for McFaddin and Collins," Jeff called. "Seen 'em?"

After a pause one of the men said "Yes."

"Fine. Turn it over to them. Be seeing you later."

Jeff wheeled and led the way round the bend, then went to a canter.

Someone shouted to them to stop, but they kept going. They heard the pounding of hoofs behind them. Just before they disappeared over another hill a rider showed at the head of the draw. He shouted again, then fired, too hurriedly for accuracy.

"This way," Morgan called to his companion, and slid into a hollow between two rises.

The country was a huddle of hills, and inside of a few minutes their pursuers had completely lost them.

"Who were those fellows?" Morgan asked. "They're mighty quick to burn powder. I'll say that."

"Yes. With few questions asked."

"Must be warriors of some of the big outfits."

"Yes, but not cowboys." Brand's eyes were shining with excitement. "Part of this army the *Republican* was tellin' about."

Morgan pulled up his mount. "Hell! It might be thataway. We'd better find out for sure, and if it's so, get word to the boys."

"Just what I'm thinking, Dave. Let's scout around and find out how big a bunch of them there are."

They talked it over together, then made a wide circle to strike Johnson's Prong from the pines above.

XXIV

A TEXAN led the pack horse back to the camp among the pines.

"Couple of fellows brought some freight in for McFaddin and then lit out like the heel flies were after them," he said. "The other boys are chasin' them. They acted right funny."

McFaddin and Ellison stepped forward.

"I'm not looking for any freight," the Flying V C man said. "But that's my horse all right. It has been loose on the range with a bunch of others."

"Better unpack and find what it is," Ellison suggested.

"Sure. Hop to it, boys."

The Texan released the diamond hitch and whipped off the tarp. A body slid to the ground. Those present stood staring at what they saw. Sunday Brown stepped closer and stooped over the dead man.

"Spang through the heart," he said.

Ellison leaned over him. "It's Jack Turley, one of our stock detectives," he said.

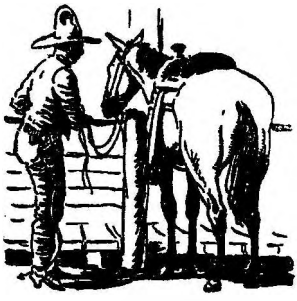
"By God, they got the double-crossing killer," McFaddin said bluntly.

From the coat pocket Ellison drew the note Morgan had written.

> Here is yore killer [he read] come back to report.

Collins looked at Ellison. "So this fellow was the killer."

"That's a closed chapter," the No, By Joe manager replied.



"Closed for Turley," McFaddin snapped. "Whoever did this has got his nerve, bringing the body to our camp. And how did they know we were here? It's supposed to be a secret."

They looked around at one another, startled. Before they had actually started on their clean-up their enemies had flung this melodramatic challenge at them. Were their plans known and foredoomed to defeat?

Ellison called to him the Texan who had led in the pack horse.

"What did the two men say when they turned over to you the horse?" he asked

"Only said this freight was for Mr. McFaddin and Mr. Collins and for us to see they got it. One of 'em yelled they would be seeing us later."

"What did they look like?"

"I wouldn't know. They weren't close. Just like any two guys on horseback."

"That fellow you and I met, John, must have told them we were here," Collins said.

"What else did he tell them?" Ellison asked acidly. "That there were forty or fifty strangers with you, all heavily armed, just out having a look at the scenery?"

The rubicund face of Collins stiffened. "How could he tell them that when he didn't see anybody but us? That's why we let him go."

"Anyhow, we had better move fast," Gaines said. "After being chased off the map these two fellows must suspect something."

"Let's go," McFaddin said with a sardonic laugh. "We don't have to wait any longer for Turley to guide us. He's here. A little late for his appointment with us, but I reckon he couldn't help that."

They were off to an inauspicious start. To most of them the arrival of Turley's dead body, with the crisp jeering note attached, was a bad omen they found it hard to shake off. Moreover, the secrecy they had depended on as an aid to swift success was gone. The men who had brought the pack horse must know there was something up. They would spread their misgivings far and wide.

THE regulators, as the invaders called themselves, looked to their cinches and mounted. From the prong they wound up through the pines into a country of open range too wild for homesteaders. The spread was too rocky and too hilly to invite settlers. Presently they would cross a mountain spur from which they would drop down into a district of gulches, rock rims, and small valleys where at not too frequent intervals a few nesters and cow thieves held the fort unmolested except when posses from the big ranches came hunting stock that was missing. On Ellison's list were the names of a dozen men

who lived in this section. He and his allies meant to wipe out as many of these as they could in a few hours and sweep on up to the neighborhood of the big ranches where they would establish a base for operations.

They straggled forward in no formation, Ellison and McFaddin in the van. From a long rocky slope they came into a little mountain park, not far from the summit, a saucer-shaped depression fringed on the far side with jack pines. Just beyond this was the backbone of the spur they were climbing.

McFaddin lifted a shout of warning and whipped up his rifle. Two men had appeared on the rim and started to ride down, but at sight of the large company pulled up and turned. One of them flung up a hand in protest as the Flying V C man's gun cracked. The echoes of that shot rolled across the valley. A sorrel horse stumbled and flung his rider, then raced across the slope with reins flying wild. The man who had given the Indian peace sign called to his companion. It was almost as though the dismounted man had bounced back from the ground, so quickly was he on his feet. He ran a few steps along the hillside and vaulted to the back of the uninjured horse behind his friend. Three or four Texans fired, but the horse and its double load reached the rim and vanished.

Giving the cowboy's "Hi-Yi-Yippy-Yi," McFaddin brought his cow-pony to a canter and pursued. The others followed him. From the summit they looked down on a tangle of huddled hills, little valleys, and dark canyons. The terrain looked like ideal cover for outlaws. A man who knew the district might hide for weeks in unsuspected pockets.

A roan horse, carrying two men, was traveling fast down the side of the spur but was already showing signs of distress.

"We've got 'em," yelled McFaddin. "Come on, boys."

It looked as though he was right. The fugitives were losing ground rapidly. Bullets whizzed past them. Again the man back of the saddle lifted his hand to give the Indian peace sign. But there was to be no peace for him today. The invaders meant to capture him, and to hang him if his name was on the list Ellison carried

JUST ahead was a little clearing with a log cabin on the edge of a creek. A man had appeared from behind it driving a few cattle. He was at casual ease, in no hurry whatever. At the sound of the roaring guns he swung his head, took in the situation, and instantly forgot there was such a thing as leisure in the world. While the fugitives were still a good two hundred yards distant he jumped his horse to a gallop and vanished up a draw.

The hunted men flung themselves from the back of the horse and ran into the house. The door slammed behind them. The pursuers dragged their horses to a halt and many of them dismounted. Frightened by the firing, the horse of the men in the cabin splashed through the creek and bolted.

Ellison took command. He named four or five men to follow the cowman who had disappeared up the ravine. The others he distributed about the place, most of them in or back of the barn, which was over seventy-five yards from the house. Several he stationed across the brook in the brush near the edge of the clearing. A steady intermittent sniping centered on the cabin. Already its windows were shattered. The defenders had dug spaces in the dry mud between the logs of the walls which they used as loop holes for their guns. One had a rifle. Apparently the other was armed only with a revolver.

The door of the cabin opened a few inches and a hand came out to wave a white flag. A voice called out something that was drowned in the crash of guns. Quickly the arm and the rag were withdrawn, the door shut and bolted.

"Why not let them surrender?" Gaines asked. "Save us some time and trouble."

"Let 'em surrender and then hang 'em?" McFaddin asked harshly. "No, by Jackson! I won't stand for that. If we're going to hang 'em we'll have to dig 'em out."

"We don't even know they are on our list," Collins said.

"We know damn well they are. They are the scalawags who brought Turley's body back. If they hadn't been rustlers they would have held up their hands and let us take them. Oughtn't to be much trouble to collect them."

The forted man with the rifle served notice he was not to be taken too lightly. He wounded in the arm a ranch foreman who exposed himself rather carelessly. Ellison passed the word among his men not to take any unnecessary chances. A few moments later a bullet tore through the calf of one of the Texans.

The men who had pursued the cowman returned after a time. On account of his long start they had failed to catch him. This was disturbing. It meant that news of the invasion was bound to get out. The leaders held a consultation.

"We can't fool away the rest of the day here," McFaddin said impatiently. "To heck with this siege stuff. I move we charge the cabin and wipe 'em out."

"Losing three or four men," Ellison scoffed. "That would be dumb of us."

COLLINS made a suggestion. "You're both right. What say Clint stays here with ten or twelve men and attends to this business while I take the rest and sweep the hill pockets? I can get back before dark."

After some discussion the Antelope Creek man's plan was adopted.

"It's not foolproof, Tod," Gaines said. "But it looks to me as good as any."

McFaddin said he would ride with Collins. There were some thieves in this district he had been wanting to get a crack at for a long time.

"Be sure not to let yourselves get cut off from us," Ellison cautioned. "And don't waste any time. We've got about four hours, I would guess. Five at the most. By that time we'll have to be on our way, or we may not get out of here at all. Whatever happens, don't be tempted to swing too wide a loop. I don't like being so deep in the enemy's country. I'll feel better when we reach Packer's Fork. Once there, it won't be so easy to cut us off from our own district."

Collins promised to be back in time.

McFaddin nodded. "Sure. You do your job here and we'll do ours. All I hope is that the fellow who got away hasn't warned every thief to escape. I don't see how he can have got to all of them."

The sound of the firing on the cabin followed his party into the hills.

XXV

ELLEN was making up a postoffice report that had to be sent to Washington when she saw a horseman emerge from a fissure in the hills and come down the long slope to the ranch at a gallop. He was flogging his mount with a quirt. Jim Budd was at the door, leaning against the jamb, resting from the exertion of having swept the floor. It was in his horoscope that he would go through life as easily as he could.

"Seems to be a gen'elman in a hurry, Miss Ellen," Jim drawled.

"Yes." The girl watched the rider through the window. A faint unease stirred in her. Men did not usually ride like that except to carry bad news. She was glad she knew her father was stringing barb wire for a new pasture. It could not be about him.

The rider drew up in front of the postoffice and flung himself from the horse. The man was Lee Hart. He spoke to Ellen, who had come out to the porch.

"Where's Lane?" he demanded.

"Father is down with the men fencing a new pasture," Ellen answered. "About three miles due west from here. Do you have to see him?"

Hart mopped his perspiring forehead

with a bandanna handkerchief. "Never saw it fail," he cried bitterly. "Need a man and he ain't there."

"What's wrong, Lee?" the girl wanted to know.

"Wrong! Everything." The heavy set bowlegged man slammed his dusty old hat on the porch floor. "A bunch of wild Injuns is raidin' this country. They came bustin' down on my place with forty guns a-poppin'."

"Indians?" the girl repeated incredulously.

"Well, these Texas warriors the paper was telling about. They was chasing two guys. I lit out lickitty-split."

"Who were they chasing?"

"I dunno. They're likely wiped out by now. They hadn't but one horse between them. When I took my last look they were making for my house to hole up."

"What do you want with father?"

"Well, we got to spread the news to everybody. I'm headin' for Round Top. Someone has got to ride up the Alford Road and let the settlers there know. Tell 'em to meet here. Send Jim if you haven't got anybody else."

"No," Ellen said promptly. "I'm not going to get Jim mixed up in it."

"Mixed up in it. You tellin' me yore black man is too good to work with us?" Hart snarled.

"I'm telling you it is none of his business."

Hart fastened his gaze on two horsemen coming down the road at a slow trot. In his eagerness to tell the news to Jeff Brand he forgot his indignation. He bowlegged through the dust to meet the riders as they drew up at the hitching post.

"Have you heard, Jeff? The big outfits have done brought a bunch of Texans here to run us outa the country. Paul Vallery told me this mo'ning. He got it from Lane Carey, who read it in the Denver *Republican.* Well, sir, I seen them comin' down the hill hell-for-leather and lit out just in time. They was chasin' two birds."

Brand swung from the saddle, to go forward to meet Ellen. "Chasing who?" he asked over his shoulder.

"I dunno. Couldn't wait to find out. I burned the wind getting away from there."

"You don't know what became of the two men?"

"They got into my house and forted up, but I reckon they couldn't hold out long. Must of been a hundred in that army."

"Fifty-eight," Brand corrected.

"How do you know?"

"We hid on a ridge and counted them," Morgan said.

"A bunch of warriors brought in to shoot down innocent men," Hart cried angrily. "We'll see about that. I'm on my way to tell our friends at Round Top."

"No need," Jeff said. "We've already sent a messenger. Better stay and gather a relief party to ride over to your place. We'll need every man we can get."

"When do you aim to go?"

"We've got to get off right quick if we're going to save the boys they have trapped. Say inside of an hour."

"We can't get together seventy or eighty men that quick," Hart protested.

"Don't need more than ten or a dozen. We'll lie in the rocks above and shoot down at them."

"Not me," Hart answered promptly. "I just got out with my skin, and I don't aim to try it again."

JEFF looked at the man contemptuously. "Thought your specialty was shooting from cover," he jeered.

"My specialty ain't committing suicide," the bandy legged man snapped, stung by the other's gibe. I'll take reasonable chances, but I ain't foolhardy."

"Go hide under a bed, you louse." The pale blue eyes of Brand burned into the man. "But not till you've done your job. Ride up the Alford Road and send down all the men you can find. After that you can go jump in a lake."

Jeff turned away and joined Ellen on

the porch. He grinned at her. "Well, sometimes a newspaper piece turns out to be true," he said.

"You feel sure this crowd is the one the *Republican* told about?" she asked.

"Sure. Two-thirds of them were strangers to us. They are a tough-looking bunch, but not tough enough for the job they are tackling."

Morgan joined those on the porch. "I'd better ride to Deep Creek and warn the folks up that way. From what Lee says looks like these fellows are headed there."

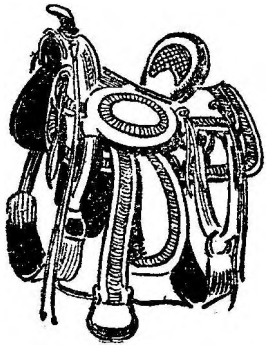
"Yes. Better rope one of the horses in the corral." Jeff added casual information. "I'm going to Lee's place to see what has happened to the two trapped in his house. Maybe I can make a diversion from the rocks that will help them."

"Must you, Jeff?" asked Ellen in a low voice.

He nodded. "Can't desert two of our men without trying to help them." His manner was cheerful and nonchalant. "Dave has picked the tough job. He's liable to meet a bunch of these Texans any turn of the road. But someone has to warn our friends."

"I suppose so. But you don't have to go and attack fifty men, do you?"

Brand's gaze followed Morgan as that young man swung on his horse to ride to



the corral. "He'll do it too, if they don't get him first. That guy will do to ride the river with." His attention came back to what the girl had said. She could see that excitement was quickening his blood. "This isn't any Arnold Winkelried stuff like we read about in our sixth reader. I don't aim to step out and ask them to shoot holes in me."

"I don't see what you can do alone."

"Can't tell till I get there. Soon as a bunch of the boys roll in tell them to hop over to Lee's place fast as their broncs will bring them."

She watched him, always spectacular, fling himself into the saddle without first touching the horse. He waved his big white hat in farewell as he rode away. The girl's heart sank. He was so brave and loyal, had so many good points. But all his fine qualities were neutralized by the one fatal lack in him.

XXVI

FROM the Box 55 to Lee Hart's place it was eight miles across the hills. Jeff rode fast, for he knew it could be only a question of time until the defenders were overwhelmed by numbers. He had not the least idea who had taken refuge in the cabin. It might be outlaws whose activities were wholly illegal, or it might be settlers who only rustled occasionally on the side. In any case they were allies of his, men who had a claim to his support in such an emergency.

Before he had covered half the way to the hill ranch he heard the sound of firing far to his left. The explosions came faintly, as firecrackers do when set off at a distance. First, a single shot, and perhaps a minute later two more. Though he listened for more, no popping reached his ears.

To Jeff there seemed something sinister in these breaks disturbing the silence. His imagination pictured a man peacefully hoeing a potato patch or mending a fence. From the direction of the report it might have come from Wade Scott's place. If so, Wade would probably have been whistling, his mind on a girl in Cheyenne who worked in the railroad restaurant, one he was expecting to marry in a few months. Jeff

could see Wade look up in surprise, to see vigilantes closing in on him. He could see him turn to run, the smoke of guns, the buckling of his knees as he went down.

Later Jeff heard more shots, but these were from the Hart place. Since this meant that the defenders were still holding off the attack, he was glad to hear them. He rode fast till he reached the top of the ravine which ran down to the Hart clearing just back of the house. Instead of taking the gulch he followed the rim, keeping to cover as he came close to the edge. Looking down, his gaze swept the clearing and picked up details.

He saw two men crouched back of the barn. Evidently there were others in it, for as he stood there a puff of smoke came from the window opening in the hay loft. At least one man was stationed in the bed of the creek a hundred and fifty yards from the house. A shot from that point told him so.

There was a small alfalfa field to the left of the house. It ran to the draw leading up to the ravine. He could see the ditch crossing it in the direction of the house. Rank grass covered the edges. A wild idea jumped to his mind. Why not get into that ditch, crawl along it till he was close to the cabin, and make a dash to join the defenders? It was the sort of plan to catch Jeff's fancy. He felt the pulse of excitement beating in his throat which for him always accompanied danger. By heaven, he would try it.

Near the top of the ravine he picketed his horse, then moved down it cautiously. It was possible one or two of the sharpshooters were placed near the bottom of it in a position to command the house. As he came round a bend in the gulch, he looked down into the little basin which held the ranch. Thirty yards below him a man crouched behind a large boulder, a rifle in his hands. He was watching the log cabin, evidently hoping to get a glimpse of one of the defenders. Lower down in the draw and fifty yards to his right another marksman was also waiting behind cover for a shot.

Jeff tiptoed forward, revolver in hand. He had not been a big game hunter for nothing. No perceptible rumor of his movements reached the lank Texan toward whom he was soft-footing. Unwittingly the sniper helped at his own undoing. Intensely preoccupied with the job in hand, his mind was following a single track which led straight from him to the quarry in the cabin. When Brand was about ten strides from him he drew a bead and fired. As the rifle cracked Jeff flung aside caution and took the last stretch on the run. . The Texan whirled, too late. The long barrel of the .45 smashed down on his lifted forehead. His body swayed, and collapsed. Jeff pistol-whipped him again, to make sure he would not come back from unconsciousness too soon.

Nobody had noticed what had taken place. Jeff helped himself to the man's rifle and cartridge belt. He moved to the left and stepped down into the dry ditch he had seen from the bluff above. Crouching low in it, he crept forward. The alfalfa hid him pretty well. If he were seen by the attackers he would probably not be molested, since he would be taken for an ally of theirs trying to get close to the enemy.

Crossing the field was a slow business. He went on all fours, dragging the rifle beside him. The firing was intermittent. Occasionally the reverberating crash of a gun beat across the basin. He was near enough the cabin to see lead fling splinters from the logs. At this point the ditch deflected at a sharp angle. Every foot he took in it now would take him away from his destination.

He called, softly, "Hello the house," and when no answer came back to him he called again, more loudly. It was after his fourth attempt that somebody inside answered.

"Who is it? What you want?"

"Jeff Brand. I'm gonna make a run for the door. Fling it open for me when I give the word."

There was a perceptible silence before the man in the house replied. "How come you there—if you're Brand?"

"Don't talk, you fool. Do as I say."

Jeff came out of the ditch running. The distance was farther than it looked from the bluff above; nearer fifty yards than the twenty he had guessed it. But he could not go back now.

From the edge of the valley he heard a shout. Somebody had discovered the Texan he had knocked out and was spreading the news. The guns roared. A bullet whistled past his head. Involuntarily he ducked, still racing for the cabin. Twenty yards more would do it.

He bowled over, all the power knocked out of him in an instant. That he had been hit he knew, though he felt no pain. Still clinging to the rifle, he tried to clamber to his feet. The ground tilted up at him, and he went down again. Still conscious, he crawled forward a foot or two.

A splatter of sand kicked up in front of him. Another bullet parted his curly hair.

The cabin door was flung open. Two men showed at the entrance. One man ran toward Jeff, in long reaching strides. The other covered the rescue, firing at the figures which had come into the open to get Brand. It was a matter of seconds, but they stretched interminably. The first man reached Jeff, gathered him up, and plunged back toward the house. As he crossed the threshold the man with the rifle slammed the door shut.

XXVII

CALHOUN TERRY and Larry Richards, on their way to Round Top to meet a cattleman who had a registered Hereford bull for sale, struck across country to hit Johnson's Prong and take the short cut down Box Canyon. They traveled at a road gait, not pushing their horses, for there was a long journey ahead of them. It was not necessary for them to make talk, since they were knit in close friendship tested by a hundred experiences shared together.

When they talked it was mostly about a new enterprise in which they were to be partners. They had made an arrangement with John Q. Powers to buy the old Terry ranch once owned by Calhoun's father and with it a fine stretch of river land adjoining. Larry had lately inherited some money. This was to make part of the initial payment. The rest of it was to come out of Terry's interest in the Diamond Reverse B. Six hundred cattle with that brand were included in the deal. There would be enough cash left for current expenses.

"You're getting the most unpopular man on Buck River for a partner," Calhoun said. "The little fellows and the big outfits have just one thing in common. They both agree that I'm a deserter and a traitor."

"Inside of a year all that will be forgotten," Larry predicted. "The big ranches will be following your example. The bad feeling will pass away soon as the friction is removed, and the settlers will give you credit for taking the first step to straighten things out."

They came to the lip of a small mountain park and dipped down into it. Terry pulled up his cow-pony and pointed to the opposite slope. A large body of men on horseback was moving down it.

"The Texas invaders," Larry said instantly.

"Yes, and we'd better get away from here," his companion decided. "When they see us they will hold us prisoners, to make sure we don't spread the news. That wouldn't suit us. We don't want to be identified with them."

Too late, they wheeled their horses. The sound of a rifle shot roared across the park. Larry's horse went down and flung him. His friend raised the palm of his hand to give the peace sign, but the answer was a splatter of bullets.

"Come a-running, Larry," called Terry.

Richards vaulted to the back of the horse, and they were on their way. From the ridge they headed down into a country of huddled hills and ravines where outlaws had their abode. The roan gelding did its best, but when Larry looked back he knew the race would be a short one.

"They're coming hell-for-leather," he said. "We won't reach the hills."

He held up his hand in the peace sign, but it did not stop the crashing of the guns.

"We'll have to hole up at Lee Hart's 'til we get a chance to explain we're not the men they want," Terry said.

"Yep. There's Lee down there with his stock. He isn't waiting to ask questions either."

"Don't blame him. He's on their list."

They reached the clearing, flung themselves from the horse, and raced for the cabin by the creek. Once inside, they slammed and bolted the door. From the window Larry saw the leader of the regulators disposing of his men.

"I could bump that fellow off with yore rifle, Cal," he said. "He figures we can't shoot, I reckon. It's Clint Ellison."

Terry joined his companion at the window. "Yes, it's Clint. He doesn't know who we are, but I don't think he would mind picking me off, sort of accidentally, even if he did."

They could hear bullets thudding into the logs. One shattered the other window.

"We'd better move back out of sight," Larry suggested. "Have to dig out holes between the logs to shoot through."

"I'll try a white flag," Calhoun said. "If they'll hold back long enough to listen to us we'll be all right."

HE found an empty flour sack, opened the door a few inches, and waved the white sack. He called out his name to Ellison. The noise of the guns killed the sound of his voice. Lead tore into the door.

"Quit that foolishness, Cal," his friend snapped. "You'll get shot up, first thing. The darned fools are crazy with the heat."

With their knives they dug away the mud plaster between two logs. They had to have sights for shooting and they could not use the window spaces. Already the shattered glass on the floor showed the enemy fire was concentrating there. As yet the defenders had not fired a shot and the gunmen outside were growing bolder. Some of them began to press closer.

"Have to stop that," Calhoun said.

He did not want to kill anybody. A time would come, he hoped, when he could let the cattlemen know who they were. He had recognized Tod Collins and John McFaddin. They had been associates of his only a short time ago, and he did not want to have to hurt either of them or any of their party. But his warning had to be effective.

A foreman of the Circle C C ranch, a big blustering fellow who rode his men hard, was gesticulating violently and pointing toward the cabin. Apparently he was urging them to a charge. Terry shot him in the arm, and he took cover behind the barn. During the rest of the battle he was not seen again by the besieged men. A few seconds later Calhoun's rifle scored another hit. A lumbering Texan behind a cottonwood tried to improve his position by running to another tree closer to the house. He stopped before he reached it, lurched sideways, and fell to the ground. With scarcely a moment's delay he began crawling back to his original position.

"You got him," Jerry cried.

"In the leg. I didn't want to kill him. Maybe his friends will get the idea that they haven't been invited to come any nearer."

"Some folks can't take a hint unless a Methodist church falls on them," Larry said lightly. "Wish I had a rifle too. My six-gun won't carry that far with any accuracy. Looks like I'll have to be an innocent bystander until they begin to crowd us."

Both of them knew there could be only

one ending to the battle if it went to a finish. But they were cool game men, used to danger, and they could take whatever was in store for them without weakening.

THE attackers grew more wary of exposing themselves. Presently the firing died down except for an occasional shot.

"Something's up," Calhoun said. "Probably getting ready to rush us." He laughed, sardonically. "I never was in this kind of a jam before. All we have to do is let them know who we are and they would let us alone, but as soon as we poke a nose out to tell them they blast away at us."

Larry was watching the attackers through his peep hole. "They are getting their horses." His voice grew excited. "By the jumping horned frog, they're riding away. They figure it would cost too much to dig us out of our hole. Seems too good luck to be true."

It was too good to be true. More than forty men took a trail into the hills, but enough were left to keep up the attack on the cabin. Terry tried again, during the lull in the firing, to let Ellison know who they were, but he was fired upon the instant he opened the door. The No, By Joe manager had nothing to discuss with the two rustlers he held cooped in the house. His intention was to wipe them out.

For nearly an hour he kept up a desultory firing, most of it from the sharpshooters stationed in the barn and among the brush at the foot of the ridge. At the end of that time he stopped the waste of ammunition and tried another plan to dislodge them. Two horses were taken into the barn. A few minutes later they came out drawing a wagon with a hay rack on it.

"Will you tell me what the blazes that is for?" Larry asked.

The wagon was driven through a poor man's gate* into a meadow of wild hay. Near the center of the field was the remains of a stack of hay, most of it weeds tossed aside as unfit food for stock. Men began to gather this trash with pitchforks and load it on the rack.

At first Calhoun was puzzled, but the purpose of this jumped to his mind. "You picked the right word when you said blazes, Larry. Ellison is going to burn us out."

Larry caught the idea. "Sure. They aim to get behind the hay and push the wagon by the tongue up against the house. Then they will set fire to the hay."

"Go to the head of the class, Master Richards. That's just what they intend to do."

After a moment Larry spoke. "You've been favoring these fellows, Cal, and that was right so far. But no longer. They mean to kill us, even if they have to burn us up. It's them or us. I won't let them rub me out without fighting back."

Calhoun nodded agreement. "Nor I. But maybe the time hasn't quite come for that, Larry. The thing is to delay them all we can. Help is on the way to us by now, I expect. Hart could not have recognized us. He thinks we are some of his outlaw friends. When he reaches Black Butte he will start gathering men to save us. That will take some time, but not very much if we are lucky."

"You mean if there's a bunch of men at the postoffice? Not likely this time of day. Besides, they would have to get their rifles before they came. No use foolin' ourselves. Help won't reach us before night."

Terry found no words to refute that. His friend had said what he too thought. When the attempted rescuers arrived it would be too late to do any good.

"If they try to rush the house I'll show myself at the window," he said. "When they are close they will recognize me."

* A poor man's gate is made by three strands of barb wire attached to a pole at each end.

"After they have pumped lead into you."

Terry did not answer. He was watching the wagon and the men with it. They had loaded the refuse hay and were picking up brush to pile on the top of it. The driver swung the team round to return to the gate. He was nearer the house than at any time since leaving the barn.

Calhoun took careful aim and fired. One of the horses sank to the ground.

"That will hold them for awhile," he said.

"Good shot," Larry applauded. "Must be four hundred yards. Watch the brave boys scurry for cover."

THERE was a flurry of renewed firing at the cabin. For ten or fifteen minutes it continued to cover the activities of those with the wagon. Five or six men rode out there, making a wide circuit, and dragged the dead horse out of the way. They hitched another animal to the load. Terry fired again and missed.

A voice outside, not far away, hailed the house. It came from the side Larry was defending. Richards searched the alfalfa field and saw nobody.

"Someone has worked up right close to us," he told his companion. "Sounds like he's only forty or fifty yards away."

"Ask him who he is," Terry said. "We can send a message by him and tell Ellison who we are."

Larry shouted the question. The answer astonished him. He passed it on to his friend.

"Claims he's Jeff Brand and is going to make a run for the door. He must have crawled up the ditch." Larry demanded more information from the man outside. A moment later he cried, in excitement: "Hell, it's Jeff all right. He's coming on the run. They've hit him. He's down."

Terry ran to the door and flung it open. He thrust the rifle into the hands of Richards and raced toward the man on the ground who was crawling toward the house. The spiteful whine of the bullets whistled past him. He knew that Larry was in the doorway firing at their enemies, holding a position more dangerous than his because he was not moving.

Stooping, Calhoun picked up Brand, the rifle still in his hand, and hurried back to the house. He reached it in safety and Larry bolted the door.

Terry put the wounded man down on the bed. "Where did they hit you?" he asked.

Jeff Brand did not answer. He stared at his rescuer in vast astonishment.

"They got him in the ankle," Larry said, pointing to a hole in Brand's boot.

The man on the bed sat up. He gazed at Larry, then once more at the manager of the Diamond Reverse B. This was as bad as a Chinese puzzle.

XXVIII

JEFF said bluntly, "What in hell are you doing here?"

"The gents outside ran us in here," Larry said, chuckling. "Now they are fixing to run us out again."

"But—what for? I don't get the reason."

"They didn't wait to find out who we are. Began to make targets of us before we had a chance to explain. Better let me get that boot off your leg, Jeff."

Terry was back at his loop hole. He had to make sure of what the attackers were doing. Brand looked at him—and laughed. There was no mirth in his laughter.

"I take the cake for damn fools," he said acridly.

"You surely picked a hot spot, one that's going to be hotter soon," Larry told him. "If I hurt you too much while I'm working the boot off, holler."

Brand set his teeth as Richards removed the boot. Tiny beads of perspiration stood on his forehead, but he did not flinch. Gently Larry drew off the sock. While he was getting water from a bucket to wash the wound he swept the alfalfa field with

his keen eyes. It was important not to let anybody else come up out of the ditch.

"Everything seems to be quiet along the Potomac," he announced, turning away, and as he spoke a bullet crashed through a small section of glass in a window through which he had been looking.

He tied up the wound with a handkerchief he found in a drawer. Brand rose and tested his leg gingerly. Larry caught him as he started to slump down.

"Better lie there on the bed," Terry said, without looking round. "Let Larry have your rifle."

"It's not mine," Brand answered. "I borrowed it from a guy I met at the foot of the ravine."

"Borrowed it," Larry repeated.

"Yep. He didn't need it right then. He was counting stars, I reckon." Brand grinned. "Maybe he still is. I wouldn't know. You can have the loan of it till I quit feelin' dizzy, Larry."

"Better lie down," Terry said again. "Until you feel steadier, anyhow."

Jeff looked at Terry's flat strong back with cold dislike. This was a nice pickle to be in. Without knowing it, he had come to rescue an enemy, and by another queer topsy-turvy quirk the man had saved him. He had heard of life's little ironies. This was one in which he could find no pleasure.

"I'll sit up," he said.

"Ankle hurting much?" Larry asked.

"I can notice it," Jeff answered dryly. "But in a couple of minutes I'll be able to sit up in a chair and pick off some of these wolves." He added, his hard narrowed eyes on Terry, "Ought to be like shooting fish in a duck pond. How many of 'em have you got?"

"They haven't ever come within range of my six-gun," Larry explained. "Cal has wounded two."

"Fine work," Jeff derided. "But I reckon he hates to kill off his friends."

"Would you call them his friends? And them bringing a hay wagon down to burn him out of here."

Brand looked quickly at Larry. The Diamond Reverse B puncher had spoken in a voice cool and even, but the rustler did not make the mistake of deciding that he did not mean what he had said.

"You wouldn't be loadin' me?" Jeff asked.

"They are bringing the hay to the barn now. Some of them will take hold of the tongue and back the wagon against the window. Then they will set fire to the hay."

Jeff showed his white teeth in a grim smile. "That's what a fellow gets for coming to a barbecue when he hasn't had an invite."

Without looking round, Terry said, "It may not be as bad as that. When they get close I'm going to try to let them know who I am."

Again Jeff laughed, mirthlessly. "That will be fine—for you and Larry."

THE words of the outlaw gave Larry a shock. He had not thought of it before, but he saw now that even if he and Calhoun could save themselves by surrender, in doing so they would condemn Jeff to death. And Jeff had come here, thinking they were his allies, to fight off the invaders until help arrived.

"How soon will your friends get here?" Larry asked. "I reckon they are gathering quick as they can."

"I sent Lee Hart out to pass the word. My guess would be in another hour and a half. Depends who leads them. Dave Morgan would have jumped them along, but he had to go warn the Deep Creek settlers."

After a pause, "We can't stand them off another hour and a half," Terry said.

A sinister light quickened Jeff's face. He said, ironically, "You'll be able to make a nice deal for yourselves now. They won't have two to hang, but one is better than none."

Terry did not answer. Larry flushed angrily.

"You have a fine way of making friends, Jeff," he said.

"I'm particular about who my friends are," Brand jeered.

"I've noticed that. A scoundrel like Lee Hart who shoots from back of a wall at a man not expecting it. A bully-puss ruffian like Jack Turley. A scalawag like—"

"Don't talk about Turley being my friend," Jeff interrupted. "I killed him this morning."

Larry stared at him, waiting for information. The roar of Terry's rifle filled the room.

"Get one?" Larry snapped.

"Hit him in the foot. They are ready to start the wagon."

Jeff hobbled to the wall, dragging a chair with him. "Gimme that rifle, Larry," he ordered, and got out a knife to dig a loop hole.

"All right. Soon as you're ready for it. Howcome you to kill Turley?"

"We found out he was the traitor who shot Jim Tetlow and the other boys. I gave him an even-steven break, which was more than the skunk deserved. We found the blood money in his cabin. You and yore friends can't get it back, Mr. Terry, because we turned it over to the widow of one of the men your killer shot."

Terry looked at him, and the eyes of the ranchman were hard as agates. "They are starting the wagon. In ten minutes we may all be dead. I told you before I had nothing to do with those murders, and I tell you so now."

"They've stopped the wagon," Larry interrupted. "Someone has brought in a horse without a rider. Looks like the roan you were on. Bet a dollar they have recognized the horse and are having a powwow about it."

"It looks like only one of us may be dead in ten minutes," Jeff snarled. "I'll take that rifle now, Larry. I aim to go out in smoke."

Larry looked at the Diamond Reverse B manager.

"Give it to him," Terry said, his gaze fixed on the outlaw. "But don't make a mistake, Brand. I wouldn't have chosen it that way, but we're all in this tight together. We all come out of it alive or none of us do. Let me do the talking; that is, if any of us get a chance to do any with these fellows."

"We're getting a chance all right," Larry cried. "Someone is running out a white flag from back of the barn."

The narrowed glittering eyes of Brand held fast to those of Terry. The rustler trusted his friends but was suspicious of his enemies.

"How do I know you won't throw me down?" he asked harshly.

"Don't be a fool, Jeff," Larry cut in. "Cal and I are both square shooters. You ought to have sense enough to see that."

Terry walked to the door, unbolted it, and waved the flour sack. Ellison and Sunday Brown came out of the barn and walked toward the house. When they were about forty yards distant the No, By Joe manager shouted a question.

"What made you run away, Terry?" he demanded irritably. "You might have got killed."

THE Diamond Reverse B man waited until they were nearer. "So we might," he agreed, sarcasm riding his voice. "Whether we ran or whether we stayed. Your hired killers are too ready with their guns, Ellison. I told you it would be that way."

"We took you for two scoundrels who had killed one of our inspectors and had the nerve to bring his body to us with an insulting note. Naturally when you ran we followed. If you had stayed and held up your hands there wouldn't have been any trouble." Ellison smiled thinly, his eyes hard and cold. Larry guessed he was not sorry for the bad two hours he had given them.

"If you expect me to say your explanation makes everything all right I shall have

to disappoint you," Terry answered stiffly.

"Too bad you were annoyed," Ellison said, with smooth insolence. "By the way, what adjustment do you expect to make to the three men you have wounded?"

"Just tell them they are lucky Cal is a good shot," Larry retorted. "If he hadn't been you would probably have had to dig graves for them."

Ellison looked at him. "I wasn't talking to you."

"No? Well, I'm talking to you." Into Larry's face beneath the tan dark blood swept. "Your hired killers have been plugging at me for a couple of hours. You're no better than that dead wolf Turley you were telling us about. The sooner you are run out of the country the better."

Larry had made a slip and Ellison pounced on it. "Did I mention Turley? How do you know he was the man?"

"Never mind how I know. He has nothing to do with our complaint against you. I'm going to see that it gets into the Denver papers that you attacked us."

Sunday Brown spoke for the first time. "Who is the man that slipped into the cabin a little while ago?"

Terry looked at him bleakly. "You wounded the man, whoever he is. That's enough for one day. I advise you-all to mount your horses and get out of here while you can."

"Don't try the high and mighty with me, Terry," the No, By Joe manager advised, restraining his temper with difficulty. "We're letting you go. That's enough. If you want my opinion, you're no better than these rustlers you are secretly encouraging. I'm asking you two questions, and I don't intend to leave till I get answers. The first is, how do you know Turley was killed, unless you are in on the job? The second is, who did you carry into the cabin a little while ago?"

"You're out of luck in your questions, Ellison," drawled Terry. "We won't answer either of them."

"I'll satisfy myself on the last point by looking," the leader of the regulators announced arrogantly, and stepped toward the house.

Quick as he was, Terry barred the way. "Nothing doing. The man is our guest, and he isn't entertaining visitors today."

Little white spots of rage dented Ellison's nose. "By God, you're not in the clear yet, Terry. I'll tell you that. You're in with these thieves—or you're not. I've asked you two plain questions. If you are an honest man you won't wait a moment to clear yourself."

TERRY looked him over coldly. He too was curbing his anger not too easily. "I'll be the judge of my honesty, Mr. Ellison. And I'm not answering your questions. That's final."

Sunday Brown tried the soft word. The big Texan had ridden into the brush many times to drag out desperate criminals. He and his men had brought out a good many lashed to pack saddles as Turley had been, dead bodies to be identified and buried. But these two men facing him were not criminals, at least as far as he knew.

"Let's be reasonable, gentlemen," he said. "I don't reckon you mean to aid outlaws. You're with one of the big concerns, Terry. We'd better get together on this. Ellison's questions look fair to me."

A man appeared in the doorway of the house. He leaned against the jamb for support, but the rifle in his hands was quite steady.

"You've got me so plumb scared that I expect I'd better answer yore questions, Ellison," he said, not raising his voice. "I'm the guy in the cabin, and I'm the one who told them about Turley. I knew about it because I shot the skunk this morning. Maybe I'm one of the men you're lookin' for."

The color slowly drained from Ellison's gray face. His guess was that Brand meant to kill him now.

(*To be concluded in the next* SHORT STORIES.)

When the Sheriff's Lugger Rounded the Towhead, He Found Quite Different Fugitives Than He Expected

WE'RE SAILING TOGETHER

By KENNETH PERKINS

Author of "Pearl Fever," etc.

WHEN he answered the telephone Seth thought it must be another message about the three robbers who had fled down here to the sea marsh. He had already been warned that they might come to his hunting camp for food. His three shacks, wharf and gas pump were in a lonely cypress slash that made a good place to hide. But this phone call was really more exciting.

Seth's wind-browned hand shook as he held the receiver. A girl wanted to come down to his camp. She had had an altercation with her father. The receiver knocked and crackled, the connection being bad, for the wires went over miles of stormy swamp land from here to Houma.

It was a desolate spot, Seth reminded her, and he was alone. He asked how long she wanted to stay but could not understand her answer. She was as excited as he and the wind seemed to be singing in the wires.

He went to the kitchen shack to see what he could offer her when she came. He walked on air, the singing in his nerves echoing that frenzy in the connection. He built a fire in the stove, set chunks of cypress in the main shack with kindling and Spanish moss ready.

He knew this girl and he knew her father well. Major Martin was a hot-headed old gentleman with enough Spanish-Creole in his veins to make him belligerently protective of his daughter. He raised perique tobacco, cotton and rice which kept him busy except in the hunting season. Then he would come down with his daughter to shoot ducks and gallinule at Seth's camp. He was a very good shot.

Seth of course fell in love with the daughter. At seventeen she was rather thin and had a complexion like thick cream which needed no make-up, a point that emphasized her total lack of sophistication. But Seth knew she was old enough, and that she loved this hunting camp. In the game season it was bleak and wild but exciting. And when the trumpet vine and pecan groves bloomed it was the place to spend a honeymoon, Kirstie Martin said.

Seth said nothing to her, except with his eyes which were the big, gloomy eyes of a bloodhound. He asked her father first. Major Martin liked him, admired him for his mastery of guns and dogs and hunting and the marsh. But he told him to wait a year. Then he told him to wait another. His daughter being motherless was still a child to him. Seth waited a third year.

But that was too long. The telephone message told all about it. Inspired, Seth started to cook supper for her—or rather for two! Often he cooked a gumbo for the New Orleans hunters who came to his camp. It was only a hobby of course, for he intended—when he made enough from his hunting club—to become a cotton factor. But he knew how to prepare a feast. He must get a woodcock or two—despite the closed season. Some pompano for the first course, then a dish of sausage, ham, rice and whatever birds he could bag.

AFTER sweeping up the shacks he went out to rake away the flotsam from the shell beach. He thought of ringing up his friend Père Halloran, a priest at Dulac, asking him to be on hand in case he was needed! But this was rather flighty. He was content to dream about it instead.

He came out on the pier eagerly watching the long prairie of water to the north. But he only saw a pinch-shouldered redbone called Carbon Ferret paddling his dug-out down a narrow trail. This fellow Carbon was a bad one. He was apt to shoot frogs, sell heron feathers or put his trap within ten feet of a muskrat nest, unless watched like a thief.

When he shoved his dug-out over the shells and ooze, Seth said, "Listen, Carbon. You better watch out what you got in your pirogue today. They're searching everybody in the marsh account of that bank robbery at Houma."

"What do I care about that? Got any molasses rum?"

Seth saw his basket of crabs. "Got any females in there with eggs on 'em? Better throw 'em back."

Carbon's red eyes spurted up to the lanky figure on the pier. "What you mean everybody get search'?"

"The sheriff said one of the gang knew the marsh. The one who shot the teller had brown hands and fingers raw from shrimp juice—like yours. He was a shrimper. What you got in that bag, Carbon?"

"Doves."

"Doves! Hells bells, are you crazy! You'll be in jail tonight. How many doves?"

"Just two."

"Give 'em to me, Carbon, and I won't tell the agent."

Carbon handed them up and Seth began plucking them as he talked. "It was a bad robbery, Carbon. They're killers and they're around here somewhere. Sheriff's sure of it account of their getaway car. They mired it in the swamp grass twenty miles from here and then lined down to the salt marsh."

"All right. Give me some rum."

SETH felt so friendly with the whole world that he gave him a jug and told him to get out. Then he came into the shack to fix the doves with Spanish onions and pecan nuts. He had everything ready when Kirstie arrived.

She came in her father's duck-cabined motorboat which dragged old lilies that had caught at the stern. The lilies meant that she had come down surreptitiously by the side bayous. Seth feasted his eyes when she stood up and steered through the mud lumps. She was still a very thin, very young figure, whipped by the Gulf wind, wet with spray of the last prairie which she had to cross in the open. She swung to the pier but as Seth reached for her, a pirogue came out of the rushes of a side bayou.

Evidently its occupant had been watching for her, for they hallooed and waved to each other.

"It's Jack Burlin!" she announced, her eyes dancing. "We planned to meet here. We're eloping!"

"You're what!"

"We're going to get married. He phoned me from Molino's store here in the marsh and I came down." Again she waved.

The paddler shoved his canoe into the grass and Kirstie ran down to meet him. He was a young man with pink cheeks and bright black eyes. His hair was so smart that it looked pomaded and black as a nigger goose wing. Seth watched them in each other's arms. She would prefer the arms of a boy like that, he reflected. Seth's arms were too long and iron-hard and he smelt of the piney woods and salt water and pipe tobacco. This youngster looked as if he smelt of pomade and cologne.

The girl brought him to the pier. "This is Seth Hubbard, Jack. He'll fix everything for us. We can trust him all right—for everything. Don't you know Jack Burlin, Seth?"

Yes, Seth knew him. But the last time he saw him he was a high school kid and without the qualifications for being the head of a family. Seth's dazed eyes stared as if at a perfect stranger. "Does your dad know about it?" he said to the girl.

"He knows I'm not home. But you've got to tell him the rest. You've got to fix it up, Seth. I picked you out as the one man who'd help us."

"But where you going to get married?"

"Right here! You can get Père Halloran."

"But your dad'll know by now and have the sheriff hunting you."

"I came down by the inside trails you showed me last winter." She could do that well, Seth realized. She knew the swamp like her own plantation and she could handle that motorboat in the mud shoals and lilies as well as any shrimp-seine Cajan. "We're safe here—with you, Seth. With you hiding us, there's no fear in the world."

"Yeah, but how long are we staying here?" Jack Burlin said. "It's a jumping-off place. Let's get on to Barataria Bay and Lafitte. We'll be married in New Orleans."

Seth said absently, "Come in a while anyway. I'll build a fire so you kids can get dry!" He picked up Kirstie's overnight bag.

JACK looked into the row of lean-to bunkrooms. "How can we get dry in this shack when you got no heat?"

Seth hurried to the stove in the main room and put a match to the Spanish moss. "I got supper started. Jambalaya and gumbo. Doves. I didn't know there'd be two of you. But there's enough for two."

"I thought you understood, Seth," Kirstie said. "I told you as much as I dared over the phone. I couldn't come right out with it. But I thought you'd guess. You're smart that way."

"Sure. He looks pretty smart," Jack said doubtfully.

"I couldn't hear much over the phone," Seth said. "It's a bum phone." As Jack warmed his hands Seth stared at him, long-faced. He was the same as any kid you would see at a Saturday night baile or a dance hall in the city. Stove heat made his face glow like a cherub's. And life made his eyes glow. Seth felt something of the thrill this boy must be feeling and it warmed his long, aching body.

"Any chance for a drink in this joint?" Jack asked.

Seth got a bottle. "Here you are—Spanish Burgundy. My compliments. A wedding present. It's yours."

Jack studied the bottle, his brows knitting. "H'm. Not so bad for a camp. Think I'll keep this for tonight. Kirstie and I'll have it in New Orleans. Got a key to this suitcase, dear?"

Seth gaped. He had thought all three would drink to the occasion together. But he had forgotten that the eloping couple would be jealous of anyone in the world stepping into the circle. He watched Jack put the bottle into the overnight bag and set it in one of the bunkrooms.

"Pretty nice looking kid," Seth said. "Know him long?"

"We had a party at the plantation, mostly dad's friends, but one of them brought Jack along. That was last spring. He asked me to go to the movies when dad was away. We did that a lot. We wanted to be married a long time. He sells cars."

"Thought we were going to eat," Jack said, breezing in from the bunkroom.

Seth plodded into the kitchen and came back with the pompano. He did not sit down with them, but went out alone on the pier. He wanted the balm of that Gulf wind on his hot face. Gulls wheeled down there by the reefs, and to the north ducks scattered out of the canebrakes into the sky. It was a motorboat that had scared them.

Seth hurried back to the two lovers who were eating from each other's plates and holding hands. "Bert Daley's coming!"

It was hard to tell which face turned whiter, Kirstie's or Jack's. "Dad's found out!" Kirstie said. "He's sent the sheriff after us!"

Jack said, "Let's get out of here. Get in the boat, Kirstie!"

Seth chuckled. "Keep your shirt on, Jack. He isn't after you two kids. He's after big game. But if he sees you trying to put off from here just as he's coming, he'll run you down easy. Hide in this bunkroom, both of you." He closed the door on them and went out to the pier as the sheriff's lugger rounded the towhead.

BERT DALEY was a small man with a face the color and hardness of a mammy-oak ball. He had two scrawny redbones with him as deputies.

"I'm putting up a posse to sail at sundown, Seth," Daley called as he shut off his motor and slid up to the pier. "We got a line on where the bandits are hiding out. There's three-four men camping on Tom's Bay and they ain't hunting ducks either—according to what I heard at the Chink shrimp camp up yonder. I figure they got a Cajun guiding 'em, somebody

who knows the marsh and can get 'em grub."

"A Cajan came by here today," Seth said. "Carbon Ferret. He'd been crabbing, looked like."

"You trust folks too much, Seth. I told you anybody coming up from the sea marsh must be searched."

"He wasn't coming up. He was heading down from the fresh water bayous."

"Maybe he's the one who's feeding the crooks," Bert Daley said, ready to cast off. "Get your boat, Seth, and come on. I want about ten men. Whose boat is this?"

"Just a kid came down to do some fishing."

One of the deputies was examining the motorboat. "Don't look to me like he's going fishing, Bert."

"He was getting his bait and stuff from me," Seth said quickly. "You know I supply the bait and lines, Bert."

"Let me talk to him."

Seth went in and came out with a jug of taffia which he passed around. He was followed by Jack Burlin. "Want to see me, Bert?" Jack said nervously.

SETH thought of Kirstie cowering like a frightened bird in that bunkroom. He went to her. "It's all right," he said. "Just lie low."

"But Jack's scared," she said. "Why don't you stay with him, Seth, and help him out?"

"I figured you'd be the scared one. Don't worry about him."

"Sorry to trouble you, Jack," she heard the sheriff saying. "But I'm checking up on everybody. I got all the waterways stopped, but I won't know who the crooks are till I find the loot. They wore masks in that hold-up—"

"Figuring I'm one of them, Bert?" Jack laughed.

"Listen, Jack. I'm going on only one hunch. Course they could hide their loot down here somewheres and get back to town, but when heat's on a crook he needs lots of ready cash for hide-outs, especially N'Orleans hide-outs. So I'm not letting anyone out of the marsh without searching 'em head to foot. That's the only way we can catch 'em—with the goods on 'em. What's the matter? You look like you swallowed a bird."

Jack tried to laugh again. "I just did swallow a bird—a good one Seth fried."

"Anyway, I got to search you."

Before Seth knew what had happened, the girl rushed to the door. Evidently she did not like the idea of her lover gulping and sweating out there while she just sat in the bunkroom taking it easy.

Her eyes were sparks, her fists doubled. "You let that boy alone, Bert Daley! You frog-eared old fussbutton! Jack and I are eloping. He thought dad had sent you to catch us. That's why he's acting so nervous."

Seth heard the bellows of laughter. "Well I sure did step into something!" the sheriff said magnanimously. "My apologies, Mam'selle Martin. Hey, Pierre! Lay off searching that boat. They elope in that motorboat and we search them like criminals. Oh, no! Get out of that boat, you web-footed bum! Don't let's be fussbuttons."

SETH heard all this although he was very busy at the moment. He was intrigued with Kirstie's bag which had been set under a bunk. He remembered Jack had not returned the key to Kirstie, and the point seemed suddenly important.

Why had Jack Burlin locked up that bottle of Burgundy when he was going to New Orleans where he could get all the liquor he wanted? It brought another point to Seth's mind. Why had Jack phoned to Kirstie from down here in the marsh? What was he doing down here in the first place?

There was an answer that fitted pat. No one could get out of the marsh without being searched. The crooks knew that.

Doubtless their Cajan guide had warned them. And one of the crooks had found a safe way to get out and to New Orleans, taking his share of the loot with him.

Seth pried the lock off with his hunting knife. He looked through the mass of stockings and underthings and found the crash lining of the bottom cut open at one end. Underneath was a sheaf of bills, hundreds and fifties, spread out flat. Seth pocketed the money, closed the bag and turned. He almost bumped into Jack Burlin as the latter came to the door.

"Sheriff wants to see you, feller," Burlin said. It gave him a good excuse for coming in, although Seth knew he had another reason—Jack Burlin did not want to leave that suitcase unwatched.

One of Seth's mottoes was to think no evil, even when Cajan fishermen had seines with less than a nine inch mesh. He tried to believe that this money was Kirstie's. "She had drawn it out of the bank. Her father must have put a good amount to her credit as she came of age." But there was a reasonable doubt.

Seth went straight to the main room to his gun rack. "I'll be out in a minute, Bert!" he called to the sheriff.

Bert Daley was talking to the girl. "Take your time, Seth. We can't raid 'em till after dark."

Returning to the bunkroom, Seth found Jack Burlin stooping over the suitcase. His body seemed very slim and young. Seth could not have pulled the trigger on a kid like that even to save his own life. But Jack Burlin, despite the excitement of the sheriff's coming, seemed very anxious to know if that suitcase had been examined.

The muzzle of the shotgun pressed his back. "Reach, Jack."

Burlin stiffened, his hands snapping inside his coat without turning.

"Do this quiet, Jack. My shot gun will tear your whole stomach out, maybe." He reached around across Jack's chest and under his armpit, which took a very long arm like Seth's. He got the automatic from under Jack's coat. Kirstie had saved the boy from being searched just in time.

"Listen, Seth," Jack Burlin said, facing the wall. He had to speak over his shoulder and from the side of his mouth which made him sound tough. "Don't turn me over to Bert Daley right in front of that girl. It'll break her heart."

"A lot you thought about that when you planted your swag on her. Turn around You're a dirty rat, Burlin. Who's going to believe she didn't know anything about it?"

"All right, who? You better figure on that!"

"Nobody's going to know she had the loot in her suitcase, but you're going to jail just the same. She won't hear about it—not until her dad breaks it to her what kind of rat she picked up with. Go out and tell Bert Daley you're offering to sail with his posse."

THERE was a silence broken by the sheriff calling from the pier. "Ready, Seth! I want you to go over to La Verne Isle and get Charley and the Poligs—"

The voice came from outside. Inside the bunkroom Seth and Jack Burlin still faced each other. Seth lifted his gun. "You heard me, Burlin. You said you don't want that girl to see what's coming to you."

Jack Burlin shrugged his shoulders, feeling the pressure of the gun. "Looks like you're giving me the best way out." He walked stiffly to the pier. "I'm joining your posse, Bert."

Kirstie gasped. The deputies, already aboard, looked up grinning. Jack Burlin put his arm around the girl's shoulder. "Listen, dear. They need men, Bert says. I'll be right back."

"You're eloping," the sheriff said, jumping into the lugger cockpit, "which lets you out."

Jack Burlin glanced to Seth for a cue, and got it from his eyes. "Guess I'll go anyway, Bert," he said lamely.

Kirstie was stiff-lipped and white like a child having a splinter picked out—one that hurts. Seth thought her dad was right. She was still too young. But she caught herself. Here was the man she was to marry offering to go on a fight. That was a man after her own heart, a chip off the old block, a man like her dad. And her dad would judge Jack for this, and pass on him!

"Of course you're going, Jack," she said. "You wouldn't get out of a fight hiding behind someone's skirts. They need men. I'll sail over to the Poligs' camp and tell them you want them, Bert."

"Get in this dory, Jack," Seth said casually. "We'll sail together, you and me."

As the sheriff was about to cast off he gave his plan for raiding Tom's Bay. They called these low islands bays, some of them merely tracts of moss hung oaks, pyfeen grass and scrub palm. "I'll have four boats and we'll make for it under sail, with our motors shut off. I'm banking on the crooks still being there."

"They're there all right," Seth called from his dory. "I saw the way the birds were staying off."

JACK BURLIN tore his hand free of Kirstie's and jumped to a thwart up forward. Seth started the motor and stood off in the sheriff's wake. Birds shot into

the air from mud lumps and reef grass. Seth was not thinking of the raid, but of the girl. He saw her standing on the pier head, small and lonely against the red light and the wheeling gulls. She lifted her thin arm waving, and the wind from Timbalier and Terrebonne blew her hair back from her forehead which was dead white.

"Don't let her ever know, Seth. Give me a chance! I really loved her."

"Like hell! You made her your gun moll. You knew you couldn't get out of the swamp without being searched, but nobody would search her. And then what? You were going to some N'Orleans hide-out and ditch her."

"No, Seth, honest to God! You got it all wrong. I had to get to N'Orleans with some cash—how could I marry her without it?"

He jabbered on despite Seth's grunt. "Listen, I'm telling you, Seth! We went together a long time. We talked of getting married for weeks but I was broke. I got in this jam, with these N'Orleans crooks. I met 'em at Jefferson Park, see, Seth? We picked the same horses. One of the crooks I used to know at school. They gave me some little jobs and big money. I wanted to quit, but they had their hooks in me. They asked me about hide-outs here in the marsh. I got a Cajan guide for 'em and thought I could drop out. But they made me stand in back of the bank on watch. And they made the Cajan go in with 'em because he was a crack shot. I'm telling you the truth, every word of it!"

"And you're wasting your breath. I ought to salt you for what you've done to that girl. Only I got a better idea. Bert Daley's going to catch you with the goods when this raid's over. So leave off begging. I can't hear you. I'm deaf."

As Bert Daley had arranged, four boats at sundown came out of four different bayous. A dozen muskrat trappers, oystermen and Cajan guides bore down on Tom's Bay. Seth did not see much of that fight. He saw and sensed only a crazy combat of lights—phosphorescence, marsh fire, gun shots in the dark, the lugger's spotlight sweeping the slash.

With his prisoner bound hand and foot, he quartered across the prairie under sail.

He nosed through the floating turf and into the crab grass so quietly that the trapped men did not know he was there. They fled the sheriff's spotlight and came directly for him. He picked off one man, and then found himself lying on his back. That's when the lights went crazy. Most of them were inside of Seth's skull because a slug, he realized gradually, had cut through his hat, barking him.

He had a vague memory of seeing his prisoner slicing himself free with Seth's hunting knife and then pitching headlong into the water. It was easy enough to understand later that he was shot by his own partners who mistook him for one of the posse.

LIGHTS roved and jumped and banged. The posse coming across the island with pocket flashes looked like fireflies in the scrub palmettoes, roving, dilating, turning intolerably bright.

The sheriff was kneeling over Seth and an old oysterman was washing the blood from his head with whiskey. They must have brought him to with a drink of whiskey for his throat burned. He mumbled, "What happened, Bert?"

"They tried to get away in your dory as near as I can figure. They were ready to shove off when we surrounded 'em. You held 'em off just long enough."

"What happened to the kid?"

"Plugged in the chest."

Seth was silent a long time. Then, "We got to tell the girl, Bert."

"She knows all about it. She's here."

"Where!"

"She got the Polig brothers and came along with 'em. Had a shotgun too. She got to worrying about her sweetheart and figured she could help. Just like her dad —whenever there's smoke those Martins sure get the smell of it, duck-hunt or man-hunt."

Seth's haggard eyes kindled and he felt life coming back to his weary bones. He dragged himself to his knees, to his feet. His eyes, kindling brighter, cleared and he saw the group of trappers and oystermen standing around two prisoners. Two others lay on the shell beach, and at the side of one of these there was the slim figure of a kneeling girl.

Seth did not go to her right then. He wanted to straighten out a point first. "Did she see the kid fight?"

"None of us saw much till we caught two of the crooks in your dory. You and the kid were stretched."

SETH tried to make out the two prisoners who were alive. One of them was a pinch shouldered Cajan. "So Carbon Ferret was one of the gang!"

"He's the one plugged old Jeff at the bank," the sheriff said. "The folks at the bank spotted his hands."

Seth tried to think despite his throbbing head. "Carbon was getting the news and food and rum for the gang. He looked guilty, but I thought it was because he had doves. I should of searched his pirogue."

"You did search! You're lying!" Carbon Ferret shouted. "There's my pirogue yonder in the tules. I just pass' by. I don't know this gang!"

"The hell you don't!" the other crook said. "You think you can get out of it because you hide your swag in the marsh somewhere and we get caught with the goods!"

Seth walked weak-kneed and dizzy to where Carbon pointed. The sheriff and some of the deputies followed. The pirogue was well hidden in the grass, covered with Spanish moss and cane, which meant that Carbon was not "just passing by." Seth got to the pirogue first, in time enough to stuff a big roll of bills in the basket of crabs.

As the sheriff searched, Seth went back to the girl. With the moon up, he saw her sitting on the shell beach, her head hanging, her hands in her lap. When he helped her up, her face shone because it was wet

and the red in her eyes made them like coals.

"Pretty hard on you, little thing," he said. "But he was swell. He fought off the whole gang when they came for our dory. He was great!"

"And so were you, they said."

"Shucks, I didn't know what it was all about. I was on my back."

"You got hurt, Seth."

"A slug parted my hair, that's all. Listen, I'll take you home to your dad."

BERT DALEY and his deputies stamped up from the tules. "We found the rest of the loot all right. The crooks had it split up already. Two of 'em had their wads in their pockets, but Carbon Ferret had his in a basket of crabs." The triumph went out of his voice. "I'll take care of this boy, Kirstie. We'll take the body to Houma. You go along with Seth."

As she got into the dory, Seth saw her eyes dazed and hollow searching his. Her lips were hard, and this made her older. The laughing child was a thing of the past. He wondered why her eyes were so smart. It gave him a qualm. He had forgotten that she would find out something about her overnight bag—that the lock had been pried off, the lining cut. Of course that must have started her thinking.

He said quickly, "Your dad will be on your side when he hears how the boy fought."

"Did Bert Daley find that loot, Seth, or did you?"

"Why, Bert found it."

"But you searched the pirogue just now."

"Didn't think of looking in the basket."

The stark look in her eyes softened, turning them human. She had stopped crying for some time, he thought. After all, people don't cry when a blow comes so suddenly and murderously. Her eyes were dry and—he noticed it again—smart.

"Tell me this, Seth. Why would that fellow Carbon Ferret hide the money in a basket of crabs which is the very place in his boat that the conservation agent is always searching?"

It Was Loose Lip Lock Who Really Got the Wind Up About Not Being Able to Tell the Spies from the Dicks

SPY SCARE AT FEDERAL

By A. A. CAFFREY

Author of "Everything Seemed Super-Super," "Test Hop," etc.

LOOSE LIP LOCK, old hand in the big test hangar out on Federal Proving Ground's roaringly-busy aviation section, had been giving the between-hangars, noon-time loungers an earful of the latest hot news. In turn, the boys who were snatching the after-lunch smoke out there on the concrete apron were giving old Loose Lip a bit of a riding. "All right, all right," Loose Lip complained. "But you guys're always gettin' me wrong. I didn't say that all these new lugs are foreign spies. Naw, I don't claim that. Hell no! Only half of 'em's spies. The other half's dicks; Secret Service guys, Intelligence Department dudes and G's of one sort or another. An' don't tell me I'm wrong, either. I've been kickin' 'round Uncle Sam's air plants too long to be fooled by any of these here where-the-hell-did-you-pop-up-from newcomers. What I mean, I know all the regulars—in tin hats, pilots, macs, brooms and office judies. And take it from a guy with years on his back and hair on his chest, the good Mr. Lock can spot a dick as far as he can see one."

"And any guy that you don't know, Loose Lip, is a wrong guy. Eh, feller? That's a big order of something, and so are you," said Streeter, civilian in charge of Parachute Section at Federal Proving Ground. "Why, ya dizzy wahoo you, where are they goin' t'get the man power to man the new over-size Air Corps unless they take on just a few guys you don't happen to know? Say, Loose Lip; why don't you put a zipper on that Ubangi opening an' quit giving out with these prize bum guesses?"

"Silk worm," Loose Lip said to old Streeter, "if I was you—Gawd forbid—I'd keep me own snoot clean, look wise, say nothin', then take all of Parachute Section's secrets home with me every night. Ya old stiff, you, your end of the game is right square on a spot, an' you're too danged old-army to know what's comin' off on this here proving ground. Go ahead an' laugh, you monkeys. Ya think noth-

in' can happen here, eh? How about what they dug up at Mitchell Field? Did they have spies there? Did they have plenty inside dicks workin' the case? How about this guy they just turned up out on March Field?

Dam' right these air post're hot; an' don't think for a minute that John Public hears about all of 'em. You givin' me the bird, silk worm, when ya're old enough to know that Federal Proving Ground is bound to have ten spies for every one found on a trainin' field. Be your age, all you mugs, an' don't razz a bird as knows his stuff—meanin' the good Mr. Lock. Hell, I bet I could toss this here test hangar an' hit no less than half a dozen spies—and twice that many dicks—without takin' aim."

"Guess I'll get out of here before the guy really starts trying," said "Long" John Kupp, one of the white-collar boys from the engineering department, as he snubbed out his cig, stopped sitting on his heels, then strolled away.

LOOSE LIP LOCK watched him go. "That long drink ain't kiddin' anybody," he mused. "Kupp? What kind of a name do ya make that? Ain't American, eh? Maybe just the 'r' was left outa 'Krupp,' or something like that. An' the guy's in the draftin' room, too. Does that add up with what I was just tellin' you mugs?"

"Oh-o," mused "Beaker" Swartz, one of the hard-drinking men from over in the paint shop; "I was just going to get off me sitter and head back toward the labor, too, but now I guess maybe I'd best sit tight. What the hell kind of a name is 'Swartz' when it isn't on a beer keg?"

"I'm going to sit right here till the last dog's hung too," old Streeter decided. "I just remembered that there was a big-shot Zeppelin commander named Streeter during the War."

"Rave on," Loose Lip Lock said. "Go ahead, show yourself a good time; but ya'll see plenty fur fly here at Federal before she's many weeks older."

"Sh-e-e-e," Streeter warned. "Sush. Pipe down, Loose Lip. Here comes one sure-shot, new-crop spy now. Or maybe he's a dick. I can't guess 'em apart, one from the other. But this bird's a new hand. Work's down in visiting-ships hangar, doesn't he?"

Loose Lip Lock and the half dozen loungers still on hand glanced fieldward, across the wide cement apron that fronts all hangars, to where Swanson, the new visiting-ships hangar mechanic, was strolling. Spotting the group, Swanson started that way. Loose Lip, talking through lips that were really tight, mumbled, "Yes, an' this new john is just one more that might be anything, Streeter. Where does he come from? Frisco. How did he get here? Kostoff, this new captain down in Armament Section, brought him east from the Coast. An' who the hell ever heard of this Captain Kostoff before he showed up here on Federal four-five weeks ago? Is Kostoff one of the old-line Air Corps flyers? The hell he is! Never heard of him. Neither did you, silk worm."

Under his breath, and with Swanson almost within earshot, Streeter argued, "Cap Kostoff came over from Ordnance, ya dizzy lug. Hell, ain't they always transferring officers from the old-line branches to Air? Kostoff's a small arms expert."

"So was Dillinger," growled Loose Lip Lock.

Swanson drifted in and asked: "Wonder if I can promote a smoke here? Forgot to buy me a pack down at the cafeteria."

He said, "Thanks, pal" when Loose Lip, silent for once, held out his just-opened deck of cigs. Then Swanson rolled the gift between his palms, deposited it gently between his lips, grinned and added, "And now if I had a light I'd be sittin' pretty."

Loose Lip Lock snapped his lighter and held it at arm's length for Swanson's use. "I suppose you do your own inhal-

ing and exhaling, eh?" he growled. "Didn't I know you down at Kelly Field?"

"No," Swanson answered. Just "no" and no more.

"Langley?" Loose Lip tried. "Musta knowed ya there, eh?"

"Musta been two other fellers," said Swanson.

LOOSE LIP knew that old Streeter was laughing at him; and so were the others. Maybe Swanson was too. But by now Swanson's whole attention was on a ship in the sky. It was a new ship, an important ship. It was a ship that spent all its ground time hiding behind high canvas walls, right there in Loose Lip Lock's own big test hangar. But not even Loose Lip could get a peek at the thing, for the craft was the last word in mystery planes, and field guards kept even the test hangar macs away from the canvas walls, while imported mechanics—guys from the West Coast factory—took care of all that was done on the big bird. That was hard to take, too, for old hands such as Loose Lip feel that test hangar rightfully belongs to them. Mystery ships, canvas walls, guards and outside macs! No wonder Loose Lip and some of the others were doing a slow burn over this new setup. Well, let Proving Ground run things this way, and one of these fine days, surer'n hell, they'd run their thick heads up against something that wouldn't give.

Worse yet, strange pilots had been dropping in to fly the new mystery ship. And when these strange pilots arrived, they usually came in via air, setting down out on the main runway, then taxiing in and quitting their strange ships at visiting-ships hangar. Swanson was the mac who usually strolled out to meet and welcome the newcomers. Some of said newcomers had been Air Corps men. But Loose Lip Lock also knew that many of them were civilian pilots, perhaps factory personnel, maybe Civil Aeronautics Authority guys. And they all came, had their look and say, chances are took a hop in the big bus, then departed. Departed full of the old mystery stuff, too. Aw, it was all wrong. Test at Federal used to belong to Federal's test-hangar gang. And said gang knew just where it stood on each and every experimental job that came in for the works. But now what was what? Hell, not only didn't you know what was what but a man no longer knew who was who. Yes, sir, she was getting to be one dizzy world, there at Federal; and old Loose Lip was in a spin.

TO TOP it all, and make it harder for the test gang to stomach, this mystery job was an Orr factory product. Hitherto, back down the years, Bill Orr, that smart designer-builder of grand planes, had been free and easy as an old boot with the gang at Federal. When an Orr ship had been in for test, Bill Orr had always been along to see how "the damned old brain child shaped up." Bill was the man to fly 'em too. Nobody knew an Orr ship better; and the big boys on Aviation Section's acceptance board would tell you that this Orr man never really began to draw blueprints of a ship till after the thing had passed all tests and been accepted. That is to say, an Orr ship, from the smallest part to the biggest idea, was in Bill's head. That was bad, they said, especially when you stopped to think that Bill Orr was the man to fly 'em ragged. One of these days, the acceptance board feared, Bill Orr and a whole headful of swell ideas might spin into the ground together. Still and all, try as they might, the big boys in the big office couldn't talk Bill Orr out of his Orr-type business methods. "Shucks," he'd say, "don't kid me. Anything I've got I got from Wilbur and Orville and old Doc Junkers, and the guys to come, when I'm gone, will go right ahead getting their stuff from Wilbur and Orville, old Doc Junkers and little Anthony Fokker."

And now Bill Orr was on Federal with this new mystery ship. But it didn't seem

to be the same old Bill. He wasn't exactly avoiding the old gang, not that, but he wasn't enjoying the necessary between-flights delays. Bill wasn't here, there and everywhere, doing this, that and the other thing, just for the boot he got out of being among air people, any air people, from the C.O. down to the humblest broom in the clean-up gang. Well, anyway, the word was out that Bill Orr was under orders, that he had to stick with his new ship, play along with all those mysterious visitors, and, above all, cut out all the old free-and-easy comradery of the past. No dam' foolin'—and Loose Lip Lock was right—strange days and strange guys were working hand in mitt on Federal Proving ground.

This new Orr job was a stratobomber. It had been built behind guards and within windowless walls out on the Coast. Rumor, of course, was the only one speaking any great claims for the new job, but if Rumor had anything on the ball, then this new mystery ship of Bill's had all the fiscal war-scare features—plus. It was a low-wing ship. There was only one propeller, and this was right on the nose. Rumor said that there were three 1500-hip radial motors, banked one behind the other, directly behind that one propeller and all three clutched to the drive; all three at the same time, or just two in use, or one. One propeller to a hundred feet of wingspread! And what wings! There wasn't a single fitting or gadget on either of those mighty, all-metal, cantilever panels. They were as slick and keen as knife blades. And there was design purpose other than the usual desire to lower parasite resistance in the freeboard fabrication of these wings, for in these panels Bill Orr was giving aviation its first barometrically controlled telescope surfaces. That is, as the mighty craft went up, higher and higher into thinner and thinner air, the wings enlarged themselves, not alone in length but in cord width and camber depth. An imagination-staggering, world-beating device that meant the mighty ship would lose little of its lifting, carrying power even in the thin air of the never-before-reached levels of stratosphere.

And this wasn't rumor, for on the second test hop flown by the mystery ship something had gone wrong with the barometric control of the wings. Bill Orr and his test crew had remained aloft seven hours in a vain attempt to rectify the trouble. But there were certain angles to the jamb that demanded more in the line of tools than they had aboard. So, at the end of the seven hours, and when they knew that Federal's working day had ended, they shot their landing—wings and tail-service members in full expansion. Yes, the tail-service was also telescopic in all surfaces; stabilizer, rudders, fins, flaps and elevators. Well, Federal's working day had ended, but the test-hangar gang were standing by, waiting, cussing overtime ships, and waiting some more. And they say—at least, Loose Lip Lock said—you could see the waiting gang's eyes bulge out when the Orr mystery ship finally came up the wind, floated lightly over the west-side trees and oozed a full 180 feet of wingspread down on the runway. Right away, everybody in charge of anything, including the captain of post guards, began to warn all observers to keep dam' mum and forget that they'd ever seen this mighty mystery ship in, what somebody called, a stretching mood. But the cat was out of the bag. Maybe all those observers, so warned, did keep mum. Who knows? Perhaps it was their wives who spread the important news. At any rate, either way, Federal knew that Bill Orr's latest job contained at least one world-topping feature. Expanding wings that could really expand, do it automatically, barometrically and carry the load. Ye gods—eagle stuff!

But that had happened during the mystery job's first week at Federal. And now nearly a month had passed, a month of the canvas walls, guards, ultra-secrecy and newcomer guys such as Swanson.

"Well, soldier, you'll know that ship when you see it again," Loose Lip finally growled at Swanson; for the new visiting-ships-hangar mac was standing and staring way off to where the incoming Orr stratobomber had the whole, empty noontime sky to itself. Swanson sort of gave a start, grinned, dropped his just-kindled cig and ground it out under the sole, said, "What say, pal? Oh, yeah. Sure. Some ship," then hurried away.

IT WAS getting close to one o'clock, and the end of the time-honored gab fest. Because parachute loft and the paint shop were on the back row, at no little distance from that between-hangars gathering, old Streeter and the pigment-spattered Beaker Swartz started on their way, each begging Loose Lip Lock to lay off them while their backs were turned. Presently, and almost as one man, the rest of those lounging macs got up, stepped on the butt, then went away from there. Loose Lip Lock, one eye on the incoming Orr ship, the other eye on the now-distant Swanson, finally took both eyes from those well-separated objects and discovered that he was alone with "Willie the Broom" Hackletree, Willie the Broom one of that small army of lesser men who propel wide push brooms, very slowly, across the boundless acreage of hangar floors—stopping ever and anon to swap small talk and eating tobacco with the macs, pilots, instrument men and others on hand where important planes are having this and that done to them in the pressing interest of military aviation's restless advance.

Loose Lip Lock sort of snapped out of it when Willie the Broom Hackletree observed, "Them there ol' boys is kinda hard on you-all, eh, Lockie boy?"

"Sez who?" said Loose Lip. "Say listen, Willie; them babies ain't kiddin' nobody. See? Say, where the hell do you come from, Willie?"

"Me? Way down yonder," said Willie the Broom. "N'Awlins."

"New Orleans?" questioned Loose Lip. "An' how come you come way up here to Federal just to push a broom?"

Loose Lip watched Willie closely; and he felt sure that Willie stalled a bit before answering. "Why, Lockie boy," Willie said, "Ah don' come way up chere just to agitate a push broom. Ah'm jus' driftin' when Ah lands me this fine position o' work."

Loose Lip Lock stalled a bit on that one. "I suppose ya like aviation, eh?" he asked. "Like to be near it, eh?"

"M-m-m, well not so hot, Lockie boy. Me—Ah was brung up in the livery-stable game. Pop still handles a sizeable mess o' live stock down yonder. Guess one o' these days Ah'll be goin' back to hoss life, Lockie boy."

"Ya've got somethin' there, Cracker," Loose Lip said. "What's the diff, eh? Sweepin' hangars or livery barns, it's still just a matter of pickin' things up."

"Pickin' things up is kor-rec'," agreed Willie the Broom, and he too quit Loose Lip for the labors that await within hangars.

THE Orr mystery stratobomber was back on the ground and taxiing, very slowly, toward test hangar by the time Loose Lip Lock had returned to his labors inside. Loose Lip, making a small routine adjustment on the nose-wheel of another big ship, sat on the concrete floor, under the wide span of the sliding doors, and watched the Orr ship's inward progress. He saw the big craft come up to the deadline and kill its power. Then Bill Orr and his flight crew, talking about the hop just made, stepped down and turned the ship over to the guards. The guards, making certain that all would-be butt-ins were

kept at their distance, prepared to trundle the ship in behind the canvas-walled secrecy of the test-hangar's deep, dark corner. Loose Lip Lock hated all these guards, for that, and he hated all that privacy, too.

Captain Kostoff came from somewhere and hurried out across the wide concrete apron.

He joined in conversation with Bill Orr and the flight crew. Then Bill, Kostoff and two others—two civvies that Loose Lip couldn't place—began strolling north along the deadline to where a civilian plane waited out front of visiting-ships hangar.

As the four strolled north, still talking, Swanson and one other mac strolled out from the visiting-ships hangar.

Just then Captain Call, officer in charge of Flying Office, came along and took Loose Lip's attention from the doings out on the flying field. "How's this job coming?" Captain Call asked, just as a matter of form. Then, sort of glancing around, toward the nearest macs on the big hangar's floor, the captain dropped his voice very low and said, "Listen, Lock. These days, you know, even a feller's best friend won't tell him what's wrong with anything. Now don't ask me to explain, but the word comes over the underground tattle-type that you've been making some speculations about this and that, these and those, if you get what I mean. I don't go for this stuff any hotter than you do, but I know that you and I, and the rest of the old-line hired help, have to be like the three monkeys that see nothing, hear nothing, and say nothing." Having said that, Captain Call habitually lifted a boot and gave the big nose-wheel's tire a test kick, then strolled away.

Whew!—thought Loose Lip—that was plenty-fast service; a guy does a little gassin', not more than fifteen minutes ago, and already the hush-hush has gone through official channels and put the silencer where it's supposed to do the most good. And to think that all those wise eggs laughed at him when he said that Federal Proving Ground was just simply loused up with wrong guys!

IT WASN'T half an hour after that when "Squirt" Short, one of the kids who run errands and messages all over the reservation, popped into test hangar. The kid shot his furtive glance here and there, then sidled up to where Loose Lip was busily inspecting a motor cowl. Loose Lip noticed that the kid was full of news, so he asked, "What is it now, Squirt?"

Squirt Short said, "The G's just took two guys an' a jane off his post."

"What? You're screwy, Squirt," Loose Lip said.

"No kiddin', Loose Lip," the kid said. "I just delivered a headquarters memo to the guard on the gate, an' I was there when the car drove off with these two guys an' the jane. She's that little redhead that was workin' over in Employment Section. The good-lookin' kid that came on the job only five-six weeks ago. An' one of the guys was this new mac up in visitin'-ships."

"Swanson?" Loose Lip asked.

"That's him," said Squirt. "I think that's his name."

"Now I know you're nuts, Squirt," Loose Lip said. "I just now, not more'n half an hour ago, saw Swanson out on the field."

"An' it was only ten minutes ago I saw him go through the main gate," said Squirt Short. "An' I ain't nuts, guy. I know what I saw; and the guard on the gate slipped it to me that the other guys in the car were G's. Them guards tell me stuff. I tip them off on stuff, too. An' the other guy they grabbed was a tall, slim bird outa Engineering."

"Not that long drink called Kupp?" Loose Lip asked.

"I don't know his name," Squirt answered. "But he's one of them white-collar dudes over in Engineering. One of them guys that draw pictures of parts of

planes, you know—with rulers and circle-makers, an' stuff like that."

"Kupp! I'll be damned," said Loose Lip Lock. "Listen, Squirt, you keep this stuff under your hat. Don't run all over this post telling what you see. Not in days like these. But if you get any more dope, just come to me. I'm ace-high here. You know that, eh?"

About three o'clock Parachuteman Streeter came into test hangar and yelled, "Where's Loose Lip Lock?"

"Right here, silk worm," Loose Lip called from the cockpit of an open pursuit job, way over against the back wall of the hangar. Streeter, brushing past wingtips and rudders, made his way back there.

"What d'ya know, silk worm—an' what d'ya want?"

"I know that you signed up for a back-pack chute all of two months ago," Streeter said, "an' I wanna know why you haven't turned it in for inspection and a re-pack during the past month."

"Oh, that old thing," said Loose Lip. "I'll tell you where it is. I let Bill Orr borrow that chute."

"What t'hell does Orr want with it?" demanded Streeter. "That big mystery job —an' am I laughin' at the 'mystery' part? —is completely equipped with seat-pack chutes, new regulations."

"Right again—for a wonder!" Loose Lip enthused. "But it's this way, Bill Orr told me that he didn't like the seat-pack chute.

"Not on this job. It seems this big crate calls for lots o' walkin' an' crawlin', from one compression chamber to another, an' even out into the insides of them there accordion mystery wings; and Bill said a seat-pack chute kept whaling hell outa his butt an' makin' him think the rest of the crew was puttin' the old boot to him. Anyway, that factory pilot Bill has with him, Newcome, in doin' most of the flyin' while Bill observes; an' I happened to be out on the apron when Bill climbed down one day and said he was goin' down to your deadfall an' get a back-pack chute. Well, Bill Orr's an old sidekick of mine, so I said, 'Never mind goin' down to parachute shop, Bill, I'll let you take my back-pack.' An' that's that, silk worm."

"Well, anyway, I want that chute in for re-pack," Streeter said. "Get it, an' get it this afternoon. Them's orders, guy."

"I'll get it as soon as I see Orr," Loose Lip said, "an' that might not be this afternoon, feller."

"Orr's up in Fying Office chewin' the fat with Call, right now," said Streeter. "Give him a buzz on the phone."

Loose Lip Lock stepped into the small hangar office. With Streeter standing by, he called Flying Office. Then he talked with Bill Orr. After a few minutes, Loose Lip hung up.

"There's a guy," Loose Lip said to Streeter. "Bill isn't sure where he left the chute. But he thinks maybe he left it down in visiting-ships hangar. Well, I have an idea maybe he did. I saw him walkin' down that way after his last hop in the big job, an' the chute was on his back then, if I remember right. Tell you what, I'll walk down to visiting-ships and see if I can find it. If I do, I'll take it right down to your joint. See you then, silk worm."

Five minutes later, down in visiting-ships hangar, Loose Lip located his back-pack chute on a workbench where Bill Orr had abandoned it. McGough, the civilian in charge of that hangar, popped out of his small office just as Loose Lip was picking it up and asked, "That your umbrella, Dropsy Puss?"

LOOSE LIP tried his best to slay McGough with a look of utter disdain, and said, "You an' your den of forty thieves! An' silk thieves, at that! 'Course it's my chute. Well, don't look at me like that, owl eyes. What do ya know—if anything?"

"Nothin' above a whisper," said McGough. "Why?"

"I don't see this new mac, Swanson, around," Lock said.

"Well, look at me, sweetie pie, ain't I just as pretty?" McGough asked. "Listen, chisel chin. I'm the swellest hangar chief on this reservation. All my macs have to do is hit the time-clock when they come in, then go find a nice comfortable hiding place till quittin' time. What's more, I'll see that they're waked up in time to clock out and get off the post before the guards close the main gate for the night."

"That's goo, McGough," said Loose Lip Lock; "an' I still don't see Swanson. Can you?"

"Cap Call's a pretty white gent," McGough said, "but I hear tell he can be rough as hell when he has to use a club."

"O, so that's the kind of a pal you are, eh?"—and Loose Lip Lock, back-pack chute slung over his shoulder, was on his way.

When Loose Lip arrived back at test hangar, intending to carry on over to Streeter's shop, he spotted Squirt Short and Willie the Broom tossing pennies at the back wall of the hangar. Loose Lip called Squirt and told him to run the chute over to Streeter. "Tell the silk worm that Mr. Lock sent it over, and that Mr. Lock wants a first-class re-packing job," he said, real loud. Then, as he handed the chute to Squirt, Loose Lip lowered his voice and asked the kid, "Anything new?" Squirt said there wasn't. "Well, keep you eyes an' ears open," was Loose Lip's parting words.

Down at headquarters Captain Call, Bill Orr and a Mr. Rider—said by some to be connected with the Intelligence Department—were behind closed doors with Major Bent. Bent was officer in charge of Aviation Section. Bill Orr had taken quite some time in explaining just why he wasn't ready to say his big stratobomber was all set for turn over to Federal's test section.

"Well, what's holding us up, Bill?" Major Bent had asked. "Is it all that a mystery ship behind canvas should be? Will it go up where the newspaper guessers claim for it—clear out of sight and sound of watching groundlings? Is it as terrifying, as utterly awe-inspiring as all that?"

Bill Orr, hardly ever serious, was entirely that way when he answered, "It makes me sit up and take notice, Major. Fact is, it goes beyond my wildest dreams. No, sir; I never thought we'd take tonnage up where we've flown this ship. We've been doing better than 60,000 feet without trouble. We've unclutched two motors at that altitude and registered 425 miles per hour on the speed indicator."

"And what with all three motors—at that altitude?" the major asked.

"Can't say," said Bill Orr. "The airspeed indicator, you know, is only marked up to 500, and we shove the arrow up against that 500-mile stop before the ship, under three motors, really gets to sliding."

"Bill," Major Bent then said, "during the past ten or twelve years, as I hardly need remind you, this country has heard much about mystery planes being built behind high walls and guards, and, up to date, the greatest mystery is—what becomes of the mystery planes.

"Yes, sir, that's a fact," the major carried on. "Sad to say none of those great mystery ships ever reach Federal. But now, Bill, you say that the thing has happened. And if you say so, I know that it's here. I'll go into Washington this evening and tell the Chief that American air is tops today. Meantime, Bill, you are the most important man in aviation. As usual, I suppose, this ship—and especially the expanding wings—is blueprinted only on the tissue of your brain. Right?"

BILL ORR grinned. He said, "Not entirely, Major. There're a few rough drawings out in the factory safe. But, anyway, I can take a few of your draftsmen and put this wing on paper in no time."

"I wish you would," Major Bent said.

"I don't need to tell you that air supremacy is the whole works today. This ship gives the supremacy to Uncle Sam. By the way, your control bay, engine room, bombing compartment and four machine gun blisters are each separate air-tight, ground-pressure units, eh? Were you able to maintain normal ground pressure, without oxygen masks, at all altitudes?"

"We were," Bill Orr said, "and without any sign of stress or discomfort. Fact is, we were so sure of our compartment air-conditioning that we never once carried emergency masks of any kind."

"And that's what I call faith in equipment," said Captain Call. "But what if the ground-level atmospheric pressure goes off those units at, say, 60,000 feet, Bill?"

"Your guess is as good as mine," Bill Orr said. "Quick hemorrhage and sudden death, I suppose. But that ground pressure can't go off, suddenly, all at once, unless through major accident. Of course, anti-aircraft, or airplane-cannon shot, might hole the bays one by one; but under actual war conditions the crew could be equipped with the standard individual mask and oxygen tank."

"As I get it," Major Bent stated, "all compartments are manually closed, from the pilots' bay, say by the officer in charge, when the ship reaches a certain altitude. For example, 20,000. Then if any doors or ports are opened, it must be deliberately, and against the red light on the warning board in each unit.

"But all unit doors can be opened either by the control officer, in the pilots' bay, or by the individual crewmen in each compartment."

"That's correct," said Bill Orr. "I doubt that you'll ever have any trouble with the air system. Your Air Corps men know that they've got to take care of the man when they take him way up there in the thin stuff."

"That's right," agreed Major Bent. "So what's holding us up, we ask once more. Are you going to turn this bus over to us today, Bill? We're all pepped up over it, you know."

Bill Orr paced the office, studied a taking-off ship for a minute, then said, "Well, I'll tell you how it is. A few funny things have happened aboard this ship. I've talked it over with Mr. Rider—that is, as soon as Intelligence Department took me aside and explained just where Mr. Rider, here, fitted into this Federal picture. Anyway, Major, you'll recall that, early in our test hops, we came in one day with the wings in full expansion. That, strictly speaking, wasn't an accident. That happened at 50,000 feet. We were on the way down. The ship began to fall into a spin before I noticed that the right wing had stopped pulling in. The barometric control unit was working, and, as near as I could tell, in perfect order. What's more, there was no red light showing against that right wing's action on the dark board.

"As Mr. Rider can tell you; we later discovered that the red bulb for that particular control had been twisted back a few turns from its contact. That red bulb, of course, could have been twisted back any time just before the hop. No, there were no fingerprints on it. Except my own, for I twisted it in to contact before I thought what I was doing. But, anyway, the right wing was holding out in full extension, and the left wing was drawing in under the usual barometric control. That left side was falling low, and, as I say, we had the big bus in the first swoop of a spin before I tumbled that something was wrong. Well, we had to take a chance. I was doing the piloting myself that hop. Sid Newcome was at my side, in the right-hand seat. At 50,000 feet we couldn't take a chance on breaking down out ground-pressure atmosphere in the pilots' bay, so I turned to Sid and said, 'The right panel isn't coming in, Sid. We're in a spot, feller. There's nothing to do but spin off some of this altitude and be all set to open chutes if she goes to pieces on us. What say?'

"Sid Newcome didn't bat an eyelid. He

yelled—for she was swishing and spinning pretty noisily by then—'She won't go to pieces, Bill! This bus can take it. Let 'er spin. But I'll buzz the boys in the other units and tell 'em to be all set in case chutes are in order.'

"So I let it spin," Bill Orr continued. "We had the usual test crew, two motor men and the instrument man, along. Then, in the bombing compartment, we had three observers from Washington. Sid, when he gave them a buzz on the ship's phone, asked them all to work themselves as close to the right side of the ship as possible. Well, I could feel that weight helping. That is, it sort of eased the strain on that low left side; and I began to think that maybe I'd get her to a place where I'd be able to kick her out of that spin—when the right time arrived.

"WE reached 40,000, and she was still all in one piece; but that left wing had retracted more than halfway. Yes, the right panel was still out full. What the hell are you smiling about, Call, old heller?"

"Boy, that must have been a sight. A kick," Captain Call grinned. "One long, wide wing. One short, natural-size wing. Didn't you, for just a few minutes, think that maybe the old D.T.'s had caught up with you, Bill?"

"And then some," Bill Orr grinned. "You bet, that was a sight.

"Thirty-eight thousand feet showed on the altimeter. Then 36—35—down, down and down to 30,000 feet. And was she doing a tight, whipping spin by that time! Sid yelled, 'I still say she'll take it! Give 'er a bit of a pull, feller, an' see if she'll show any signs of easing out!'

"That wasn't such a hot idea on Sid's part," Bill Orr went on. "I might have pulled her out of that spin, but what would be the use—she'd plunk right back into another. Yeah, you've guessed it; that left wing had retracted to almost normal size.

"I had an idea that Sid and I could break our cabin's air pressure at 30,000 feet and get along pretty well. And I knew the time had arrived to give it a try. At the same time—after turning over the flying to Sid—I gave the engine-room a buzz and told my three crewmen to be ready to come out. Then I went back through our door, opened the engine-room door, and motioned the three to follow me. It's a stepdown, from the engine-room level, to the inter-wing section of the fuselage. Well, the four of us got down there among the sliding rods and cables, then went to work. Inch by inch, with that ship still spinning like the very devil, we hand-worked those rods and cables until we had the left wing back in full extension again. Why, didn't we draw in the right, you ask? It couldn't be done. It was jammed.

"So that was that. You all know the rest. We pulled her out of the spin at about 6,000 feet. No, you didn't know that. It happened about thirty miles west of this reservation. But you do know that we set her down with the wings in full extension. And you'll recall that I held her way out against the south fence while the thing was repaired. And that setdown didn't come until after we'd labored for nearly seven hours, in the air, trying to locate the jam."

"And what was the cause?" Major Bent asked.

"It was a half-inch ball bearing." Bill Orr picked up a pencil and began to draw cables, pulley-guides and other queer-looking control arms on the major's scratch pad. "I'd have to take you aboard the ship," he said, "to make you see this clearly. But, roughly, that ball bearing had worked itself down this channel, and

jammed itself under this pulley. That fouled the wing action."

"And that ball bearing didn't get there accidentally?" the major asked. "How can you be sure it didn't?"

"No," Orr stated. "There isn't a half-inch ball in the whole ship's construction—outside the motors."

"That was some time ago," Major Bent mused. "Any other trouble—recently?"

BILL ORR glanced toward Rider. The Intelligence Department man said, "Plenty, Major. Most of it, of course, in the usual line of fantastic threats. Some of these via the Orr factory, some directly to your own engineering office, here on Federal. What worries us, Major, is that too many of these letters show a quite comprehensive understanding of the ship's wings. In other words, the blueprints of these wings are not on Mr. Orr's brain alone."

Bill Orr added, "When we had that jam, while I was head-down in the workings of the mechanism I found a micrometer and a six-inch steel ruler. Looked as though somebody had been suddenly surprised, perhaps while making a parts drawing, and dropped those drawing tools down into that deep wing well. They were beyond arm's reach. I had to lift them out with a magnet."

"Couldn't those instruments date back to your assembly at the factory?" Major Bent asked.

"They could, but they don't," Rider said. "We took good fingerprints off both the micrometer and the steel rule. I'll tell you about that later, Major. However, there have been other raw attempts at mechanical tampering aboard the ship; and it doesn't seem like a good idea to turn it over for Air Corps tests until we satisfy ourselves that there isn't something real bad planted aboard."

"Maybe you'd best give us a few more days," Bill Orr said.

"Okay," said Major Bent. "Okay because there's nothing else I can do. But look here, Bill—why can't you turn the flying over to your man Newcomb? You stay on the ground. Perhaps you could spend your time getting some of this wing stuff on paper. Now, listen. Don't argue with me, soldier. Hell, you're like a kid with the only ball and bat in the neighborhood; you don't fully understand your value. I'm not kidding, Bill. You're one of a half dozen men in America, in the world, and at a time like this you should play things safe."

"Aw, alley apples," said Bill Orr.

"Well, it's your field, sir," Captain Call said to Bent. "Why not mark this Orr guy 'on the ground'?"

"Try that and I'll pick up my bat and ball and start for home," said Bill Orr.

There were loud voices in Major Bent's outer office. A clerk out there was saying, "You can't see Major Bent right now. He's in conference."

"But this is important," the other, louder voice was saying. The other, louder voice belonged to Parachuteman Streeter. "I gotta see the major, an' this won't wait."

Major Bent gave Captain Call a nod and said, "Open up."

CAPTAIN CALL, nearest the door, reached out and opened it. Streeter, taking Major Bent's 'Come in, Streeter,' pushed past the clerk and came in. "Hello, Cap," he said to Call. "Hell, Bill, I'm glad you're here," he said to Orr. Then to Major Bent he said, "Major, I just uncovered—" Streeter was staring at Rider. Major Bent said, "Meet Mr. Rider, Mr. Streeter. You can talk, Streeter. Mr. Rider's all right—to hear anything."

"Okay, Major," Streeter said. "Well, here's what I came down to report. I just found a parachute with the harness straps cut through at the shroud-rings. I mean, you know, them straps have been rough-filed—like they've been badly worn—until there's only a thin coverin' of web threads left. That chute, Major, 'd just open, puff

free of a guy, an' leave him sittin' on a cloud. It's murder, that's what it is. I was doin' a re-pack. That's how I found it."

"Whose parachute is it?" Major Bent asked.

"Well, it's a chute that Bill Orr, here, 's been using. This Lock guy, down in test hangar, was signed up for it."

"Lock?" Mr. Rider questioned. He turned to Captain Call and asked, "Isn't this Lock the—?"

"Yes," Captain Call answered.

Major Bent stared at Orr. "How did you happen to have this chute, Bill?" he asked.

"Why, let's see—well, if I remember right, Loose Lip stepped up and offered me the use of his chute. That is, I was just about to run over and draw one from parachute shop, and it was then that Loose Lip said I could use his back-pack chute.

"Where's the chute now, Streeter?"

"Down in the shop, on the packin' bench," Streeter said. "I was goin' to bring it down, but then I thought I'd best not go through this post carrying that with me. It might tip off somebody that the thing had been discovered."

"Good," Rider said. "Does this man Lock know that you're doing a re-pack?"

"Why, yes," Streeter answered. "It was Lock told me about Orr, here, using the chute. And Lock himself sent the chute over for re-pack. That is, he did after I called it in. It was weeks over-due on this re-pack, though."

"That so?" Rider said, and added, "you had to call for it, eh? I think we better take a look at this parachute, Major."

"Just a minute," Major Bent said, turning to Streeter. "Did you take a look at the seat chutes in the stratobomber?"

"Not yet," Streeter answered. "I'd have to get an order from the guard to go anywheres near that mystery job. What's more, I'd have to tell 'em why I wanted to go behind that canvas. So I thought I'd best leave that up to you. Anyway, Major, all them seat-pack chutes aboard that ship belong to Bill, here, you know. They came with it from the factory. If he wants me to look 'em over, all well an' good. Any time."

"Glad you kept away from the ship," Rider said. "Later, perhaps, we'll see that the captain of the guard takes over that station, then you can go aboard and inspect the chutes while the captain of the guard sees to it that no others get hep to what you're there for. After all, you know, lots of these guards are new to Federal. Of course, they're not new to Federal guard posts. Now and then, though, we've had fast ones put over by guards we thought we could trust. You never can tell. Damned if you can!"

AS ALL five passed from the inner office, Bill Orr said, "I'll be danged if this doesn't sound screwy." And Rider said, "Nothing's too screwy or fantastic for the eggs we're trying to crack these days. I think you've got to do your own thinking a bit crack-brained, too, to compete with them.

"Say, Call," Rider then said, hesitating near the phone desk in the outer office, "maybe you'd better ring test hangar and have them send this Lock over to the parachute shop. We'll want to ask him a few questions."

Captain Call gave test hangar a ring. Slim Rand, chief mac in charge of test hangar, told the captain to hold the line a shake until he could make sure that Lock was in the hangar. "That guy," Slim Rand said, "might be wondering hell 'n' gone way down to museum hangar, you know. He's what you might call a free-lance, Cap."

Then, while the group stood by in the corridor and waited, Slim Rand came back to his end of the wire. "Hello, Cap," he said. "Say, I can't locate Loose Lip any place round here. The gang in the hangar don't seem to know when they saw him last. I've sent a few boys out to see if

they can find where he's goldbrickin'; and as soon as he shows up I'll have him get in touch with you. Where will you be? The chute shop, eh? Okay."

Captain Call turned from the phone and said, "They can't locate Lock just now, down at test; but as soon as they dig him up, he'll be over to chute shop."

"Can't locate him?" Rider asked. "Funny. Say, is this Lock—eh, do you say he's regular?"

"Lock's an old man here," Captain Call said. "And a first-rate boy, too. Oh, he's inclined to run off at the mouth, now and then, but the man's harmless. I'll vouch for him."

"I'll gamble a right arm on old Loose Lip," Bill Orr put in.

"Hope you're right," was all Rider said. Then the group stepped out into the main company street, went north between Final Assembly and the wind-tunnel lab, and into Streeter's parachute shop. Jack Lang, Streeter's right-hand man, was standing guard over a parachute that was stretched full length on a packing bench. The chute boss told Jack Lang to scram, then the former expert began explaining the obvious harness-strap sabotage to an interested gathering. It was bad, plenty bad, and it didn't take much expert explaining to convince all hands that those web straps had been, as Streeter first said, rough-filed—no doubt with a large-size rat-tail file—to make them appear badly worn.

"Whew! Good Lord, what a stunt," Major Bent mumbled. "Bill, maybe you and Old Man Death have brushed each other closer than we know."

"Me and the Old Man?" questioned Orr. "Say, I intend to go right along, as in the past, wearing out chutes by sitting on 'em—not opening them."

"But somebody else might intend something else for you," Rider said.

"And this was it," Streeter emphasized, "or I'll buy you a hat. But I want you to say, Major, that you're satisfied this is deliberate sabotage, and not neglect on the part of my shop," the chute-shop boss said to Bent.

"I'm satisfied," the major stated.

"Then we'd better call in every chute on the reservation for inspection," Streeter suggested. "I want no more like this one."

"That would mean washing out all air work," Captain Call reminded them. "It'd be sort of hard to explain."

"And it would—an' no damn' foolin'—tip our hand," Rider added. "You'll have to go slow, and let us hold what we've got."

"Tell you what I'll do," Call said. "I'll see to it that Flying Office issues all test-hop flying orders with the specific order that all men going up on such flights report to parachute shop for equipment check. Then Streeter, you can swap them new chutes for their own, telling them that it's orders.. Later on, you can recall the new chutes to stock. After you have time to check and re-pack those taken in. Guess that's the best we can do, eh?"

MR. RIDER finally said, "No sign of this Lock yet. Where do you suppose that guy is?"

"Aw, hell," old Streeter grumbled, "that Loose Lip guy's liable to be anywhere from in a ship at 20,000 to in your hair out between hangars at high noon. But just a shake, men—there's the kid, out there, that delivered this chute for Loose Lip." Out on the narrow strip of grass, between chute shop and the behind-hangars road, Messenger Squirt Short had stopped to match coins with one of the colored boys who push lawn mowers all over Federal Proving Ground. Without taking his eyes off the black hand whereon a coin was just being uncovered, Squirt asked, "What d'ya want, silk worm?" when Streeter yelled "Come here, Squirt," through an open window.

Major Bent glanced out at the gambling, shook his head and slipped Captain Call a wink. "Working for the government," he mused

"I'm winners, so far," Squirt Short called to Streeter. "Give me another yell when I'm losers, an' I'll quit."

"I'll give you a runnin' kick in the butt," old Streeter said, "if ya don't get in here and quit keepin' the major waitin'."

Squirt made a Bronx-like noise, saying, "To you an' the majo— What was that, silk worm?" And then the kid took a look. "Oh, er—I mean, I was only foolin'. Me —I er—"

"Step in here, young feller," Major Bent said.

Young Squirt Short started for the door. Then he turned, went back to where he'd been matching coins, stooped and pulled something from the grass. This something Squirt tucked into his belt—pirate fashion—then, still greatly ruffled, came into to face Major Bent and the others.

"Squirt, how come Loose Lip sent you over here with this chute?" Streeter asked.

"I just happened to be there," Squirt answered.

"That was in test hangar, eh?" Streeter asked; and the kid nodded an affirmative. "An' you came directly here? No stallin' along the line? Nobody else handled this chute?"

Squirt gave two yeses and a no to those questions, adding, "I had to be back at headquarters by 3:30, so I sorta hurried."

"Seen Lock since?" Captain Call asked.

"Yes, sir. I went over to Aero Supply at about four and Loose Lip was in there talkin' to Lieutenant Page. They was in the lieutenant's office," Squirt made known.

Captain Call picked up the phone and called Aero Supply. "How's tricks, Pagie?" he said. "Say, you haven't got Loose Lip Lock in stock over there, have you?"

"No," Page answered. "He was here, a while back, but he's gone now. Why?"

"Well, listen, Pagie," Captain Call went on. "Major Bent and a few other gentlemen are here at my side, and we're all, for some reason or other, interested in Loose Lip's whereabouts. Would you mind telling us just what Loose Lip wanted with you?"

Speaking loud, so's all on Call's end of the line might hear, Page said, "Don't you folks make light of my man Lock. He's turned sleuth. He came down here to find out whether we were shy one of the chute-jumper's oxygen units—mask and midget tank. Well, we didn't know it till Loose Lip told us so—we are shy one set. This Aero Supply, you know, only owns half a dozen of 'em. Sure enough, one's missing; and, as I've just reported to headquarters, it looks like theft."

"And how come that Loose Lip was in on the knowledge before you people?" Call asked.

"Don't ask me," Page said. "He just asked whether we were shy one outfit. After checking stock, I told him we were. He than said, 'Well, I have an idea who might have it. Leave this up to me, an' I'll see what I can do about it." And," Page concluded, "I told Loose Lip okay. That's the whole story, Captain."

Call hung up. Rider said, "The Lock man sure does get around, eh?"

"One of the chute-jumper's outfits missing," old Streeter said. "Somebody must intend to jump a chute, an' this shop hasn't heard anything about it. An' no chute-jump permit has come in from Flying Office. Wonder what the hell that Loose Lip guy knows? Say, what you got there, Squirt?"

WITH this last sudden change of subject, old Streeter's eyes sort of bulged. He reached out and took the pirate-like insertion from Squirt Short's belt. It was a rat-tail file with worn wooden handle attached. Holding the thing up for all to see, all noticed that it was an old, much-used rat-tail with two or three inches broken from the tip. It was a finger-thick, coarse-tooth file, one rough enough for wood-working usage. Streeter, without a word, handed the file to Rider. Rider took his small magnifying glass from his coat pocket and held it on the teeth. Then he took a needle from one of Streeter's bench cushions and plucked some olive-drab lint from between those file teeth. He dropped the lint on the olive-drab fabric of the chute's filed harness straps. Entirely wordless, all looked on; and, finally, Rider said, "Well, that's that, and it's something. Young feller, where did you get this file?"

"That file?" Squirt asked, sort of wool-gathering. "Oh, yeah, I remember now. I got it outa the trash can up behind test hangar."

"Not so good, but it at least checks," Rider said. "When was that?"

"Oh, three-four days ago," Squirt estimated. At the same time he turned toward Bill Orr and said, "I almost had a run-in with one of them mystery guys that's along with your ship—the tall guy with the game leg."

"That'd be Muller, my instrument man," Bill Orr said. "What do you mean, you almost had a run-in with him."

"Well, that big gimpy yelled fer me t' get t' hell 'n' gone away from that trash can. That guy has his nerve, him a visitor an' me workin' right here on Federal. I told him where he could go, but I kept movin'. That guy was sore on me anyway."

"Why?" Major Bent asked.

"Well, only a little before that, that gimpy guy an' one of them guys that draw airplane pictures over in Engineering was burnin' some of them big drawin' sheets in the big incinerator near wood-workin' shop. They let a couple sheets drop, an' I picked 'em up. They took 'em away from me an' told me to get gone before they put the boot to me. That drawin' guy outa Engineering was took away, just after noon, today, by the G's."

Rider shot a glance toward Major Bent; and the latter shook his head and batted his eyes, as though feigning a staggering blow. "Out of the mouths of fools, children and natural snoops!" he said.

"Taken by the G's, you say?" Rider questioned.

"Yeah, him—Loose Lip says his name's Kupp—and two more; that Swanson guy down in visiting-ships and a little redhead dame over in Employment Section."

"Aw, shucks. You must be wrong," Rider said. "I'll bet this Loose Lip Lock guy told you that."

"No, one of the guards on the gate did," Squirt made known. "The short, fat one, that new guy from Washington."

LEAVING Squirt with old Streeter, near the front end of the shop, Rider sort of induced Major Bent, Orr and Call toward the rear, beyond earshot of the kid. "It sure beats hell how hot tips get cooled off on a tight reservation like Federal. That little punk has the straight on this thing. That is, our man Swanson took Kupp and Miss Wolff—she's the Employment Section redhead—into Liberty on a little trip. The Wolff gal, as we found out some time ago, has been jobbing the employment-application papers in a way that bids fair to stock Federal solidly with sabotage agents. Our Captain Kostoff had Swanson employed, from the West Coast, you'll recall, when Kostoff himself faked his way in as an espionage agent. This Wolff gal and Kupp are man and wife. If Swanson and the other boys who took them to Liberty find the drawings they expect to find at the Kupp apartment, well, we hope, the Orr ship plans will be back in our hands—and the Wolff-Kupp team

will be off Federal. All of which means that we must try bringing the rest of this mystery-ship stuff to a showdown. Tell you what, Orr; perhaps it would help if you'd start talking as though you were just about set to turn the big job over to test hangar. Of course, if a man's sitting on top of a charge of dynamite, he isn't inclined to hurry the explosion."

"Aw, hell," said Bill Orr, "maybe we're running a high temperature over nothing."

The four talkers stopped talking and strolled down shop to rejoin Streeter and Squirt. Rider, no doubt, had more questions to ask. When the four arrived at the packing bench, young Squirt was talking lowly to Streeter, trying to learn what it was all about, and at the same time rolling three steel balls—half-inch ball bearings—from hand to hand along the smooth, splinterless surface of the bench.

Bill Orr reached out and picked up one of the balls. He passed it to Rider. Bent and Call sort of sucked air; and the four men were just about surprised to utter silence. Then Rider found words and said, "Where did you get these ball bearings, kid?"

"Outa that trash can down behind test hangar," Squirt Short said. "I didn't swipe 'em from no stock, Mister. They was throwaways. That Orr factory guy, the gimpy gink that shagged me for takin' the file, he threw 'em away. He was cleanin' out a steel toolbox; an' I saw these roll out when he was dumpin' it. I first thought they was marbles. An' it was when I was fishin' for them that I find that file. Can I have the file now?"

Mr. Rider did some fishing of his own. He fished in his pants pocket and came up with a four-bit piece. This he tossed to Squirt, saying, "We'll keep this old file. You go buy yourself a new one. But listen, Squirt old man; don't say a word about what you've seen or heard in this shop. Understand?"

Squirt said that he understoond. Major Bent added his bit, impressing the importance of silence upon the kid. "Don't talk to anybody, young feller," he said.

"Not even Loose Lip Lock," old Streeter emphasized.

"But Loose Lip says it's all right to tell him things," Squirt said. "That's what he told me when I told him about the G's taking them two guys an' the Employment Section redhead off the post."

"Ye gods, Lock again," moaned Mr. Rider. "Wonder where the hell that omnipresent, omnipotent, omniscient on-my-nerves is right now?"

"Somebody takin' my name in vain?" a voice from the far end of the shop was saying; and Loose Lip Lock, having entered via the alley door, was making his way forward, dodging right and left as he passed between weighted, suspended chutes back there in the loft section of the shop.

"Where the devil you been, Lock?" Captain Call demanded.

"Where haven't I been?" Loose Lip shot back. "Cap, I've been a busy woman this afternoon. Not much test-hangar labor put out, but plenty territory covered. An' I think I've done some good for us, too."

"What do you mean?" Major Bent asked.

Loose Lip took a good look at Rider, the only one in the shop he didn't know. "Can I talk?" he asked.

"This is Mr. Rider," the major said. "Yes, you can talk."

"It's about Bill's stratobomber, an' all these new guys on this post," Lock said. "I think Bill, here, is just about due for a fall. Bill, how about this game-legged guy you got along with you on instruments? Is he old-issue, regular, eh?"

"That's what we're beginning to question," Orr said. "Why?"

"You should ask why," said Lock. "I think the guy's all dynamite, plus. Anyway, just after noon today, I got a tip that three of the newcomers were taken

off the post by the G's. Don't ask me who told me that. But one of the three was this Kupp guy over in Engineering. I never trusted that Kupp bird. But here's somethin' else. Four-five days ago, I saw this Kupp an' this game-legged guy burnin' some sort of blueprints over in the wood-shop incinerator. They didn't know I saw 'em, but Squirt, here, can tell you I'm right. Squirt doesn't know it, either, but I saw him try to salvage some of the sheets. An' Kupp and the other guy like to fan Squirt's fanny with the old boot. It struck me that them babies was pretty dam' particular about destroyin' them there drawin's; an' why?"

"The young feller told us about all that," Rider said.

"That so?" Loose Lip asked, glancing at Squirt. "Well, then, I suppose he told you about Bill's gimpy guy cleaning out his tool box, out in the trash can. I saw Squirt get in Dutch there, too. Well, I was inside the hangar, working in a turret-top pit, when I saw that. It sort of struck me funny that this Orr factory guy was doin' so much house cleanin' all of a sudden. Anyway, the gimpy guy didn't know I was in that turret. There were four-five big jobs in for service, out on the apron, and gimpy boy thought he was alone in the hangar. Just before he went out to empty the tool box, just outside the open back door, he took something from the box and slipped it under a tarp on the workbench. Quick like; an' he sort of made sure nobody was lookin' when he did it. I spotted the thing right away. It was one of these new chute-jumper's oxygen masks, an' tanks. I know all about them gadgets 'cause I was flyin' mac on the high-altitude job that took one of Streeter's jumpers up on first tests. Couple months ago. You remember that, Streeter?"

"Yeah, what else?" said Streeter.

"Well, I know there's only a few of them there midget-tank oxygen outfits on this post. An' I had an idea that this gimpy bird, an outsider, didn't rate one. An' if he did, if he'd drawn it regular from Aero Supply, why was he hiding it? I began puttin' two and two together; and, man, have I been busy with the old arithmetic since then!"

"Well, never mind adding that up now," Rider said. "We want to talk to you about this chute, Lock.

"What do you know about this 'worn' place, both these badly 'worn' places where the shoulder straps loop the shroud rings?"

"That my chute—the one Bill's been usin'?" Loose Lip Lock asked, stepping closer to the bench and turning the damaged web shoulder straps between his fingers, better to turn them to the fading light of late afternoon. "Man, what I mean—this is bad, plenty bad. But at that, what's one more bum chute in a ship like this mystery job?"

"What do you mean, Loose Lip?" Bill Orr asked.

"Bill," Loose Lip said, "in your whole ship, outa eleven seats, there's just one chute that can be used."

"How the hell do you know that?" Rider demanded.

"That's one of the places I've been spendin' the afternoon," Loose Lip said—"aboard the mystery job."

"How did you get past the guards?" Major Bent asked.

"That's easy, Major—the way more than a few other guys've been in there sightseein', an' worse. Through the pipe tunnel, the pipe tunnel that carries all the heatin' pipes, water an' gas pipes, and juice lines along under an' behind the hangars. That tunnel, you know, has two manhole outlets in each hangar. One openin', the one I went in, is down in the toilets, at the Flying Office end of test hangar. An' the outlet I came up is right there under the mystery job's rudders."

MAJOR BENT, usually a pleasant high-ranker, clouded up when Loose Lip unfolded this story of infringement of regulations. He said, "Seems to me

you've shoved your neck too far out, Lock."

"Maybe, sir," Loose Lip agreed. "But then again, stricter guardlines than this have made exceptions for geese that uncovered golden eggs. The gang was ridin' hell outa me for sayin' this here Federal layout was loused up with wrong guys. An' hell, I reached a spot where I couldn't take it—especially when an old sidekick like Cap Call, here, comes along an' tells me to button the lip.

"That was the blowoff for me—when Cap told me that, only this noon—an' I made up my mind to deliver the goods or get off the nest. As I said before, I began puttin' two an' two together. I remembered listenin' to this Kupp bird talkin' over against the Engineering lab wall one noon, about a week back, while the gang was havin' the noon-time smoke. I remembered that Kupp was talkin' about this gimpy guy of Bill's. Name's Muller—isn't it, Bill?"

"That's right," Orr said. "What about him?"

"Well, this Kupp guy was tellin' the gang what a hell of a tip-top airman Muller was. He said that Muller had gone down with a big test job, a four-motored bomber, out on the Coast, and that Muller was the only one to get out alive. Kupp said that that was how Muller got the game leg. Kupp also claimed that this Muller guy had jumped a chute from another twin-motored job that went to pieces in one of them South American countries. What's more, Kupp claims Muller was aboard one of the Navy's Zeps when it went down."

"That's all correct," Bill Orr said.

"Well, how about it, Bill," Loose Lip asked, "doesn't it strike you that this Muller baby is perhaps makin' his own major accidents? That's how it hit me."

"You mean this Muller perhaps breaks 'em up, on the wing, then takes his chance with the chute?" Orr questioned. "Aw, hell, it doesn't add up, Loose Lip."

"Oh, yes it does!" exclaimed Rider. "This sabotage thing, as we've long since learned, doesn't pay off except on actual results. These murder agents can't plant the business, walk away, then collect on their own say-so that they were the smart boys who caused all that damage. But now that you've been aboard the stratobomber, Lock, what were you saying about the seat chutes on that job?"

"Well," Loose Lip said, "I was in there sort of lookin' for the chute-jumper's oxygen unit that I'd seen this gimpy Muller take outa his tool box and hide on the bench. It kinda strikes me that maybe a guy would sink that little pint-size outfit somewheres under a seat cushion, or something like that. So I goes aboard the mystery job and starts with the seats in the engine-room. Sure enough, I located stuff—tubular lengths, wire coils and things like that—that you'd expect an instrument man to have along. Well, the first seat chute I tried to lift wouldn't come off the metal seat. You know how them Halsey seat-pack chutes are fastened—six push snaps holdin' the fabric chute envelope to the seat itself. I gave that first one a lift—to see if there's anything under—but that seat-pack didn't come off the seat. The six snaps pulled free, all right, but that was all. So I took a good look, just to see if there's somethin' I don't know about these new Halsey seat-cushion packs. Damned if that chute's fabric envelope wasn't lacquered to the dural seat. I tried the next seat. It was the same. I went ahead to the pilot's bay. All three—each pilot's and that jump seat—were lacquered tight. Then I went aft to the four machine gun blisters. All four were fouled tight in the same way. So I went back to that engine-room. An' of the four seats there, there's just one that the seat-pack cushion was free. That's the seat where all the instrument-repair stuff is stored."

"Muller always uses that seat," Bill Orr said. "The right-side-rear seat."

"That's the seat," Loose Lip said. "An' if ya had a major accident, that's the only

guy who'd have a chance for his white ally. Does that add up, Bill?"

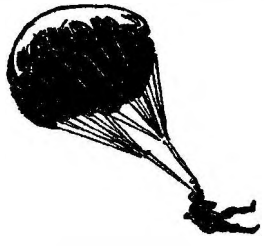
"It's beginning to," Orr said. "Did you locate the chute-jumper's oxygen unit?"

"Damned right I did!" said Loose Lip. "They don't fool Mr. Lock, for long. I'll show these wise eggs who they're tryin' to play hoss with around Federal. I found that unit under the floor boards, right down alongside that one good seat. It's right there within easy reach of this gimpy Muller. Now what do you men think of that? No need of havin' the instuctions written on the heel with red ink when it comes to pourin' that there kind of water outa a boot, eh?"

Bill Orr said, "Oh, I don't know—maybe I just imagine I'm hearing this stuff."

"You haven't heard anything yet," Loose Lip said. "After I located the jumper's unit, I—"

THE telephone rang. Captain Call picked it up, then he handed it over to the major, with, "It's for you, sir," Major Bent took the receiver and said, "Major Bent speaking. Who—Mr. Rider? He's right here. You say the call is from the outside? Put it right on this line." Then Bent handed the phone's receiver to Mr. Rider, saying, "An outside call for you."



Just about then, quitting time arrived on Federal. Shops hangars and offices were pouring their laborers into the narrow streets. Major Bent, while Rider talked on the phone, put a hand on the nape of Squirt's neck, easing the kid through the door and once more urging utter silence on the part of that snoopy one. Jack Lang, that good right hand of Streeter's, and three other parachute workers came from an inner room, took care of their cards at the time clock, then went out. Meantime, Rider had uttered hardly a word into that phone. Now and then he had grunted, maybe mumbled "good," "swell" or "check," and that was all. But when he hung up there was a pleased grin on his face. He said, "Kupp and the girl friend have been nicely accounted for. You'll recall I mentioned the fingerprints on the micrometer and steel rule—the ones found in the wing well. The boys found the rest of that Swiss set in the Kupp apartment. They also found a fine set of Orr-wing drawings."

"That's service," Bill Orr said to Major Bent. "Now I won't have to put 'em on paper for you."

"And about this man Muller," Rider went on, "he and your motor men had the afternoon off, didn't they?"

"That's right," Bill Orr said. "I told them they could take the afternoon, soon's as we landed from the morning hop, just after one. You see, I've got a night flight scheduled for eight-thirty tonight."

"That checks," Rider said. "Our man Swanson is with Muller right now, over in East Liberty. Muller's been beering up all afternoon, but he claims he's got to be in condition for a night hop, tonight. Swanson should be able to keep the gimpy guy busy till then—and away from the Kupp apartment. Still and all, even if Muller did get tipped off that things were breaking up, he'd still sit tight and be on hand. What about this beer-bum stuff, Bill?"

"The guy likes his booze, all right," Orr said. "But up to date, he hasn't lost any time through it. Just give him a few whiffs of cold, fresh air and he's cold-sober. That's what I call a good airman."

Mr. Rider began pacing the parachute shop nervously. "Let's see—eight-thirty, eh?" he mumbled. "Say, by the way, what was that you were saying when the phone rang, Lock? Something about Bill Orr not hearing anything yet—was that it?"

"Right," said Loose Lip. "I found an automatic under the floor boards with the jumper's unit." Loose Lip reached into a hip pocket, adding, "I pulled the clip an' put the automatic back." He handed the clip to Rider.

Rider said, "That just about frames the final picture, or I lose my guess. You see, when the wing jammed on that first near-accident, we questioned all hands aboard—right after the hop. The two motor men, Black and Stillwell, told us that Muller started to open the side door, ready for a chute jump, at about 32,000 feet. Black and Stillwell pulled Muller back, and threatened to cool him down with a ball-peen hammer if he didn't keep away from that door. Well, it's a cinch Muller didn't have the automatic along, nor the oxygen unit, or things might have been different. But now he's all set for the next try."

LOOSE LIP LOCK laughed. "All set," he said, "squattin' on a chute that has its pull-pin fouled, an' within easy reach of an empty gun an' an oxygen unit that's wired so tight to the floor boards that a guy couldn't jerk it free with a pinch-bar."

"Why, you dam' wrecker, you!" old Streeter barked. "Foulin' a chute's pull-pin, eh! I could have ya put away for that."

Shortly after eight that night, under the flood lights of test hangar's wide cement apron, the guards were trundling Bill Orr's stratobomber to its starting position. Black and Stillwell, the Orr factory motor macs, were already on hand; and Loose Lip Lock, standing there on the apron with those macs, was telling them that Orr had given him permission to make this hop. "You gents know how it is," Loose Lip explained. "Pretty soon now, maybe after this hop, Orr's goin' to turn this job over to a regular test department. Then, as always, the motors will be in charge of the great Mr. Lock. Hope you guys haven't put these three big hot-pots on the hummer. As a rule, I have to undo all the damage done by you factory macs. Oh-o, here comes the gimp."

Instrumentman Muller came across the apron from the general direction of main gate. He was sober enough, as Orr had predicted, but busily chewing cloves. "Hello, gabby," he said to Loose Lip; "and what the hell are you doing out here in the middle of the night?"

"*Mister* Gabby to you, Gimpy!" Loose Lip snapped. "I'm hoppin' along on this night flight. Black an' Stillwell're goin' to sort o'break me in on the motor end of the thing. Guess this will maybe be the wind-up for you factory babies."

"That so?" Muller speculated, and there was plenty of surprise in his question. "Orr say that?"

"Sure," Loose Lip said. "Cap Call's comin' along, too. This ship's just about done walkin' the dog on this post."

Muller was suddenly all action. He started to climb aboard. Loose Lip Lock climbed right along with him; and, right away, Loose Lip knew that Muller didn't like that. Black and Stillwell, maybe through prearrangement, did likewise, so there wasn't much chance of Muller being alone—if Muller had any desire to be that way.

Bill Orr, Sid Newcome, Captain Call and Rider came aboard shortly after. Major Bent and a few other officers of the post were there on the apron. Flying Office had washed out all other night-flying activities, in this way giving the stratobomber and its crew all the privacy desired.

By eight-thirty Bill Orr had given the three-motored power unit its warming run, then throttled low while he quit his seat and went aft for a last-minute word with the occupants of each compartment. Captain Call and Mr. Rider were seated in the bombing bay. The two motor men, Lock and Muller filled all four seats of the cramped engine-room. Of course, because of the ground-pressure-retaining require-

ments of the ship, each of the three main bays—pilots', engine-men's and bombers' —were anything but spacious. Truth is, the Orr stratobomber wasn't a comfortable ship by any stretch of the imagination. It was really the ship that was introducing submarine discomforts to air.

WHILE Orr talked—and, no doubt, stalled—Streeter drove out onto the apron with his chute-shop service truck. He wheeled up alongside the stratobomber's main side door. "Hey, Orr," he yelled—"hold this ship a minute. Listen, feller. I'm going to issue regular back-pack chutes to all you men. How many of you aboard this cull? Eight? Hell, what a mob."

It was Muller who shoved his head out the door and said, "This bus has Orr-factory equipment, feller. They're Halsey, late-type seat-cushion packs. Best on earth."

"But not so dam' hot in the air!" Streeter yelled back. "You guys can keep your Halsey late-tripe seat-cushion butt-jacks, an' welcome, but you'd best strap into the real thing while you've got the chance."

Streeter began passing the back-packs chutes aboard.

"I'm satisfied with what I'm sitting on," Muller said.

"All right, sister," Streeter yelled back. "I won't ask you to change your mind. Why hell, I'll even go one better than that —I won't even issue you one, not if you beg."

Muller didn't beg. Sullenly, sticking to his corner seat, he watched the others strap into the back-packs chutes. Then the ship was ready for take-off. Bill Orr was back in the left-side pilot's seat. The stratobomber purred down to the end of the east-west runway, swung bow-on into the evening breeze, took the green flash from the tower, then got under way. Orr circled wide. Soon the red-lighted boundaries of Federal's flying field began to shrink smaller and smaller, altitude came fast and furious, and the mighty stratobomber was really "up," and getting more so each passing second of flight. That ship was sure hell when it came to reaching for ceiling.

"Ten thousand feet," said Loose Lip, studying the altimeter on the engine-room's instrument board. "M'gosh, you dudes have all the comforts of home in here—altimeter, air-speed, atmospheric pressure, temperature. Sure gotta have lotsa eddication to read this board—an' keep track of all them there red, blue, green and white bulbs on the dark-board, too . . . 15,000 feet, an' we've just started . . . 16,000. . . . Where t'hell does it go! . . . Remember the first time I ever rode to 16,000 feet in a ship. Took us three-quarters of an hour to get up there, an' both the pilot an' me was both worn out . . . 18,000 . . . Two thousand put on that clock just while I'm sayin' hello to you guys. . . . Them three hot pots sure purr, eh? . . . Say, is this bay under ground-pressure now?"

"Not yet," Black said. "Orr won't throw in on the super-chargers, and close 'er up against leakage, till we get up close to 25,000. . . . Say, did Orr tell any of you fellers how high he's goin' tonight?"

"Sure. All the way," Loose Lip said.

"You sure of that?" Muller asked suddenly.

"Sure as I'm sittin' here," said Loose Lip. "This is sort of a preview for Cap Call and that Congress guy back there in the compartment with Call." Just then the rear door of the engine-room opened and "Congressman" Rider and Captain Call stooped their way into the already-crowded bay.

"Stay right where you are, men," Rider said. "The captain and I felt lonesome as the devil back there alone. We're going to squat on our heels, right here against this rear bulkhead, and listen to these motors hum. Carry on with your talk. Don't let us interfere."

THE inter-bay phone buzzed. Engineman Black answered the call. He said, "Okay. Everything's jake. What? Yes, all six of us are in this bay. Close 'em up." Then Black turned to his five mates and said, "We're hermetically sealed now. There she sings"—as a new droning sound came to ear—"and we're being built up to ground pressure." Twenty-five thousand feet was on the altimeter.

On the dark-board a pair of green lights were sliding outward from the center, one to right and the other to the left, behind and within a narrow slot. Muller and the two enginemen had their eyes on that widening green-light movement; and, now and then, those men would glance out side windows. Call, Rider and Lock tumbled to what it was—the dark-board's check on the expansion action of the Orr altitude wings. Presently, all six were checking that action. It was damned awe-inspiring, almost super-something—watching those riding lights, way out there on either wingtip, going further and further away from you. And steadily too, for the altitude had gone past 30,000—then 31,000 feet, and up.

Muller's job was to watch and check all instrument action, and there were plenty instruments aboard that stratobomber. Well, he had been checking them for weeks now—months in fact, counting the factory test period—and his present attention seemed to be more on the altimeter than on those other, newer gadgets. Captain Call turned to him and asked, "At what altitude do they reach full expansion?"

"Depends, of course, on atmospheric conditions," Muller answered.

"Generally speaking?" Call persisted.

"Oh, between 45 and 50,000 feet," Muller said.

"It won't be long now then," Call mused, glancing at the 35,000 foot reading on the altimeter."

Muller was obviously under a fidgety strain. Rider was watching him closely. Muller began moving about, without, of course, quitting his seat, sort of rearranging his tool boxes and other trade articles of his crowded corner. Then Muller looked over to Call and said, "I understand we're going all the way up tonight, that right?"

"To full wing expansion, at least," the captain answered. "Orr said he'd show the Senator and me how these Orr wings work."

RIDER saw Muller slash his tongue across dry lips, then fidget some more. He also saw Muller move about among his belongings and start easing his arms through the shoulder straps of that Halsey seat-pack chute. Muller, sort of hiding the action, then silently hooked the lap snap. Then, still handling his supplies, those down near his right foot, Muller dropped his right hand down along the side wall and felt under the floor boards. Rider—Lock and Call, too—saw the look of surprise that crossed Muller's face when, without question, he discovered that the chute-jumper's unit was no longer free. They saw Muller try again with a steady, hard pull.

Thirty-eight-thousand feet was the altimeter's reading. Muller's eyes were glued, thoughtfully, on that altimeter for a full half minute. He took them off that dial when 40,000 showed there. And the riding lights, green and red, way out there at wingtips, seemed far away when that tall, gimpy feller shot a glance through his side window.

"Man, this is what you call 'up'," said Captain Call.

"One hell of a place to be," Loose Lip Lock said, "if a guy's sittin' on a fancy-pancy Halsey seat-pack that wouldn't open if a guy gave it a try. You know, Muller, I can't figure a guy like you. I can't figure why you wouldn't take a good, regulation chute instead of that fouled pack you're sittin' on."

Muller's eyes went glassy. "What d'ya mean—fouled!" he very nearly yelled.

"Why, haven't you heard?" said Loose

Lip. "Ten of the Halsey chutes are lacquered to the seats, and the eleventh, the one you're sittin' on, has its pull-pin fouled."

Muller came out of that small seat and out of that chute's harness as though shot from a gun. He flipped the chute pack up so's all could see, and his knowing hands went to the flap-guard that protected the all-important chute-release pull-pin. That flap-guard was hopelessly fouled around the pull-pin, wired through and through with a length of Muller's own piano wire. Muller shot a glance at the altimeter; 42,500 feet! No time to find pliers and attempt the clearing of that piano-wire tangle. Muller dropped that Halsey chute. Then he was on his knees, both hands working under the floor boards. Again he tried to lift the chute-jumper's oxygen unit free; and again Loose Lip's expert fastening resisted the pull. Then Muller made another reach under the floor boards and snapped to his feet, automatic in hand.

"All right, Gabby, I'll take that chute you're wearing!" Muller snapped. "Get out of it!" He gun-poked Loose Lip.

"The hell you tell," exploded Loose Lip, grinning and reaching slowly for the blunt snout of the black-blue automatic. Just as Loose Lip put his hand on the large-bore muzzle, Muller squeezed down. The gun's action clicked. Muller's face fell. And Loose Lip Lock jerked the empty automatic from his hand.

Forty-three thousand and two hundred feet was on the altimeter; and so were Muller's eyes—just for an agonized glance. Then Muller reached for the telephone. Rider stepped forward and pushed a gun into the small of Muller's back. "Hands off!" he snapped.

MULLER half turned and stepped back. "You've gotta stop this climb!" he wailed. "Tell Orr to level off—and stop this climb!" And Muller, doing a cold sweat, was yelling by then.

"Why?" Rider asked. "Don't you like altitude any more?"

Forty-four thousand feet was the altimeter's reading. The dark-board's wing-check lights—those green lights that had been working outward so slowly, steadily—had merely reached the end of the board-wide slot.

"If she gets to full expansion," Muller yelled, pointing at the dark-board's slit, "you're done for. This ship is wired for a wing explosion at full expansion. Stop Orr! I'm not kidding, you damned fools! I tell you——"

"Tell us who wired it," Rider demanded. "Come on, come on. There's the 45,000-foot mark! Who wired it?"

"Kupp. That Engineering guy they grabbed—"

"You're a liar," Rider yelled back. "Kupp's the boy who made the drawings. You're the rat who—"

"All right, all right. I did it," Muller admitted. "But she goes off at full expansion. Get Orr on that phone! Get Orr! You crazy damned fool, don't I say I did it—what the hell you standing there for!"

"Well, that's all we want to know—you did it," said Rider. Then, with the gun still in the small of Muller's back, Rider studied the dark-board's wing-expansion check.

The green lights had nearly reached the outer ends of the slot. Forty-five thousand five hundred was on the altimeter. Muller was standing there like a man dead on his feet, his legs trembling so rapidly that his heels rattled their rat-a-tat-tat above the roar of motors; and the sweat stood out on his white face. But his dead eyes were on the dark-board too.

Then the altimeter's arrow crept over the 45,800-foot marker; and, at the same time, the spreading, creeping green lights

reached the ends of the slot, and the green gave way to blue lights.

"Full expasion," Rider said. He turned and sort of grinned at Call. "You don't suppose our Muller boy is a liar, do you? Full expansion, and no explosion. You weren't kidding, were you, Muller?"

MULLER, without answering, stood there and stared at the altimeter through another full thousand feet of climb.

Then he sort of wilted, felt for his seat, and flopped. Rider took the gun away and let him flop.

Rider grinned at Captain Call, and gave him the nod, saying, "Any time now."

Captain Call stepped to the phone, got pilots' bay on a buzz, then said, "The party's over, Bill. Take 'er down. Forty-seven thousand feet of night sky is a great plenty for me."

On the way down, Rider finally took an ordinary tobacco tin from his pocket. The tin was sealed tightly, soldered neatly around the cover where stubbed, cut wires hung out. Muller's eyes almost bounced from his head when they fell on that tobacco tin. Then Rider turned to Black and Stillwell and said, "I don't want you men to think Muller's a nasty liar. Nope, he's a fine, honest boy. He wouldn't lie. He might blow you boys to Kingdom Come, but he doesn't lie. Yes, our boy Muller had this nitro bomb set up, out there in the right wing, for full-expansion contact. Surprising, isn't it? Yes, sir, it is! Why, even I, an old hand at murder, was surprised when Lock, here, handed over this bomb. Lock old man, you know you're a pretty good boy. Captain Call, I'm going to say a good word for your man Lock where a good word will do a lot of good."

"Hell's bells," said old Loose Lip. "They better not play hoss with the great Mr. Lock. Not on Federal, anyway."

And a half hour later, Bill Orr had cut the full 47,000 feet of night sky from under his mighty stratobomber. Getting out, he informed Major Bent, and those other post officers still waiting out front of test hangar, that the big ship would be turned over for Federal test tomorrow. And Rider, turning over Muller to a few of his boys, agents, also waiting on the apron, strolled over to Major Bent and said, "Guess this just about cleans up the business on hand, Major. Can you think of any odd ends that need picking up?"

"Mmmm, no," Major Bent answered. "But just a shake, Mr. Rider. One little thing, and I almost forgot. Just as I was easing that young messenger through the chute-shop door—the boy Lock, here, calls 'Squirt'—Squirt told me to tell you to let him know if you want some more old files at four-bits apiece. Seems Squirt can get plenty more around the shops. Guess that's all."

The Man Swimming In the Fog Found Himself in As Much of a Fog in Another Matter. Hell—Dames!

DAMES

By MURRAY LEINSTER

Author of "Buck Comes Home," etc.

EVEN before the echoes came, the man felt gloomily certain that he was going to drown. When they did come, the nearest one —the one on which his hopes were set—was definitely farther away than it had been. And that meant that it was quite useless to swim. A current was carrying him away from whatever headland echoed the distant steamer's fog-horn.

He could not see anything. A thick pall of mist hung about him, curiously tinted by an unseen sun. It allowed him to view a circle twenty feet from his eyes in every direction. In that circle there was nothing but oily water, stirring sluggishly in long swells of complicated outline. The distant steamer hooted, and echoes came, and somewhere he heard the staccato beat of a power-boat's motor. Fishermen in the Inside Passage take no account of fog. But the power boat was far away, and the nearest echo was still farther this time than before, and the man knew more gloomily still that there was no possible way for him to escape drowning.

He turned on his back to float. He had not shed his clothing before, and it was too late to do it now. He had to paddle to keep his head above-water. When his strength gave out and he could not paddle any longer, he would drown. He swore a little—rather resentfully than in desperation—and paddled. Only his face showed drawn and weary.

The steamer's fog-horn grew more distant and more distant still. The echoes grew fainter. The man who was presently to drown seemed to concentrate all his attention upon the mere feat of staying at the top of the water for as long a time as possible. But he had already been swimming for a very long time. Presently he struggled a little. His face went under. He thrashed, and ripples spread about him. He floated once more. He spat out water, weakly, and continued to paddle.

His eyes were peevish, and once he spoke aloud to the encircling mist. One word, and that with a scornful bitterness: "Dames!" It was as if he epitomized his own life. His ears were below the surface, so he heard nothing at all. There was little to hear except the single staccato power boat. But he did not even hear that. He paddled.

He went under again. Again he thrashed, and floated once more. But

he was near the end. Presently his mouth opened convulsively. The motor boat was near, but he was hardly able to hear it. He went under. His arms thrashed feebly. He came up and made choked sounds. He came up yet again and uttered a cry which was not altogether human. From that time onward it seemed as if his body fought for life without any help from his intelligence. He fought the water blindly. He splashed weakly, and struggled and writhed.

The cry and the splashing was enough to cause the power boat to swerve. It came gliding out of the mist just as the struggles of the exhausted body were about to cease. A hand reached out swiftly and stayed the sinking of that body. A rather small hand, but a capable one. The putt-putt-putting of the motor stopped. Then a dim figure in the mist struggled manfully to draw the utterly limp figure of the swimmer into the boat.

HE dropped on the floor-boards of the power boat and watched with a desperate alertness for some sign of suspicion or of doubt in his rescuer. A girl had rescued him. If she was pretty, he did not notice it. For one reason, he was exhausted.

She reached forward to the engine and cut the ignition. She listened sharply to the racket of echoes that came back through the fog, even after their source had ceased. She cut the spark in again before the fly-wheel had stopped. The engine resumed with a valorous uproar. She considered, frowning. Then her face cleared.

"About right."

She swung the tiller. The man understood. She was using the echoes as he had tried to use them; as the steamer no longer audible used them; as a means of guidance in the fog. The boat swerved. Wraiths of mist flowed past. The fog remained impenetrable. The world seemed curiously hushed, save for the racket of the motor and its echoes.

"I came over from the mainland," said the girl. "On my way the fog came down, but I kept on. We're used to it, around here."

"Where are you takin' me?" asked the man.

"Home," said the girl briefly. "I've got to attend to the chickens. Maybe the fog'll lift and I can get you back to the mainland before long. Ours is the only house on our island. Is it important for you to get back quickly?"

The man hesitated. Then he said, "I don't know. It depends on what"—he licked his lips—"on what my prisoner did."

The girl peered at him through the mist. "Prisoner?"

"I'm a sort of G-man," said the man, not altogether convincingly. "I was takin' a prisoner down to Seattle by boat. We were up on deck together an' I wasn't looking close, so—well, I guess he slugged me. The first thing I knew I was in the water an' the steamer was a long way off. I heard echoes an' I headed for 'em, swimmin'. It was the only chance I had."

The girl looked at him again. She cut the motor momentarily. The echoes were deafening in the interval before the resumption of the motor-roar.

"You did pretty well, at that," she observed. "What do you think your prisoner did?"

"He—uh—well," said the man lamely, "maybe he jumped over himself, with a life-preserver. Or maybe he just hid. Without me to raise a fuss, he might just walk ashore when the steamer docks."

THROUGH the racket of the motor there came the staggered beating of an echo almost as loud as the motor itself. The girl cut off the engine altogether. Echoes resounded startlingly, and as startlingly died away to nothing. The power boat went on of its own momentum, with a sound of bubbling at its bow. There was a curious, muffled silence. Then the

boat's keel grated loudly on sand and pebbles. It stopped short, crunching.

"Here we are," said the girl.

The man got up with tremendous effort. The girl sat still for an instant. She regarded him steadily.

"Did you ever hear of Butch Traynor?"

The man jerked his head around.

"Butch Traynor? No. Why?"

"I just wondered," said the girl. "You G-men ought to get after him."

The man got out of the boat into six inches of water. The feel of solidness under his feet was peculiar. He saw a stretch of sand, with ripples lapping at it. A vaguely darker area in the fog which was probably a headland. He hauled tiredly at the boat. The girl stepped up to the bow and jumped lightly ashore. The man followed her up on the beach and tethered the boat to stakes—drying-stakes for nets—which came close down to the water's edge. The girl vanished. Moving about, the man saw vague shapes dimly through the mist. Rocks. A boat drawn up and turned over for repair. He heard cacklings somewhere near. A minor tumult of flapping, unseen wings. The clatter of a tin pan. He heard the girl moving about. A door opened and closed. Presently a pump squeaked. All this in invisibility.

He blundered toward the noises. The girl started when she saw him. She made a swift, frightened movement. Then she said:

"Oh, it's you!"

She turned away. He said, almost humbly:

"Is there any chance of gettin'—uh—some dry clo'es?"

She hesitated.

"I suppose so. I'll look."

She moved off through the mist. He followed her, chilled and exhausted. He saw a house take form gradually through the fog. A small house, hardly more than a cabin. Three—four rooms, perhaps. There was something missing, though. It was seconds before the man realized that there was no smoke coming from the chimney. The fog was undisturbed above the stubby brick stack.

She came out of the house. She stood quite still. After an instant he identified the pose. She was listening. He listened,

too. No sound except the formless noises of a flock of newly-fed fowl. The indefinite, liquid sound of the water about the boat. Occasional, unrythmic tapping noises which were the drips of condensed mist from overhanging objects.

"You can go in," said the girl briefly. "The room on the right. I've put out some of my father's things. They won't fit so well, but they're dry."

The man went inside the cabin. The smell was of emptiness. The house was furnished frugally, but it had not the odor of occupancy. He went into the room on the right. There were clothes laid out. Fisherman's clothes. He stripped off his own wet garments and clothed himself in them. He went out again.

The girl was standing on the tiny porch, again, listening. She held up her hand.

"Wait!—I think I hear a boat."

THE man strained his ears. He heard nothing but the same muffled sounds of the fog; ripples on the beach, and irregular dripping impacts, and the noise of the chickens feeding. But as the girl stood immobile, her face frowningly intent, he thought he heard a motor too. He could not be sure if it was real or imaginary. In any case it was infinitely faint.

"I'm not sure," said the girl abruptly. Then she added, with a trace of grimness, "If it is a boat, it's Butch Traynor."

The man said:

"This Butch Traynor. You mean he might come here? An'—uh—you don't want him to?"

"Yes," said the girl.

She made an impatient, irresolute gesture.

"But," said the man, "what does he want?"

The girl said, "Me."

"But——"

"Have you got a revolver?" she demanded.

He shook his head.

"I guess—I guess my pris'ner took it after he'd knocked me out." Then he added uneasily, "This—uh—Butch Traynor—"

"He says he wants to marry me," said the girl hardly. "He says so! But he's got a bad name, and he's earned it. If a man cuts another man's fishing-nets away, he's pretty low. Butch Traynor's done that.

"He's done other things. There's talk of a killing or two that can't be proved on him. And he says he wants to marry me!"

"But—uh—"

"If you want to believe it," said the girl. She added fiercely, "He says he'll make me! My father made him stop coming here, but if he thought I was here alone he'd come after me. He says he's going to make me marry him. You figure out how!"

The man made an uneasy gesture.

"My father broke his leg," said the girl resentfully. "A bad break. We had to take him over to the mainland. My mother's staying there with him. I've been coming back here every day or so to attend to the chickens. If Butch Traynor heard I came over today—"

She stopped, again to listen. Her brow was dark. The man did not look at her, though she was good enough to look at. Sun-browned and full-bodied and firm-fleshed and young. Her hands clenched. She seemed almost to tremble with inner rage. But she listened keenly.

"We could start back now," said the man uneasily. "He couldn't see you in the fog. You could use a—compass, maybe. An' he would go right past you without knowin' it."

"With a motor making as much noise as mine does?" demanded the girl. "His boat's faster, too."

"You could listen for his engine," said the man urgently, "an' if you heard it, cut yours off an' drift. He couldn't find you then!"

"I've got to attend to things here!" said the girl fiercely. "This is all we have to live on, while my father's helpless."

SHE moved off into the mist. The man stood still. Twice he licked his lips affrightedly as if at some inner vision. The girl opened the door of some invisible structure behind the pall of white. The man heard her moving about. She went to the chicken-yard again. More cacklings and flutterings. She was in the chicken-yard for a long time. Time always passes more slowly to a man when he is waiting for a woman to accomplish something in which he takes no interest. To this man it seemed an age, an aeon, in which he stood in the blank white fog while indefinite noises told of cryptic things the girl was doing. Gathering eggs; doubtless. Filling water-trays; probably. Refilling whatever devices gave the chickens feed. Doing this thing and that.

It seemed hours that he stood there, alone. Actually, he was so weary that it was painful merely to stand. And he listened more for the completion of the girl's tasks than for any outer sound, so that when he did notice the noise of a motor it was very near. It was not faint. It was not distant. It was a plainly audible chugg-chugg-chugg-chugg that was steady and rythmic and coming closer.

He heard it, startled. He went in search of the girl, calling guardedly. He came

upon her standing with a bucket of eggs in her hand, listening as he had listened. Her eyes were bright and hard. She breathed quickly.

"I heard a boat," said the man, uncertainly.

"It's Butch Traynor," said the girl, tight-lipped. "I know the motor. He's—after me."

"We can—uh—get your boat started," said the man.

"Are you afraid?" she asked bitterly.

"I don't want any more trouble," said the man, humbly. "I had plenty already."

The girl said in queenly scorn, "Go and hide, then! I'll——"

She put down the bucket and hurried away into the mist. The man followed, again and very tiredly. He saw her coming out of the cottage. She thrust something out of sight inside her dress. The man saw the glint of steel. A knife, probably.

"Go and hide!" she repeated bitterly. "He'd be bound to catch up to me some time. He's been following me around long enough!"

She hurried away once more, deathly pale, her hands shaking, her eyes like flames. The man went slowly after her. He had been exhausted. He was not much less than exhausted now.

THE sound of the motor out on the water stopped abruptly. It started again, and stopped, and started. For echoes.

It's timbre changed. The boat out there in the white mist had changed its course. Now echoes came from every side through the fog; sharp and ringing repetitions of the motor's sound. And now, too, and very abruptly, the color of the mist altered. It had been faintly golden from an unseen sun. That golden tint deepened.

The man reached the sand-and-pebble beach and saw the girl standing in desperate defiance, facing the water. The oily ripples of the little bay were blue, now, instead of slaty gray.

The motor in the invisible boat cut off. A man moved, out there in the fog. There were bubbling sounds, of a cutwater parting the surface. A grinding sound. A shadow in the mist.

THE man moved heavily toward the source of the sound. A figure loomed through the now-golden fog, running along the beach. The man looked at a drawn, unshaven face which stared at him unbelievingly.

"Who the hell are you?" demanded a taut voice.

The man who had so nearly drowned said hungrily:

"Listen! They tell me you're in trouble with the law. You bumped off a couple men—"

"Who the hell are you?" cried Butch Traynor fiercely. "What're you doing here? Where's Ellen? What've you done with her?"

"N-nothin'," said the man. He swallowed, and went on desperately. "Listen! If you're in trouble with the law—"

The girl's voice came, strained and defiant:

"You Butch Traynor, what're you doing on our land? Didn't my father tell you to stay away?"

The new man said savagely, "I came here for you, and by God I'm going to take you away with me!"

"Listen!" said the man from the water, desperately, "If you're in trouble with the law, I want to—"

Butch Traynor went swiftly to the girl. He seized her two arms in his hands and said hoarsely:

"I've argued enough! I can't stand any more! I won't stand any more! Are you comin' peaceful, or—"

The girl did not shrink. She cried passionately:

"If you did carry me off, if I couldn't kill you I'd kill myself! But you won't!

That man there is a detective. A Federal man! He's seen enough now—"

Butch Traynor turned upon the man who had so nearly been drowned. He was a young man, Butch Traynor. His muscles were hard and his jaw was craggy. His clothes were rough and his manner grim. He looked at the man from the water. Then he released the girl and came purposefully toward him. His hands worked.

"Listen!" said the man from the water, humbly. "She's got me wrong. She picked me up from the water just now, drownin'. I'd jumped off the steamer for Seattle. I ain't a G-man. I'm—"

BUTCH TRAYNOR stared at him with little ugly lights in his eyes; the battle light of the male who is brought to desperation by a woman and seeks combat as a necessary, explosive alleviation of his state. He continued to advance. The small waves rippled on the shore. The fog-wraiths drifted by, damp and clammy and golden-white from the sunlight above. The girl stood still. Butch Traynor was very near, crouched a little, his lips twisted in a silent snarl.

"Listen!" stammered the man from the water. "I—bumped off a guy an' beat it. They caught me up in Seward. A bull was bringin' me down to Seattle for trial an'—an' I jumped off the ship. Tryin' to make a getaway. I'd rather die drownin' than go through with all that. If you got trouble with the law, like she said—"

Butch Traynor put out his hands and closed them about the other man's throat. The knees of the man from the water buckled under him. "Say, listen!" he panted, choking. "Listen—"

He sagged to the ground as Butch Traynor contemptuously released him. Butch Traynor went back to the girl.

"Your brave defender," he said bitterly, "won't fight. I'm taking you along. You can walk to the boat if you will. You might want to. But you're going!"

The man from the water beat on the ground with his fists, raging suddenly. Then he got heavily to his feet.

"I'll kill you," cried the girl fiercely, "or else myself! You know I will!"

"You lie," said Butch Traynor with an elaborate, raging courtesy. "you used to care for me. Then you got some damned idea in your head—"

"Beast!" panted the girl. "Take your hands off me!"

"Then walk! To the boat!"

There was the sound of a scuffle. The man from the water clutched a heavy stone. He made whispering, raging noises to himself. He moved very heavily—exhaustedly—through the mist to the two figures who swayed together. The girl cried out in a voice filled with hate:

"I tell you—"

The man from the water raised his stone and struck terribly, from behind. It should have crushed in Butch Traynor's skull. But an unexpected movement, in the struggle with the girl, made it partly miss. It did not brain Butch Traynor. Instead, the stone only scraped his skull. But it landed with paralyzing force upon his shoulder.

It numbed that whole arm. And the girl, struggling, jerked free her hand. It darted out of sight and back into view again. Steel flashed. It struck. Butch Traynor swore. His right arm had been numbed before the stroke landed.

Then the girl gasped.

THERE was a half-second of silence. The man from the water half drew back in panic as Butch Traynor whirled upon him. Desperately he raised the stone again. Then something like a wildcat sprang upon him. It was the girl. She swarmed upon the man with the stone, striking and scratching and crying out incoherently. He gave back dazedly, and dropped the stone, and would have run away but that he tripped and fell sprawling.

Butch Traynor pulled her off. There was blood running down his shirt, and at sight of it the girl cried out again and struggled to be free. But her panted rage was directed at the man from the water.

"He'd have killed you, Butch!" she gasped fiercely. "He tried to brain you from behind! He—"

"Yeah," said Butch Traynor savagely, "while you knifed me from the front!"

The blood on his shirt spread rapidly. The girl went deathly pale.

"I'll—I'll bandage it, Butch. I—thought you'd catch my hand. I—knew you were strong and quick."

Butch Traynor's face was very savagely grim.

"Go get the bandage," he ordered curtly. "No need bleedin'. An' no need of your lyin', either. Go on!"

She turned. She ran. She came back with white cloth she was tearing into strips as she ran. The man on the ground watched dumbly. Then a look of cunning expectation came on his face. It oddly matched the granite-like expression on the face of Butch Traynor. The girl was panting—half sobbing.

"I hurried, Butch," she said desperately. "Is it still bleeding?"

Butch Traynor's jaws clamped tightly.

"Maybe," he said deliberately, "maybe I'd better do the bandagin' myself. You might have some kinda trick in mind. You used to care some about me, but now—"

"I do!" panted the girl, more desperately still. Her fingers trembled as she tore at his ripped shirt to bare the wound she herself had made. "I—I do! Listen, Butch! Granny Holmes told you I was coming over here today. She told you I'd be by myself! Did—didn't she?"

He watched her grimly, while she swiftly made a compress and put it in place with shaking hands.

"I told her to do it," she panted. "We'd—quarreled. And—I wouldn't give in. But—I wanted you to make me give in! Don't you see? If you loved me enough you wouldn't let me lose you! You'd—you'd make me marry you!"

Butch Traynor regarded her as grimly as before. He was young, and his face was drawn. He looked at her with no softening of his expression.

"L-listen, Butch!" she cried. "There's that man there! I—picked him up, swimming. He told me he was a G-man. But he told you he's an—an escaped prisoner. There'll be a reward for him! You can—get money for taking him in. I'll tie him up for you! I'll run the boat! I'll do anything—"

"How about marryin' me?" asked Butch Traynor grimly.

She clung to him, pressing close. And she sobbed.

"Oh, Butch! Yes! Please! Please!"

THE fog was thinner. Instead of a horizon of twenty feet, with all beyond it emptiness, now one could see almost forty feet with clarity, and distinguish vague shapes at sixty. The golden tint was more pronounced. The waves were still oily, and the small uncertain swells were still mere undersurface surgings of the water. Now and again irregular lanes of clear vision opened in the mist. Some times one might see, momentarily, for as much as a hundred yards.

The shore, though, remained quite unseen until the power boat was almost upon it. Then Butch Traynor cut the ignition. The two boats—the rearmost one towed—went on with diminishing speed until the prow of the first touched land.

"You get out here," said Butch Traynor grimly. "I don't know anything about you, an' I don't want to know. But I'm not havin' my wife in court tellin' how she picked you up swimmin'. Get out!"

The man from the water got up shakily. But he stopped to say in a last flicker of hope:

"Listen! She said y'were in trouble with the law. An' if y' are, why—"

"Hell!" said Butch Traynor. "You

can't believe a crazy woman. She was crazy. Crazy mad. With me. That's all."

The girl said urgently, "He tried to kill you, Butch! You oughtn't let him go!"

"So did you try to kill me," said Butch Traynor curtly. To the man he added, "Git!"

He shoved off the boat with his one good arm. The man from the water heard its motor catch. It backed out, with the other, empty boat bumping clumsily about it. It started off down the coast. The man on shore saw it move into one of the erratic lanes of clearness in the golden mist. Sunlight actually struck upon it. The two figures in it were clearly visible. The girl sat almost humbly before the man, who held the tiller. Just before they vanished in the lessening mist, she reached over and stroked his hand hopefully.

The man on shore turned. The mist was thinning. Before it thinned too much he had to be far away and hidden. He had to stay hidden until the world believed him drowned. His chances were not excellent, but they were fair. He began to climb the leaf-littered bank, on the top of which virgin timber began.

But as he climbed and before he became absorbed again in the business of being a fugitive, for one fleeting instant he thought of the pair he had just left. And he spat.

"Dames!" said the murderer disgustedly. "Hell!"

The Most Dreaded Man in Six States Couldn't Close His Eyes in the Presence of Even His Closest Friends

ASSASSIN

By FRANK GRUBER

Author of "Rope for Rustlers," "Guerilla Range," etc.

THE train screeched to a stop and Billy Mason swung up to the engine platform. He thrust his Frontier Model Colt into the face of the engineer and said: "Throw up your hands!"

Dick Small, a moment late as usual, came up from the other side and covered the fireman. "And damn quick about it!" he snarled.

The fireman's teeth chattered, but the engineer was made of sterner stuff. He raised his hands slowly. A scowl twisted his face.

He looked from Dick Small to Billy Mason and asked, "Which one of you is Jess Carney?"

Dick Small swore and struck at the engineer with the long barrel of his Colt. Billy Mason struck out with his left hand and knocked the gun down. "Cut it!" he snapped. "You know the orders."

From the direction of the express car, a voice roared, "Open up, or we'll blow it open."

A gun roared; another. A man screamed in pain. Dick Small's face showed fright. "Easy," Billy Mason cautioned.

The sharp, spiteful crack of a rifle was followed by a half dozen duller reports, then Jess Carney's triumphant voice rang out: "All right, Sam!"

Billy Mason knew Jess was talking to Charley Ford, who was using the name of Sam, according to prearrangement. Billy knew too, that the ring in Jess's tone indicated that the express messenger had surrendered.

Boots clattered alongside the engine and Billy risked a glance to the side. He saw the bearded face of Jess Carney and nodded.

"Another minute!" Jess said.

Charley Ford appeared carrying a half-filled wheat sack. "All right, Tom," he said to Jess.

Jess Carney cried out, "You engineer, start up. And if you stop inside of a mile I'll blow your head off."

The engineer said, sullenly, "Which one of you is Jess Carney?"

Jess Carney snarled, "You think Jess Carney's the only man who can stick up a train?"

Billy Mason clambered down from the cab. Behind him came Dick Small. They lined up beside Jess and Charley Ford.

"Get going!" Jess ordered.

STEAM hissed and the wheels of the engine began moving. The four bandits waited until the engine had gone perhaps fifty feet, then, as if by a signal, they turned and plunged into the thick brush that lined the roadway.

"Tom!" a voice called softly from ahead of them.

"All right," Jess replied.

They found Ed Mitchell already mounted on his horse, holding the reins of the other four. The men mounted swiftly and headed their horses in a northerly direction.

"Whew!" Ed Mitchell exclaimed in relief. "When I heard that shootin' I thought sure——"

"You think too much!" snapped Jess Carney. "I told you nothing would happen."

Ed Mitchell subsided, but after a moment Billy Mason asked quietly, "What happened, Jess?"

Jess Carney turned his head in the gloom.

Billy could not see his features, but he sensed that the outlaw chief was trying to see his expression.

Finally Jess said, "The conductor opened on us with a rifle."

He did not add, "So I killed him," but Billy Mason knew that. When Jess Carney fired he shot to kill. He had always done so. That was why he was the most dreaded outlaw of the age, perhaps the most desperate man in the country. He was a killer by instinct.

Billy Mason had never killed a man, but now the stigma was on him. He was tarred with the same brush that had blackened Jess Carney these many years. If he was captured he would receive the same treatment as Jess Carney.

Well, he had thought of all that before he had thrown in with Jess Carney. He had weighed everything and made his choice. Yet, he had not thought it would feel—like this!

They came to a small stream and halted. "In a couple of hours everybody in fifty miles is going to be on the lookout for four or five men. I think we'd better break up here and meet again later on."

"Sure," said Dick Small, "but let's divvy up first."

"Why?" Jess Carney asked softly.

"Because—" Dick Small stopped short. He cleared his throat. "No reason at all."

"Anybody else want a divvy now?" Carney went on.

"Whenever you say the word, Jess," Charley Ford said, quickly.

Jess Carney snorted. "All right then, we'll split here. Billy, you come with me. The rest of you go east. We'll meet tomorrow night at your place, Charley. Now, remember—don't take any chances. I

mean that particularly for you, Ed—don't get drunk!"

JESS CARNEY waited until the three men had gone off before he fell in beside Billy Mason. He said then, "Why I ever picked up a bunch of fellows like that, I don't know."

"Don't you think it went all right?" Billy Mason asked.

Jess Carney snorted. "The conductor killed and the express messenger wounded. Hell, there'll be plenty of noise over that. But *you're* all right, Billy, I was watching you. You were a lot cooler than Dick Small or Charley Ford."

Billy Mason said nothing. Jess Carney peered at him and asked, "Well, how do you like it?"

"I don't know," Billy Mason said truthfully. "I hadn't counted on anyone being killed."

"It couldn't be helped. With Charley, Ed and Dick so jittery, they got me nervous." He sighed wearily, "If I only had a bunch like we had in '76—Frank, Cole, Clell. Well, let's go on."

'Seventy-six, Billy thought. Yet that was the year the powerful Carney Federation had suffered its severest defeat. Eight of them, probably the outstanding outlaws of the day, they had descended upon Northport in Minnesota. Three had died and three had remained there, behind bleak, dank walls. Only two of the eight, Frank and Jess Carney, had escaped.

And now Frank Carney, in poor health, had gone into retirement and Jess Carney had gathered about him a new band, an inferior one he said. It was the second job for Dick Small, Ed Mitchell and Charley Ford, the first for Billy Mason. A hefty wheat sack on Jess' saddle was the result.

And one man dead, another wounded.

They would howl about that; the newspapers and the law enforcement bodies. Jess Carney, the terror of the countryside, the outlaw and killer. He must be exterminated.

Billy Mason was riding with Jess Carney now. He had crossed his Rubicon, headed up the road from which there is no turning back. He was an outlaw, a member of the notorious Carney gang.

They rode through the woods and came out upon a narrow country road. Ahead and to the right, a tiny square of light showed in a larger rectangle of blackness. A dog barked.

"Easy, Billy," Jess Carney said quietly.

But Billy Mason was not skittish. He had been cooler than Charley Ford and Dick Small back there on the train. Jess Carney himself had said that.

He rode beside Jess and said, "Do you suppose it's really safe to go back there to Ford's place?"

"It's as safe as anywhere," was Carney's reply. "The Fords have a bad reputation in their own neighborhood and people let them pretty much alone. They've got the local law bluffed."

"But what about the Wilkinsons?"

Jess Carney snorted. "Since 1875 Mr. William hasn't stepped out of his house in Chicago without a couple of bodyguards. He's afraid I'll get him. He does a lot of hollering but he does it at a distance. Shucks, Billy, I've been at this a long time. A long time."

HE SHOOK his head and went on: "I never really came in. I went out in '63 and this is '82. Nineteen years and I'm only thirty-four now." He laughed harshly.

There were questions in Billy Mason's mind. He wanted to ask, Do the faces of the men you've killed ever haunt you in your dreams? Do you ever wish you could look at a policeman and not be afraid? Don't you ever—ever yearn for *peace?*

Billy wanted to ask those questions, but he didn't.

Because he was riding beside Jess Carney, now. And soon he would learn the answers himself.

Morning. A golden sun creeping up over the freshly plowed farmlands. Smoke coming lazily from a chimney; a rooster crowing.

Jess Carney said, "Milltown's just ahead, but we'd better get some breakfast here."

"Here?"

"Why not? They don't know us. We are stockbuyers. This sack"—he slapped it—"might contain grain for our horses."

They had thrown their linen dusters away during the night. They were wearing now broadcloth suits, with rather long coats, sufficiently long to conceal the pistols strapped about their waists. Many men dressed like this. Jess Carney was tall and slender. His beard, neatly trimmed, gave him a dignified appearance. Some might even mistake him for a minister. Certainly he didn't look like Jess Carney.

Jess Carney was a hulking, beetle-browed man with a ferocious black beard and blazing black eyes. Women and children quailed when he looked at them, strong men trembled. That's what people said.

They rode into the farmyard.

"Hello!" Jess called.

A man carrying a milk pail came out of the log barn. "Morning, strangers," he said cheerfully.

"Good morning, sir!" Jess Carney replied heartily. "We were just riding by and we wondered if we could beg a bite of breakfast."

"Why, certainly," the farmer replied. "I imagine Florence is just about settin' the table. Light, won't you?"

Jess Carney swung easily to the ground. Billy Mason dismounted rather stiffly. He turned toward the door of the house—and stopped.

A girl had come out, a tall slender girl with chestnut colored hair. She wore a gingham dress and there was flour on her bare forearms and a spot of it on the tip of her nose, but her features were finely chisled, her complexion smooth and fresh. Her eyes smiled a welcome.

"I've just taken the biscuits out of the oven," she said, "won't you come in?"

"We certainly will," said Jess Carney. "Allow me to introduce my assistant, Billy Mason. My own name's Tom Howard."

"Howdy, Mr. Howard," said the farmer, "and Mr. Mason. I'm Jim King and this is my daughter, Florence. Traveling men, aren't you?"

"Something of the sort." Jess Carney shot a quick glance toward the small log barn, then added, "I'm a stockbuyer. You haven't got fifteen or twenty good head you want to sell, have you?"

"Gosh, no!" exclaimed Jim King. "I've got two cows, that's all."

THEY went into the house and sat down at the table in the kitchen. Florence King set out plates, poured coffee and brought crisp bacon, eggs and fresh biscuits.

"Pitch in, gentlemen," said Jim King.

Jess Carney reached for the plate of biscuits, took one and passed them to Billy Mason. Billy took a biscuit and broke it to apply butter.

Jim King said, "Heard about the holdup?"

Billy Mason's teeth closed on the biscuit. A ripple ran up his spine, paralyzed him. Then Jess Carney's matter of fact voice broke the spell. "What holdup?"

"Train holdup, over near Black Cut, last night. Jess Carney's gang."

"Doggone," exclaimed Jess Carney. "So he's done it again. I don't see how he gets away with it?"

"Neither do I," replied Jim King. "Except that everyone's so scared of him, they don't even chase him much. Paul Potter was by here a half hour ago. He told me

about it. Carney got $50,000 out of the express car and the whole train crew was afraid to go after him."

"Fifty thousand!" exclaimed Jess Carney. "That *is* somethin'. Almost makes a fellow want to turn train robber, doesn't it?"

From near the stove, the voice of Florence King said crisply, "Why should it?"

Jess Carney turned. "Fifty thousand dollars is a lot more'n most people make in a lifetime of hard work."

"That's true," conceded Florence King. "But I don't imagine Jess Carney gets much enjoyment out of his money. He can't lie down in a bed at night and know that he'll still be in that bed in the morning."

"Why not? Your dad himself said folks are so scared of him they don't even dare go near him."

Florence King came a step closer to the table. "But what about his own men? Can Jess Carney *trust* them? With the huge reward the governor's placed on Carney's head, can Jess Carney go close his eyes at night and be sure that one of his own men won't creep up on him in the dead of night and send a bullet through his head?"

The light went out of Jess Carney's eyes. Billy Mason, sitting across from him, saw that. He saw, too, the slight twitching of the muscles about the mouth and he guessed suddenly that sheer nerve was carrying Jess through these days. The chase had been too hard, too long for Jess Carney. He was scared stiff—and as dangerous as death.

Billy said quickly, "I imagine Jess has made pretty sure of his men."

"Has he? No man can trust his best friend—if there's a huge premium for treachery?"

Jess Carney laughed. Was there a slight touch of nervousness in his laughter? "Well, *we* don't have to worry about Jess Carney, do we? These biscuits are mighty fine, Miss King. Wish I could eat more of them."

HE WIPED his mouth on the damask napkin, pushed back his chair. "Thanks, folks. I guess me and Billy have got to be riding on." He tossed a silver dollar on the table. "Thanks, folks!"

Florence King came over, picked up the dollar and handed it back to Jess. "Sorry, Mr. Howard. We're not running a hotel."

Jess Carney bowed. He started for the door. Billy Mason followed. At the door he turned. "Thanks, Miss King—for the breakfast."

She smiled at him. "You're entirely welcome."

He hesitated. "Perhaps, we'll be riding back this way in a couple of days." He knew he shouldn't have said it the moment the words were out of his mouth. He was Billy Mason, a member of Jess Carney's gang. A girl like Florence King must always be a stranger to Billy Mason.

But she said, "Stop in and say hello when you come back."

They rode until shortly before noon when they entered a grove of poplars by a small stream. Jess dismounted and tied his horse to a sapling. "We'll lay low here until dark."

Billy climbed from his horse and tethered it securely. Then he sat down on the bank of the stream and looked into the water.

"Better get some sleep, Billy," Jess said kindly.

"How about yourself?"

Jess shrugged. "Not sleepy. I'll sit up—and keep watch."

Was he thinking of what Florence King had said? That he couldn't close his eyes even in the presence of his closest friends. Jess Carney, the most dreaded man in six states.

Billy Mason dropped back. He moved his hat so it shaded his eyes. He tried to sleep but sleep wouldn't come. He was relaxed, but deep down in him a bell seemed to be tolling slowly.

Some time later, Jess Carney's voice asked softly, "Sleeping, Billy?"

"No," Billy replied.

"Thinkin'?"

"Yes."

"That you shouldn't have done it?"

Billy sat up. "No, of course not. I knew what I was getting into and I'm not sorry. I'd do it again."

JESS CARNEY was silent for a moment. Then he said, "How old are you, Billy?"

"Twenty-three. Why?"

"Just thinkin'. When I was twenty-three every sheriff in six states was lookin' for me. Lord, that was a long time ago. Eleven years. Sometimes it seems like fifty. I think I'll quit and go to California."

Billy Mason looked at him, sharply. Jess Carney grinned. "Don't worry, I went to California once before. I didn't stay very long. But I wish Frank'd come back. He was much better at this thinkin' business. He'd figure out a job and we'd pull it without any fuss. Then we'd go somewhere and have a good time."

"But you're married, Jess. What does Mrs. Carney think about it?"

Jess Carney's eyes blinked. "She does not say anything—any more."

Billy Mason dropped back to the grass.

Shortly before sundown they started again.

They rode for three or four hours, then Jess halted. "One shade is up, one down. That means it's all right."

Billy Mason stared at the chink of light ahead of them.

"They're here—?"

Carney nodded. "Yep! Now for the squabblin'."

They rode up to the house and Jess whistled. Instantly a door was jerked open and a woman looked out. "Maggie?" Jess asked.

The woman disappeared and a tall youth appeared in her place. "Jess!" he exclaimed and came out.

"Hi, Bob," Jess said. He turned to Billy Mason. "Shake hands with Bob Ford, Billy. Charley's younger brother. Bob, this is Billy Mason."

Billy swung down from his gelding and Bob Ford's lean hand gripped his own. There was strength in the boy's grip. Billy looked into Bob's eager face. "Howdy, Bob," he said.

"Sure, glad to know you, Billy," Bob Ford replied. "The boys were telling me about you."

"Put the horses away, will you, Bob?" Jess Carney asked.

He went into the house and Billy Mason followed. There were five persons in the room into which they entered, four men and the woman Jess had called Maggie. Charley Ford introduced a vicious looking man of about fifty. "The old man, Billy. Call him Cap."

"And my wife," Dick Small said, nodding to Maggie.

Billy Mason turned to Maggie Small. He did not even make a mental comparison between Maggie and Florence King. To think of the two in the same moment would have been an insult to Florence.

Jess Carney tossed the wheat sack on a bare table. "There she is, boys!"

Ed Mitchell reached avidly for the sack. Jess Carney lashed out with his fist and knocked Mitchell back. "I'll do the divvying!" he snapped.

Ed Mitchell's eyes glistened. "Some day——" he muttered.

Jess Carney caught hold of Ed's shirt. "What's that?"

"Nothin', Jess, nothin' at all!" Ed Mitchell exclaimed.

JESS released Ed and sniffed contemptuously. Then he upended the wheat sack upon the table. Exclamations of awe and delight went up. Billy Mason saw that young Bob Ford had come in. His eyes were shining as they took in the money on the table.

"Fifty thousand!" exclaimed Charley Ford.

Jess Carney snorted, "We'll be lucky if there's half of that."

"What do you mean?" cried Dick Small.

"You know damn well, they always exaggerate the amount we get. If the papers say fifty thousand my guess is twenty thousand."

Ed Mitchell's eyes blazed. "That's what *you* say, Jess. There'd better be fifty thousand here, or—"

"Or what?"

Jess' words were toneless. His hands remained on the table. But Ed Mitchell looked into Jess' eyes and wet his lips.

"Nothin', Jess. I was just saying those newspapers lie like hell."

Jess Carney stacked the money on the table. His strong, lean fingers counted it swiftly. When he finished, he said, "They didn't lie so much this time. There's

thirty-eight thousand. That's seven thousand apiece."

Seven times five is thirty-five," said Bob Ford.

Jess Carney straightened. He looked at Bob Ford, then at Charley Ford. "Your kid brother's good at arithmetic."

"I'll crack his teeth in if he doesn't keep his mouth shut," snarled Charley Ford. He took a step toward his younger brother. But Bob did not retreat.

"Try it some time, Charley," he said. "I'm taller'n you and——"

"Shet yore mouth, Bob!" said old Cap Ford.

"The extra three thousand goes to someone," Jess Carney said. "I told you boys about that. How do you think we know when there's money on a train?"

Bob Ford's eyes glowed. "Say, that's clever. I didn't know that——"

"Shut up, Bob," said Charley Ford.

"What for? I may as well talk now. Jess, I want to join up with you."

Jess Carney cocked his head to one side. "How old are you?"

"Twenty. That's more'n you were when you started."

"Maybe so, but it's too young—these days. Better wait awhile, Bob."

"What for?" demanded Bob Ford. He jabbed a finger at Billy Mason. "He ain't much older'n me. And I bet I can shoot better'n him."

"Can you now, Bob?" asked Jess Carney, showing his teeth. "Billy's the best man in the outfit—after me."

Instantly, Billy felt the hostile eyes of Ed Mitchell, Dick Small and Charley Ford. Jess did not seem to notice. He divided stacks of bills. "There you are, fellows. If you're smart you won't spend it all right away. One of these times——"

"When we spend it there's more where this came from," chuckled Dick Small.

Old Cap Ford went to a cupboard and brought out a bottle and a pack of greasy playing cards. "How about some fun now, boys?"

Ed Mitchell grabbed the bottle and took a healthy swig. "That hits the spot," he said, smacking his lips.

Dick Small was already shuffling the cards. He did it dextrously. "All right, boys, ante up!"

Jess Carney put a hand to his mouth and yawned. "Count me out. I'm goin' to get some sleep."

"I think I will, too," Billy Mason said.

Jess Carney frowned. "Cap'll fix you up with a bed."

"Yep, you c'n use mine," Old Cap volunteered. He gestured toward a cot on one side of the room. Billy Mason looked at the dirty horse blanket that covered the cot.

"You'll need it yourself, Cap," Billy said.

"Naw, I'll prob'ly stay up and play poker with the boys."

Billy regarded the bed with disfavor. "I'd just as soon sleep out in your hayloft—" he began.

Jess Carney cut in. "No, you stay in here."

But he moved to the door himself and went out abruptly. Dick Small dealt cards, then said, "What's the matter with Jess? He afraid to sleep in the same house with us?"

Ed Mitchell sneered. "Maybe we're not good enough to sleep with. On'y good enough to do the dirty work."

"You know that's not so," Bill Mason said quickly.

Ed Mitchell banged his fist on the table. "You callin' me a liar, squirt?"

Billy Mason's hands dropped loosely to his sides. "If you want to take it up—yes," he replied softly.

Ed Mitchell pushed back his chair. Beside him, Charley Ford caught his arm. "Cut it, Ed. He—he might be outside, listening."

Ed Mitchell's nostrils flared. "All right, Mason—but I'll remember that."

"I don't care if you do," retorted Billy. He walked to Cap Ford's smelly cot and dropped down on it.

But he did not sleep. The others played cards. They bickered and argued. Dick Small's wife wanted him to stop drinking and he cursed her furiously. Ed Mitchell picked a quarrel with Dick Small and Charley Ford again had to intercede to prevent a fight. Then both Mitchell and Ford turned on Charley and it took the combined efforts of the three Fords to quiet them.

Billy Mason did not sleep. He stretched out on the cot, his eyes closed. Jess Carney was outside, probably sleeping in the woods. It was true, what Florence King had said. Jess Carney could not close his eyes in the presence of his own men. He could not trust them because the State of Missouri had offered so much money for his body—dead or alive—that he was afraid one of his men would make a try for the reward. For the reward and amnesty.

The gambling and drinking continued through the night. When the lamps were no longer necessary in the room, Jess Carney came in. Billy Mason looked at his face and thought that it was drawn. The eyes, he knew, were bloodshot.

He looked around the room and said, "Dick, get your wife to make some breakfast. I want to get going."

"Where to?"

"Clay County, first, then home. My advice to the rest of you is not to hang around here. Scatter and lay low for a month or so. I'll get in touch with you if I figure out anything new." He turned to Billy Mason. "What are you goin' to do, Billy?"

BILLY shrugged. "I haven't made any plans. I might run over to St. Louis for a while."

"Oh, then you won't be coming my way?"

"I will, Jess," said Charley Ford. "I want to see a lady over near Independence."

"All right, Charley."

Maggie Small cooked breakfast and served it grudgingly. All the men ate, then Jess Carney got up from the table and nodded. "I'll be seeing you, fellows."

He and Charley Ford went out. Bob Ford followed. Ed Mitchell glared at the closed door. "He'll be seeing us!"

Dick Small shook his head. "He's gettin' mighty skittish."

"Don't blame him," rumbled old Cap Ford. "Ten thousand dollars is a mighty powerful bunch of money."

Bob Ford came in. His lean face was dark with anger. "What's the matter, Bud?" sneered Ed Mitchell. "Did he tell you, you was still wet behind the ears."

Bob Ford looked coldly at the outlaw. Billy Mason stepped to the door and went outside. There was a heavy dew on the grass and a nip in the air. He shivered.

He looked at the tumbledown log barn and the littered, unkempt yard, then turned and regarded the exterior of the house, which he hadn't seen during the day. He sighed and shook his head. The

Fords were a disreputable lot, he thought.

He walked through the wet grass to the barn and found his horse inside, his saddle tossed on the floor. He found a bin of oats and gave the gelding a half-measure, while he curried it. Then he saddled up and led the horse out to the yard.

Angry voices reached his ears. He frowned and wondered if it wouldn't be best just to leave without saying a word. But after a moment he shrugged and entered the house.

Dick Small and Ed Mitchell were facing each other in the middle of the room, their faces distorted with anger. Cap Ford and Maggie Small had gone to another room, but young Bob Ford stood to one side, watching the proceedings with a brooding look on his face.

Billy Mason inhaled sharply. "Cut it, fellows," he said, sharply. "First thing you know you're going to get into a fight."

"This is a fight!" snarled Ed Mitchell.

"Reach for your gun—if you've got the nerve!" invited Dick Small.

Billy Mason took a step forward. Then he leaped back.

Small and Mitchell had gone for their guns. Mitchell's was out first; it thundered and Dick Small staggered, but then he was firing. The room shook to the deafening explosions.

BILLY whipped out his gun, yelled. "Stop or—!"

And then Ed Mitchell pitched to the floor. Dick Small, his left hand clutching his thigh, hobbled forward. "I got him!" he exulted.

Maggie Small bounced into the room, saw Ed Mitchell on the floor and screamed.

Dick Small turned toward Billy Mason, saw the Frontier Model in Billy's hand and hissed, "You sidin' with him?"

"No," replied Billy thickly. He felt suddenly sick with revulsion.

"He had it comin' to him," Dick Small said. "Didn't he, Bob?"

Bob Ford said evenly, "I guess he did, Dick. He wanted a fight and he got it. You hurt much, Dick?"

Dick Small looked down at the trickle of blood on his trouser leg. "Nah, just a scratch. I can hardly feel it." He lifted his head, suddenly. "He drew *first* on me. Remember that!"

"What difference does it make?" asked Billy.

"It makes a heluva lot of diff'rence, if you was figurin' on tellin' Jess about it."

Billy moved to the door. "*You* tell him about it."

He stepped outside, mounted his horse and rode away.

CALLING at General Delivery in St. Louis, for a letter, Billy Mason found one addressed to James Latimer. He tore it open and read:

> Dear Jim:
>
> I was talking to Tom Howard the other day and he told me you were looking for a job. Jack Ladd is looking for a man. The pay is good, I understand, and the work not too hard. Why don't you go and see Jack Ladd? Best wishes —John.

Decoded the message was to the effect that Jess Carney had planned another holdup and that he wanted Billy Mason to come to a certain place in Clay County, Missouri.

Billy took the train to Kansas City, the same evening. Arriving at Kansas City in the morning he bought a horse and saddle and started eastward. This was familiar country to him; his own home was not far from here. It was also Jess Carney's country.

Jess had been born and raised twenty miles from here. During the war he had skirmished through the entire section, as a guerilla under Quantrell. Even today, hunted though he was, Jess Carney could always find shelter in Jackson and Clay Counties.

Before he was an hour out of Kansas City, Billy Mason knew that the grapevine telegraph was reporting the presence of a horseman, riding eastward. His description was going ahead of him and somewhere along the line, someone would identify him as Billy Mason, whose family lived in Clay County. That he was a member of Jess Carney's gang was not generally known.

He reached Liberty around noon, had a substantial lunch in a restaurant and took the northeast road out of town. A mile and Billy saw a horseman awaiting him beside the road. It was Charley Ford.

"Hi, Billy," Charley greeted as he fell in beside Billy.

"Hello, Charley, what's new?"

"Nebraska, I think, although he hasn't made up his mind definitely. He mentioned Butte, Montana, too, but that's too far from here. None of us would know our way around."

"He's here?"

Charley nodded. "He was at his brother-in-law's with me, last night. Don't know where he'll be tonight. You know, he never sleeps twice in the same place." He shook his head and shot a covert look at Billy. "He doesn't know about Ed Mitchell."

"How do *you* know?"

"Bob told me. He told me something else. That Dick Small's scared stiff Jess will find out he killed Ed and kill *him*. You think it'd be best to tell him?"

"I'm not a squealer if that's what you mean," Billy replied shortly.

"I didn't mean anything of the kind," retorted Charley. "Only the kid's here and he was there when it happened."

"Bob's here?"

"Yes. Jess may let him come with us on the next job. Especially if one of the others doesn't show up and Ed won't, of course."

They reached the little country village of Centerville after awhile, but rode directly through it. People saw them, but gave no sign of recognition or salutation. That wasn't the custom around Centerville. You nodded at a stranger and he might turn out to be a Wilkinson man—or one of the "boys." Either way, it didn't do you any good.

Three miles out of Centerville, Charley turned in at a lane leading to a house almost out of sight of the road. "This is Hill's place; his sister's married to Jess's step-brother."

A man sat on the doorstoop, whittling. He got up when Charley Ford and Billy dismounted. "Shake hands with Billy Mason, Bud," Charley introduced.

Bud Hill held out a limp hand. "Harya!" He turned and yelled, "Donny! C'mon out here and put these horses away."

A barefooted boy of about twelve popped out of the house. "I'll take care of my horse," Bill Mason said. He turned —and stopped.

Bob Ford and Jess Carney came out of the woods at the side of the house. "I see you got my letter," Jess said. He jerked his head to the trees and Charley Ford and Billy Mason followed him. After a moment Bob Ford came along. Jess did not order him back.

"I've got something good figured out," Jess announced. "Soon's Dick and Ed get here we'll start out. Unless I've got a bum steer, it'll make Black Cut look like small potatoes."

"Say, that'll be swell!" exclaimed Bob Ford.

Jess Carney frowned. "I haven't said yet I'd let you come along, Bob."

"But if one of the others don't show up?"

"They'll show up," Jess said confidently.

But Billy Mason knew that Ed Mitchell would not show up. Bob and Charley Ford knew that, too. The two brothers looked at one another uneasily.

Jess Carney said, "Charley, you come with me. The two young fellows can stay with Bud tonight."

Billy would have preferred to go with

Jess, but the outlaw chief had not asked him. He turned back to the house, with Bob Ford.

The moment Jess Carney was out of sight, Bob Ford caught hold of Billy Mason's arm. "There's a dance up here

at the schoolhouse tonight, Billy. Let's me and you go."

"I've been ridin' all day," Billy said, "I don't feel much like dancing."

"Aw, the exercise will do you good."

"Perhaps—but I don't think we ought to appear in a public place. Someone might——"

Bob Ford snickered. "Around here? Hell, half the people are related to Jess. And the rest'd be scared to open their mouths. Jess goes to these places himself, when he feels like it. Besides—" Bob Ford winked at Billy, "if I'm goin' to be one of the gang, we ought to get acquainted."

BILLY MASON had no heart for music and laughter, but perhaps the gayety of a country dance was just what he needed. It might relieve for a few hours, the black oppressiveness that had been with him for days, since—yes, since he'd turned up the road.

He shrugged. "All right, we'll go to that dance."

The Hills were going too, it seemed. Supper was early and immediately afterwards there was a general washing, scrubbing and dressing. Bud and Mrs. Hill and the three young Hills were all eager for the dance.

When they were ready, Bud Hill caught Billy's eye and walked to one side. "They usually leave their guns at home, when they go to the dance. But if you don't want to do that, there's a woodpile behind the schoolhouse where you can stash your'n. Tell Bob."

The schoolhouse was only a mile from the Hill home and they all walked there. Before they reached it, they could hear the wail of a fiddle.

Bill drew Bob to one side and led him behind the schoolhouse. "Bud said to hide your guns in the woodpile."

Bob Ford looked toward the schoolhouse. "But suppose someone in there should try something?"

"If you think there's a chance of that, we'd better not go in."

Bob shrugged. Then he opened his coat and unbuckled a belt from about his waist. He rolled it around a long-barreled Frontier Model Colt and stuck the whole thing deep into the woodpile. Billy did the same with his own Colt.

Then they went to the front door of the schoolhouse where the dance was being held.

The little room was crowded with thirty or forty men, women and children. The desks and benches had been cleared to the sides and a number of couples were dancing to the music of a single fiddle.

They entered. And the first person Billy Mason saw was Florence King. She was standing on the side talking with another girl. When she saw Billy Mason her eyes opened wide and her nostrils flared a little.

Beside Billy, Bob Ford said, "There's a couple of good-looking girls. Let's ask them to dance with us."

Billy walked steadily toward Florence King. When he reached her he stopped and said, "Hello."

For a moment she just stared at him. Then she said in a voice that was strained. "You——"

"Will you dance with me?"

She hesitated, then nodded suddenly.

He put his arm about her and moved to

the center of the floor. "I hadn't expected to see you here," he said.

She replied, "Who are you?"

"Billy Mason."

"But that boy you came in with—that's Bob Ford."

"You know him?"

"Yes, of course. You see, I'm visiting my uncle. I've been here before and I've met the Fords. But you——"

"My name is still Billy Mason."

"That man who was with you the other day. He's—"

"I'm sorry," Billy cut in, "but he told me his name was Tom Howard."

She stiffened. He felt it and turned cold inside.

She tried to draw her hand away from his. "Do you mind——?"

"I do," he said, quickly. "Won't you step outside a moment?"

"No." But she let him lead her to the door and did not hold back there. Billy took Florence King beyond hearing, into the shelter of a big oak tree.

HER face was just a blur and he hoped she could not see his own distinctly. He said, "You mustn't get the wrong ideas—"

"I haven't. But I remember now. Both of you were so interested in the Black Cut robbery and there was a wheat sack on his horse. The papers said——"

"No," he cut her off quickly.

In the gloom she laid her hand on his arm. "Look at me and tell me you're not a member of Jess Carney's gang. Tell me the man with you that day was not Jess Carney—or one of his men. Tell me that."

He couldn't tell her that. He couldn't say anything. And his silence told her the answer. She inhaled slowly. "I must go inside."

"Florence——" he began and there he stopped. There wasn't anything he could say to her. Because he had ridden up the road with Jess Carney. He could never say anything to Florence King. The conductor who had died at Black Cut stood between him and Florence.

Yet he followed her to the schoolhouse. And at the door a hulking man who had imbibed too freely of corn whiskey grabbed his arm and snarled:

"What's the idea takin' Flo outside?"

"Walter!" Florence King exclaimed. "Come inside."

"I will, after I teach this squirt where he gets off foolin' around with my girl."

It was an indiscreet thing to do, but Billy hit the big man, then. Hit him squarely in the mouth with all the strength in his powerful shoulders.

The man called Walter reeled back, hit the door jamb and recoiled. Billy Mason smashed him again. Behind Billy a man yelped and hit him back of the ear. Another of Walter's friends lashed at him from the side.

"Fight!" someone roared.

Billy Mason took a stiff punch in his stomach, then lowered his head and swung with both fists. They landed satisfyingly.

Bob Ford leaped through the door of the schoolhouse. "I'm here, Billy!" he cried.

One of Walter's friends smashed Bob in the face and the stripling fell forward on his face. A terrific blow landed on Billy Mason's right ear and he bared his teeth.

Walter and his two friends closed in on him. It was a tight spot for Billy Mason.

And then Jess Carney's voice rang out, cold and hard.

"Stop that!"

The attackers fell back. Billy Mason looked up and saw Jess Carney standing a few feet away, in the light cast by the open doorway. There was no gun visible on him. Perhaps these men didn't even know him by sight—but they could recognize the glaring eyes and the grim face and the timbre of the voice.

None said a word, but Billy Mason caught a glimpse of Walter's face and saw that it was slack and sickly looking.

"What's going on here?" Jess Carney demanded.

"Just a little fight," mumbled one of the men.

Bob Ford climbed to his feet, cursing. "Who's the fool that hit me?"

"Shut up, Bob!" snapped Jess Carney. "The fight's over."

THE men who had attacked Billy Mason plunged into the schoolhouse. A woman's face appeared in the doorway for an instant, then was jerked back.

Jess Carney was alone outside, with Bob Ford and Billy Mason.

"Come over here," Jess said, jerking his head toward the gloom.

The two followed. When they were under the tree where Billy had spoken with Florence only a few minutes ago, Jess said:

"Dick Small's given himself up!"

"Billy Mason gasped. "Surrendered?"

"Bob, where is Ed Mitchell?"

Bob Ford stammered. "Ed, why—why, I don't——"

"Don't lie!"

Billy Mason said, "He's dead, Jess."

Then Bob Ford burst into a torrent of words. "After you left the other day, Dick and Ed got into a fight. Ed drew on Dick and Dick killed him. He was afraid to tell you. I guess—I guess that's why he gave himself up."

"Yes?" snarled Jess Carney. "Or because he expects to get a reward for snitching?"

"I don't know, Jess, honest I don't!" Bob Ford exclaimed. "He left the same morning. I haven't seen him since. Neither has Charley, I know."

Jess turned to Billy. "Why didn't you tell me about Ed?"

"Because I don't play the game that way, Jess."

Jess was silent for a moment, then he said, bitterly, "What a bunch of chicken thieves I've picked for men."

Billy said, stiffly, "All right, if—"

Jess Carney made a savage gesture in the gloom. "Not you, Billy. You're the only man I've got any faith in. Ed and Dick and—" he stopped, "that yellow-belly, Dick Small. He'll talk his guts to Wilkinson. We've got to clear out of here."

"We've got our guns in the woodpile," said Bob Ford.

"Get them. No—wait, I'll come with you."

HE DIDN'T trust them out of his sight. The finger of suspicion had stabbed at Jess Carney. The thing he had been fearing so long had happened. One of his men had turned traitor. Another might do so. He couldn't trust anyone, now.

They walked to the woodpile and Bob Ford got out the two pistols rolled up in the belts. He handed one to Billy Mason.

"All right, Jess."

"You come with me, Bob," Jess ordered. "Billy, you go back to Bud's place. Charley Ford will pick you up there. He'll bring you to St. Joe." He stopped. After a moment he sighed.

"I trust you, Billy."

He didn't. The very fact that he said so proved that. But he couldn't help himself.

Billy Mason walked back alone to the cabin of Bud Hill. It was dark and quiet but Charley Ford materialized out of the gloom and said, "Billy?"

"Yes."

"Where's Bob?"

"Jess came to the dance and took him off with him. You know about Dick?"

"Yes, I was with Jess at his mother's place when the news came. Damn that dirty Dick. He was afraid Jess would find out about Ed and kill him. So he turned rat and went to the police."

"Who'd he surrender to?"

"Marshall Gray of Kansas City. And Sheriff Liggett."

"How long ago?"

"This morning. The newspapers haven't

got it yet, but it came over the grapevine. It's true, all right."

"But if he surrendered this morning, how come—well, it's strange Liggett and Gray haven't done anything. Dick knew we were gathering here."

"Yes, but the sheriff of Jackson County doesn't come out to Jess Carney's house. A sheriff did that ten years ago. Jess met him up the road. No, they'll get him somewhere else.

"What makes you so sure they'll get him at all? Jess has been around a good long while."

"Yes, but he's been overdue a long time. Up to now, the people've been friendly. He—we could go to any old Confederate soldier and he'd put us up and wild horses wouldn't make him squeal. But since the governor's issued that big reward and offered immunity——"

"Immunity," said Billy Mason softly. "Yes, that's it. Dick was between two fires. The law wanted him for a killing and Jess wanted him. The law offered immunity for turning traitor."

"The yellow dog!" But there was no vehemence in Charley Ford's epithet. It was too dark to see his face.

Charley Ford went into the house and got a lantern. By its light they went to the stable behind the house and saddled horses. It was then that Billy Mason touched the butt of his Frontier Model. He drew it from the holster.

"Bob got our guns mixed!" he exclaimed. He recalled now Bob had dug the two guns rolled up in their holsters, from under the woodpile. Billy had taken the one offered him and strapped it about his waist. Too upset with the startling news delivered by Jess Carney, he had paid no attention to the gun. But now the touch of it had felt strange.

Charley Ford looked at the gun. "What's the difference? It's the same model as yours; newer, though."

"Yes it is." Billy held the butt of the gun under the lantern. "What're these initials on the butt—H. H. G.?? Where'd Bob get this gun?"

CHARLEY FORD cleared his throat. "Well, I wouldn't exactly want Jess to know, but Bob and Jim Cummings over near Richmond pulled a couple of small jobs. Bob got this gun in one of them—"

Billy shook his head and holstered the gun. "I'll change with Bob when I see him. I'd prefer my own, even if this is newer."

"Yeah, sure."

They mounted their horses and rode into the night. They would always ride in the night, from now on. From now on, it would be dangerous for Billy Mason to show his face in daylight, among men. The finger had been pointed at him by Dick Small. He was known, now, as a Carney man. And what did the governor's proclamation say about Carney men?

". . . and five thousand dollars reward for any member of Jess Carney's band, *dead or alive.*"

They rode until morning, then hid in the woods. At nightfall they came out, along with the other beasts of prey. Three days and on the third night they reached St. Joseph. But they did not go into the city until dawn was breaking.

The house rented by "Tom Howard" was at the edge of the city, on a little hill. It was a white frame building with a large, sagging barn behind it. The closest house was a hundred yards away.

Charley Ford and Billy Mason led their horses to the barn and put them inside. As they came out of the barn, Bob Ford stepped out of the kitchen door, his right hand under his coat.

He exclaimed in relief when he recognized his brother and Billy. "Say, but I'm glad to see you."

"Je—Tom inside?" Charley Ford asked.

Bob Ford shot an uneasy glance over his shoulder then motioned toward the barn. Charley and Billy followed him. "What's up, Bob?" Billy asked sharply. "Something wrong with Jess?"

"Yes, he's breaking, I think. Ever since we've been here he's been as nervous as a cat. Stays in the house all day, in his room, then spends half the night prowling around, outside. You can't even talk to him without his snapping your head off."

"Well," said Charley Ford, "he never was very even tempered. What's Zee—his wife, say?"

"Hardly anything. But she's plenty worried. Wouldn't surprise me if she pulled out with the kids."

It was telling on Jess Carney. He didn't even trust anyone in his own house. He prowled outside at night, afraid of shadows, yet forcing himself to investigate and prove they were only shadows. He was afraid. The accumulated years of outlawry, living in constant danger had worn his nerves to a frazzle.

BILLY MASON could understand that—even though he had been on the dark road for only a few weeks. His nerves were steady, but deep within him, something gnawed at his vitals. In time it would tell on him, too. He had an object lesson, in Jess Carney.

"Is he here now?" Billy Mason asked Bob Ford.

Bob Ford shook his head. "No, we went to bed together last night—in the same bed—but inside of an hour he was up and prowling around the house. I went down—to get something to drink—and discovered he'd left the house."

"What's the news of Dick Small? We haven't seen any newspapers in three days."

"Nothing," replied Bob Ford. "Jess's been getting the papers every day and there hasn't been a single word printed about Dick Small. I'm not so sure that Dick gave himself up."

"But Jess said Dick had been seen in Harry Gray's office!" exclaimed Charley Ford.

"Gray?" asked Billy. "Who's Harry Gray?"

"Police Commissioner of Kansas City. Jess had some connection in his office. Don't know exactly what it is."

Harry Gray. Was there a middle initial. A chill fell upon Billy Mason. Deliberately, he drew his gun. "Bob," he said, "you mixed up our guns the other night at Centerville—"

"I know it. Discovered it the next morning. Here—" Bob reached under his coat and brought out Billy Mason's own Frontier Model. "They're the same make except that mine's newer. . . ."

Billy Mason smiled. "Yes—but it doesn't have your initials, I notice."

Charley Ford said, sharply, "I told you about that. What're you trying to do—rub it in?"

"Of course not. I was just——"

He stopped. A tall, slight woman had suddenly appeared in the doorway of the stable. Her face was drawn and her eyes suspicious. "Who are these men, Bob?" she asked crisply.

"My brother, Charley, Mrs. Car—I mean, Mrs. Howard. And Billy Mason."

"How do you do, Mrs Howard," Billy said, bowing. He stared at the wife of Jess Carney. She looked—why yes, give her a bit more color and take away about fifteen years and she could pass for Florence King's sister.

She was aware of his eyes upon her and catching his, held them a moment. Then she relaxed. "You're a—friend of Tom's? Won't you come in and have some breakfast?"

"We'd appreciate it, Mrs. Carney."

They left the barn, walked through the little backyard and entered the

house by the kitchen door. Mrs. Carney busied herself swiftly at the stove, while Charley Ford and Billy Mason washed some of the travel dirt from their faces and hands.

By the time they were finished Mrs. Carney had set food on the table.

But Billy Mason never ate any of it. Hardly had he seated himself at the table, than Jess Carney slammed into the house.

"Billy! Charley!" he cried. "We've got to clear out of here. Dick Small's confessed. Look—!" He threw a newspaper on the table and dashed into a room off the kitchen. "Zee!" he cried from there.

Billy Mason caught up the newspaper. "Member of Carney Gang Confesses!" screamed a headline.

"Read it out loud!" exclaimed Bob Ford, behind Billy Mason.

Billy Mason read:

> Police Commissioner Harry H. Gray admitted tonight that the mysterious man who surrendered to him last week is none other than Dick Small, lieutenant of the notorious Jess Carney band of bank and train robbers. Small, the commissioner stated, has made a complete confession, which it is believed will result in the eventual arrest of every member of the outlaw gang. The story is an astonishing one. . . .
>
> Harry H. Gray, Police Commissioner of Kansas City, H. H. G.

Billy Mason put down the newspaper and pushed back his chair. At that moment, Jess Carney, coatless, came out of the bedroom. "Boys," he announced. "We haven't got any time to lose. We've got to——"

"Jess," said Billy Mason. "I must talk to you."

"Later, Billy. We've got to——"

"This won't wait. You've got to hear it now!"

Something in Billy's tone caught Jess Carney's attention. His bloodshot eyes seemed to look right into Billy Mason's brain. He nodded, almost imperceptibly.

Billy Mason stepped swiftly to the door and Jess Carney followed. "Wait, Jess!" exclaimed Charley Ford. "Don't go out like that. Somebody might see your guns. Your coat——"

Jess Carney turned back. "All right, Billy, I'll be out in a moment."

As he walked to the barn, a warning knell struck somewhere deep within Billy Mason. He stopped, turned.

And then a gun thundered in the house!

"Oh, lord!" cried Billy, aloud.

He plunged toward the kitchen door, tore at it and burst into the house. In his first wild glance he thought the room was empty. But then his eyes went to the floor, beyond the table—and a cry of horror was torn from his throat.

Jess Carney lay there, blood streaming from a horrible wound in his head.

In the front of the house a door slammed. Feet pounded on stairs, and Zee Carney burst into the kitchen.

"Jess, oh my God!" she screamed and threw herself upon the man on the floor.

BILLY MASON leaped past her and tore through the house. He jerked open the front door and sprang out upon the porch. He saw them running, already more than a hundred feet away. He saw, too, in that one glance, a woman and a man in front of the neighboring house. And he knew it was too late—even for vengeance.

He went back into the house and found Zee Carney sitting on the floor beside the body of her dead husband. Jess Carney, the greatest outlaw of all time—dead at the hand of an assassin.

"*You* didn't do this?" Zee Carney moaned.

"No. The Fords——"

"It was Bob," Zee Carney said, dully. "I didn't like him right from the start. His eyes—they couldn't ever face me. He was planning it all along."

"Yes," said Billy Mason, "I knew it. I—I was calling Jess outside to tell him. I knew for days but didn't tumble to the significance of it, until Jess brought in that paper. I was going to tell—" He broke off and his eyes saw the leather belt on the table, the belt with a holster on each side, one containing a Navy Colt, another a Smith & Wesson. "They got him to take off his guns."

"The first time he took them off in years." Zee Carney's face twisted and a bitter, hysterical laugh came from her lips. Suddenly she got to her feet.

"It's all over, the thing I've dreaded and feared for eight long years. He's dead, and—Jesse!" The face of a small boy showed in the door leading to the front part of the house. Zee sprang toward him, shoved him back into the other room. Then she hurried back to Billy Mason.

"You've got to go! The neighbors have heard the shot. The police will be here."

"It's all right," Billy said dully. "I'm willing to surrender. I—I didn't like it, anyway. I'll take what's coming to me."

"You won't have a chance, Billy Mason!" cried Zee Carney. "Dick Small's turned traitor. Bob and Charley Ford will turn against you. You'll take it all alone. You mustn't——"

"It doesn't make any difference. There's no one——"

"No one cares for you?" cried Zee Carney. "You haven't got a sweetheart? There's no one whose heart would break like mine did during these years—no one?"

There *was* someone.

Billy Mason wasn't an outlaw. An outlaw is one at heart and Billy Mason never had been. He'd known that the moment he had first thrust his gun at the head of that railroad engineer, so long ago. He'd ridden down the road with Jess Carney, but he hadn't thought as Jess Carney had thought.

Billy Mason straightened. He said, "Good-bye, Mrs. Carney!" and leaped to the door. With his hand on it he whirled and said, softly:

"Good-bye, Jess Carney!"

Hold everything for the next

SHORT STORIES

•

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All in our next issue

Adventurers All

Super-Medicine Man

LATE afternoon faded and night swiftly followed as it does in the tropics without twilight, while I lingered doling out medicine and doing tricks in the Jivaro chief's thatched roof house. Outside there was an ominous silence over the vast Upper Amazon jungle silhouetted by a gibbous moon which reflected rippling sheens in the nearby stream where a long war canoe loaded with strange men was rapidly approaching.

Before noon, with a mahogany-skinned Indian guide who talked the local language but acted suspiciously, in skirting the head-hunter's zone our boat had unexpectedly turned a riparian curve where the rapids carried our craft toward this hidden village. It was really not a surprise because proximity of the Indian town had been betrayed when our boat flushed a group of nude nut-brown sprites, who, before they vanished into the heavy timber, were skipping along the sandy shore like so many daughters of Menastho.

What made me suspicious of the guide was a mysterious signal he had sent up the river that morning. Just after shooting a mantled howler with my 351 automatic rifle the rascal had rapped several times on the gunwhale with his paddle, causing a distinct succession of sounds to go reverberating for miles along the water—and this immediately following the sharp report of my rifle.

After landing and fastening the craft to a friendly lignum-vitae leaning over the bank, the guide vanished. Before taking French leave, however, he was polite enough to ask a group of hostile looking savages to help tote my medicine box and a bag of cheap presents to the chief's house. When we entered the Cassique's abode I was carrying the loaded rifle in one hand and my life in the other. It was a silly thing to do, for if these naked natives who had jet black hair covering their heads and shoulders like exaggerated manes, made up their minds to rush me, my chance of escaping alive was one out of a million. My only hope was to play the role of a super-medicine man and appease the chieftain with gifts of tobacco, knives, trinkets, etc.

In the medicine box, besides an assortment of drugs and taxidermic chemicals, was a loaded carbine lamp—for night hunting—and an electric flashlight, which when it flashed seemed to convince them that the white medicine-man could hold sunlight in his hand. Burning water also had them mystified after one of the women was asked to pour water into the upper container of the acetylene lamp; another one was then given a match to light the "water." They did not know of course about the carbide lumps, already placed in another container below the water which had just been poured in above.

The village inhabitants, continually on the lookout for nocturnal head-raiding parties from rival tribes, had lessened

their vigilance tonight by reason of the free medicine they were receiving for various ailments as well as in watching the magic stunts of the visitor. The place was packed with humanity.

Making fire that burst into flames by mixing oil of vitriol with moist potassium permanganate and then adding sulphur, for some unknown reason caused the spectators to leave the hut without saying a word. Why should everybody sneak out and leave me alone? Was this a characteristic of their ilk? Where they afraid of something? Scared of what? I pondered and decided that a better chemical stunt might bring them back, not knowing that a silent alarm was being whispered, and spread, about the enemy head-hunters who had been spotted advancing toward the village from the river.

While busy mixing another batch of sulphuric acid with permanganate of potash I did not see a strange, lithe creature stealthily approach through the open portal from my rear. He was one of the raiders from a war canoe looking for a white man's head and also for the rifle he carried. This same rifle had killed a twenty pound monkey this morning and a double-crossing guide had then sent a message. What a trophy this young warrior would bring back to proudly show off in his own village! This probably was what he thought, closing in without making a sound.

The savage was now ready to make a leap that would drive the weapon into my back, a razor-edged knife long enough to pass through my body. And then my head —what a trophy!

Suddenly the killer hesitated. There was something he could not understand; his victim was making smoke from nothing; brown particles of manganese dioxide and ozone were puffing from the acid and moist permanganate. Unconscious of quick death from the knife, and believing the hut was empty, I added sound to the "smoke" in the form of alcohol. There was a violent explosion from the calabash cup, followed by a guttural exclamation from behind. Turning like a flash I now saw the intruder for the first time. He dropped his knife and rushed madly for the door, terror-stricken at the white man's invisible boom boom.

The savage raced for the war canoe, while his pals—my guide no doubt was with them—went with him without any heads.

Demoralized, their paddles churned the water as their craft disappeared in the darkness.

Thanks to the gods of Chemistry and Superstition, I slept in the big hut that night unmolested, and in the morning a guide was procured by the local chief who watched us go safely upstream toward the Andes.

Harry B. Johnson.

The STORY TELLERS' CIRCLE

Dawson's Golden Streets

AS YOU remember from many Hendryx stories of Halfaday Creek—we hope you didn't miss the one in this issue, *One Good Turn Deserves Another*—when gold dust piled up on Halfaday and Old Cush's safe got too full, Black John traveled to Dawson to bank the takings from the various claims on the creek. Dawson was then, of course, the center of the Klondike gold rush, and full of miners, prospectors and all the followers of a particularly hectic gold strike. It is an interesting fact that today from this same Dawson comes the modern story of a town whose streets are still paved with glittering metal, for Dawson City, Yukon Territory, boasts the somewhat startling and unique fact of having streets of gold. During the hydraulic operations of recovering the gold from the gravel washed down from the high levels above the Klondike Valley hundred of tons of waste or tailings in which gold remained was used to grade the roads around and the streets in Dawson. While the gold content is small the inhabitants of Dawson City have every right to the claim that their streets are literally paved with gold.

Today mining operations in the Klondike area with the use of the huge hydraulic dredges is a fine art. Had these been in operation in Black John's time it is doubtful if Dawson City could boast of gold streets. One interesting fact concerning the operation of these dredges is the great variety of odds and ends picked up. These include large quantities of bird

shot, bullets, cartridges and odd pieces of jewelry including rings and watches, and guns of all sorts and descriptions.

At one time this junk was thrown away until one engineer treated several hundred pounds of shot, bullets and small pieces of metal recovering several hundred dollars worth of pure gold. Today all shot, bullets and bits of metal are carefully salvaged and treated to extract all gold content.

Portions of the trans-Canada highway in Ontario also lay claim to being surfaced with gold. In the Kenora district, which was the oldest and busiest gold producing area in Canada until the Klondike was discovered, the road construction crews blasted the roadway for miles through gold bearing rock and quartz. This was crushed and used to surface the highway. The gold content in several places was sufficiently high as to cause a frantic race among claim stakers, who staked claims on each side of the highway for several miles.

Mill Stone Money

THE popularity of R. V. Gery's stories of the Outer Islands shows us that our readers are interested in these scattered bits of land Down Under, and from Kenneth Wood comes an interesting piece of information about the Yap Islands of the western Pacific, which, it seems, have the distinction of being among the least-known islands of the world; one of the few remaining places on earth that is untainted by civilization. Here, the natives build enormous houses, roofed in and walled at the sides with mats, and construct stone piers or jetties of great length. Some of their dwellings stand on mounds of earth, often nearly one hundred feet square, the sides of which are cased in with stones. Against these the rich place the extraordinary money which is found, perhaps, only in their islands.

This money is composed of large disks of arrogonite, often of great size, resembling for the most part huge mill stones. Six feet in diameter, twelve inches in thickness, and an estimated weight of three tons are not uncommon dimensions. The largest piece known is said to be nine feet four inches in diameter, fifteen inches thick at the hole in the center, and seven at the outer edge.

The weight of this stone was estimated by an American trader, who helped to move it, at four tons and a half. This money is not used as a medium of exchange, but for the purposes of ostentation, the richest men being those who can pile most of it against the earthen platforms on which their houses stand. Sometimes these natural mill stones are used as a ceremonial present on solemn occasions, like the bits of seventeenth century European glass called money in the Pellew Island, and the whales' teeth money of the Fijis.

"The Dirty Little Coward . . ."

A PARTICULAR version of the assassination of Jesse James, by Bob Ford, is known to everyone who has ever read anything of Jesse James. The story is usually to the effect that, as Jesse was dusting off a picture on the wall, Bob Ford, his cousin and a member of the gang, shot him through the back of the head.

Frank Gruber's story in this issue is his own version of the assassination—and he writes us that he thinks it's about ninety-nine percent true. "Incidentally," the author's letter continues, "it was given me by a relative of Jesse James who knew Bob Ford quite well. He is the man who actually went to the dance with Bob Ford—as related in the story—and saw the initials on the gun, the significance of which he did not understand, however, until after Ford had killed Jesse.

"Bob Ford was *not* a cousin of Jesse James; he was not related to him at all. Neither was he a member of the gang, in the sense that he had taken part in any of

Jesse's exploits. Charley Ford was a member of the gang. The Ford home, near Richmond, Missouri, was a rendezvous for desperate characters. Jesse stopped there often in the last couple of years of his life.

"The events leading up to Jesse's assassination are briefly: Dick Liddil (Dick Small in the story) and Bob Ford killed Wood Hite (Ed Mitchell). Wood Hite was a cousin of Jesse and the brother of Clarence Hite, the youngest member of the gang.

"Dick Liddil feared Jesse's vengeance more than he did the law and made a deal to surrender. As a result, Clarence Hite was arrested in Kentucky, convicted and sent to the penitentiary for twenty-five years. He was paroled after serving only a year, because of poor health. He was a consumptive and died within a month after being paroled.

"Bob and Charley Ford attached themselves to Jesse, remained with him for almost a month, during which time they waited for an opportunity to kill Jesse. It finally came and Bob fired the fatal shot. The picture hanging episode is mere fiction.

"To their consternation, Bob and Charley Ford were not hailed as heroes. Bob, in fact, became the subject of the famous ballad:

"'The dirty little coward who shot Mr. Howard—'

"The Fords were arrested, tried and convicted. They were sentenced to be hanged, but pardoned by the governor. They went on the stage, but the public, despising them, stayed away in large numbers. After awhile, Charley Ford shot himself. Bob Ford drifted to the Colorado mining camps and ten years after killing Jesse James, was killed by a drunken former deputy sheriff.

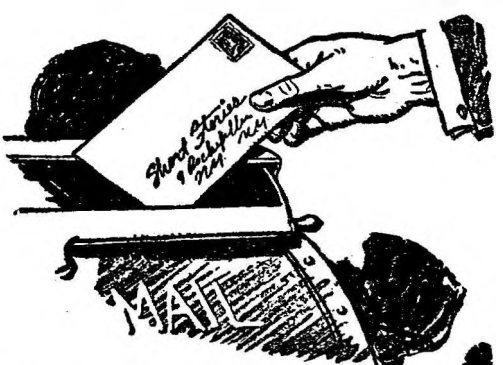
"Dick Liddil was the chief witness against Frank James, when the latter surrendered and stood trial. The trial was the most famous in decades and aroused international interest. Frank was acquitted, rearrested and taken to Alabama there to stand trial for murder. He was again acquitted, but when he returned to Missouri, was arrested for the third time. After holding him in jail for a while, the prosecutor despaired of obtaining a conviction and released him. He lived until 1915.

"It is my contention that Frank James retired after the Northfield, Minnesota, fiasco in 1876. He was the brains of the gang and when Jesse started in again in 1879, after three years of retirement, he did not have the benefit of Frank's cool brain.

"Here's a mystery for you. What became of Dick Liddil?

"After testifying against Frank James in 1883, Dick Liddil dropped out of sight. He never served any time in any prison thereafter and officials when questioned, professed ignorance of him or changed the subject. Was he pardoned for turning states's evidence?

"I think so. But what became of Dick Liddil thereafter? *"Frank Gruber."*



SEZ YOU!

The Editor,
SHORT STORIES,
9 Rockefeller Plaza,
New York, N. Y.

Writing beyond a single gag line for me is more or less of a chore. But you asked

for the opinion of readers as regards SHORT STORIES, and being one of SHORT STORIES' most ardent followers for the past fifteen years or more, figured I at least owed the editors a few lines in appreciation of the many enjoyable hours I have had.

Tuttle is my favorite Western author, with Sad Sontag being ditto as a Western character. Hendryx' yarns like Tuttle's always leave me with a desire, or is it a craving, to read any and everything the author may have published. Undoubtedly one of the major reasons why I find little time in which to do my own work.

As for the other authors, I like their stories also. For if it's in SHORT STORIES, I know it is a yarn worth reading, whether it be on land, sea or air. Modern as tomorrow or old as yesterday. They tell of things that happened, or may happen with a vividness akin to fact.

As a free-lance comic artist for several New York magazines, I often find the opportunity to travel. In my wanderings about the country I have found SHORT STORIES in some of the most outlandish places. Therefore, keep SHORT STORIES tomorrow as it is today, as we've had it yesterday. A magazine of clean, interesting reading attractively illustrated and inimitably different, a publication enjoyed by the most discriminating reader.

Martin Filchock.

New York City.

The Editor,
SHORT STORIES,
9 Rockefeller Plaza,
New York, N. Y.

Have been reading SHORT STORIES for over a year now and think it contains the best stories on the market for the price. I never let an issue get by without reading it from cover to cover.

There are so many good authors in SHORT STORIES that one finds very little to criticize. Hendryx and his Black John novelettes are tops and the major yarns are worth anybody's money. Gruber, Dragon, Cameron, Tuttle, Gery can always be depended upon to provide first-class entertainment.

Why not have some more of those grand adventure stories by Frank Packard in SHORT STORIES? I feel sure that many other readers of SHORT STORIES would again like to hear from the inimitable Mr. Packard.

R. V. Beals

Worcester, Massachusetts.

We thought a Packard story would be a good idea, too, but Mr. Packard was tied up on the radio last we heard. We'll try again.—Editor.

The Editor,
SHORT STORIES,
9 Rockefeller Plaza,
New York, N. Y.

I want to protest against the beastliness of the story *Winds of the Llanos,* by Arthur O. Friel, in your issue of May 25th. The details of the tearing to pieces of one man by another do not make the kind of reading that a normal man likes. What is the use of civilization if it does not teach us disgust at that sort of degenerate description? It certainly turns one's stomach. Let us have adventure and plenty of it, but not that sort of thing. The story did not need those disgusting details to be good. Indeed it would have been far better without it. Your readers could then have filled in with their imagination the kind of details they prefer.

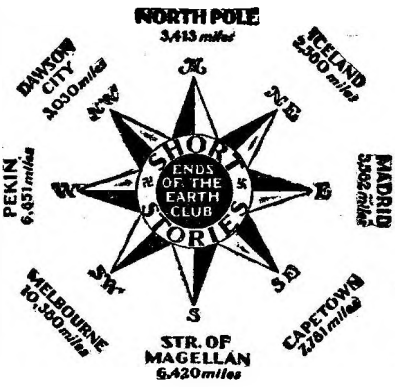
By the way, can't we have some more railroad tales?

C. W. Johnson

Schenectady, New York.

Glad to have this comment, and we'll try to watch this point even more carefully in future. We'll also look out for the railroad angle.—Editor.

THE ENDS OF THE EARTH CLUB



HERE is a free and easy meeting place for the brotherhood of adventurers. To be one of us, all you have to do is register your name and address with the Secretary, Ends-of-the-Earth Club, c/o Short Stories, Inc., 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York, N. Y. Your handsome membership-identification card will be sent you at once. There are no dues—no obligations.

Don't forget members—5c postage on all foreign letters.

Dear Secretary:

I wish to express my sincere thanks to you, and all members of your worthy club for accepting me as a member.

I would be pleased to hear from pen pals all over the world, especially from Canada and the United States. Seamen on British, Canadian and American merchant ships that might call at the seaport of Calamata will find a true-blue friend in me.

I am Greek by birth, but have received my education in Canada. Toronto, Ontario, and Montreal, Quebec, are a couple of the cities I have lived in.

At the age of fifteen I was brought to Greece again; that was in the year 1922. All these years I had no one to correspond with, so will try to make up for lost time by answering all the letters that I receive, from either sex. I will exchange photos and souvenirs with all.

Thanks again.

Dennis Petropulos

Asprohoma, Calamata,
Greece.

So you won't have to dig out the geographies — the Falkland Islands are south of South America.

Dear Secretary:

Please enroll me as a member of your club. I have been three years in the whaling industry, and as I am one of the over-wintering personnel I should welcome letters from members in any part of the world.

I will exchange snapshots and explain the nature of the work here to the best of my ability. Thanking you in anticipation, I am

Yours truly,

John McAllister

Leith Harbour Whaling Station,
South Georgia, S. Atlantic,
Via Port Stanley,
Falkland Islands.

We welcome a member from China.

Dear Secretary:

Is there any chance for a young man living in China to join the Ends of the Earth Club? I am twenty and am a Civil Service employee.

I enjoy swimming, drawing and various hobbies and will exchange news, stamps or any object that may be of interest with the other readers.

Thanking you in anticipation and wishing you every success, I am

Yours sincerely,

Spain J. Wu

G.P.O. Box 1145,
Hong Kong, China.

A collector of unusual photographs

Dear Secretary:

Please enroll me as a member in your Ends of the Earth Club. I am 17 years

old and collect all types of interesting or unusual photographs.

I would like to correspond with members all over the world and will answer all letters.

Sincerely,

H. E. Gray

550 West 96th St.,
New York, N. Y.

Hobby—stamps and post cards.

Dear Secretary:

I began reading SHORT STORIES just a fortnight ago. Indeed I found the Ends of the Earth Club a marvelous idea and I'd like to join.

I'm twenty and a stamp and post card collector. I'd like to exchange correspondence with anyone anywhere. I have crossed my country from North to South, also I know many Western cities. I can answer in English, Portuguese or Spanish. Although I haven't had many adventures or excitement, I'm sure I can write very interesting letters.

Very truly yours,

Norberto Rigot

Rua Apiahy, 60,
Sao Paulo,
Brazil.

A plea from Africa for pen pals. Isn't there someone who wants a pen pal in Africa?

Dear Secretary:

I am a member of your Ends of the Earth Club, but have never received any letters although my friends who belong to the club have. Will you please publish this letter in your SHORT STORIES magazine, for those who would like to correspond with pen pals here in Africa?

Sincerely yours,

Jonathan O. Oguns

17 Holloway Street,
Lagos, Nigeria,
West Africa.

Calling all scouts.

Dear Secretary:

I am writing this letter to you because I am anxious to become a member of the Ends of the Earth Club and also to tell you that I have enjoyed reading SHORT STORIES very much.

I am assistant Scoutmaster of St. Michael's Troop and would like to correspond with scouts in the United States and any other country. I am 20 years old, weigh 145 pounds, five feet nine inches tall and have black hair and blue eyes. Am interested in camping, woodcraft and photography.

Wishing good luck to the Secretary and fellow members, I am,

Sincerely,

Bernard Healy

5673 St. Urban Street,
Montreal, Que., Canada.

From a medical student in Brazil.

Dear Secretary:

I am an ardent reader of your splendid magazine SHORT STORIES. and I especially admire the section of the Ends of the Earth Club. I am a student of medicine at the University of Sao Paulo and would be very obliged if you were kind enough to consider me for membership in your club.

Sincerely yours,

Ourival Nascimbeni

Via Mirasol,
Balsamo, Estado de Sao Paulo,
Brazil.

A collector of stamps, post cards and coins.

Dear Secretary:

I am a young fellow 19 years old and like practically all sports. My hobbies are stamps, post cards and coins. I should like to correspond with anyone, living outside of the U. S. A., especially those living in Latin America and the British Empire. However, this does not mean that I will

not answer those letters that come from any place else. It follows that I will answer all letters from young or old, male or female.

Sincerely,
F. J. Calabro

285 Mott Street,
New York, N. Y.

Information please on Ascension Islands and Tannu Tura.

Dear Secretary:

I would like to join the Ends of the Earth Club. I am a stamp collector and want information and stamps of Ascension Island and Tannu Tura. I'm in the medical department of the National Guard, a photographer, a musician and in fact interested in nearly everything. So, let's hear from one another.

Sincerely yours,
A. Bruce Evans

826 Dunham Street, S. E.,
Grand Rapids, Mich.

A young Brazilian joins our ranks.

Dear Secretary:

A little while ago I bought a number of SHORT STORIES and it was the first time I read your wonderful magazine. I liked it so much and write to ask to join your Ends of the Earth Club.

I am Brazilian, 19 years old, born in Rio de Janeiro. I would be delighted to receive letters from any part of the world.

Sincerely,
M. Carreira

Craia de Botafogo No. 488,
Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

A reader of eighteen.

Dear Secretary:

I wished to be enrolled in the Ends of the Earth Club. I have just finished my first issue of SHORT STORIES and I find it very interesting.

I am 18 years old, and my hobbies are reading and building model airplanes. I am interested in foreign countries and would like to hear from members of the club from all parts of the world.

Sincerely,
Ambrose H. Jackson, Jr.

526 Woodlawn Avenue,
Bristol, Tenn.

Another stamp collector to add to your lists.

Dear Secretary:

For years I have been enjoying the stories in SHORT STORIES and would appreciate if you would enroll me in your club. Also, if possible, add my name to your list of members interested in stamp collecting.

Sincerely,
John G. Kunz

Miranda, Oriente,
Cuba.

A new correspondent.

Dear Secretary:

I am one of the many readers of the SHORT STORIES and I have enjoyed reading it ever since I read my first copy.

I wish to join your club and I hope that you will enroll me. I shall be pleased to correspond with any one who wishes to do so.

Sincerely yours,
Robert J. Kadala

95 Loiza Street,
Santurce, Puerto Rico.

Friend of a friend.

Dear Secretary:

I have enjowed reading your magazine, SHORT STORIES, for a long time and hope I will be able to continue reading it.

A friend of mine has interested me in your club and now I wish to become a member. I hope that I will receive my membership card soon.

Yours sincerely,
Carmen G. Rodriguez

186 Fernandez Juncos Avenue,
Santurce, P. R.

ENDS OF THE EARTH CLUB MEMBERS

WITH hundreds of letters from new members coming in every day, it is obviously impossible to print all of them in the columns of the magazine. The editors do the best they can, but naturally most readers buy SHORT STORIES *because of the fiction that it contains. Below are more names and addresses of Ends of the Earth Club members. Most of these members will be eager to hear from you, should you care to correspond with them, and will be glad to reply. Note these lists, if you are interested in writing to other members. Names and addresses will appear only once.*

C. Checknoff, 619 Saratoga Ave., Brooklyn, N. Y.
M. Clark, 1296 W. 65th St., Cleveland, Ohio
A. Udoh Dickson, Training Institute Etinan, Uyo District, Nigera, W. Africa
James E. Douglas, 147 W. 84th St., New York, N. Y.
W. Drennan, Ampat Tin Dredging Ltd., Tujoh Section, Kampar, Perak, E.M.S. (Malay)
Pvt. Alex. Dubovik, Battery C, 11th F. A., Schofield Barracks, Oahu, T. H.
E. Du Nolan, Route 4, Stillwell, Oklahoma
Paul Duran, 1325 S. Centre St., San Pedro, Calif.
Robert Durham, 2309 Bancroft, Okaha, Nebraska
James Elwood, 504 Fifth Ave., South, Seattle, Washington
Lew D. Farrell, Newcastle Bridge, Queens Co., N. B., Canada
Gene Flauraud, 3454 Duncomb Ave., Bronx, New York City
Henry P. Forde, 51-17—65th St., Woodside, L. I., N. Y.
Roy M. Forseyth, 12 Wangalla Rd., Lane Cove, New South Wales, Australia
Christe Gadesi, 1614 A, Nebraska Ave., St. Louis, Missouri
I. Gartner, 1203 Feliciana St., New Orleans, La.
Seymour Goldberg, 761 Miller Ave., Brooklyn, N. Y.
Bernie Golden, U. S. Vets Hospital, Castle Point, N. Y.
M. Green, 4-1, Box 62, Colfax, California
Joan Guinee, Jr., 14 Dutton Circle, Medford, Mass.
M. Harthertz, 342 Pine St., Williamsport, Pennsylvania
W. Harvey, Jr., 314 Swan St., Dunkirk, N. Y.
Frank J. Hatch, 72 Esk St., Invercargill, N. Zealand
Charles F. Henning, Hq. Battery, 16th C. A. Fort Ruger, Honolulu, T. H.
Jack Holt, *U.S.S. Ontario,* Pago Pago, Tutuila, Samoa
Harry Howie, 6417 Flora Ave., Seattle, Washington
A. Hullah, 10 Gason Terrace, Birstall, England
W. Ilbery, 69 Ramagate Ave., North Bondi, Sydney, N.S.W., Australia
Fred C. Jones, c/o C.M.S. School, Freetown, Sierra Leone, W. Africa
Dan Kazantzas, 10912 Vernon Ave., Chicago, Illinois
Marty Kelly, 2034 Crystal St., Chicago, Illinois
Robert Knepper, 1027 W. 47th St., Los Angeles, California
Frank Kulcsar, 514 Foam St., Monterey, California
Maurice Lemay, 168 St. Joseph, Grand Mere, Que., Canada
Ray Livingston, 4418—16th St., Detroit, Michigan
Douglas McGilliwroy, 69 Rivercrest Rd., Toronto, Ont., Canada
Douglas D. McIver, *U.S.S. Pelican,* Pearl Harbor, Hawaii
John C. McKee, 1812 Las Flores Drive, Eagle Rock, California
Francis A. McManus, 378 Summer Ave., Newark, N. J.
Robert W. MacGlashen, Box 79, Moncton, R. R. 5, New Brunswick, Canada
Campbell MacFellan, 60 Rivercrest Rd., Toronto, Ont., Canada
William Martin, 1021 E. 77th St., Cleveland, Ohio
Neil Baillie Matheson, West River Station, R. R. 2, Pictou Co., N. S., Canada

P. F. C. J. Meyers, Hq. & MP. Co., Schofield Barracks, Honolulu, T. H.
Charles Miller, 1492 Montgomery Ave., Bronx, New York City, N. Y.
Jules Montagne, 187 rue du Trone, Brussels, Belgium
S. Morris, 356 Benzinger St., Buffalo, N. Y.
M. H. Motta, R. Canada 591, S. Paulo, Brazil, S. America
M. A. Nicoll, 206 Bay 11th St., Brooklyn, N. Y.
Frederick Ogden, 159 Alcorn Ave., Toronto, Ont., Canada
C. N. Okereke, c/o B. C. M. O. 3295, Police Barracks, Degema, Nigeria
Haille A. Pace, Warford, W. Virginia
Chris B. Panagakos, 671 Congress St., Portland, Maine
F. Pierre, 16 St. Vincent St., San Fernando, Trinidad, B. W. I.
Tony Pilotti, Jr., 141 Lincoln Ave., Bridgeport, Conn.
Murray Pollar, 909 E. 173rd St., Bronx, New York, N. Y.
E. Post, 1535 Newmai Ave., Lakewood, Ohio
Ralph Roden, 110-26 Northern Blvd., Corona, N. Y.
M. Rodevitch, c/o Standard Vacuum Oil Co., Changsha, China
Legionnaire Frank Roelants, No. 70110, 2. Cie 1/5 Regt. Atr'a, Tran-nik, Loas.par, Vink, Annam, Indo-China
Pvt. Gerardo Russomanno, Battery C, 11th F. A., Schofield Barracks, Oahu, T. H.
Jimmy Salyer, CCC Co. 3542, Camp DG 122, Las Vetas, Nevada
Wilfred Schaffner, Route 5, Takoka, Texas
Morris Schiff, 412 E. 101st St., New York, N. Y.
Ray W. Schuenemeyer, 33rd H. Q. Co., Fort Clayton, C. Z.
Leroy Seidel, 992 Stryker Ave., W. St. Paul, Minnesota
H. Shipman, Route 4, Stillwell, Oklahoma
George Shott, 613 Durfee St., Fall River, Mass.
George Sires, Co. 912 CCC, Death Valley, California
Frank H. Staines, 807—7th Ave., New Westminster, B. C., Canada
Steve Stephenson, 11 North Jefferson St., Lexington, Virginia
George Summerlin, Bahia Blanca 210, Republica of Argentina, S. A.
Ed. Thompson, 1907 N. Henderson Ave., Dallas, Texas
M. Walls, Copley Farm, Leeds Road, Birstall, Yorkshire, England
A. Was, 5127 Coral St., Pittsburgh, Pa.
John E. Waterman, *U.S.S. Lexington,* c/o Postmaster, Morgan St. Annex, New York City
Frederick J. Way, 31 Pansy Ave., Ottawa, Ont., Canada
D. Wharton, 20 Smithies Moor Lane, Batley, Yorkshire, England
John Whitehead, 195 Ennerdale Rd., Toronto, Ont., Canada
Eric B. Williams, 54 Ann St., Stepney, Adelaide, S. Australia
John Wingert, 1858 Quebec St., Regina, Sask., Canada
C. Wrobel, 2716 W. 23rd St., Chicago, Illinois
No. 2656684-Pte J. F. Watson, H2 loy, The Mortar Pltn., 2nd Bn. The Black Watch, Tulavera Barracks, Jerusalem, Palestine
Dale Weaver Co. 311 F-32A, Clarkdale, Arizona
Thomas Weeks, Co. 311 F-32A, Clarkdale, Arizona
George D. Werdann, 230 E. 51st St., New York, N. Y.
Joe Wietrzykowski, 2525 Military Ave., Detroit, Michigan
E. M. Wild, 1848 Marengo St., Los Angeles, California
Wilho Williams, 1505 W. Main Ave., Spokane, Washington

James Hanover,
SHORT STORIES,
9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York, N. Y.

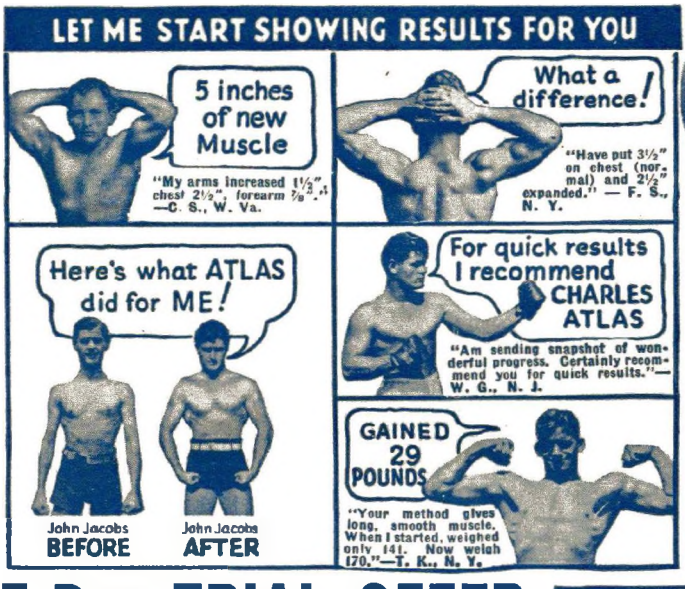
I enclose these four coupons from SHORT STORIES.

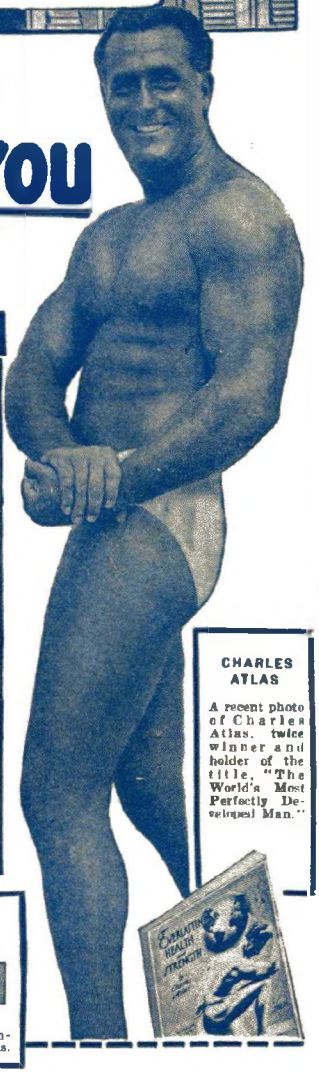
Please send me a list of Ends of the Earth Club members interested in stamp collecting.

Name .....

Address .....

Will You Let Me PROVE I Can Make YOU a *New Man?*





CHARLES ATLAS

A recent photo of Charles Atlas, twice winner and holder of the title, "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man."

7-Day TRIAL OFFER

I could fill this whole magazine with enthusiastic reports from OTHERS. But what you want to know is —"What can Atlas do for ME?"

Find out—*at my risk!* Just give me a 7-day trial—just one week—and even in that short time I'll start giving RESULTS. And it will be the kind of RESULTS you (and anyone else) can SEE, FEEL, MEASURE with a tape!

Accept My 7-Day Trial Offer

I, myself, was once a skinny weakling of 97 lbs. I didn't know what real health or strength were. I was afraid to fight, ashamed to be seen in a swimming suit.

Then I discovered the secret that changed me into "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man," the title I won *twice*, and have held *over almost* against all comers. My secret is *Dynamic Tension*. It is a *natural* method. Its purpose is not only to give the powerful, rippling muscles you'd like to see in your own mirror, but also—for those whose systems are sluggish from lack of proper exercise—to help them tone their entire body, inside and out.

Do you want a better build? Are you dissatisfied with your present physical development? All I ask is a 7-DAY TRIAL. Just one week! In even that short time you will notice your chest hardening and filling out with solid muscle—or the 7-Day Trial will cost you nothing. Surely this is proof enough that by continuing with my "Dynamic Tension" method I will make you a *New Man*—give you bodily power and drive, and put you in magnificent physical condition which wins you the envy and respect of everyone.

Free Book on Dynamic Tension

Let me show you the results produced for other men! I'll send you FREE my famous book, *"Everlasting Health and Strength."* It shows actual photos. Write your name and address carefully on coupon. Mail to me personally *today*. I'll rush your free copy to you AT ONCE. Charles Atlas, Dept. 9H, 115 East 23rd Street, New York, N. Y.

THIS STERLING SILVER CUP BEING GIVEN AWAY. — This valuable cup stands 14" high on a black mahogany base. I will award it to my pupil who makes the most improvement within the next three months.

CHARLES ATLAS,
Dept. 9H, 115 East 23rd Street, New York, N. Y.

I want the proof that your system of *Dynamic Tension* will help make me a New Man—give me a healthy, husky body and big muscle development. Send me your FREE book, "Everlasting Health and Strength" and full details about your 7-DAY Trial Offer.

Name .....
(Please print or write plainly)

Address .....

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

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Electric Lantern With Every 2 Tires Ordered

Complete with batteries and newest type reflector bulb. Ready for instant use. Strong, sturdy light. Useful everywhere. Order now.

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Thousands of smart, thrifty **tire users** all over the United States vouch for the gratifying **Long, Hard Service** given by our **Standard Brand** tires, reconditioned with high-grade materials and latest methods by our tire specialists. Order **Now** at **low** prices listed below.

Our 22 Years' Experience

Makes it possible for us to offer tires at **lowest prices** with **legal agreement** to replace at one-half price any tire that fails to give **Twelve** (12) **months' Service.**

"WELL PLEASED"

"I was well pleased with the tires I received from you a short time ago, and would like three more like them. Enclosed find $3.00 deposit."

W. N. Williams, Utah

"GOOD SERVICE"

"The tire I ordered from you sometime ago is giving good service. Enclosed find price for another cord tire, size 33x4."

C. L. Webb, W. Va.

EVERY TIRE GUARANTEED

BALLOON TIRES

Size Rim	Tires	Tubes
29x4.40-21	$2.15	$1.05
29x4.50-20	2.35	1.05
30x4.50-21	2.40	1.15
28x4.75-19	2.45	1.25
29x4.75-20	2.50	1.25
29x5.00-19	2.85	1.25
30x5.00-20	2.85	1.25
5.25-17	2.90	1.35
28x5.25-18	2.90	1.35
29x5.25-19	2.95	1.35
30x5.25-20	2.95	1.35
31x5.25-21	3.25	1.35
5.50-17	3.35	1.40
28x5.50-18	3.35	1.40
29x5.50-19	3.35	1.45
6.00-17	3.40	1.40
30x6.00-18	3.40	1.40
31x6.00-19	3.40	1.45
32x6.00-20	3.45	1.55
33x6.00-21	3.65	1.55
32x6.50-20	3.75	1.75
6.00-16	3.75	1.45

REGULAR CORD TIRES
(High Pressure)

Size	Tires	Tubes	Size	Tires	Tubes
30x3½	$2.35	$0.95	33x4½	$3.45	$1.45
31x4	2.95	1.25	34x4½	3.45	1.45
32x4	2.95	1.25	30x5	3.65	1.65
33x4	2.95	1.25	33x5	3.75	1.75
34x4	3.25	1.35	35x5	3.95	1.75
32x4½	3.35	1.45			

HEAVY DUTY TRUCK TIRES
(High Pressure)

Size	Tires	Tubes	Size	Tires	Tubes
30x5	$4.25	$1.95	34x7	$18.95	$4.65
33x5	3.95	1.75	38x7	10.95	4.65
34x5	4.25	2.25	36x8	11.45	4.95
32x6	7.95	2.95	40x8	13.25	4.95
36x6	9.95	4.45			

TRUCK BALLOON TIRES

Size	Tires	Tubes	Size	Tires	Tubes
6.00-20	$3.75	$1.65	7.50-20	$ 6.95	$3.75
6.50-20	4.45	1.95	8.25-20	8.95	4.95
7.00-20	5.95	2.95	9.00-20	10.95	5.65
			9.75-20	13.95	6.45

ALL OTHER SIZES **DEALERS WANTED**

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2328 S. Michigan Ave., Chicago. Dept. 5843

Gentlemen: Please ship at once to—

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Quan.	Size Tires	Size Tubes	Price Each	Total

SEND ONLY $1.00 DEPOSIT

on each tire ordered. ($3.00 on each Truck Tire.) We ship balance C. O. D. Deduct **5 per cent** if cash is sent in full with order. To fill order promptly, we may substitute brands if necessary. ALL TUBES BRAND NEW—GUARANTEED—

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