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THE BANSHEE HOWLS
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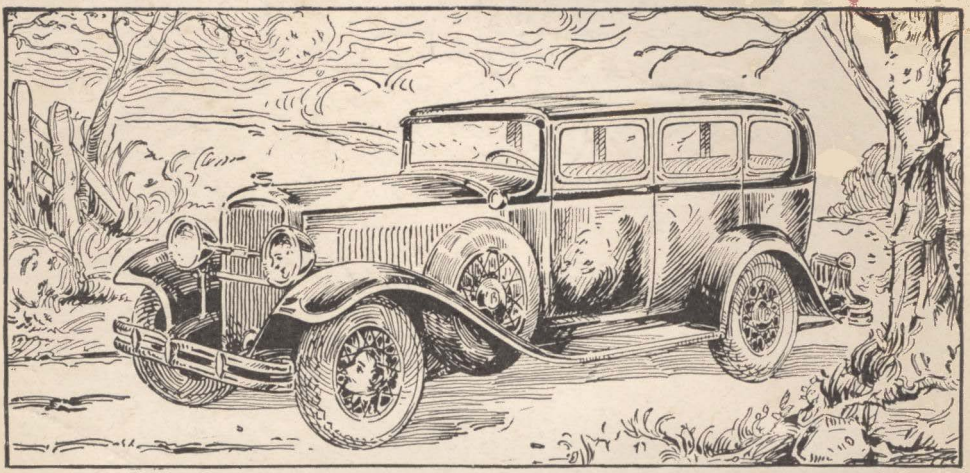

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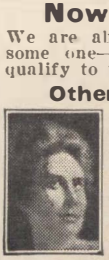

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THE BANSHEE

Death rides the wind as double-crossing smugglers play

CHAPTER I.

PROPHECY OF THE WIND.

A CURIOUS shudder rippled through me. It could not have been premonitory, for certainly neither Rande nor I foresaw the madness into which this night would lead us. And yet, the instant I stepped off the train that tremor of apprehension assailed me like a warning.

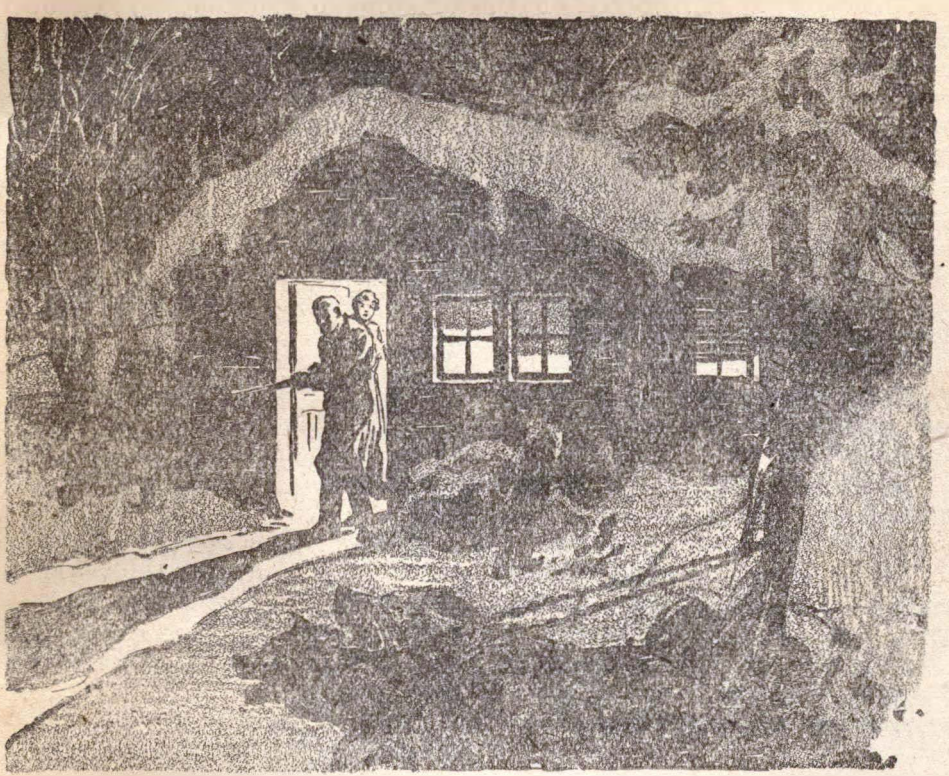
Perhaps it was the utter desolation of the mountain blackness and the screaming of the wind in the trees that so weirdly affected me. I know that as I watched the train's lights vanish around the bend, I felt a twinge of aching loneliness, almost of fear. In an effort to overcome it I turned to Rande with a forced show of brusqueness.

"Well? Where the devil is that guide of yours?"

"Ought to be around somewhere." Rande grumbled. "Yes, here he comes." He waved his arm and lustily yelled, "Hello there, Triggett!"

"Well, well, Mr. Rande! H'are ye?"

The voice that boomed out of the darkness was deep and sonorous and cheerful, an adequate forerunner of the man who hurried toward us with swinging strides, as if he were being blown along by the wind. He was grinning a



HOWLS

By Oscar Schisgall

their unscrupulous game in the storm-torn Adirondacks.

welcome, and I liked him at once. Tall, gaunt, incredibly homely, but a structure of brawn and hardihood, Steve Triggett was a perfect portrayal of the legendary backwoodsman.

"Sure glad to see ye again!" he enthusiastically greeted Rande. "And I'm happy to know you, Mr. Hyde. Ye picked a mighty fierce night to come, all right. Noisiest, coldest wind we've had all year!"

"The sooner we get out of it," Rande declared, "the better I'll like it. Brrrr! Got your flivver around?"

"Sure thing. Just beyond the station. Here, let me take those." With no indication of strain Triggett gathered up our heavy grips. Rande and I, lifting the hunting rifles—which we were destined so soon to use in a man hunt—bent against the gale and started for the battered shack that served Curtis Junction as a station. But we had taken scarcely two paces when a soft exclamation from Triggett halted us. "Well, now," he was muttering, "somebody else got off with ye, eh?"

We turned.

Some one was back there in the darkness; a woman—or, to judge by her slenderness, a girl.

Leaning against the drive of the gale and carrying a small bag, she seemed, somehow, grotesquely misplaced in that

vast blackness. She was coming directly toward us; and when she was near enough, I saw that she was young and unusually attractive, wearing a gray fur coat more suggestive of Fifth Avenue than of Curtis Junction. She stopped and stared at us with a faint hint of anxiety. In a low, rapid voice she inquired:

"I wonder if any of you can tell me the way to the Scurrey hunting lodge?"

Triggett blinked. "Why, ma'am," he answered, "that's 'way up on Moonrise Lake."

"Far from here?"

"About twelve miles. But, miss, there ain't anybody out there."

This information she ignored.

"Twelve miles?" she repeated in dismay. "Oh, I didn't think—— Isn't there some way of getting there?"

"Well, there's a road," acknowledged Triggett. "But the lodge is empty, miss. Ain't a soul been there since summer."

"No, no," she assured him hastily, as if she felt she owed even a stranger an explanation of her interest in the lodge. "Mr. Scurrey took a party there this afternoon. I think——" Uncertainly she peered toward the village. Its few stores being already closed, it presented an aspect unspeakably gloomy and hostile. "I suppose," she ventured uneasily, "I could hire a car?"

"Well——" began Triggett.

But Gordon Rande, who had been regarding the girl with strange intensity, suddenly interposed: "As a matter of fact, we're driving to Moonrise Lake. If you care to join us, you're more than welcome."

His words wrought a bewildering effect.

Instead of accepting Rande's offer, the girl stepped back from him with a downright start. Her large, dark eyes widened. I was watching her closely, and I could have sworn that not only surprise, but actual terror seized her countenance. She stared from one of us to another in panicky indecision, and her hold on the bag tightened.

"No!" she gasped. "Oh, no—thank you!"

And while we stood there, stupidly gaping at her in our amazement—for surely we had done nothing to frighten the girl!—she whirled around and hurried, all but ran, toward the village.

WELL, now," growled Triggett a few minutes later, when we were driving to Rande's cabin, "what in blazes was the kid scared about? Anybody make faces at her?"

His only answer came from the wind—a wild scream among the naked trees that walled our road. Their tortured branches rasped and groaned so horribly that I, with my city-tuned ears, shared their agony.

Rande, who sat in the front beside the guide, asked: "Think she can hire a car?"

"Oh, if she's willing to pay his price she can prob'ly get Andy Jerescott to drive her out—pervided he ain't asleep. The old hog'll charge her plenty, too. All the same," he added ominously, "sounds queer to me, her going out there alone. I didn't notice anybody at the place to-day and I passed two-three times."

Rande glanced at him quickly.

"Possibly," he said, "Scurrey was out hunting." He turned to me, and he was frowning. "We're apt to have neighbors, Phil. The Scurrey place is only a half mile or so up the lake from my cabin."

"If that girl was a specimen of your neighbors," I answered, "I won't mind them a bit."

But I couldn't continue that pretense of heartiness. Not while the freezing wind whipped tears from my eyes and ripped away my breath in spurts of mist. I was shivering. There was no

lap robe, and my coat, heavy as it was, seemed unable to resist the force of the icy gale.

Moreover, the very strangeness of our surroundings chilled me. Our road was narrow, and twisting, and tortuous, hardly better than a lumber trail. It was utterly black, and Triggett's headlights seldom revealed more than fifty yards of it at a time. No road I had ever before traveled yielded so many bumps, and rocks, and pits. Constantly I was being thrown about the seat; and the grips, as well as the rifles, were covering me with bruises.

A miserable trip; and yet, in its way, a fitting prelude to the night ahead of us. When Gordon Rande had invited me to spend a couple of weeks in hunting at his Adirondack cabin, I had anticipated the venture with delight. But now, actually launched upon it under such disheartening auspices, I was beginning to long, rather bitterly, for the comforts of my own apartment in New York.

Of a sudden, when we had gone some seven or eight miles, a new sound cracked through the darkness. More accurately, a chorus of sounds. They were distant yappings, and barkings, and snarls, borne to us on the wind.

"Oh, good heavens!" I muttered. "What's that? Wolves?"

Triggett chuckled; and Rande, his own face stiff with cold, looked around to explain:

"Dogs. They belong to Louis Giroux. He's a French-Canadian who's got a place up the road and raises Alaskan Huskies. Some beauties, too. We can have a look at them to-morrow."

"Yes," I grumbled, "a good look at Alaskan Huskies is about all I need to warm me up."

At Louis Giroux's place we stopped. It was set back from the road, and from the Huskies tied to trees around the shack—at least a score of dogs, I was certain—came so menacing and terrifying a roar that I, for my part, had little inclination to step out of the car. Triggett blew his horn a few times. "Louis," he explained, "will be wanting to say hello to ye, Mr. Rande." But Giroux must have been away at his trap lines, our guide decided, for the Canadian did not appear. And so, to my relief, we rode on.

Rande stared up into the trees, where the gale was shrieking more boisterously than ever.

"That," he whispered after a long silence, "is just about the weirdest sound in the world, isn't it? The howl of the wind—like the howl of a banshee."

Triggett peered at him narrowly. "Like the howl of a what?" he asked.

"Banshee," repeated Rande, and then laughed at the man's mystification. "The banshee," he explained, "is an old Celtic witch who howls and screams at night to warn of approaching death."

"Oh, so that's it, eh?" chuckled Triggett. "Nice and cheerful old critter. Well, Mr. Rande, I hope it's no banshee ye're hearing to-night!"

But it was.

CHAPTER II.

IT BEGINS.

ODDLY enough, the drama of that terrible night began during an interval of calm.

Triggett had prepared the log cabin for our arrival, and we soon had gay flames dancing in the fireplace, with a sizzling coffeepot suspended over them. True, we were granted less than a half hour of such tranquillity; but during that time, while we sat before the fire, my entire outlook on life brightened. What if the wind still shrieked outside? What if the windows were frosted white? Here we could bask in warmth, smoking sweet pipes and laughing as if the cold, bleak ride from the station had been merely a prank of fancy.

It was inevitable, of course, that we

spoke and wondered about the girl who had accosted us at Curtis Junction. At any rate, Triggett and I spoke of her, for Rande remained silent, gazing into the flames. The incident, however, was not—or did not yet appear—pertinent to our own affairs, and we finally tossed it aside for more relevant considerations.

At last Triggett rose and stretched his gaunt figure. He took his mackinaw and fur cap from their pegs, shouldered an ax, and set out to chop more logs for firewood.

"Need any help?" Rande called.

"No, never mind. Better start unpacking. Ye'll be wanting to get to bed soon."

But we were destined, all of us, not to get to bed at all that night. For Triggett had been gone scarcely five minutes when the first of many surprising things happened.

Some one pounded on the cabin door.

Rande, who had already begun to unpack his grip, looked up with a startled jerk of his head. We were both silent for an instant, motionless, staring at the door. Perhaps it seems now we were astonished by a trivial thing, but to understand our surprise you must remember we were twelve miles from town and far from the roads of casual travelers. And eleven o'clock on so uproarious a night was hardly a time for visitors.

"Who's that?" demanded Rande.

Through the door a sharp, high, impatient voice shouted: "Come on, man, open up! It's cold as hell out here! We're freezing!"

"Who is it?" Rande insisted, though he was already striding to the door.

"Marketline!"

Because he didn't recognize the name, Gordon Rande sent a look of wonder at me. But he drew back the bolt.

Two men plunged into the cabin; they were literally swept in by the wind. I gaped at them as if they were gnomes suddenly produced by the witchery of the wilderness. They shuddered at the contrast of warmth indoors; shook themselves like wet dogs; behaved as though this, thank Heaven, were the end of an exhausting journey.

OBVIOUSLY they were not woodsmen. Both wore city clothes; felt hats, and heavy ulsters, and ineffectual tight gloves. One, whom I noticed the more keenly because he impressed me so unfavorably, was lean and taut-featured, possessed of a sharp Roman nose and remarkably brilliant black eyes that darted searchingly from me to Rande. The other was a plump little fellow with a tawny mustache and a rather harmless, bewildered manner. He blinked at the fire incredulously, as if so merry a blaze was more than he had anticipated. His round face, stung by the icy gale, was glowingly red, and his breaths escaped him in rapid gray cloudlets.

"What a forsaken place!" he panted. "I thought it was near Curtis Junction!"

Rande, who had been closing the door against the mighty push of the wind, finally turned. He regarded both men oddly.

"I don't think," he said, "I caught the names."

"Oh, come on," the lean man snorted. "No use kidding each other. It's too damned late and cold for fuss. I'm Kurt Marketline. This is Arthur Dombey."

He drew off his hat to reveal a high, pointed head skimpily strewn with reddish hair. He moved to the fire and, relieving himself of "Whew, what a trip!" stretched out his hands to seek warmth.

The stout Dombey, meanwhile, was unbuttoning his coat and vehemently protesting.

"Had a devil of a time finding this place! Never saw such a road in my

life! And cold? Man, I used to think Montreal was bad. But this makes our town feel like the tropics. I'm ice clear through to the bone. If you've got anything that tastes like a drink——"

"Just a second," interrupted Rande, somewhat sharply. I guessed he disliked the appearance of these men as much as I did. "You're making a mistake. Whose place are you hunting for?"

Marketline, bending to the fire, glanced over his shoulder and grinned. It was an extraordinary grin, something like a satyr's, cunning, wise, and insinuating.

"Oh, cut the comedy," he advised. "You're Henry Scurrey, aren't you? Or is it your friend here?"

"As it happens," said Rande, "it's neither of us. The Scurrey lodge is up the lake."

At that Marketline straightened, spun around, and stared in astonishment. Dombey, too, parted his pendulous lips and gaped unbelievingly.

"Sorry to disappoint you," quietly continued Rande, "but if you're looking for Scurrey, you'll have to go half a mile farther up the road. Of course, you're welcome to stay a while and warm up. We've got some hot coffee."

Marketline, round-eyed, looked at Dombey; and Dombey, in dismay, looked at Marketline. And meanwhile I made a strange discovery.

The plump man had begun to throw off his coat, so that it now hung from his left arm. His jacket had crept up over his hip, leaving a back pocket of his trousers exposed. And from that pocket jutted the black heel of a revolver.

I tried to attract Rande's attention to the weapon. He must have seen it, for his eyes narrowed curiously.

"Say," abruptly challenged Dombey, "you're not trying to kid us, are you?"

"And why," asked Rande, "should I do that?"

For a moment the stout man merely stared. Then he gasped, "Well, I'll be damned!"

FOR ten minutes they remained at the cabin, these men, accepting the comfort of the fire and the tonic of coffee. But their attitudes changed in a puzzling, disquieting way. They became reticent, speaking no more than was necessary. Again and again I saw them dart perplexed, almost suspicious glances at Rande and myself. And when they finally departed, I felt inexpressibly relieved.

"Neighbor Scurrey," I observed to Rande, "seems to be going in strong for midnight hospitality."

"It's a queer sort of party," he muttered slowly, "to which men bring revolvers." He was frowning into the fireplace, while his fingers mechanically filled a pipe. His dark hair was slightly disheveled, and his legs were parted in a stance that lent a suggestion of dogged strength to his really splendid figure. "I wonder," he added, the frown deepening, "if that girl we met will be going out there to-night?"

"Better boil up some more coffee," I advised. "She may be our next visitor."

"Not if Andy Jerescott drives her out. He knows the Scurrey place, all right."

"Who is this Scurrey, anyway?"

Rande shook his head. "Don't know him very well," he admitted. "Met him once or twice during the summer, but we never had much to say to each other. Matter of fact, I didn't care much for him—too oily." He lit the pipe, gazed at the match a while, then tossed it into the leaping flames. "Well," he finished, abruptly turning, "let's get through with the unpacking. Triggett will be back soon and ready for bed."

So once more we went to the grips. To be quite candid, I was vaguely apprehensive. I couldn't have explained

the feeling. It was a kind of nervous presentiment to which, no doubt, the crazy howling of the wind contributed in no small measure. I had expected to find stillness and calm in the Adirondacks. Instead we had encountered a disturbing hint of drama.

And the drama itself arrived very quickly.

We were just completing the task of unpacking the grips, some five minutes later, when it occurred to Rande that Triggett was staying out an inordinately long time. Indeed, the man had been gone almost a half hour. I suggested that we go out and yell to him. And Rande was about to answer when, suddenly, he snatched the pipe from his mouth and stared at the door. He stood rigid, alert.

"What was that?" he whispered.

"I didn't hear anything."

"Listen!"

I did listen. All that came to me was the wail of the wind, the rasping of tormented branches.

"For the love of Heaven," I snapped, "stop it! That gale gives me all the creeps I want!"

"But I heard——"

"Of course," I scoffed, with a pretense of sarcasm. "You heard a banshee, too. Suppose we get our coats on and go hunt up friend Triggett."

Rande, however, didn't trouble about his coat. He went to the door, pulled it open, and stood boldly in the gale, peering off into the blackness. The wind, tearing into the cabin, played havoc with the few papers we had left about the place. It sent a chill through me, and I was reaching for my coat when Rande's voice, rising in a cry of amazement, called:

"Good heavens! Come out here, Phil! Quick!"

By the time I reached the door he was off in the darkness, running wildly. I saw at once what he had discovered. Something leaped within me, started to pound furiously. As I raced after him I didn't notice the cold, nor did I hear the gale, but I was trembling.

Fifty yards from the cabin sprawled a black huddle. I knew instantly who it was. No mistaking the long, gaunt figure of Steve Triggett!

Rande was already raising him.

"Grab his legs!" he gasped.

But momentarily I stood horrified, gaping at the hideous blood-clot over Triggett's eyes.

CHAPTER III.

TO SCURREY'S.

TRIGGETT was not dead. That first terrible fear vanished as soon as we had him stretched on a cot. He was breathing heavily, his massive chest struggling up with every inhalation, then limply collapsing.

The ugly gash on his forehead must have caused him infinite agony, however, and he was unconscious.

"There's some whisky in my grip!" hoarsely directed Rande. "Pour some into his mouth while I get water!"

Fully a quarter of an hour we worked over the guide before his heavy lids quivered open. He groaned softly, squirmed on the cot, and an unsteady hand groped its way to the bandage around his forehead.

"Easy!" Rande cautioned. "Take it easy, old man! Keep your eyes closed!"

"Scu——" Triggett attempted to say, but another groan broke his voice.

"Don't try to talk yet. Wait!" Rande snatched up the whisky bottle from the floor. "Swallow this," he whispered. "You'll be all right!"

Then he and I tensely looked at each other. Just what he was thinking I couldn't know. My own thoughts, however, were grim and excited. Though Triggett had tried to say "Scurrey," my suspicions did not go to Henry Scurrey; he was merely a name to me. Instead, my mind sprang to those two strange

men, Marketline and Dombey, who, with their revolvers, had been seeking the way to Scurrey's lodge.

But I thrust aside this idea to ask, "Can we get a doctor?"

"None nearer than Curtis Junction!"

"That's nice," I muttered. "And what do you do out here when you want the police?"

"Act as our own police," snapped Rande, "until we can get State Troopers!"

"I suppose that for troopers, too, we've got to go to the Junction?"

"To telephone them, yes."

"Just a conveniently located little nest you have here, isn't it?"

"Well, don't worry about that now," retorted Rande. "I think Triggett's coming around all right. Let's hear what happened before we try to do anything."

When, several minutes later, Triggett did tell us what had occurred, the news in no way simplified our problem. It left us appalled. Lying limply on the cot, his hollow eyes fixed on us, the man spoke in a voice scarcely recognizable as his own. It was unsteady, but we caught its story clearly enough.

He had gone to chop firewood, he explained, at Eagle Point; a wooded promontory, I later learned, that jutted far out into the frozen lake. From there, as he worked, he could see a light at the Scurrey lodge. This, however, did not unduly astonish him, since he recalled that possibly, as the girl at the station had averred, Scurrey himself was there. Not until the wind brought him the staccato sounds of revolver shots did Triggett become alarmed.

THEN he dropped his ax and gaped toward the light. "I sort of figured something was wrong," he whispered. "Nobody'd be hunting so late. So I started for the lodge to see what was what. Ran right across the ice on the lake, so's I could watch the light all the time. Once I saw somebody go past the window—just a shadder, like. But I didn't spot another soul till I got close to the place, on shore. Then——"

Triggett paused, grimacing in sudden pain. We made no effort to hurry him. Rande gave him another drink. And presently, after drawing an unsteady breath, he continued:

"Honest, I hardly know how it happened. Mebbe somebody saw me coming over the ice, or heard me, and waited behind a tree. Anyhow, when I passed that tree, a hand swung out at me. I saw the gun, all right! I tried to duck, too, but he caught me square on the head. Gosh, I must have gone down like a log! There was lights and stars and——"

"Did you see the man?" whispered Rande.

"No, not as I remember. But I did hear the rat scoot away. By the time I could pick up my head and look around, he was gone."

"One man?"

Evidently Triggett was puzzled by the question. "Why, I guess so. Only one hit me."

Rande glanced up at me, and I felt that he, too, had been thinking of Marketline and Dombey. To Triggett, however, he said simply, "Go on. Take it easy. What happened then?"

The gaunt man told us the rest in a weary monotone.

He had not immediately lost consciousness. Nor, apparently, had he lost a sense of caution. He knew, he said, that something serious must have occurred at the Scurrey lodge. But he also knew that in his dreadful condition, with blood pouring down his face and a thousand thunders crashing in his head, he could offer no great resistance to any one he might encounter within the place. His best course would be to fight his way back to our cabin while his strength lasted.

So he had staggered back over the ice. Though he did not emphasize the details of the journey, I could readily imagine the mighty fight his rugged figure must have waged, reeling and stumbling, falling, sometimes beaten down by that furious wind, dragging himself along on hands and knees, only to rise and lurch on again.

"I didn't think I could make it," he admitted feebly. "Once or twice things went sort of black, and I just kept going without knowing what I was doing. I tried to yell, but it wasn't any good. The wind just took the yells away."

At last, within fifty yards of the cabin, he had lost the battle. His strength was gone. Once more he tried to shout—Rande had heard him that time—and then he had plunged into insensibility.

That was all.

WHAT are you doing?" I demanded as Rande went for his rifle.

"Going up to the lodge," he said grimly. "You stay here with Triggett."

"But look here——"

"I've got to see what happened up there!"

"You can't go alone!" I declared. "You wait till——"

Triggett's fingers plucked at my sleeve. I stopped and glanced down at the man.

"You go with him," he whispered. "'Tain't safe for one to go by himself."

"Nothing doing!" snapped Rande. He was shrugging into a mackinaw. "We can't leave you alone!"

"I'll be all right now," the gaunt man insisted. "Just set that bottle near me and put my gun alongside the cot. All I need is a bit of rest. I'll be back on my feet inside a few minutes. Go on, Mr. Hyde."

But Rande remained obdurate. He took an electric flashlight from a shelf, where he had placed it in unpacking, grasped his rifle, and pulled open the door. "I'll have my eyes open," he promised, "don't worry. And I've got my gun. You stay here with him, Phil."

He turned, hunched his shoulders against the wind, and started away. Little as I liked to see him go without me, I could clearly understand the folly of leaving the wounded Triggett alone. Also, it was certain that one of us must go to the Scurrey lodge. The shots Triggett had heard could not be ignored.

And so, yielding, I went to shut the door behind Gordon Rande; but I didn't.

He had halted within ten feet of the cabin. He stood still, tense, peering ahead into the darkness. I followed his gaze and when I saw what had stopped him, a peculiar thrill quivered through me.

A man was there!

An enormous man, a veritable giant, whose bulk was rendered all the more formidable by the immense fur coat that billowed about him. With the rolling gait of a bear he was coming directly to the cabin, cumbersomely hastened along by the gale. And suddenly, in a high nasal voice, he called:

"Well, well, Mr. Rande! Howdy! Howdy!"

Rande did not stir. "Hello!" he answered sharply. "That you, Jerescott?"

"Right! Kind of late for visitors, hey?"

"Kind of. What brings you out here?"

"Just druv a young lady over to the Scurrey place," the huge man shouted. "Saw yer light goin', so I left the flivver up on the road and dropped by to say howdy. How's things?"

He had reached Gordon now, and they shook hands. The wind screamed about them and tore at their clothes. Abruptly Rande turned and came back with the man to the cabin. He was

frowning. With two brief words, as they entered, he introduced me to Andy Jerescott. And a second later the red-faced, fur-bundled giant stopped to gape in amazement at Triggett.

"Well, I'll be dog-goned!" he gasped. "What's gone an' happened here?"

"Triggett," snapped Rande, still frowning, "was attacked by some one near the Scurrey lodge."

"What!"

"You say you've just been there?"

JERESCOTT blinked, his tremendous frozen face stupefied. "Why, sure," he blurted, then hastily corrected himself: "Leastwise, I was on the road near the place!"

"You didn't go into the house?"

"No! The girl got out and ran to the place herself."

"Did you see any one around?"

"Not a soul! But—but there was a light in the lodge!"

"How long ago were you there?"

"Why, no more'n five minutes ago. Mebbe less. Dropped the girl and started right back. How long's it since Triggett was hurt?"

Rande muttered that it was almost a half hour, then looked at the floor and was silent. Still thinking, despite myself, of Marketline and Dombey, I seized the opportunity to interpolate a query of my own:

"Jerescott, did you pass any car on the road?"

"Why, no-o," he drawled in surprise.

"You didn't see any one between Curtis Junction and the Scurrey lodge?"

"Nope. Well, that is, nobody exceptin' Louis Giroux."

At that Gordon Rande glanced up sharply, his eyes suddenly narrowed. "Where," he demanded, "did you see him?"

"Right in front of his shack. He was feedin' them Huskies o' his when I druv past. I honked my horn, and we jist waved to each other."

From Steve Triggett issued a grunt. "Damn queer time," he growled, "to be feedin' dogs!"

"I wouldn't put it past him," declared Jerescott vehemently. "That crazy Canuck is the kind that'll nurse his pups any hour o' day or night. On tother hand, though, I wouldn't exactly swear he was feedin' the critters. He was standin' among 'em. That's all I saw."

To me this seemed irrelevant. I had begun to consider a new idea. Acting on it, I snatched my own new mackinaw from its peg, turned eagerly, and asked:

"Look here, Jerescott, can you stay with Triggett? Rande and I are going up to the lodge!"

Quite readily the big man assented; even suggested that we use his car. Rande, starting out of a reverie when he heard Jerescott, again snatched up his rifle and briskly nodded to me.

"All right! Let's go!"

So it was that, on the unforgettable visit to the Scurrey lodge, I accompanied Gordon Rande—and shared his shock of horror.

WE did not drive to the place. If the man who had attacked Triggett was still in the vicinity, he would be warned away by the sound of an automobile. And since we harbored a hope of catching him, we decided it would be wiser to walk. But it was no easy task to fight our way along that black road against the icy frenzy of the gale.

In its zeal to impede us, to drive us back from this mad adventure, the wind seemed to gather fresh violence. Sometimes its noise in the trees sank to a low, ominous moan; then it would race up through a terrifying crescendo to become an insane, strident shriek. We had to bend low against it; and because we were looking up constantly to search the blackness of the woods, our eyes were filled with tears.

And I felt strangely frightened.

As we trudged along, I kept so close to Rande that often our shoulders collided. He did not speak until, after a few minutes, I called almost into his ear:

"Any other cabins along the lake?"

"No," he panted. "Only Scurrey's and mine on this side. There's a place on the other side, but it hasn't been used in three-four years."

"Where does Triggett live?"

"Curtis Junction."

But it was too severely breath-taking to talk; we pressed on in silence. What we should discover at the lodge, I could not know. The girl, probably. Perhaps those two men, Marketline and Dombey. I gripped my rifle hard.

When at last we saw the huge Scurrey log-house through a curtain of trees, when we actually advanced toward its lighted window, my heart thudded heavily.

The light, though it issued from a kerosene lamp, seemed extraordinarily brilliant in this world of intense blackness. It flowed out of the window in a wide yellow beam to splash upon barren ground and the trunks of near-by trees. A cold light. We approached it with cautious steps, apprehensively, a little afraid, I think, of what we might find.

At last we stopped and peered into the window.

A large, log-walled room with a kerosene lamp burning on a rough table. A few chairs. A fire still writhing in an immense hearth. A coffeepot, two tin cups, and a few scraps of paper abandoned on a wooden bench. More we did not see. But we could not, from our position, look over the entire room.

"Let's get inside!" Rande whispered.

We moved along the wall until we reached a closed door. It had a great wrought-iron handle which I grasped. Both of us were ready to push with all our strength and were rather astonished to have the door yield easily.

Rande entered first, though I was at his back. We still saw nothing we hadn't seen from the window. But the wind, swirling in past us, whipped dangerous sparks out of the fire, and I swung the door closed. And then——

Then we saw what that door had concealed. And seeing it, I stood petrified, gaping, gripped by a terror more freezing than the cold of the night.

A man was on the floor.

He sat with his back propped against a corner of the room. His head lolled forward, so that his chin hung on his chest. One of his legs was stretched across a revolver. He was a thickset, baldish man wearing a loose tweed suit. The vest of that suit, I saw in horror, was wet with blood—blood that had streamed down from his neck. I did not have to touch him to know he was dead.

Heaven knows how long I stood there, staring, before I was able to gasp something. Then, in a low, hoarse voice I asked Rande:

"Who—who is he?"

His face was as hard as rock, and his eyes burned, as he answered thickly:

"That's Henry Scurrey!"

CHAPTER IV.

WE FIND——

SECONDS passed in utter silence. Finally, in a daze, I kneeled beside the body and hesitantly reached out with some vague hope of detecting a heartbeat. At the same time Rande raised the man's head; and I started back in revulsion, sick and dizzy and almost falling, when I saw the horrible wound in his neck.

"Shot!" Rande whispered unsteadily. He let the head sink back to the chest. Then, suddenly stiffening, he peered quickly around the room. "That girl!" he rapped out, the words so soft I could hardly hear them. "She must be around!"

"And those men!" I added tensely.

"Come on!"

Shuddering, I was glad enough to turn my back on Scurrey. Across the room was a door, and toward this Rande signaled. We moved forward on our toes. He had his flashlight ready, and I held my rifle up rigidly, prepared for anything. It was like stalking a hidden animal. The fire crackled sharply. Outside, the banshee in the wind raised its unnerving howl. The whole thing seemed fantastic, nightmarish.

The adjoining room was dark, save where the kerosene lamp threw a dim yellow shaft through the door. On its threshold we paused, while Rande's slender ray of gold stabbed its way into every black corner. No one was there. We stepped in and crossed toward another door, passing through a thin, icy draft that cut like a knife.

And then, of a sudden, we both stopped. Exactly what I heard, I don't know. Perhaps a squeak, or the rustle of cloth, or the sound of a breath. Something like that—something not easily identified. I halted, chilled, and caught a swift, warning look from Rande. He'd heard it, too. There was no doubt of the thing.

Some one was in the next room!

Scurrey's murderer, waiting to shoot for his safety? It was quite possible. I raised my rifle, my finger curled about the trigger.

But Rande motioned me to stand still. He had extinguished his light. Now, in darkness, he advanced to the wall beside the door. He thrust his head forward cautiously, inch by inch, until he could peer into the blackness of that next room without exposing more than half his head. His hand moved out with the electric torch; and suddenly flashed a brilliant beam through the door. The light evoked an instant response.

There were two shots!

The whole lodge reverberated with the sounds. The flashlight crashed to the floor. I heard a rush of steps, a cry of horror, and then a scream. In terror of Rande's having been hit, I yelled to him. His voice roared back out of that next room.

I was already jerking my own torch out of my pocket. When I sent its beam into the blackness, it revealed an amazing thing. Like a theatrical spotlight, it splashed full upon Gordon Rande and the girl we had seen at the station!

They were struggling frantically.

He had her slim body, with all its bundling of gray fur, crushed fiercely against himself, while his left hand forced her wrist high above her head. She was gripping a revolver, its muzzle now directed at the ceiling. And she fought—Heaven, how that girl fought! Savagely, furiously, gasping and writhing and kicking. As I sprang toward them, Rande's leg managed to encircle hers and restrain, in some degree, the violence of her kicks.

"Drop the gun!" he cried hoarsely. His face was only an inch from hers, and their eyes flamed into each other.

"I won't!"

"Drop it or I'll twist!"

"I won't!"

By that time I had reached them. There is nothing very noble in the spectacle of two sturdy men fighting a slender girl. But she had tried to shoot us; this was no time for delicacy. I seized her lifted hand and pried her fingers apart. It was a hard thing to do. Every muscle in her supple body was battling. The effort gained me several painful kicks.

BUT the revolver finally fell. I snatched it up and stepped back, keeping the golden circle of the flashlight focused on her face.

"Are you going to be still?" Rande panted.

"Let me go!"

"Will you be still?"

"No!"

"Then I'm going to hold you till you talk!"

"I've got nothing to say to you!"

"You've got plenty to say!"

Her eyes were blazing, and she was breathless. Her hat had been pushed awry, so that disheveled waves of russet hair tumbled and streamed over her forehead.

"What do you want?" she gasped.

"Why did you shoot?"

"You ought to know, you—you murderer!"

"I don't know and I'm not a murderer—and stop kicking!"

"Let me go!"

"When you're ready to talk sensibly. What are you doing here?"

"I'll tell that," she cried, "to the police!"

"You bet you will. But meanwhile you're going to tell it to me."

"I'll tell you nothing!"

"That's a bad guess. I want to know what you're doing here and who you are. A man's been killed——"

"You killed him!"

"I? I don't know what you mean by that, but——"

Then Rande stopped. An unexpected and disconcerting thing happened. With a final wrench of her body, the girl suddenly moaned and fainted in his arms!

At any rate, we imagined she had fainted—we credulous fools.

Rande stared from her to me in confusion. She sagged limply against him, her knees bent, her arms dangling, her head lolling on his chest. "Good heavens!" he muttered. "Come on, Phil, help me carry her inside!"

We took her into the room where the body of Henry Scurrey so grotesquely slumped in a corner. One chair, crude but commodious, offered some promise of comfort, and in this we stretched the girl. She sprawled there listlessly, her cheek on her shoulder, while the firelight and the kerosene lamp joined to throw a quivering glow over her. Rande, scowling, began to rub her hands.

"See if there's water in that bucket!" he whispered.

The bucket he indicated stood in a far corner. I found it empty. As I stared about, he saw the coffeepot on the bench. Because he was nearer to it than I, he went quickly to see its contents. And so, with neither of us looking directly at her for the moment, the girl was left alone.

She seized the chance at once. The pretense of unconsciousness vanished in the hundredth part of a second. Out of the chair she came and literally hurled herself at the body of Henry Scurrey! I, at the far side of the room, cried out wildly. Rande whirled around and leaped after her. But he was an instant too late, just a little too far behind her.

THE girl whipped up the revolver that had lain under the dead man's leg! Now, with Rande five feet from her, she aimed it full at his chest!

A shout was lost in my throat; I stood paralyzed, expecting her to send a bullet straight into his heart. Rande halted as if he had already been hit. He gaped into the muzzle of the gun, his eyes round in amazement. Waited—waited through an interval of unspeakable tension.

The girl did not shoot. In a fierce, lashing tone she whispered:

"Get back!"

Rande hesitated. But there was no use arguing against the deadly earnestness of the command. The girl's eyes were flaming. She was still on the dangerous brink of panic, and it was clear that at the slightest provocation she would squeeze the trigger.

"Get back!" she repeated, more ominously.

And Rande went back. Slowly, his frown fastened on her white face, until he stood at my side. No doubt he felt

as ridiculously helpless as I before the steady weapon in the girl's hand. She had straightened. And suddenly she was smiling—a tight, narrow-eyed, triumphant smile that had in it a world of menace.

"Now," she whispered, "give it to me!"

Rande peered at her. "Give you what?"

"What you took"—she jerked her head toward the body in the corner—"from him!"

"We didn't take anything!" snapped Rande.

"It won't do you any good to lie!"

"And it won't do you any good to shoot. I don't know what you're talking about; or anything about Scurrey's death. We found his body just a moment before——"

"Empty your pockets!"

"What?"

"You heard what I said. Empty your pockets!"

Rande looked at me, almost in bewilderment. It was humiliating and preposterous for the two of us to be so thoroughly dominated by this girl. I think he all but laughed at the absurdity of it. But there we stood, confronted by the revolver in her hand. That she was fearless and determined, she had already proved by shooting when we found her. And certainly the weapon was as deadly in her fingers as it might have been in a man's.

I said gruffly, "All right," and started turning out my jacket pockets. It occurred to me that if we placated her by complying unprotestingly with everything she asked, we might eventually bring her to a reasonable attitude.

"One of you," she warned, "at a time!"

Keys, a handkerchief, a penknife, loose change, a few scraps of paper—I dumped them all on the floor, from one pocket after another. The girl watched intently. She was tensely on guard, as though afraid I might produce a revolver. When at last I finished, she looked disappointed and puzzled. But she swung at once to Rande.

"Now you!"

"Your luck will be worse," he predicted. "I've got empty pockets." He was calm now. As he pulled the lining out of his pockets, he continued to talk: "I don't know who you imagine we are or why you think we killed Scurrey. But you're all wrong. My name is Gordon Rande. This is Philip Hyde. We have a cabin down the lake, and we came here because somebody—probably the man who murdered Scurrey—attacked and wounded our guide. If you'll put away that revolver and try to discuss the thing sanely, we may be able to get together and make some sense of this killing."

"Don't waste time trying to trick me!" she retorted. But I could see she had lost some of her vehemence. A queer expression had entered her eyes. She seemed perplexed and uncertain. Perhaps it was the failure to find whatever she was seeking which troubled her. She peered from Rande's face to mine, then down at the things we had dropped on the floor. Her pallor was quite ghastly now, and for the first time the fingers that gripped the revolver trembled.

Of a sudden she started backward toward the door. The weapon, however, continued to point at us. And her brilliant eyes remained implacable.

"You two," she whispered, "stand where you are!"

"For Heaven's sake," rasped Rande, irritated beyond endurance, "what's the idea? Who are you?"

"I'm—Rhoda Scurrey!"

"His daughter?"

"His niece!"

"Well, why——"

"That's all I intend to tell you. And I'm telling you this much only to make you understand!"

"Understand what?"

"What's going to happen to you!"

CHAPTER V.

WITHOUT POLICE.

WHAT did happen to us in the ensuing few minutes was, from a masculine point of view, most humbling. For Rhoda Scurrey achieved, with very little effort, a decisive victory.

There was a large key in the latch of the door, and this she transferred to the outside, meanwhile keeping her revolver leveled at us. The gale swept in past her, bringing its cold sting into the room and whipping the flames in the hearth to a leaping fury. She did not speak again. She merely stepped out, pulled the door closed after her, and clicked the lock.

Instantly Rande and I lunged forward. We tugged violently at the handle, but the lock held. We cursed—which accomplished nothing. Rande sprang to a window and tried to open it. The thing was either jammed or frozen, and it refused to be budged. Another proved equally obstinate. At last, too impatient to test all the windows in the lodge, I picked up my rifle and smashed the frosted pane with its stock. I broke the glass out of its frame completely. Then, like schoolboys, both of us scrambled through the improvised exit.

"She must have gone to the road!" Rande cried. We rushed there wildly, ran fully a hundred yards along its frozen, deep-rutted surface. But of Rhoda Scurrey we saw no sign. In frustration we turned to search among the trees. Time after time we paused to listen for possible footsteps. There was no sound save the moaning of the wind in the branches above us. Our flashlights constantly stabbed the blackness; but the girl had a start of several minutes.

"No use!" Rande finally snapped. "Heaven knows where she is by this time!"

"She'll have to head back for Curtis Junction, won't she?" I demanded.

"No other place to go."

"And she has no car!"

"That gives us an advantage, yes," grimly said Rande. "If we drive in with Jerescott, or take Triggett's flivver, we can head her off."

"And yet," I muttered as we halted, "I don't think she knows anything about the murder."

"More than we know, anyhow!"

"She couldn't have been here when it was committed. Triggett heard the shots fully a half hour before Jerescott brought the girl to the lodge."

"If she knows so little," rapped out Rande, with a strange access of bitterness, "why did she try to shoot us? Why did she speak of something stolen from Scurrey?"

"Because she thought we had killed him."

Rande was scowling. He shook his head and started off through the darkness. "We won't get anywhere," he muttered, "by guessing. Come on."

"What do you want to do?"

"Have another look around the lodge."

"Don't you think," I protested, "the first thing to do is call the police or State Troopers; or whatever you call in this forsaken place?"

"Of course. But we've got to go to Curtis Junction to do that."

"Then the sooner we start, the better!"

"Not," insisted Rande, "before we have another glance through the lodge, Phil. We may have overlooked any number of things. Come along. It'll take only a moment."

I acceded, naturally, and we started back for the Scurrey lodge. Through the stark trees its illuminated window shone to us as a beacon. And above

us, in the groaning branches, the freezing wind howled a wild mockery of our efforts.

IT is possible, of course—though I honestly doubt it—that a trained detective would have found a score of clews in that log house: it is also conceivable that he might have read, in such clews, a clear, coherent account of the tragedy. As for us, however, we were not detectives. Nor were we experienced in criminal investigation. When we looked through the lodge, it was with the eyes of amateurs.

And still, I think, we did quite as well as the authorities who came after us.

A thorough search of every room in the house, with our flashlights blazing into each black nook, yielded a single new discovery: Rhoda Scurrey's small bag. It was the same grip—a sort of week-end bag—she had held when we spoke to her at the station; we found it close to the spot where she had pretended to faint. It was locked. And Rande's first impulse was to force the thing open, in the hope that its contents might reveal more about the girl and the murder.

There, however, I objected. "No use exceeding our authority. We'll simply get into difficulties with the police. Better take it along and let the troopers break it open."

To this he finally conceded, though reluctantly, and we returned from darkness to the dimly lit room where lay the body of Henry Scurrey. To that horrible huddle, however, we did not go immediately; for my part, I'd seen enough of it. We paused, instead, at the bench on which were the coffeepot, the two tin cups, and the scraps of paper—bits of jaggedly torn newspaper.

"Scurrey," softly observed Rande, "wasn't alone when he took coffee. Both cups have been used. And look, Phil, this newspaper was wrapped around something greasy. Food, I'd say: meat."

"It's a French paper."

"Ye-es." Rande frowned at a scrap of it. "From Quebec."

"Quebec? Didn't Dombey say he came from Canada?"

"Montreal. But he wasn't carrying a package."

"He could have had it in his car."

With this idea Gordon Rande was not deeply impressed. He seemed to believe some one else had left the fragment of newspaper, though he could offer no guess of the person's identity. "In the first place," he argued, "Dombey and Marketline hardly had time to come from our cabin, murder Scurrey, attack Triggett, make a meal, and get away before Andy Jerescott drove up. Hardly. And besides——"

"But are we sure," I interrupted, "that Marketline and Dombey were gone when Jerescott arrived?"

"Andy didn't see their car around."

"Well, then, where did they go? Where does the road lead from here?"

At that Rande glanced at me queerly, then frowned back at the bench. "That's the strange part of it, Phil," he muttered. "The road ends here at the lake!"

I STARED in astonishment. "You mean the only way to go from here is back toward Curtis Junction?"

"Exactly."

"But Jerescott said he didn't meet another car!"

"Well, you figure that one out. I can't—yet."

Bewildered, I looked at Rande wide-eyed. He was frowning grimly.

"Do you imagine," I demanded, "any one would be crazy enough to drive out on the ice?"

"What for? It wouldn't lead anywhere."

"Damn it!" I whispered. "This thing's becoming absolutely uncanny!"

It would, of course, have been easy enough for Marketline and Dombey themselves to vanish in the blackness of the woods. But what of their car?

"Suppose," said Rande, with sudden briskness, "we have another look at the body, and go. We've seen about all there is to see, I think."

This final inspection I allowed him to make alone. Personally, I had no desire to touch again the horribly blood-soaked figure in the corner. While he went through the dead man's pockets, I propped before the fireplace a screen that had been leaning against the wall. As I finished, Rande glanced at me over his shoulder in perplexity.

"No wallet," he said.

"Eh?"

"No wallet. He has just about everything else you'd expect to find in a man's pockets. But there isn't a wallet." He looked around curiously, the firelight flickering on his puzzled countenance. "I just wonder where his overcoat can be."

"There's a sort of closet over there."

In the closet we found the great coat hanging on a peg. It yielded gloves, cigars, handkerchiefs, matches, keys, any number of things; but not a wallet.

"I have an idea," muttered Rande, "it was the wallet Rhoda Scurrey tried to find in our pockets. And perhaps it was for the wallet that Scurrey was killed."

Meanwhile, a new thought had occurred to me; something which had no connection at all with the missing wallet. But I had to utter it:

"Look here, as long as we're asking questions—where's Scurrey's car?"

"What's that?"

"Scurrey's car! He wouldn't have walked here!"

"There's a shack behind the house," Rande suggested thoughtfully. "A kind of lean-to. Maybe it's in there."

We went out together to see. And I was inordinately relieved to find a huge, black sedan, its hood covered by a blanket, in the makeshift garage. That it was Scurrey's automobile was attested by the initials on the door: H. S. One problem, at any rate, was eliminated.

"Well," snapped Rande, as we turned back to the house, "we'd better go and notify the Troopers. There's nothing more we can do here." The wind suddenly swept against us with a terrifying whoop, and we had to hunch our shoulders against its freezing, stinging fury.

I thought of Rhoda Scurrey, fighting her way alone through this bitter blackness.

"Hope," I cried, "that girl has sense enough to follow the road!"

The gale howled derisively.

CHAPTER VI.

A STOP EN ROUTE.

THE half mile trudge to Rande's cabin was like the descent of a steep hill, for the wind, now at our back, swept us along, sometimes whipped us into an unwilling dog-trot. Our flashlights played on the road, casting into stark relief every frozen rut and pit. But Rande's ray, I noticed, frequently darted off among the trees on a search of its own.

When at last we stamped into the warmth of the cabin, it was like coming out of a bad dream into a world of cheerful, comforting reality.

Steve Triggett appeared to have profited considerably from his rest. He was sitting on the cot, his back propped against the wall. And though a scarlet stain discolored the front of his head bandage, though his bony countenance was still gray, there was a suggestion of the old keenness in his narrow eyes. Andy Jerescott, having discarded his fur coat, sat poking the fire—a tremendous man, ponderous as a bull, with a mass of curly, silver-streaked hair. Both men started up excitedly for news. And when we told,

briefly, what we had to report, they sat stunned.

"Fer Heaven's sake!" Jerescott whispered in awe. "Fer Heaven's sake!"

"We're going in for the troopers right away."

"D'ye think it was the"—the big man blinked stupefied eyes—"the girl who killed him?"

"No!" decisively snapped Rande. "Scurrey must have been killed by the shots Triggett heard. That was some time—at least twenty minutes, I'd judge—before the girl reached the lodge."

"Them two fellers, then!"

"I don't know. Driving to town, Jerescott?"

Slowly the big man pushed himself up from his chair. He still looked bewildered, as if he could not credit the fact that a murder had been committed. Watching him, Triggett suggested that since he had to return to Curtis Junction, Jerescott himself could summon the authorities; there seemed no necessity for the rest of us to go. But I instantly protested; and Rande, too, vetoed the idea.

"I want to go," he declared. "If we run into Marketline and Dombey, or pick up Rhoda Scurrey, I want to be there!"

"That bein' the case," promptly said Jerescott, and sat down with new resolution, "suppose ye drive in yerselves. I'll stay here with Triggett."

"No need for that," the guide assured him. "I'll be all right now—be walkin' around soon."

But Andy Jerescott shook an obdurate head. His mouth was a determined slash. "No, sirree," he insisted. "When them there troopers come, I want to be in on the excitement. Besides, like as not they'll have to ask me questions about the girl I druv out. No use my leavin'. Ye can drop by an' tell my wife, Mr. Rande. Jist tell her I'm all right, not to worry none. Take my car, if ye like."

When we departed, however, it was in Triggett's noisy flivver. Rande, because he knew the road better than I, drove. His profile, faintly illumined by the dashboard lamp, was hard and grim, his eyes strangely narrow. He watched not only the road itself, but I could see his gaze dart from side to side in a perpetual hunt for Rhoda Scurrey.

I sat beside him and peered tensely along the golden shaft the headlights threw before us. The rifles stood between my knees. I felt unutterably, shiveringly cold, and my feelings were in no way soothed by the endless fury of the wind. It screamed as wildly as ever in the trees about us—a long, maddening *whoooo-eeeee!* Like the howl of a banshee, Rande had said. And he'd been right! A fanciful man, a superstitious man, might have heard another tragic omen in the continued howling. I didn't. I imagined we had had our share of horror.

But I was wrong.

A LONG time we drove in silence, jostled and bounced by every bump in the road. Then, of a sudden, Gordon Rande said:

"Louis Giroux's dogs—hear them?"

"Yes," I muttered. "Sounds like a pack of hungry wolves. Just the sort of cheerful thing we need on a night like this."

"I guess they hear us coming."

"Where's Giroux's place?"

"Around the next bend. I'm going to stop there."

"What for?" I demanded.

"To ask him if he heard any cars go by, or if he saw Rhoda Scurrey."

"The fellow's probably asleep."

"Not with those dogs barking like that!"

We rounded the curve. In the blackness ahead, some twenty yards to the left of the road, stood the dog-breeder's shack with light still glowing in its windows! Rande stopped. I peered

uncertainly toward the house. There appeared to be a path of some sort leading to the door, but on each side of that path I could dimly discern the leaping, straining bodies of the man's Huskies. Those dogs barked and howled in a manner that should have frightened away any trespasser. Fortunately, they were chained to trees and we were safe enough—as long as we did not go too close to them.

As Rande stepped out of the car, the door of the shack suddenly swung open. It poured a flood of light over the path. Silhouetted against that light stood the figure of a short, lean man; fully dressed, round-shouldered, holding a rifle with his finger on its trigger. He shouted a command, and the dogs truculently lowered their barks to sullen growls.

"Who's that?" Louis Giroux sharply challenged.

"Gordon Rande, Giroux!"

"Eh? O-o-oh!" The rifle was lowered, and the small man thrust his head forward. "M'sieu' Rande? You wait one leetle minute, yes? I fix these *canailles* so they keep quiet! You can come in in jus' one minute."

He vanished indoors, only to emerge again in a few seconds without the rifle. Now he was bundled in a high-collared mackinaw that seemed grotesquely too large for his thin body. He stood among his dogs, speaking to them, waving his arms. What wizardry he exercised I couldn't hear, but every one of those Huskies went slinking away in silence.

Then Louis Giroux ran out to us and fervently shook Rande's hand and mine. I saw a thin, intense, excited face with blazing black eyes and a small dark mustache. He had not put on a hat and the wind tore wildly at his long hair.

"Triggett," he ejaculated, "he tell me this morning that you come, M'sieu' Rande. I am ver' happy to see you. Ver' happy! But listen——"

"Just a second, Giroux. Before you rush on, I want to know something. Have you heard any cars go by, during the last couple of hours, toward Curtis Junction?"

"Eh? But certainly! I hear one maybe an hour ago."

Rande shot a flashing look at me, then quickly asked the man: "Did you see who was in it?"

"No. My dogs, they bark. I look out of the window and see the car pass. It does not stop. That is all; but, please, M'sieu' Rande——"

"What sort of car?"

"Beeg. M'sieu', I beg you to stop a minute." Giroux's face was alive with agitation. He seized Rande's arm. "You listen to me. You come inside, yes? I have funny thing happen. I have in there a—a lady! I don't know what to think."

"What!"

The exclamation was Rande's, but I myself half rose from my seat in the car. Giroux, his black eyes flaming, nodded jerkily.

"Yes! She—she sit in there with a revolver!"

Rande was on the verge of dashing to the house, but Louis Giroux held him back.

"Wait! First you let me tell you what happen'! Five minutes ago, no more, I swear, my dogs, they are barking. I look out and—*sacre bleu!*—it is a girl! She is standing there, afraid to pass the dogs. So I go out and bring her in. She is frozen. She is weak. She cannot talk. I make her sit down. I have prepared something hot for her. Then she hear your car and—phoot!—she jump up like she see a ghost. She pull a revolver from her pocket. She say two men, they have kill' Henry Scurrey at the lodge and now, they chase her! So I take my gun and go to the door. But I see it is you, and I go back and tell her it is all right, not to be afraid—only my frien'. She

say all right, she is not afraid, and sit down with gun. You come in now with me, please, yes?"

CHAPTER VII.

A LIGHT SHINES THROUGH.

RHODA SCURREY was standing in front of the fireplace. Meeting her, we were so astounded by the change in her bearing that we halted, quite instinctively, to stare at her. She stood erect, facing us, her head raised in a hint of defiance. Of the revolver there was no sign, but she kept both her hands significantly sunk in the pockets of the jacket under her gray fur coat. That coat hung open, revealing a figure of remarkable poise and beauty. She had thrown off her hat, so that her auburn hair was shot through with the red glintings of the fire behind her.

"Well, Miss Scurrey," said Gordon Rande, without advancing; and for the first time in hours he actually smiled. "You've managed to cov r considerable distance since you left us."

"I suppose," she said quietly, "you've been following me?"

"No. This is wholly accidental. We're on our way to notify the police."

Louis Giroux, who had been busy closing the door and throwing his mackinaw to its peg, now went, almost fawningly, to the girl. He was smiling reassurance. "You mus' not be afraid, mamselle. M'sieu' Rande, he is my ver' good frien'. And this gentleman, too, he is all right. I can give you my word. You mus' not be afraid."

"I'm not afraid," she said firmly. Then she looked levelly at us. "So you are Gordon Rande and Philip Hyde."

Rande inclined his head in a curious gesture between a nod and a bow. "Thank you, Miss Scurrey, for remembering the names. Why did you think we were lying?"

"I—I couldn't be sure you weren't."

"And couldn't risk taking a chance?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"You might have been inventing the names simply to make me lower my gun."

"I see. Who did you think we were?"

She hesitated. On impulse I moved into the pause to hazard: "Marketline and Dombey?"

At that Rhoda Scurrey spun toward me with a violent start. Her eyes flared. Her voice fell to a low, hoarse note as she challenged: "How do you know them?"

"We don't really know them," I replied quietly. "They dropped into our cabin by mistake."

"To-night?"

"Just a short time before we went to the lodge. They were looking for Henry Scurrey."

A rush of color flooded her cheek. One hand leaped out to grip the back of a chair, and those eloquent eyes burned.

"They killed him!" she cried furiously. "Marketline and Dombey!"

"Are you positive of that?" Rande demanded.

"It couldn't have been any one else! They were the only ones who knew my uncle would be at the lodge to-night! The only ones who knew he was bringing——"

She stopped. It was an abrupt, breath-taking stop, as if she feared she had said too much; and, for a second, she looked frightened. But Rande, no doubt recalling the missing wallet, softly prompted:

"The only ones who knew he was bringing money?"

SEARCHINGLY Rhoda Scurrey stared at him; tensely, as though wondering how far she could actually trust him. One thing was clear: since Louis Giroux had vouched

for our identities, she had abandoned her air of defiant enmity.

"Money?" Rande repeated.

"Yes! They stole it from him!"

"Much?"

"More than twenty thousand dollars!"

"Whew! Quite a haul. I imagine, Miss Scurrey, you'll have a great deal to tell the police."

"And," she promised vehemently, "I'll tell it to them!"

"There are quite a few things," he said quietly, "I'd like you to tell us, too; if you will. First, why in Heaven's name did you shoot at us?"

Rhoda Scurrey did not immediately answer. A moment she looked straight into Gordon Rande's eyes; then she frowned down at the floor. Sinking to the chair beside her, she turned that frown toward the fire.

"I suppose it's useless," she murmured, "to say I'm sorry. I was in a panic. When you two came into that dark room, I was certain you were Marketline and Dombey. I knew you'd kill me if you found me there. That's the only way I can explain it."

I said, "You are, thank Heaven, a rotten shot."

She did not answer.

Rande, meanwhile, had unbuttoned his coat and sat now on the edge of a small table, his hands in his pockets, his legs swinging slowly. He regarded Rhoda Scurrey from under contracted, puzzled brows.

"Tell me," he muttered, "who are these fellows—Marketline and Dombey?"

The girl was still looking into the fire; its glow filled her rumpled hair with incredible lustre. And she continued to look into those flames a long time before she replied, in a low voice:

"Canadians."

"Were they to meet your uncle at the lodge?"

"Ye-es.'

"Why?'

Unexpectedly, then, she swung around. "Please," she begged, "I want a chance to think this thing out before I answer questions!"

"Oh," Rande said dryly, "of course ——" He rose to his feet. "I'm sorry."

"It isn't," she cried, "that I want to hide anything! I just—oh, I want to get hold of myself!"

Because she appeared to be genuinely distressed, I turned to Rande with a sudden suggestion: "Suppose we take Miss Scurrey with us to Curtis Junction. We can talk on the way."

Rande instantly acceded, but Louis Giroux, who had been puttering around in a corner, with most of his attention on us, would not have his hospitality ignored. The little man insisted that Rhoda Scurrey wait and have the hot coffee and food he had so hastily prepared. "Mamselle will feel stronger and better for the cold ride, no?" He grinned quite handsomely, displaying, beneath his dark mustache, teeth as pearly and perfect as the fangs of his dogs. "In one leetle minute," he promised, "all will be ready. So! You will wait—yes?"

THE one leetle minute, however, extended through several minutes while the girl gratefully ate. I sat down and spent the time in thinking. At last, it seemed, a beam of light was beginning to shine on the mystery of Henry Scurrey's dreadful death. He had been murdered for money he was carrying—more than twenty thousand dollars!

Granting this, I was still confused by innumerable questions.. Why had the man carried so much money to the lonely lodge? Had Marketline and Dombey been the killers? If not, then who? And where were those two men now? Was it one of them who had attacked Triggett? And again, what

was this girl doing in the wilderness? Why had she come to her uncle's lodge at so unearthly an hour and on such a tempestuous night?

These reflections and many more were chasing themselves through my mind. And while I considered them I gazed, rather absently, around Louis Giroux's shack.

It was squalid. A malodorous place, dirty and upset. His cot, apparently, had not been made up in weeks, and its coverings were disgusting. For want of sufficient blankets he had cast a couple of nondescript pelts over the things; and these lent his sleeping quarters a downright barbaric look. It certainly suited the wilds.

And yet there was something fascinating about a man who could live this hermit life, dedicating himself to the companionship of dogs. I gazed around in increasing interest. The log walls were profusely adorned with pictures of Huskies. Among them, on one side, hung a splendid moose-head possessed of magnificent antlers. And near that trophy were crossed snowshoes and two hunting rifles. I rose to move about that strange room, as though I were inspecting a museum's gallery.

I went slowly until suddenly I stopped and stared into a corner. The thing that lay there, on the floor, gave me a queer thrill of astonishment. I glanced at Giroux—a quick, sharp glance. He was bending solicitously over Rhoda Scurrey, his back toward me.

Excitedly I signaled Rande.

When he came—perplexed, I imagine, by my evident agitation—I jerked my head to indicate what I had found. He looked; and his brows sprang up in surprise.

The thing was a stack of old newspapers.

French papers, *Le Journal de Quebec,* the same papers of which we had found scraps at the Scurrey lodge!

CHAPTER VIII.

TWENTY THOUSAND DOLLARS.

IN that moment the shack seemed peculiarly hushed. There rose, abruptly, a new and alarming aspect of the night's mystery; a view of it in which the figure of Louis Giroux loomed large and ominous.

As if to stimulate an unspoken suspicion, strange memories rushed into my mind. I remembered, for example, that Louis Giroux had not been at home when first we passed his house between ten and half past ten; Triggett had guessed that the man was out on his trap lines. I recalled also that Andy Jerescott had seen the French Canadian outside his shack, "feeding his dogs," at about eleven. Provocative thoughts!

Rande, I must say, managed the situation very adroitly.

Motioning me to remain quiet, he returned to sit on the edge of the table. Quite casually he thrust his hands into his pockets and swung his leg.

"Oh, Giroux," he said.

The little man looked around. His countenance still held the smile he had been lavishing on Rhoda Scurrey.

"M'sieu'?"

"I just wanted to ask what you were doing at the Scurrey place."

For an instant Louis Giroux continued to smile. It was as if the shock of the query had suddenly frozen the expression into a mirthless fixity of muscles. But the smile began to fade. His face lost color, twitched.

"What—what you say, m'sieu'?"

"What were you doing at the lodge?"

Giroux swallowed. Clearly I could see the convulsive movement of his sinewy throat.

"Wh-what do you mean, m'sieu'?"

"Oh, come, let's not make a mystery of that," Rande urged almost jocularly. "We know, of course, that you were at the lodge. But we don't know why on earth you went there."

If Rande had been bold in assuming this attitude of certainty, the Canadian's reaction must have convinced him that he had not erred. He waited. Rhoda Scurrey had looked up in astonishment. She set aside her coffee cup and stared incredulously.

"You do not think," the little man began unevenly, "that I—*parbleu*—that I——"

"Killed Scurrey?" Rande finished for him. "No, Giroux. Certainly not. If I thought so, I'd take the idea to the troopers instead of to you. No, no. I'm simply trying to piece together the story of what Henry Scurrey did before his death. Tell me, just why did you go to the lodge?"

Indubitably he knew how to manage Giroux! The man seemed actually relieved. He brushed his hand back through his luxuriant hair and frowned at the floor.

"Eh, bien," he said hesitantly, *"écoutez.* This afternoon, oh, maybe five-six o'clock, M'sieu' Scurrey, he stop here with his car. He ask me if I like to make five dollar. And I say sure, why not? Five dollar, *ma foi,* she is good money. So he says I mus' come to the lodge with him and clean up and chop some firewood, because he will stay there maybe one-two days. I say fine, sure. Then he says he did not bring anything to eat—could I take along something for the supper? I take coffee and sugar and wrap up a nice piece of the roast pork. Then we go together. I have chop' his firewood and put it in the lean-to, while he has the supper. Then I have coffee with him, I clean up the place a leetle, and I go home. That is all, m'sieu'—I give you my word."

"What time did you leave him?"

"Oh, maybe half past nine. Maybe ten."

"Was he alone then?"

"But certainly!"

"Expecting anybody?"

"That he did not tell me, m'sieu'."

"Did you walk home?"

"But naturally."

"Meet anybody on the road?"

Giroux shook his head. "No, m'sieu'. I took the short cut through the woods from the end of the lake."

Rande nodded and gazed thoughtfully at the moose head. There was silence; a strained hush during which the dog-breeder waited attentively. It seemed, however, that Gordon Rande had nothing further to ask, for he drifted off in puzzled reverie. And so, emulating his casual, even friendly tone, I inquired:

"By the way, Giroux, did Scurrey pay you the five dollars?"

"Oh, yes."

"Did you happen to notice if he took the money out of a wallet?"

"Oui, m'sieu' he did; when I was ready to leave."

"I don't suppose you remember whether the wallet was filled with much money?"

Giroux peered at me intently. I rather expected a gruff, resentful retort, for he obviously perceived the purpose of my query. It was intended to determine, of course, if he knew Scurrey had the twenty thousand dollars. But presently the French Canadian contented himself by expressing his feelings with a truly Gallic shrug.

"It is not my custom, m'sieu'," he said, "to look into people's wallets."

And that was the end of his testimony.

TEN minutes later, when we were driving with Rhoda Scurrey to Curtis Junction—she in the front seat beside Rande, and I in the rear—I sought to learn what impression Giroux's replies had created.

"To me," Rande declared, "they sounded plausible enough."

"Then why didn't he tell us in the first place that he'd been to the lodge!"

"I asked him the same thing while

you and Miss Scurrey were going out to the car."

"Well?"

"Well, Louis Giroux is a funny sort of chap. Likes—uff!" A violent bounce of the car interrupted. "Likes his solitude and peace. He said as long as he didn't know who'd killed Henry Scurrey he couldn't help the investigation by jumping into the affair. And he preferred to remain out of it so that the troopers wouldn't pester him."

"That," I asserted, "doesn't sound quite as convincing as his other answers."

"It's his story," said Rande. "Take it or leave it, he sticks to it."

A while we drove on in speculative silence. Rhoda Scurrey, in truth, had not spoken at all since we left the shack. Bundled in her gray furs, she peered along the golden path of the headlights. I could see only the back of her head and her shoulders, but occasionally I noticed her shivering. For that matter, however, I was shuddering myself. The wind swept over me like a torrent of icy water. It was growing constantly colder and showed no disposition to slacken its howling frenzy. But I suppose I ought not to complain about that wind, for in the end it helped so materially to identify Scurrey's murderer.

Suddenly Gordon Rande glanced at the girl.

"I was hoping, Miss Scurrey," he said, "that you'd tell us about Marketline, Dombey, and your uncle."

She looked at him, then turned her head to scrutinize me. She appeared to be subjecting both of us to a penetrating, thorough appraisal.

"Have you two constituted yourselves detectives?"

"After a fashion," I admitted.

"Up here," added Rande, "until the troopers arrive, every man is his own policeman."

She nodded. "I see. Well, your only job, then, is to find Marketline and Dombey!" She seemed suddenly bitter as she said this; we waited for her to continue. But after an instant she regained her poise and went on: "You must have thought I acted crazily tonight."

"As a matter of fact," said Rande, "you did."

"I don't think you'd say that if you understood."

"Then suppose you help us to understand. It isn't altogether impossible," he explained earnestly, "that we'll meet Marketline and Dombey. If we do, I'd like to know just how we stand with those two!"

Rhoda Scurrey considered. It occurred to me that her uncle's death had not overwhelmed her with grief, though it had left her grim and excited. Still, my own perceptions might have been distorted by agitation, and I could not wholly trust them. She had turned to look ahead through the windshield again, so that I could see only the back of her head. When she spoke, the words were whipped to me over her shoulder.

"All right," she abruptly decided. "I intend to tell it all to the troopers, so I may as well tell it to you. Only, you—you'll think it sounds like a sort of cheap movie."

"After what we've seen so far tonight," grimly answered Rande, "nothing can seem too melodramatic! Go on, Miss Scurrey. What happened?"

CHAPTER IX.

THE GARAGE.

"MY uncle is, or was, the sole executor of my father's estate," she said, talking rapidly and so quietly that I had to lean forward to hear. "The way he managed that estate—well, I'm not going to pretend that it put us on the best of terms toward each other. When my father died, four years ago, he left me more

than seventy thousand dollars. Now, to-night, there isn't a cent left!"

Gordon Rande glanced at her and raised his brows; I muttered something; but we offered no interruption.

"Uncle Henry, as sole executor," she said, "had full power to draw checks, make investments, and handle the estate in any way he considered wisest. This arrangement was to continue until I was twenty-five. My father, you see," she explained parenthetically and with a trace of bitterness, "didn't think women were capable of looking after themselves until they reached the age of twenty-five. Well, I happen to be twenty-three."

She paused. Gordon Rande mumbled "I'd have guessed about nineteen. But never mind. Go on, please."

"I—oh, don't mind if I jump backward and forward in this story! I'm all confused to-night!"

"I understand," Rande assured her. "Take your time."

"I suppose I'd better start back a few years, to make things clear. Three years. I got a job on a newspaper then. Couldn't sit around just living on the allowance Uncle Henry gave me. I worked in New York ten months. Then a friend of mine—she'd been doing movie reviews on the paper—became editor of *Screen Legends,* a magazine that was being published out in Hollywood. She offered me a position as her assistant, and I took it. Went out to Hollywood and worked there until a few months ago. Then the magazine exploded, and I returned to New York.

"All this time, of course, Uncle Henry had been sending me an allowance and occasional reports about the money. But I found, when I came home, that the reports had been far from accurate. In fact, they'd been only partial reports. All I had left was a little more than twenty thousand dollars.

"Uncle Henry attributed it to the crash of the stock market, in which, he said, he'd invested so much of the money. Claimed it wasn't his fault; everybody had taken losses. Well, that seemed plausible enough, and I didn't see what I could do about it, anyway, so I accepted the situation as calmly as I could. But something happened!"

Rhoda Scurrey peered ahead through the windshield. Though I could not see her face, I knew she was frowning; the frown was in the tenseness of her voice.

"Did I mention," she asked, "that Uncle Henry was a jeweler? No? Well, it's an important point. About this thing that happened: One night he had a furious argument with a boy who worked for him. I was in the next room and couldn't help hearing the entire thing. The boy became excited and enraged, and before Uncle Henry could stop him, he let the cat out of the bag. I learned that most of my money hadn't gone into the stock market at all! More than thirty thousand dollars of it had been squandered in some wild swindling scheme which had collapsed! Uncle had tried to engineer some diamond smuggling affair, and he'd lost every cent in the effort!"

I STARTED and stared at the girl. Listening to her gave me a singularly uncomfortable, almost uncanny feeling. It was so weird an experience to bump along this black road, with the wind screaming through the stark trees about us, while we heard a history of crime.

"Believe me," Rhoda Scurrey declared, "I was no longer calm then! Oh, no! Throwing my father's money into criminal schemes was not my idea of competently administering an estate! I was furious. I wanted to take legal action immediately to prevent my uncle from touching another cent of the estate. And—oh, I wish I had!"

"You mean," Rande demanded, "that you allowed him to continue handling the money?"

"Sounds crazy, doesn't it?" she agreed in self-derision. "But he started to plead with me like a child. Actually wept. All about my sending him to prison if I revealed the truth, and causing a family scandal—all that sort of thing. And I weakened. After all, he was my father's brother; I didn't really want to send him to jail. Besides, there was no way of getting back the thirty thousand dollars he'd put into the swindling scheme. It was all gone—part of the irretrievable past. Well, I let the thing go on one condition: Uncle Henry promised not to spend another cent of the estate without first consulting me! And now, if we skip four months of comparative peace, we come to the matter of Marketline and Dombey."

By this time we must have been within a few miles of Curtis Junction; the girl's account of Scurrey's malefactions proved so engrossing that I scarcely noticed the bumpy, noisy progress we were making. And when she mentioned those two men who had come, armed, to our cabin, I pushed farther forward, the better to hear this part of the story.

"A week ago," she said grimly, "Uncle Henry came to me very excitedly with a proposal. He had an opportunity, he told me, to make a great deal of money, but he needed twenty-five thousand dollars to swing the deal. He could produce five thousand of his own, but he wanted to use my twenty thousand for the balance of what he required. 'If you let me take the money, Rhoda,' he said, and these are his exact words, 'I'll bring you a profit of ten thousand dollars within two weeks!'"

The girl appeared to stiffen.

"Any scheme," she asserted sharply, "that could yield a profit like that in two weeks struck me as being queer. So I started to question him about it." He had begun, she said, by being elusive and vague and benignly reassuring. He had chuckled at her frowning uncertainty. But when he saw that his niece had no intention of consenting before she understood the details of his "opportunity," he had been constrained to drop a few morsels of concrete information.

"He had a chance," Rhoda Scurrey continued, "of buying fifty thousand dollars' worth of diamonds for half their value—provided he acted quickly. Two Canadian gentlemen, Kurt Marketline and Arthur Dombey, were ready to sell the jewels to him—for spot cash. He'd done business with them before, he assured me, and they were entirely trustworthy. That almost made me laugh; he spoke to me as though he were telling a child a fairy tale."

WHY were Messrs. Marketline and Dombey selling these diamonds at so amazingly low a price?—she had inquired. Her Uncle Henry had muttered something indistinct about their being in desperate need of cash and their generosity in offering him the first chance to buy. Where had they procured the diamonds? He didn't know; what difference did it make, as long as he could turn over a handsome profit on the stones? And where were these two generous gentlemen? In Montreal. Were they coming to New York to consummate the deal? No; they hadn't the time to come all the way. He'd meet them somewhere.

"The whole thing was so absurdly obvious," Rhoda Scurrey declared, "that I became furious. I could see that Uncle Henry intended to purchase stolen goods which must, of necessity, be smuggled into the country. We had a frightful dispute and he finally left me with the knowledge that he couldn't touch a cent of the money!"

I asked: "Was there an understanding that if he ever used your funds without your permission, you'd take him to court on the old swindling charge?"

"Something like that, yes."

"And still——"

"Still he took the chance, yes! Maybe he hoped to be able to sell the diamonds and replace the money in the bank before I discovered what he'd done. I think he simply couldn't force himself to surrender so big a profit."

"How did you learn of it?" asked Rande.

"By sheer accident. I hadn't seen Uncle Henry in a week. This morning, on impulse, I telephoned him and his housekeeper told me he'd gone to spend a day or two at his place in the Adirondacks. I'd never been there, but I knew it was near Curtis Junction and close to the Canadian border. That's the point which shocked me. It didn't require much intuition to remember Marketline and Dombey, who were supposedly in Canada. I immediately got in touch with the bank, fortunately I know the cashier quite well, and learned that Uncle Henry had drawn my twenty thousand dollars!"

"So," Rande muttered, "you hopped on a train and chased after him."

"I couldn't persuade myself to go to the police," she confessed in a low, hard tone. "I thought if I reached Uncle Henry before he got rid of the money, I could stop the whole transaction. I just threw a few things into a grip——"

"Including a revolver?"

"Ye-es. It had been my father's. Heaven knows why I took it. I simply snatched it up—perhaps because I realized I was undertaking a criminal risk."

Concerning the rest of her astonishing account we already knew a great deal. But before we reached Curtis Junction—and unexpected drama—she offered several illuminative explanations of her recent conduct. For example, there was the mystery of her terror when we offered to drive her from the station to the Scurrey lodge on Moonrise Lake. Of this she said:

"Uncle Henry told me, long ago, that his lodge was in an almost deserted place. He had only one neighbor; some one who spent the summers there."

"Meaning me," decided Rande.

"I suppose so. That's why I was amazed when you told me, at the station, that you were going to Moonrise Lake. Immediately I thought you two must be Marketline and Dombey! Who else could be going to the place? And I certainly didn't want to drive out with those two men!"

"I see." Rande tightly gripped the steering wheel as we bounded over an unusually rough stretch. "Tell me, Miss Scurrey, just what did you find when you reached the lodge?"

SHE had, we learned, found Henry Scurrey lying dead behind the door, as we had seen him. The sight had so shocked and unnerved her that for a while she was in a daze; and the daze became panic. Because Andy Jerescott had already driven away, she was utterly alone. At once she concluded that Dombey and Marketline had been here, had murdered Henry Scurrey! The fact that she forced herself to look into her uncle's pockets, only to find that the money was gone, corroborated this idea. She was confused and terrified.

"Then I heard somebody outside! The crunching of steps. I looked through a window and saw you two. I was positive it was Marketline and Dombey returning. And—well, I was pretty wild. I knew that if they had killed Uncle Henry, they'd probably kill any one who could testify against them. So I rushed into the other room——"

"Where we found you," grimly concluded Gordon Rande. "Well, it's an amazing story, Miss Scurrey. We seem to know everything except the killer!"

Rhoda Scurrey turned to peer at him.

"What do you mean?" she demanded.

"Mean?"

"Do you think it could have been anybody other than those two men?"

"I don't know," he said slowly. "I'm afraid I'm not a good detective. But, you see, our guide was attacked by only one man, not two."

"Of course!" she exclaimed. "So that he wouldn't go into the lodge! One of those men met your guide, while the other went through my uncle's things for the money! It's obvious!"

"Well," snapped Rande, "no use guessing. There's Curtis Junction and Andy Jerescott's garage! I think we can phone the troopers from his house."

Jerescott's place stood on the main highway, into which we had already turned. A gasoline station adjoined his home, and behind this stood a dilapidated garage which had been converted to a repair shop. The thing that astonished me as we approached was the fact that, despite the hour, a light was blazing in the shop.

As we drove into the path, the wind tore past us with the howls of a hundred banshees. The motor roared just before Rande switched off the ignition.

Instantly, then, one of the huge garage doors swung open, and all of us encountered a stupefying shock.

Gordon Rande sat rigid at the wheel, an ejaculation smothered in his throat. Rhoda Scurrey bent forward with a gasp. I felt an electrifying rush of excitement go through me; and instinctively I snatched up a rifle.

For in the lighted garage door, unmistakably recognizable, stood two men in heavy ulsters.

Marketline and Dombey!

CHAPTER X.

WITH TROOPERS COMING.

FRANKLY, I half expected to see them draw revolvers. But they didn't. They were squinting at us, their heads thrust forward, and I realized that they could not clearly distinguish us in the dark, especially with our headlights glaring directly into their eyes. What they were doing here, I didn't even attempt to guess. I wasn't thinking. I was just sitting tense, every nerve quivering.

"Hello, there!"

The shrill call came from the lean Marketline. We did not answer. Rande reached back and picked up his rifle. Both of us leveled the guns over the side of the car at the men in the lighted door, but we kept them low and drawn back, so that the weapons would not yet be seen.

"Hey!" Marketline again. "Any of you fellows know anything about carburetors?"

They were advancing toward us; and suddenly, when they were within ten feet of the car, the stout Dombey cried:

"Say, it's the fellows we saw up at that cabin!"

"Eh? Why, sure enough——"

Though she had never before seen these men, and though neither Rande nor I had spoken, Rhoda Scurrey instinctively knew who they were. She could restrain herself no longer. As vibrantly and imperiously as a Western sheriff of fiction she called:

"Stand still! Both of you! We've got you covered!"

Indeed, I saw that she had drawn her own revolver—the same weapon she had picked up from under Henry Scurrey's leg—and was pointing it at the men. They stopped. They blinked in amazement. They appeared more bewildered than frightened.

Rande whispered to me: "Hop out and get their guns, Phil! We'll watch them!"

So I stepped out of the car, in the freezing wind, and approached Arthur Dombey. The stout man stared at me, then suddenly glared.

"What the devil's the idea?"

I said quietly: "We found Scurrey murdered."

At that a swift, startled, uneasy glance passed between Dombey and

Marketline. The report itself, it was clear, did not surprise them; they knew that Henry Scurrey was dead. If they were astonished, it was by our knowledge of the tragedy.

Perhaps they would have resisted. Looking at Rhoda Scurrey's weapon and Rande's rifle, however, they could not fight against my search, though they glowered furiously, and their eyes blazed. I knew precisely where to find Dombey's gun—in the back pocket of his trousers, where I had seen it at the cabin and where, incidentally, it would have been stupidly inaccessible in an emergency. On Marketline, too, I found a weapon, in his overcoat pocket.

That is, I felt the bulk of the thing as I tapped his side. But I never took it. I didn't even touch it.

Well, there is no use inventing any excuse. I was an utter, unmitigated idiot. In my eagerness I did something which was not only unpardonably thoughtless, but actually calamitous; something I have always remembered with a groan of despair.

I stepped directly in front of Kurt Marketline and between him and our car.

EXACTLY what happened, how it happened, I can only surmise. I saw the thing in a kind of blur. Marketline must have recognized an opportunity. Also, he must have been extraordinarily brave to take so wild a risk—or extraordinarily desperate. My hand was an inch from his pocket when I received a terrific smash against my stomach. His fist had traveled scarcely twelve inches, yet its strength was sufficient to drive the breath out of my lungs, to send me staggering back.

Marketline leaped with me—always six inches in front of me. When I regained my balance, he was pressing the muzzle of his revolver straight against my heart. His breath exploded in my face. And over my shoulder he rasped to Gordon Rande:

"If it's going to be a gun fight, go ahead and start!"

I stood dazed, my brain whirling.

"Stick up your arms! High!" Marketline spat the words into my eyes. With that fierce pressure of steel against me, I had no choice but to obey. After that the lean man granted me no attention, save to the extent of using me as a barricade over which to address Gordon Rande and the girl.

"Go on; try to shoot!" he challenged. "The first shot I take will go through this guy's chest!"

I didn't look around. I didn't have to look around to visualize what was happening behind me—Rande and Rhoda Scurrey were checkmated. Holding weapons they dared not use and hardly realizing how the thing had happened. All because of a second's thoughtlessness!

I wanted to cry out in sheer exasperation. Strangely, I was not afraid; only trembling with rage, and self-contempt, and inarticulate contrition. Even the wind suddenly raised a shriek to my folly.

But the damage had been done.

Arthur Dombey, with a malicious grin, boldly strode to me and, with scarcely a glance toward the car, retrieved his own revolver from my pocket.

He whispered something into Marketline's ear; and the lean man nodded. A hand, Dombey's, seized the front of my coat and pulled.

"Come along!" he ordered. "And keep your arms up!"

They pulled me on; I felt as furiously helpless as a blind man being dragged toward danger. Marketline walked backward and continued to jam his gun against my heart. Dombey led the way. I was the buffer between them and any possible bullets from Rande or Rhoda Scurrey!

"You two stay where you are!" Marketline shouted across my shoulder. "If you try to follow us, we'll drop this guy in his tracks!"

We were moving, not toward the illuminated garage, but to the blackness beyond it. Trees there—thousands of them. The edge of a pine forest through which the gale swished and whistled. When we were close to it, Marketline snapped his flaming eyes toward mine.

"Where do you fellers come off," he demanded, "to try anything like this?"

I retorted, "You killed Scurrey!"

"We? You're crazy!"

"If I'm crazy, what have you got to be afraid about? Come back and wait for the troopers!"

"Sure," the man jeered. "And while we wait we'll all sit around and be real friendly, hey? Sure! Who's the girl with you?"

"Come back and ask her."

"Wise, aren't you? Look out——"

"You won't get away with that killing!"

"We don't have to! We didn't kill Scurrey!" Marketline's tones fell to a low, rapid note. His eyes actually glittered. "Now, listen to me!" he ordered. "In a minute we're going to leave you in those woods. When we do, head back for the house. If you try to follow us, I swear I'll shoot. Understand?"

"I understand, all right," I threw back bitterly. "Just another murder. All in a night's work."

"You've got nerve talking like that to this gun!"

To tell the truth, I was too deeply humiliated to care much how I talked. I loathed myself. I was atoning for my folly with a kind of furious mortification that transcended all reason and prudence. My emotional state, at that moment, might have reveled in savage satisfaction if I had been shot.

But none of this changed the situation.

A minute later, in the darkness of the woods, Marketline gave me a violent push that sent me stumbling back among the trees. Twigs caught my heels, and I almost fell. By the time I had straightened, both men had vanished in that impenetrable blackness.

For a moment or two I did hear their footsteps. Then the howl of the wind overwhelmed the sounds, and they were gone. I ran forward, tried to catch some glimpse of the men, tried to hear another crunch of steps. But it was useless. In unspeakable chagrin I realized that we'd never be able to trail them through this Stygian forest. All we'd accomplish, probably, would be to lose ourselves. One lusty oath I groaned into the night; then I turned back slowly to face Rhoda Scurrey and Gordon Rande.

ALL right, old boy," Rande said, patting my shoulder. "You couldn't help it. Just a tough break."

"As a policeman," I muttered, "I'm a dud."

"Well, you're not on the police pay roll, so forget it."

Unfortunately, this was no great consolation, and I felt little the better for it. Rande and Rhoda Scurrey had come to meet me as I emerged from the trees, and now we moved back toward the garage in silence, the girl frowning at the ground.

They were no longer alone. Mrs. Jerescott, a heavy woman in a voluminous coat, whose gray hair was being torn wildly by the wind, had come out to join them. Evidently they had already informed her of the murder, for she asked no questions. Her eyes were snapping excitedly, and she cried:

"You folks come inside! No use trying to catch those men! You phone the troopers, and they'll tend to the fellers, all right! Ain't nobody can get very far hereabouts unless they foller the

roads. And the troopers'll watch every road for miles. Come along!"

As we quickly mounted the porch steps, Rande hastily inquired how Dombey and Marketline had chanced to be in the garage.

"Why," Mrs. Jerescott answered, letting us into the house, "'bout three quarters of an hour ago they rang the bell. I was waitin' up for Andy. They wanted to know if anybody could fix their carburetor. They was havin' trouble. Couldn't keep the motor goin'. I told 'em nobody here could do it. They said if they could use the garage, where they'd have light, they'd try fixin' it themselves. I couldn't turn 'em away on a night like this, so I let 'em go to work. Reckon they was still at it when you came. There's the phone."

It was Rande who notified the State troopers of the Scurrey murder; they promised to be at the lodge within an hour. Moreover, they received an excellent description of Marketline and Dombey, for whom, I learned, a search was at once to be launched. All neighboring towns and officials would be told to watch for the fugitives. I drew a deep breath of hope.

Rande solicited Mrs. Jerescott's advice about a physician; some one to view Henry Scurrey's body and also to treat Steve Triggett's injured head. She advised him to telephone a Doctor Cutworth, who lived only a half mile down the road. But the doctor was in difficulties. Though he was prepared and willing enough to travel to Moonrise Lake, his car was frozen.

"In that case," offered Rande, "we'll pick you up in about five minutes and drive you out. You can return with the troopers. Right?"

Doctor Cutworth readily consented.

As Rande replaced the receiver, Rhoda Scurrey began buttoning her huge fur coat. He stared at her.

"Where are you going?"

"Back with you," she declared.

"Oh, no, you're not. You're going to stay right here," he assured her. "I think Mrs. Jerescott will be glad to put you up for a while. Won't you, Mrs. Jerescott?"

"Course I will!"

"You're frozen," Rande continued, talking to the girl. "Your lips are absolutely blue and trembling. And you're exhausted. Please, Miss Scurrey. I want you to stay here and rest—warm up."

"But——"

"There's nothing you can do out at the lodge. Not now, anyway. The troopers will probably stop here on their way out; they know I called from here. If they want you to come along, you can ride out with them. Meanwhile; please rest, won't you?"

She was uncertain, but in the end; perhaps because the house was so cozily warm and alluring; perhaps because Rande was so solicitous and insistent, she acceded. I rather wished we could stay a while ourselves. I'd had more than enough of the stinging wind. My nose and ears actually pained, and I was constantly shivering.

Rande and I set out, however, picked up the paunchy Doctor Cutworth and drove back to Moonrise Lake. Twelve long, bumpy miles through freezing blackness—to the most astounding event in the whole dreadful mystery.

CHAPTER XI.

WIND.

WE stopped first on the road above Gordon Rande's cabin and led Doctor Cutworth down the path to see Triggett. As we trudged among those trees, it seemed years, not hours, since we had last been here. It was now, I judged, after three in the morning; if the weather, with its screaming gale, had changed at all, it was for the worse. That cold wind cut through all my clothes.

I noticed that the cabin itself, curtained by a dense growth of pines, could not be seen from the road. No doubt that was why Rhoda Scurrey, on running away from the lodge, had passed this place to find refuge miles farther, at the shack of Louis Giroux.

Giroux—to our amazement, we found him in the cabin with Triggett and Andy Jerescott!

"Well!" Rande exclaimed, halting in the door. "What are you doing here?"

Rising from a seat before the fire, the Canadian shrugged. "I come, m'sieu', to see what have happen'."

"I thought you didn't want to be mixed in this affair."

"What can I do? You pull me in with your questions. I cannot stay out." He frowned. "Maybe it don't look so good for the troopers if I stay out now."

"I see. Well, all right. Glad to have you." Rande shut the door as Doctor Cutworth went to Triggett. Our guide, now on his feet, looked much better, heartier, and sturdier. He even grinned, grimly jesting about his bruise. But the physician examined and redressed it with meticulous care.

"Nothing very serious," he admitted. "Still, you want to keep it clean." When he finished, he turned to Rande. "Shall we go ahead to the lodge?"

Apparently every one wished to go; that is, every one except myself. I'd seen enough of the lodge, of the gruesome figure huddled behind its door. Another view could serve no purpose. Unlike Rande, who seemed to have unlimited vitality, I was exhausted. All I desired now was a chance to thaw out and rest in front of the leaping fire.

I was not, however, to remain behind alone, for the doctor firmly refused to let Triggett go out; and so, when the others departed, we two sat in front of the crackling flames, and I told the gaunt man all that had happened. I stretched out my legs and felt luxurious warmth flow through my body. It was delicious. My muscles relaxed, and the weariness sank out of them.

"So that's that," I finished. "If I hadn't been such a blasted fool, we'd have had those two men."

"Don't worry about 'em, Mr. Hyde," Triggett advised, filling his pipe. "They can't get very far. And I reckon you're right about 'em. If they was absolutely innocent, they wouldn't have made a get-away."

"I think they're guilty as the devil!"

"Figure they killed Scurrey for his money, do ye?"

"Yes! Got him to bring more than twenty thousand dollars to this lonely spot, then murdered him for it."

"Well——" Triggett lit his pipe with long, reflective puffs. "Sounds possible, all right. Too bad ye couldn't search 'em."

We remained silent: The fire blazed and crackled. I was beginning to feel fairly comfortable again, and drowsy. If it hadn't been for the continuous howl of the gale—the most dolorous and depressing sound in the world!—I should probably have felt quite at ease.

BUT the wind's cry preserved the tragic atmosphere of the night; the banshee still wailed.

Of a sudden I sat up, startled by a heavy thud outside the door. Triggett—resembling, with his bandages, a turbaned Hindu—turned from the fire in surprise and half rose. Another thud. Then a pounding on the door.

I jumped up and drew back the bolt.

Gordon Rande entered.

His face was crimson with cold. His eyes were watery. As he set aside his rifle and unbuttoned his mackinaw, I could see that something had happened; something shocking, grim, and appalling. His features were as hard as stone, and he was breathing heavily, as if he had been running.

"What's wrong?" I whispered.

"Nothing," he rasped bitterly. "Only that I've discovered who murdered Scurrey!"

I blinked at him dazedly. Triggett drew the pipe from his mouth. For a moment there was silence. Then:

"What the devil are you talking about?" I gasped.

Rande peered at me narrowly. "Did you happen to hear the shots a few minutes ago?"

"Shots? No! Whose shots?"

"Louis Giroux's."

"Why, good heavens!" I began. "What on earth——"

"Oh, don't get it wrong," snapped Rande, his voice almost harsh in its bitterness. "Giroux didn't shoot anybody. He simply fired into the air for me. Now, listen. The troopers ought to be here in a few minutes. Before they come, I'm going to give you a chance to square yourself, Triggett!"

The guide started. His lips parted, and he looked stunned. I stood between him and Rande, like a bewildered figure in a dream, staring from one to the other.

"What—is this?" I stammered.

"Triggett knows what I mean," Gordon Rande retorted. "Triggett killed Henry Scurrey!"

A hush—a stillness that choked.

The guide did not stir. He looked straight into Rande's narrow eyes. His gaunt face was assuming a weird, grayish pallor. I could see the bony fingers tighten fiercely around the bowl of the pipe.

At last, in a low, vibrant voice: "Are ye—are ye losing yer senses, Mr. Rande?"

"Listen to me, Triggett! We've got no time to waste. The troopers will be here any minute. I like you. I don't think you're a killer. I have an idea you shot Scurrey by accident. If that's true, I want you to have a chance before the troopers arrive!" Rande paused; then: "If it was an accident, and you admit it, you've got nothing to be afraid of!"

Triggett drew a deep, sibilant breath.

"Wh-what are ye trying to do? Talk me into——"

"Listen, Triggett!" Rande shot out softly, his eyes burning. "I'm going to tell you what happened. A few minutes ago I suddenly realized that the wind isn't blowing from the Scurrey lodge toward Eagle Point, where you went to hack firewood! It hasn't been blowing in that direction all night! I wondered how you'd heard the revolver shots you told us about. That's when I got the idea. And believe me, Triggett, it shocked me!

"But I decided to test it. I got Louis Giroux to discharge his revolver at the lodge while I stood on Eagle Point, almost a quarter of a mile away. Giroux fired six times. And though I listened hard I didn't hear a thing!"

THE guide's face was quite gray now. His lips were oddly twitching. He sent one swift, hunted look at me, then glowered back at Rande.

"This," he muttered huskily, "that is damn nice; you tryin' to accuse me of——"

"It's rotten," Rande agreed, his voice a hard clatter. "I wouldn't be doing it if it weren't the truth. You didn't hear shots!"

Steve Triggett's large, unsteady hand thrust his pipe aside to the table. He seemed to be desperately fighting to retain his poise. His mouth twisted savagely.

"I reckon I ought to know what I heard!"

"Then you know you didn't hear any shots. That isn't all, Triggett. There's the other thing—the ax."

"The what?"

"The ax. I have it outside. Found it where you dropped it near Eagle Point."

At that Triggett's whole face sagged. It became, of a sudden, quite ghastly, the eyes widening with irrepressible terror. He took an impulsive step forward, then halted.

"What d'ye mean?" he demanded hoarsely.

"You told us originally that when you heard the shots come from the lodge you dropped the ax where you'd been chopping wood and ran over the ice to investigate. Isn't that so?"

"We-ell?"

"Then, you claimed, you were attacked, and staggered back here. You didn't say you stopped at Eagle Point, wounded as you were, to pick up the ax and carry it along."

"What of it?"

"This: The ax handle is blood-stained!"

Another silence. I think I was more profoundly stupefied than Triggett himself. Certainly more bewildered. I stood paralyzed, gaping from one man to the other, hardly knowing what to make of it all.

"The blood on it," Rande drove on, "shows you handled it after you'd been wounded. Wait, Triggett! Let me finish! I believe I can tell you what happened. After killing Scurrey, you ran away from the lodge with your head bruised and bleeding—and with the wallet. You were afraid to keep it on your person, however; knew it was dangerous to bring the thing here. So, when you passed Eagle Point, you got the ax, hacked a hole in the ground, and buried the money. You tried to carry the ax away from the spot. But by that time you'd bled so much that you were weak and reeling. After a while you had to drop the thing. You had all you could do to bring yourself near the cabin. Isn't that right?"

"No!" hoarsely cried Triggett. "That's all a damn lie! You can't——"

Then he stopped and stared. Stared down in incredulous horror at the thing which Gordon Rande, with the swiftness of a conjurer, had produced from a pocket.

It was a wallet!

Rande tossed it to the table. It was fat, I saw, bulging with money—Rhoda Scurrey's money.

"I went back over the path with my flashlight," he explained dryly. "Found the spot beside the dead tree, where you'd chopped up the earth. I chopped it up, too. Dug up this."

FOR a minute the guide could not utter a sound. He stood gaping at the wallet. Rande and I, motionless, watched his changing expression. Outside, the wind raised a dolorous moan—a banshee's howl to pronounce the death of Steve Triggett's pretense. It was ended.

Heavily the man sank to a chair and looked up at Gordon Rande. It was a strange, haggard look, half uncertain, half despairing. I actually pitied him. His large, bony hands curled into fists, then opened again, limply.

"I——" he started, but the phrase was checked, and Triggett swallowed. A hard and utterly mirthless smile of surrender gripped his face for a fleeting instant. Huskily he said, "Reckon ye—ye got me kind of backed up against a wall, Mr. Rande."

"Kind of."

"I don't know just what to tell ye."

"Tell me what happened."

"Why—it's hard to say, exactly." Staring at the floor, the man spoke slowly, softly. "I saw the light up at the lodge. When I remembered how queer that girl had acted at the station, I figured something funny was going on. So I went up to have a look at Scurrey's place. I peeped into the window. He was there—takin' money out of an envelope and puttin' it in his wallet. He looked up, all of a sudden, and saw me—saw me watchin' him through the window. Mebbe he thought I was a

thief or a tramp or something like that. Anyhow, he let out a yell, pulled a gun, and came rushing to the door."

Triggett paused to look up at us hollowly, as if begging us to believe him.

"When he opened the door, he had the gun in his hand. I thought he was going to shoot, and I grabbed his wrist. That's how it started. Before we could say anything, we was fighting. He twisted his arm away somehow and brought the gun down on my head. Almost knocked me cold. I fell against him, and that's when the shot came. I don't know how it happened. Mebbe he tried to shoot me just as I twisted up his hand. Anyhow, he dropped—with that bleedin' hole in his neck, and the gun fallin' to the floor."

Again Triggett paused. Rande glanced at me significantly, as if to emphasize the accidental nature of the killing, but he said nothing.

"Well," the guide went on unsteadily, "I must have been half crazy, what with my head thunderin' and blood running into my eyes. There was the wallet on the floor jammed with money. I don't know what made me take it. I—just did. Ran away. Outside, in the wind, my mind sort of cleared, and I figured if I could make up a story of some kind and hide the money, why—there was a fortune for me, Mr. Rande! Ye don't know what it means to get money into yer hands, to feel that——"

Suddenly he stopped, held his breath. He grew rigid. I, too, felt a tremor rush through me, and I spun around to face the door.

Some one was hammering upon it.

Those sounds were like blows upon my nerves. I looked at Triggett and saw his face horribly white and terrified. He was beginning to rise, like a man confronting doom when Rande sprang to him and seized his arm.

"Listen, Triggett!" he whispered in a voice that electrified the whole cabin. "That's probably the troopers! If you admit everything to them—and just let the money lie on the table, as if you'd returned it voluntarily—they haven't got a thing in the world against you! Understand? Scurrey's death was an accident, not a murder! No prosecutor can prove——"

Sharply the banging on the door was repeated.

"One second!" shouted Rande. Then, rapidly to Steve Triggett: "Do you understand? You were half crazy with pain when you took the money! Irresponsible! Tell the truth, and you'll be all right! You can't possibly get the chair, Triggett, for an accidental killing!"

Triggett blinked, bewildered by the profusion of advice. But some of it must have seeped into his mind at last, for suddenly he gripped Rande's hand.

"All right!" he gasped hoarsely. "Open—the door."

We did.

Two State troopers entered, with Rhoda Scurrey leading them. And as Triggett rose to speak, the wind outside momentarily subsided in a kind of tense, expectant hush.

IT was dawn, a gray, cold dawn, when Gordon Rande returned to the cabin after driving Rhoda Scurrey to Curtis Junction. For the past hour or two I'd been alone; and I had a pot of steaming coffee ready to help revive any one.

His first news, to my astonishment, concerned Marketline and Dombey. They had, he said as he threw himself into a chair, been seized by troopers on the road to Tennetville!

"Now don't start asking a hundred questions," he begged, reaching toward the warmth of the fire. "I'm played out, just about ready to collapse."

"But——"

"Marketline and Dombey ran away because they had a parcel of smuggled diamonds in their pockets. The troop-

ers found the things. Those two fellows saw Scurrey's body, all right; Scurrey was dead when they reached the lodge. That's why they rushed away; didn't want to be identified with the killing. On the road they spied the distant lights of Jerescott's car. So they switched off their own, pulled into a space among trees, and allowed Andy to drive by. Thanks, Phil, the coffee is good."

He finished the cup in silence, and I did not goad him on; but after an interval he glanced up curiously.

"Quite a night, eh, Phil?"

"It's cured me!" I snapped. "I've had enough of this place for a year! I'll be hearing the howl of the wind in nightmares."

"Want to—er—go home?"

"Frankly," I admitted, "steam heat and the quiet of New York hold a strong lure right now."

Rande grinned down into his cup. "I feel," he answered, "just about the same way. In fact, I've arranged to be in New York by Wednesday."

"Wednesday?"

"Ye-es. I'm meeting Rhoda Scurrey for dinner that night."

FIFTEEN THOUSAND MILES ON A DOLLAR

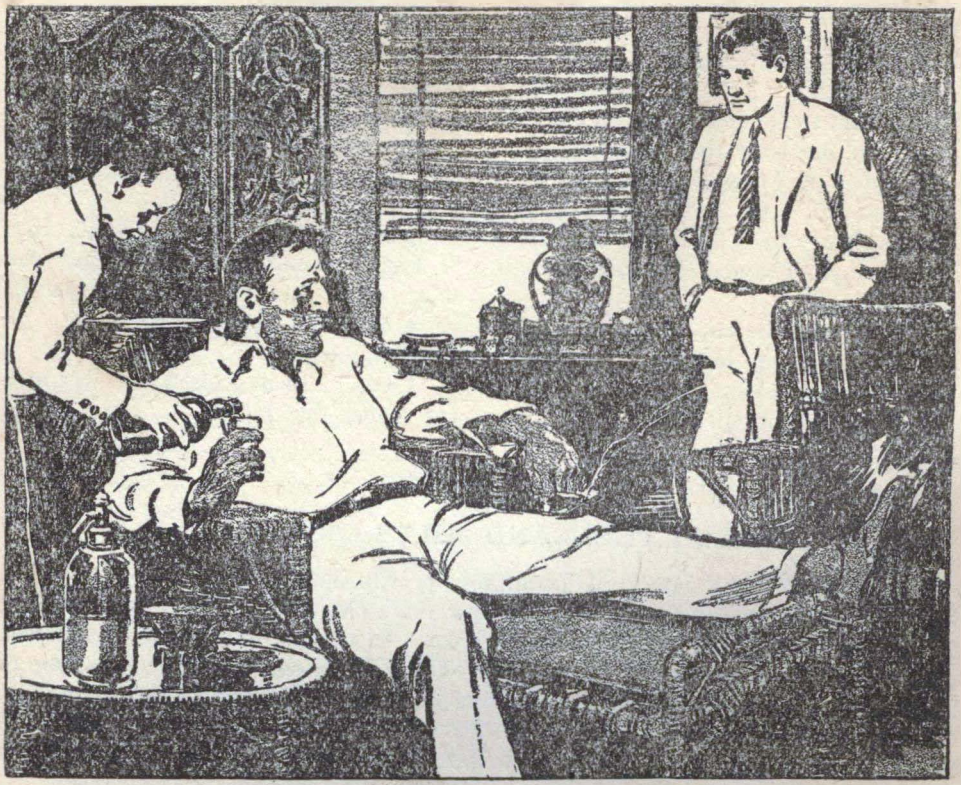
BACK in 1929, James A. Thompson, of Cincinnati, Ohio, was seized by a fit of wanderlust. He was fifty-one years old, a lithographer out of work, and his capital consisted of one dollar. In the twenty-eight months which have elapsed since April, 1929, to June, 1931, Thompson has added nothing to his capital, but he has covered fifteen thousand miles, hitch-hiking like a youngster. From Ohio Thompson went directly to the West, then up the coast to Seattle and Vancouver, then down to Los Angeles, Mexico, Arizona, and Texas. Now he is again in the East, and like Micawber, "waiting for something to turn up."

"Where did you eat and sleep?" he was asked. "In jails, mostly," he replied. Invariably when he arrived in a town he sought some charitable organization—the Y. M. C. A. or the Salvation Army. If neither of these could aid him for the night, he turned to the chief of police. "The tribe of good Samaritans is flourishing in this country," he declared. "You can find the members everywhere."

TRAIN MESSENGER RIDES OUTSIDE

HE was just a regular express messenger on a railroad train, when he happened to look up from his routine work and found he had as a traveling companion an eighteen-foot python, which had escaped from its box. What would you do under the circumstances? William Stewart took one look at the snake and then made for the door. It was an Erie train, running near Barbeton, Ohio, and a heavy rain was falling. But Stewart managed to cling to the outside of the express car until the train reached Marion. Here the door of the car was sealed, and the big serpent was left to its own devices.

When the train arrived in Chicago, Richard Auer, foreman of the Lincoln Park Zoo, with several attendants, was called in to catch the reptile. Warbling a song, Auer used a noose to get the snake back into its box. The big python was one of a shipment of four from Singapore, via New York, to Brownsville, Texas. Here a snake trainer took them in charge.



FIFTY DOLLARS REWARD

By L. G. Blochman

Any man's life is worth more than a thousand pesos—to a fugitive from justice.

FOR all its lush, green tropical scenery, its Moros in purple trousers, and its bedroom lizards, Zamboanga at heart has much in common with any village of the American Middle West. That the hot wind blows from the Sulu Sea instead of Nebraska and rustles palm fronds instead of corn stalks, does not prevent the American expatriates in this southerly Philippine port from the neighborly practice of planting their chairs in front of the hotel on week-day afternoons, tilting back against the posts that support the overhanging upper story, and holding an old-time gab fest. Some of the expatriates haven't been back to the Con-

tinental United States since before the Spanish-American War, but they still believe in such prime American virtues as civic pride, and closing the bars on Election Day.

On the day that "Pinky" Button arrived in Zamboanga, three perspiring men in shirt sleeves occupied the vantage point in front of the hotel, smoking, as they looked out upon the plaza with its creeper-hung wild-almond trees and the coral fountain dripping through ferns. The men were Major South, "Wes" Turner, and Joe Packard.

Major South was an old-time soldier with an old-time mustache. He was commandant of Pettit Barracks, but was as often seen with civilians as with his own officers. The major, having come up through the ranks, found more to talk about with men like Wes Turner, who had served in the ranks himself in the days of Aguinaldo, than with rosy-cheeked lieutenants barely out of West Point.

Wes Turner, portly, tanned, and curly haired, was from Kentucky, but was not a colonel. His military career had ended some thirty years back when he was still a private. He had never returned to the United States since the annexation of the Philippines; he was continually talking about going home, but somehow could not muster sufficient energy for a decision.

The Major and Wes Turner were lecturing Joe Packard in a kindly, paternal tone. They regarded Packard as a child because he was only thirty-five and had evidently been in the islands a very short time. They overlooked the fact that Packard had become a successful planter and trader in the few years since he arrived penniless in Zamboanga out of nowhere. He had just completed, in fact, what was probably the best civilian house in town since white ants ate the piles out from under Wes Turner's place. Turner and the major were telling Packard the errors he could have avoided in erecting his building, when Pinky Button limped up from the highly decorative municipal pier.

Pinky Button himself was far from decorative. As Major South remarked, he looked as though he had just been, or was just about to be, thrown out of some place. As a matter of fact, the throwing out had been accomplished not five minutes before. The *Pagsanjan*, a grimy inter-island steamer, had docked with a cargo of exotic products such as canned tomato soup and baked beans. Removal of hatch covers had revealed Pinky Button asleep in the cargo with a can opener near by and an empty bottle clasped fondly in his arms. There had followed a rude awakening, a noisy and ungentle hoisting of Pinky from the hold, and his deposition on the dock to the accompaniment of insults in English, Spanish, and the universal language of a well-shod toe in motion. The echo of curses had hardly died away when Pinky was being appraised by the trio in front of the hotel.

Frowns of disapproval appeared on the dew-spangled foreheads of Major South and Wes Turner. In all likelihood, the frowns were not provoked by the crumpled, unsanitary appearance of Pinky's khaki clothes, nor by the reddish stubble on his long, equine face, but by the fact that the flabby, slouching outline was crowned with a dirty battered sun helmet. A sun helmet in the Philippines is considered by Americans to be British affectation.

"Look at the bum giving himself limey airs," remarked Wes Turner with a sneer.

"Now that," said Major South, pointing with his thumb, "is what I mean by an object of misplaced charity." He turned to Packard with his fatherly air. "Joe," he continued, "I know you don't talk about it, but I'll bet you shelled out for every one of the two dozen vags that's come to you in the last year or so, and nine out of ten of 'em aren't

worth helping any more than this bird. You're too much of a sucker, Joe."

"No, I'm not," said Packard. "I'm just passing on the favors you fellows did for me when I landed here—strapped."

"That was sure different," said Wes Turner. "The major and me has been around these parts ever since we finished helping Blackjack Pershing chase Moros, and we know all these soft-soap rackets. We can tell when it's hard luck and when it's hard licker."

"Sure, you were different," said the major. "You'd had a shave and you landed sober. And you asked for a job instead of a cup of coffee."

"But this sort of thing," said Wes Turner, indicating the figure of Pinky Button crossing the plaza, "is just petty larceny. You can break your back helping a panhandler and never get a word of thanks for it. It's enough to make cheese outa the milk of human kindness."

THERE was a moment of silence as Pinky approached and halted in front of the group in tilted chairs.

"Howdy, gents," he said. He removed his sun helmet, revealing a peculiarly egg-shaped head covered with close-cropped red hair. His beady eyes darted from one face to the next as he continued: "I wonder which one of you'd care to help a fella countryman in distress. I know you're 'shamed to see a white man in this condition, and I'm just as——"

He stopped abruptly, his eyes fixed on Joe Packard. His long face split in a grin ornamented with an array of crooked teeth that would have been the envy of any dental college museum. He held out his hand to Packard.

"Hull-lo, Charlie!" he exclaimed.

Packard let his chair tilt forward until the front legs touched the ground. He stared at Pinky, but did not take the proffered hand.

"That's an old trick, buddy," said Wes Turner, "but sometimes it don't work. The world's full of Charlies, but once in a while you miss. This man's name happens to be Joe Packard."

"Oh, is it?" said Pinky, still grinning. "Well, I'm pleased to meet you, Mister Packard. My name happens to be Pinky Button. I guess maybe you've heard of me."

Packard crossed his legs.

"Can't say I have," he said.

Pinky's grin persisted, but his tiny eyes grew serious for a moment.

"You'll have to excuse me for takin' you for somebody else," he resumed, "but you sure remind me of a fella I used to soldier with in North China. You can't be him, though, because he must be in jail somewheres. I was forgettin' for a minute that Charlie killed a man."

Pinky replaced his battered helmet, slouched against a post, and looked down on Joe Packard. He seemed to be studying the rivulet of perspiration trickling down Packard's right temple. Packard motioned to a vacant chair.

"Sit down," he said after a pause, "and tell us your troubles,"

Pinky Button sighed and made his long face look particularly mournful. He shook his head.

"I wouldn't know where to start," he said. "Now if you was my old pal, Charlie, I wouldn't have to worry, because he was sure a good guy. He'd give a man the socks off his feet. I remember one time——"

"Do you want a job?" Packard interrupted sharply.

"Thanks," said Pinky without enthusiasm, "but who'd give a job to a man lookin' like this? And these are my only duds."

Packard stood up. He looked at Pinky from head to foot.

"I'll stake you to a clean outfit," he said. "I'll see you get a fresh start. Come on."

Pinky did not move immediately. He looked solemnly into space for a moment. Then he grinned again and slapped Joe Packard's back.

"You're a great guy, Mr. Packard," he said. "Where do we go from here?"

He took the planter's arm and the two men walked across the plaza. Major South thoughtfully twisted one end of his mustache, looked at Wes Turner, and smiled pityingly at this demonstration of philanthropy gone wrong. Wes Turner shook his head.

IT was a dusty, rattling ride of ten kilometers from Zamboanga proper to Joe Packard's coconut plantation. Neither Packard nor Pinky spoke. Packard seemed unusually intent on driving his flivver, considering that the entire traffic on the road consisted of one lumbering carabao cart driven by a Moro in black bell-bottomed trousers and a bright-green sash. Pinky sat beside Packard, smiling contentedly to himself.

Packard drove up in front of a spacious house surrounded completely with a screened-in veranda. He stopped the car and said: "Hop out!"

Pinky hopped. Packard ushered him up the steps.

"If you'll step into that room there," said Packard, "I'll send you in some clean clothes. I guess you're about my size."

"Sure, Charlie!" declared Pinky. "Remember how I used to wear your shirts? Maybe I'm a little fatter, but of course——"

"In the mean time you'll want your bath," said Packard, starting Pinky toward the door he had indicated. But Pinky balked.

"Whoa!" he exclaimed. "What's the rush? I ain't takin' no bath till I go through the ceremonies proper to meetin' up with an old buddy I ain't seen in —how many years is it, Charlie? And you ain't even goin' to offer me a drink? Now that ain't like the Charlie Spears I used to know."

Packard gave the redhead a long, wistful glance from his good-natured blue eyes. He motioned him to a chair.

"Pinky," he began, "I want to do something for you——"

"All right," Pinky interrupted, "I'll take whisky."

Packard called a servant. A young Chinese responded, an intelligent-looking youth, neatly dressed in Occidental fashion.

"The whisky, Wong," said Packard, "and a bottle of soda."

"Whoa!" said Pinky. "If the soda's for me, cancel it. You know I always drink my whisky neat, Charlie. Unless you've got so high-toned yourself that you go for whisky-sodas now."

"I haven't had a thing to drink, except beer since the last time I saw you," said Packard.

Pinky whistled.

"Ain't it wonderful," was his comment, "what killin' a man and desertin' from the United States army will do for a fellow."

The arrival of Wong with bottles averted the need for Packard to reply. Pinky greedily gulped the drink the Chinese boy poured, and immediately held out his glass for more. His beady eyes were detailing Wong's immaculate white suit, his black bow tie, and a heavy jade ring on his right hand.

"Where'd ya get this dude house boy?" he demanded, when Wong had gone.

"I sort of adopted him," Packard answered. "His whole family got carved up by a Moro gone *juramentado,* so I gave him a berth with me. He only works part time. He walks to school in the daytime."

"Imagine," mused Pinky. "A slant-eyed heathen house boy wearin' swell clothes and jewelry, and poor old Pinky Button on his uppers."

"Why did you quit the army, Pinky?"

"Oh, I got eased out with a set of yellow papers," said Pinky. "I burned 'em up. What good is a dishonorable discharge to anybody? And since then I just been knockin' around."

"Lucky you ran into me," said Packard. "Since I landed on my feet myself, I'm damned glad to help a fellow get hold of himself. You'll be all right after you've been working for me a while."

"Workin'?" exclaimed Pinky. "You didn't really mean you was goin' to give me a job, did you, Charlie?"

"If you don't mind," said Packard, "my name's Joe."

"All right, Joe then. What's this about a job, Joe?"

"I got a little copra schooner," Packard explained, "that runs along the coast picking up cargoes here and there. I'll put you aboard as sort of agent. You'll get your grub, your clothes, and a hundred pesos a month. If you turn out all right, I'll give you a cut in the profits."

PINKY poured himself another drink, threw his head back, opened his mouth, and let the amber fluid run into his gullet while his Adam's apple fluctuated violently. He gave vent to a sound of satisfaction that was something between a grunt and a pur, got up, and started stalking slowly about, examining the floor, the walls, the furnishings.

"You say you own that schooner, Charlie—er—Joe?" he asked.

Packard nodded.

"And this nice new house, too?"

"Yes," said Packard.

Pinky Button came upon a box of cigars, opened it, pinched several, and selected a perfecto. He bit the end off, cocked the cigar at an acute angle to his face, and applied a match. Then he stretched himself luxuriously in a chair, making contacts only with the two extremities of his spinal column. He smoked in silence for the time it took three swirling blue clouds to float to the ceiling.

"Charlie—er—Joe," he began at last, "there ain't no sense of me goin' out to work on a schooner full of little brown brothers, and leave you all alone."

"There isn't a lick of work you could do around the plantation," said Packard, "unless you're a chemist. I'll be looking for a chemist some time this year to finish some rubber experiments I been carrying on in a little laboratory I built in there. But I know you're not a chemist."

"Oh, I ain't absolutely set on workin'," said Pinky. "I could be reasonably happy just sittin' around, keepin' you company. This house is too big for a guy alone, anyhow."

"This house is just big enough for my needs," said Packard. "Because in a couple of months there's a little American girl who teaches school over Cotabato way, coming here to be Mrs. Packard and live in this house."

Pinky removed the cigar from his mouth, regarded the glowing end slyly for a moment, then replaced it.

"Well," he said, "you're certainly gettin' to be a helluva respectable citizen. I admire your nerve for settlin' down right alongside an army post, and I notice you even go in for chinnin' with the major. I don't suppose, though, that the gent with the gold oak leaves knows that you used to be Corporal Charlie Spears."

"Naturally not," snapped Packard.

"Well, then, why don't you and me figure out a way to keep him from ever findin' out."

Pinky gave Packard a sidewise glance and poured himself another drink. Packard moistened his lips.

"What are you driving at?" he demanded.

"Well, you know how talkative I am when I've had a drop to drink, Ch—Joe," Pinky replied. "Think how embarrassin' it would be if I was to bust

up to Old Oak Leaves one day and say: 'Major, old scout, I got news for you. Your friend Joe Packard ain't Joe Packard at all. He's Corporal Charlie Spears, the guy that deserted from the United States Infantry Forces in China after murderin' Henry Horn!"

PACKARD struck the table with his fist. The glasses rattled. His face was white.

"Damn it, Button! That wasn't murder, and you know it."

Pinky Button shrugged his shoulders slightly and rolled his cigar from one corner of his mouth to the other.

"All I know," he said, "is that Henry Horn was dead when I saw him last."

"You know damned well it was an accident!" insisted Packard. His voice came tensely through colorless lips. "I'm not excusing myself for what actually happened. There's no excuse for a drunken brawl to turn out the way that one did. I was as drunk as Henry Horn, and I guess I was the one started the argument. But it was Henry that pulled the gun. I was trying to take it away from him when it went off and killed him."

Pinky smiled knowingly.

"Too bad you didn't stay in Tientsin and explained all that to the court-martial instead of runnin' off and desertin'," he said.

"That was the whisky, too," Packard said. "It was one of those bright ideas a man gets when he's plastered. The only thing to do seemed to me then to run away. I remember staggering into a ricksha and waving a fistful of bills at the coolie. When I woke up I was on a little Chinese tub that had just crossed the Taku bar and was heading down the Gulf of Chihli, bound for the Philippines. It was too late, then. I realized that by running off, I'd practically confessed to murder."

"Too bad, too bad," murmured Pinky, his eyes half closed in thought. "I'll tell you what: that palatial liner *Pagsanjan* which brought me to this lovely burg, is sailin' back to Manila at dawn tomorrow. Me and the skipper ain't exactly bosom pals, but I guess I could manage to get aboard 'er. How much would it be worth to you if I left?"

Packard leaned forward stiffly.

"You mean how much—blackmail?" he inquired dryly.

"It ain't blackmail," Pinky replied. "It's justice. You robbed Henry Horn of the rest of his natural days. Now I ain't posin' as no plaster saint myself, but accordin' to my lights, murder is immoral. You can't square it afterward. You can't pay Henry Horn back for what you done, but you can pay society. And for the purpose of argument, Pinky Button will represent society. Pay, Mr. —Packard?"

"As far as I'm concerned, society is represented by Henry Horn's mother," said Packard, as though talking to himself. "Ten days after the accident I wrote to her, explained what had happened, asked her to be judge and jury, gave my address, and told her what army post to write to if the verdict was guilty. She wrote direct to me. We've been corresponding regularly ever since, and she gets her monthly allotment, just like she got it from Henry Horn, only its bigger and more regular."

"That don't count," said Pinky. "That's just conscience money. You pay the old lady to make yourself feel better. Society's still gotta be paid."

Pinky extended a flabby right hand across the table, palm up, in a bland gesture.

Packard arose, his eyes smoldering. Suddenly he seized the wrist of Pinky's extended arm and jerked Pinky to his feet.

Frightened surprise flashed across the unshaven face for a moment. Then, as his beady eyes took in Packard's angry features, his insolent grin reasserted itself.

"You oughta figure you're gettin' off cheap," said Pinky. "Usually it's a life for a life. I'll only charge you reasonable."

"You'll charge me, hell!" exclaimed Packard. "You won't get one centavo of hush money out of me, you——"

He flung Pinky's wrist from him. His two hands darted forward to clutch Pinky's throat. The red stubble pricked his fingers as he tightened his grasp. He shook the beach comber until his teeth chattered and his eyes bulged.

Pinky raised his knee sharply. At the same time he swung his left fist in an overhand arc that terminated abruptly and resoundingly against Packard's jaw.

Packard released his hold and fell against the table, which overturned with a clatter of glasses and bottles. While Wong was picking up the wreckage, Packard stood glaring at the beach comber, provoked with himself for having lost his temper, yet still tingling with an impulse to choke Pinky Button.

Pinky, with gestures self-consciously unconcerned, was tenderly feeling his bruised neck. Seeing his cigar butt on the floor, he walked over to choose and light a fresh perfecto. He came back to blow a cloud of smoke into Packard's face.

"Charlie," he said, "there's no use my wastin' time arguin' with you. You ain't either grateful or logical, not even as grateful or logical as the United States army. Why, even the army will pay me fifty bucks, just for reportin' a deserter. That's a hundred pesos. I may as well amble over to Pettit Barracks and get my century." He paused at the screen door to execute an elaborate, mocking bow of farewell. "So long, Charlie. See you in jail."

PACKARD watched Pinky go down the steps and saunter toward the road, his hands in his pockets. He swaggered a little as he walked.

Stepping into the house, Packard reappeared almost immediately with a .30-30 rifle. He pulled a plug of greasy rag from the muzzle, threw back the bolt, watched a shell spring from the magazine into the chamber, and pushed it home as he closed the bolt.

He was surprised at his calmness as he stepped outside the screen door. The indignant rage which had been surging within him, had subsided into a strange numbness. He raised the rifle to his shoulder and depressed the muzzle until the front sight sank neatly into the notch of the rear sight. He swung the alignment until the front sight bisected the swaggering shoulders of Pinky Button, perhaps sixty yards down the road. With the rear sight leaf laid flat, he would be shooting high, Packard reflected. He lowered his aim, and decided to let Pinky advance a little farther.

He was pleased to find that his nerves were as steady as they had been when he first began winning marksmanship bars in the army. It was second nature for him to keep the bead low on Pinky's back. He started taking up the slack in the trigger.

Suddenly Packard's hands began to tremble. He grasped the stock more tightly and drew it hard against his shoulder. No use! The sights wabbled and danced hopelessly. He experienced a sudden weakness in his joints. He leaned against the screen door. His arms dropped to his side.

It was futile. He could not shoot a man in the back, no matter how worthless the man. He could not kill Pinky Button in cold blood. He was licked. He called:

"Come back here, damn you, Pinky!"

Pinky swaggered a little more as he retraced his steps to the house. His beady eyes shone with a gleam of triumph. He sensed that Packard was licked.

"I knew you'd turn sensible," he said,

as he resumed his pose of ease and luxury on Packard's veranda.

Packard carried the rifle into the house without a word. Pinky Button eyed the weapon.

"I see you still keep up your rifle practice," he said. "By the way, what did you do with all your medals?"

There was a note of impertinent self-assurance in his voice as though to say, "I'm not in the least afraid of your shooting me. I know you better than you do yourself."

Packard did not reply. He returned almost immediately with a stack of bank notes which he counted carefully on the table.

"What's your proposition?" asked Pinky.

Packard finished counting before he spoke.

"There's nearly a thousand pesos here," he announced.

"That all?"

"That's all the cash I've got," said Packard, "except for a few hundred pesos I'll need to pay off the crew of the schooner and some of the plantation hands next week."

Pinky Button extended his paw.

"Let's see," he said.

Packard withdrew the money.

"You'll get it aboard ship," said Packard, "just before she sails."

Pinky's eyes narrowed, they grew round again. He shook his head in mock sadness.

"I'm sorry to see you don't take this matter serious," he said. "Here I am doin' you a favor by keepin' my mouth shut, and you try to bargain with me like I was a China peddler. And then you offer me a measly thousand pesos. Any man's life is worth more than a thousand pesos."

Packard drew a deep breath.

"That's the best I can do," he said. "In the long run, you'd find it a lot more profitable to take me up on that offer to work together."

"Work," interrupted Pinky, "is a word that don't ring cheerful in my shell-like ears. I can think up a better scheme than that. But we might have a drink first. What's the name of that dude house boy?"

Packard told him. Pinky called Wong. The Chinese youth brought a new bottle of whisky. While opening it, he was quietly examining the faces of the two Americans. He did not have to be a clairvoyant to see the tension between them.

PINKY threw back his head and let his drink slip down in one swallow. Licking his lips, he smiled with all his unsightly teeth. Slowly he arose and stood with his feet slightly apart in a blustering attitude. He pointed a pudgy finger at Packard and seemed highly pleased with his pose.

"Charlie Joe Packard Spears," he said with some condescension, "divide that thousand pesos into two piles."

Packard hesitated.

"Go on, divide it," Pinky insisted. "Never mind counting, just make two even stacks. There. Now put one pack in your pocket, and put the other back in that safe I saw you take it out of. I'll go in with you. Fine. Now tell me the combination to the safe. No tricks, now, because I'm goin' to try it out right away. That's right. Fine. You didn't try to fool Pinky, after all."

The beach comber took Packard by the arm and walked him solemnly into the next room where the Chinese boy, lighting lamps, was regarding the scene with wondering eyes.

"Charlie Joe Packard Spears," said Pinky, waggling his cigar between his teeth, "for old-time's sake I'm goin' to let you keep that wad of money you got in your pocket. That's to get a new start in life on. It's enough for that, even if it wouldn't be enough to square your debt to society, per Pinky Button. Now, Charlie Joe, you're goin' to grab

that rotten tub *Pagsanjan* outa Zamboanga to-morra."

"Why, you——"

"Now don't be rude and interrupt," said Pinky, waving his cigar imperiously, "until I finish explainin'. I just decided to take over your house, and your coconut trees, and your schooner, and your tradin' business for you. I'll probably sell out the works after a while, but you won't have to bother about that. I'll say you went to Manila to open up a head office and left me here as manager. You won't even have to make over any papers to me. I'll sign 'Joe Packard' for you, and nobody can kick about the signature because the name's phony anyhow."

"You can't get away with that," said Packard tersely.

"Oh, yes, I can," Pinky replied. "Watch me."

"And if I happen to refuse your terms?"

"Then I'll happen to run over to Pettit Barracks durin' the mornin'," said Pinky, "and collect my fifty bucks for turnin' in a deserter."

Packard made no retort.

"It's a long walk to the barracks," Pinky continued, "but I ain't worryin' any. You'll get out on the *Pagsanjan.* You'll pardon me if I don't go down to see you off, but I don't usually get up so early. I'll send you down in my car, if you want. One of my flunkies can drive it back. Let's have a drink."

BY dinner time, Pinky was reeling when he walked. He was not so drunk, however, that he could not eat the portion of three hungry men, nor continue drinking until he had emptied the bottle of Scotch begun a few hours earlier. He talked constantly, if somewhat thickly, and referred resonantly to "my house," "my ship," and "my damn flunkies."

When Wong came to pour the coffee, Pinky seized his arm, yanked the heavy jade ring off the Chinese boy's finger, and slipped it on his own. Wong said nothing, but looked appealingly at Packard.

"Give it back!" ordered Packard. "That ring's been in the boy's family for generations."

"It's out of the family now," said Pinky.

"Give it back," repeated Packard.

"Don't tell me wha' do!" exclaimed Pinky. "I'm boss o' this mess now, and 'f I don't want my flunkies wear joolry, they won't wear joolry. And that's that."

Packard's lips moved, but he said nothing.

Pinky got up suddenly, walked unsteadily across the room, and came back with Packard's rifle clasped in his arms.

"I ain't forgot that you're a murderer, Charlie," he said, "and I'm gonna defend myself."

Whereupon he turned, staggered into the next room, and tumbled onto a bed. When Packard came in to see what he was doing, Pinky was asleep, lying on his stomach with the rifle, still tight in his grip, under him. He was snoring.

Wong came in silently beside Packard, and, still the thoughtful servant, lowered the mosquito netting about Pinky's bed, and turned down the lamp.

Packard went out to the veranda to smoke. He had been there an hour when Wong appeared before him.

"Master is going away to-morrow?" the Chinese youth inquired.

Packard did not reply at once.

"I don't know," he said, after a pause.

"Redhead master is staying this side?"

"Perhaps," said Packard.

"Redhead master has buy this piece house, that piece coconut trees, this fella Chinese boy?"

"No," said Packard. "He has not bought anything."

"Mebbe master has make present to redhead master?"

"No."

"Redhead master is friend?"

"No."

"Good night, master."

"Good night, Wong."

Packard mused upon this cross-examination for perhaps half an hour, then went upstairs to his room. He had no idea of going to bed, for sleep was out of the question. He sat smoking in the dark, trying to determine his course of action.

He had known all along, of course, that this new life of his, carefully erected, stone by stone, until it approached security and happiness, was erected on sand. There was no doubt that a slight push from Pinky Button would crumble the whole structure. Was he to sit by and let Pinky report to Pettit Barracks that Joe Packard and Charles Spears, deserter, accused of murder, were the same man? That was out of the question. Was he, then, quietly to accept Pinky's condition, abandon the rewards of industry, take the *Pagsanjan* for Manila at daybreak and begin his life anew for the second time? That, too, would be a bitter pill, yet swallow it he must, unless something should——

The only alternative was that Pinky Button disappear. If the heavy-drinking Pinky should be carried off suddenly by apoplexy in his sleep? But that was unlikely. The booze-soaked beach comber was probably immune to all mortal maladies and would die of natural causes at some distant time when he was old and hoary. If he should die of some accident—suppose the gun he held, clasped in his arms should be accidentally discharged while he slept. That would solve the problem. But Packard knew that this, too, would never take place. He remembered having pushed the shell out of the chamber back into the magazine. Pinky would not shoot himself in his sleep. There would have to be some other way out.

PACKARD arose suddenly, opened a small chest, and extracted a long-barreled revolver, wrapped in oil-soaked rags. He fingered the greasy weapon in the dark, broke it, felt the cartridges in place. With a nervous motion, he spun the cylinder, waited until it whirred to a stop, then snapped it shut.

With the gun in his hand, Packard went softly downstairs. He walked around the veranda until he came to the window which looked directly into the room in which Pinky Button was sleeping. The lamp burned low, transforming the mosquito bar into a cone of golden haze suspended above the bed. Through the haze, Pinky was easily visible, his long, unshaven face turned upward, his mouth open. Packard rested his revolver on the window ledge.

There would be little trouble establishing an accidental death for Pinky. A drunken beach comber, whom Packard had befriended—Joe Packard was always befriending bums like that—had shot himself in a fatal fit of drunken clumsiness. No great loss. There would probably be an inquest of the most superficial kind, and it was not likely that any suspicion should fall upon Packard. Yet, even as he reasoned thus, Packard knew he would not deliberately shoot Pinky. He had known it since late that afternoon when he put up his rifle because he would not shoot a man in the back. And he knew he would not shoot a man in his sleep, even a worthless blackmailer.

Suddenly Packard became aware of the fact that the worthless blackmailer was not asleep. With considerable grunting, Pinky was turning himself over on the bed. His lips moved and muttered. He made sounds which resembled animal noises rather than words. He thrust his hand under the mosquito netting and passed it gropingly along the empty top of the little table beside the bed. Finally the mum

bling swelled and burst into a fierce bellowing:

"Wong!"

There was no answer. Pinky sat up in bed. He stuck out his tongue, made noises with his lips, and resumed mumbling. Profane references to the Chinese race came vaguely to Packard's ears. Then Pinky bellowed again:

"Wong! Dammit! Wong!"

The Chinese lad appeared.

"Damn you!" Pinky greeted him. "Why ain't there a bottle here beside my bed? There always ought to be a bottle there. Bring me a drink, and be damned quick!"

Wong's face was as inexpressive as ever, although Packard thought he detected the faintest trace of contempt in the way his thick lips parted as he said:

"You want whisky?"

"Don't stand there arguin' with me!" roared Pinky. "Bring it!"

Packard, leaning unseen on the window sill, watched Wong nod, then move silently across the room. He noted with surprise that Wong did not go into the pantry, where the liquor was kept, but through the door leading into the room Packard had fitted as a laboratory in which he was dabbling in rubber experiments.

Packard heard a clink of bottles and saw Wong return with a glass in his hand. He leaned forward tensely as he realized that the glass did not contain whisky. Wong was bringing some clear liquid with a slight greenish tinge. Packard quickly tried to guess from which of the bottles marked "Poison," Wong had poured Pinky's drink; probably concentrated sulphuric acid. And Pinky Button always gulped his drinks!

PACKARD suddenly had a vision of the inquest over Pinky Button's dead body. It would be a cursory affair. "The deceased has come to his death accidentally, by his own hand, through drinking poison in the belief, while under the influence of liquor, that it was whisky."

Pinky Button swung his feet off the edge of the bed and lifted the mosquito bar over his head. He swore volubly as Wong approached.

"What's idear of bringin' one measly drink?" he demanded. "Get me a bottle, like I said!"

Wong stopped, took a step in retreat.

"Whoa, dammit! Leave me that drink while you're gettin' the bottle."

Pinky took the potion from the Chinese boy, scarcely glancing at it.

Packard held his breath. In a very short time Pinky Button would be dead. Joe Packard would be free from the menace to his new life because Pinky the blackmailer would be dead from poison—"taken by mistake." But Pinky Button, the human being, would suffer atrocious agony before he gave up his twisted soul. Pinky, the ex-soldier, was about to destroy himself with liquid fire, would die in writhing torment. Packard closed his eyes for the briefest second.

When he had opened them again, Pinky had tilted back his head. Light flashed through the liquid in the glass as Pinky raised his hand.

Joe Packard also raised his hand. He brought it down quickly, instinctively squeezing the trigger as the revolver sights crossed his line of vision.

There was a thunderous burst of flame.

The glass of poison smashed into a thousand fragments.

Pinky Button sat staring at his empty fingers, his eyes bulging with surprised terror. Then he screamed with pain.

Frothy red welts grew and swelled where the scattered acid had splashed on his hands and chin.

Wong arrived calmly on the scene with a bottle of whisky and a corkscrew on a tray.

Still grasping his revolver, Joe Packard sprang into the room.

"Quick!" he flung at Wong. "Get me

a bottle of ammonia from the laboratory. It seems you can read the labels."

Wong complied.

Pinky's screams subsided when he saw he had an audience. His lips were blue and drawn tightly against his irregular teeth. All bluster was gone completely out of him.

"So you tried to poison me, you filthy murderer?" He was trying hard to be impertinently domineering, but he failed miserably. The ringing bravado he had intended to put into his voice turned out to be a frightened whine.

"On the contrary," said Packard. "I've just saved you from poisoning yourself."

"That's a damned lie!" croaked Pinky. "You're in cahoots with that dude China boy. He's the one that gave me poison."

"Don't be a damned fool, Pinky." Packard sat with his gun on his knee as he watched the Chinese boy neutralizing the acid burns with ammonia. "You know damned well you were so drunk you didn't notice what the hell you were drinking. And you would have burned your insides out with sulphuric acid if I didn't just happen to catch you in time."

Pinky said nothing as the Chinese boy bandaged his burned hand, and slipped the jade ring from Pinky's finger.

"Wong," said Packard, as the Chinese boy had finished. "Wake up Juan Luz and tell him to get out the car to drive Mr. Button to Zamboanga. Mr. Button is sailing on the *Pagsanjan* at daybreak."

Pinky looked at the revolver in Packard's hand and said:

"So you think you can throw me out, do you?"

"That's exactly what I'm doing," said Packard. "I've just saved your good-for-nothing life, and I can't think of anything better to do with it than get it out of Zamboanga. You and me are square now, Pinky."

"How about that thousand pesos you was goin' to give me last night?" whined Pinky.

"Any man's life is worth more than a thousand pesos," quoted Packard. He took a card from his wallet, scribbled a few words on the back, and tossed it to Pinky. "This will pay your passage," he added. "Tell the shipping agent to collect from me."

A motor chugged outside. Pinky turned his head. Packard arose.

"Get out," said Packard.

Pinky Button went without a word. He was a different person from the strutting creature who had made himself so obnoxious a few hours before. His brush with death had stripped him of his impertinent self-confidence, made him almost pathetic. Packard knew that it was only a question of a very short time before he would become the same, cocky beach comber. He wondered how long.

As the flivver, bearing Pinky, started down the road through the coconut plantation, Packard suddenly looked at his watch. It was not quite four o'clock. Pinky would have about an hour before his boat sailed.

JUAN LUZ did not return immediately with Joe Packard's flivver. He had expected him back by five o'clock. It was after seven when he heard the car rattling and coughing up the road. There were two men in the back seat. By his mustache and the black-and-gold cord on his campaign hat, Packard recognized one of them as Major South. The other was rotund enough to be Wes Turner. The car stopped.

The two men walked solemnly to the veranda steps to greet Packard. They seemed ominous.

"Well, Joe," said the major gravely. "You must be about through playing sucker to every beach comber that comes to town, aren't you?"

"Why?" asked Packard, his throat suddenly going dry.

"That bum you were going to give a job to yesterday—he didn't take it, did he?"

"No," said Packard. "He left on the *Pagsanjan* this morning."

The major shook his head.

"He didn't leave. He came around Pettit Barracks and woke me up at quarter past four this morning. And you know what for?"

"No," said Packard. His tongue seemed to be too big for his mouth.

"He came around to tell me you were a deserter from the army and a murderer," said the major.

"I always said," broke in Wes Turner, "that you can break your back helping a panhandler, and they never show any thanks for it. It's enough to turn the milk of human kindness to klabber cheese."

"Luckily," continued the major, "I've been around these islands thirty years instead of thirty days. I've seen that trick worked by beach combers before—trying to turn a man in as a deserter in hopes of getting the fifty dollars reward. It makes me damned tired—especially when a bum wakes you up at four in the morning to spring it on you. I was furious. I don't know how he got by the guard. Anyhow, I told him I was going to lock him up for prowling around the post after dark without a pass. I called for the corporal of the guard. Well, this bum must have had something on his conscience, because he bolted and ran. A sentry saw him and yelled at him to halt. He kept running. The sentry shot him."

"Dead?" asked Packard.

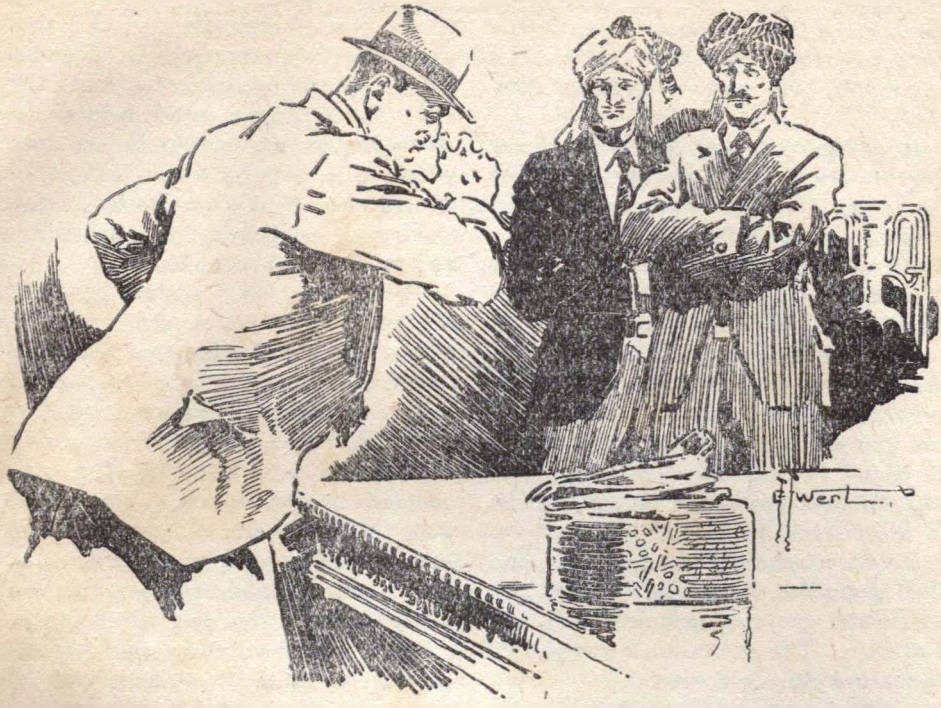
"Dead," echoed the major. "And you know why he kept running? The no-good tramp stole my watch and an old pocketbook—with nothing in it—while I was reading him the riot act about working the old trick of turning in a deserter."

"But that ain't what we come out here about this morning," interrupted Wes Turner. "The shipping agent told me last night that two genuine Virginia hams from the States arrived for you on the *Pagsanjan*. I volunteered to bring 'em out to you, and asked the major to come along and see if you wouldn't invite us to ham and eggs for breakfast as can only be made with Virginia ham. How about it, Joe? What do you say?"

"Sure," said Packard, throwing open the screen door with the movement of a man who suddenly finds himself freed of oppressive bonds. "Come on in."

CAPTAIN CONRAD SIEM

THE death of Captain Conrad Siem in Washington last June, recalls the interesting fact that he was largely responsible for the introduction of the Russian reindeer into Alaska. Forty years ago Captain Siem went to Point Barrow, Alaska, in the interests of a trading company in his native Germany. The Alaskans at that time were desperately in need of fresh meat. Captain Siem saw the meat supply was rapidly vanishing because of the wholesale slaughter of seals, walruses, and sea otters by the fur hunters. He suggested that the Siberian reindeer be introduced into Alaska, and Congress commissioned him to take the first herd, consisting of one hundred and thirty-eight head across the Bering Sea in 1899. To-day there are many herds and the natives have not only used the meat for themselves, but have profitably shipped it to the States and Europe.



A BERBER RACKET

By Captain Leighton H. Blood

Five thousand miles to mete out Berber justice to a New World robber.

CAPTAIN PAUL TRICOT lay on his bed and chuckled loudly to himself. "Name of a sacred name, will not the good Bill Cole's eyes grow as large as Atlas pomegranates when he returns!" he spoke to the room at large, and then settled himself more comfortably so that he could continue his interrupted reading.

Tricot reached for a five-week-old copy of an American newspaper, the property of his comrade, Lieutenant Cole, and inside of a minute was intently engrossed in a two-column story of Chicago racketeers. Reading about American gangsters was the favorite pastime of the giant Basque legionnaire.

Outside, in the cobbled courtyard, there was the clatter of horses' hoofs. A sharp, high-pitched voice in Berber called upon all to look at this unruly mount, and then the rider galloped away toward the Bab Douklah. Again only the hundreds of odd noises that make up a great native city like Marrakech, Morocco, disturbed the night. To the man in the bed, reading of rodmen and rackets, all was as calm and peaceful as a quiet countryside now that the horseman was gone from the court.

Perhaps a half hour had passed be-

fore Tricot laid the paper down in his lap and reached for a drink on the stand beside his bed, and lit a fresh cigarette.

It was summer and hot. In a corner a great electric fan stirred the air of the room. For comfort the captain was wearing only a singlet and pair of white-duck uniform trousers. The mass of black-and-gray hair on his chest looked like the stuffing of a mattress.

His ears caught the sound of some one wearing shoes and not native slippers, crossing the court below, and Tricot glanced down at his wrist watch. It would be Bill Cole returning from inspection of the patrol of legionnaires in the restricted district.

Footsteps sounded on the stairs, and then along the wide upper veranda that led to the quarters occupied by Tricot and Cole. The screen door was pushed open, and Bill Cole entered.

"Hello," he said, tossing his kepi, covered with the white duck of summer, onto the washstand, and wiping his hand across his forehead where the mark of the sweatband showed.

"All goes well to-night?" smiled Tricot from the bed.

"The patrol is on the job, if that's what you want to know," Cole told him, unbuttoning his white uniform blouse with its glittering gold rank markings and buttons. "Only saw a half dozen legionnaires the whole night save the patrol. Too hot for any one to be out. I signed the book and came home."

Tricot knew that Cole cared little for the routine assignment of officer in charge of the patrol in the district. It was one of those duties that every one had to share when the turn came. The patrol was in there to protect the enlisted men from robbery—and death. Yes, death stalked there for lone legionnaires, and it was up to the patrol to allow no men to go singly into those narrow streets. They were a provost guard save that they did not bar legionnaires from entering the district if there were more than one or two together, and they kept together. In reality they were there to come to the help of any of the legion who might be set upon, which often happened.

"Have a drink?" suggested Tricot, waving his hand toward a bottle of Pernod at his bedside table.

"Yes, but not absinth to-night, thanks," Bill told him, stripping down to his waist, and taking off his shoes. "I'll make myself a good old Scotch high ball if there is any ice about."

"There is ice, my old friend, which I had my orderly bring for you." grunted the big captain. "For myself, I do not need ice. Too many years have I drunk my liquor as I have found it, hot or cold, and been grateful to *le bon Dieu* that I was able to swallow it."

"And you won't stop until you die, either," added Cole, tossing back the white netting over his own bed so that he might sit down when ready.

Then Cole crossed the room in his bare feet and threw back the lid of a tin trunk, on the top of which was stenciled:

PREMIER LIEUTENANT WILLIAM COLE.
Fourth Regiment, *Légion Etrangère.*

He pulled out the top tray, on which lay an American .45-caliber automatic with a half dozen filled clips of steel-nosed cartridges by its side in a neat row. He reached for a bottle of amber liquid.

"This is the stuff to put hair on your chest, Tricot," he said, getting to his feet and pouring out three fingers into a tall glass, in which an ice cube rested.

"Name of a name of a name, and he speaks of hair on the chest in such a climate as Africa," rumbled Tricot from behind his great mustaches. "Have I not hair enough for a battalion let alone grow more from Scotch whisky?" he demanded, grasping the mass on his chest with great fingers.

"You were there when they passed out the hair ration all right," Bill Cole laughed, and opened a bottle of soda water and filled his glass, and sat down on his own bed.

"Here's to a night's sleep," he said, raising his glass.

Tricot took a sip of his absinth and his eyes twinkled.

"If you were back in America you would not get such drinks as that, no?" he suggested. "You would have to pay tribute to the racketeers for a bottle of Scotch, is it not so?"

"Yes, something like that, and it would probably be cut booze at that," Cole told him, taking a long swallow. "Whisky costs enough out here as it is, but not anything compared to the tax after the grafters and racketeers have been paid off at home."

Tricot was lighting a fresh cigarette, and now he carefully extinguished the match, all the while looking at Cole.

"I like to read in the newspapers that come to you of these gangsters and racketeers," he smiled. "Ah, they are the tough ones, no?"

"Most of them haven't a bit of guts," Bill told him. "They depend upon numbers and fear of the little fellow and the honest business man. Alone they are harmless."

"*Mais oui,* it is as I thought," declared Tricot. "A brave man, say, like Mohammed Ben Moussa, the Moghrazny, for instance, would have no fear of one of the gangsters?"

BILL COLE sat up and eyed Paul Tricot. He knew now that the big Basque had something up his sleeve and had adroitly been leading the conversation along to spring a surprise.

"What has the Moghrazny Mohammed Ben Moussa to do with racketeers?" he demanded.

The Moghrazny are Berbers who have accepted French rule and enlisted in the mobile police force that polices the High Atlas with the Foreign Legion. They are paid seven francs a day, but furnish their own horses and found, and combine policing with scouting and patrol work for the legion.

They are the most picturesque force in the world to-day, with their blue capes over white burnooses, and the cavalry sabers and carbines of French mounted troops. Fearless riders of the High Atlas, they know that to be captured by their own compatriots means a terrible, lingering death for taking the gold of France.

"Come, my little truffle, you suddenly are excited," chuckled Tricot. "Is not Mohammed Ben Moussa a most brave member of the Moghrazny? Would he not be a match for those racketeers of your own country?"

"Mohammed is a brave young man," Cole said. "But what in the name of the devil are you driving at?"

Paul Tricot deliberately paused before he answered and shook the ash from his cigarette into a sawed-off shell base that served as an ash receiver on the table.

"Mohammed Ben Moussa came down from the M'Touga sector to-night, Bill, and dropped around here to see you," Tricot answered.

"What did he want of me?" Cole asked in puzzlement. He knew the Moghrazny, and liked him. Once, a year before, Mohammed Ben Moussa had distinguished himself in a scrap with the Berbers, and Cole had seen to it that Mohammed was awarded the Croix de Guerre.

"He wanted, my old friend, to have you explain to him what a racket was and what sort of men were racketeers," came the astonishing reply from Tricot.

"What?" Bill Cole asked incredulously.

"Mohammed Ben Moussa, my little cabbage, has been given leave from his command, and is on his way to New

York," Tricot said, and smiled at the astonished look on his friend's face. "He wants you to tell him what to expect when he arrives in your country—especially regarding these racketeers."

Bill Cole set down his high ball and lighted a cigarette. He knew that Tricot was baiting him along, enjoying the sensation he had caused by the news that a Berber fighting man from the High Atlas Mountains was about to descend upon Manhattan Island.

"Why is he going to New York and what has it to do with rackets?" Cole wanted to know.

"*Mais oui,* now that is a long story best related by our Berber friend," was the noncommittal reply.

"Where is Mohammed?" he asked the Basque.

"Mohammed, my ancient comrade, just now has gone on a little expedition, but he returns shortly," Tricot told him with a crafty smile.

"I'll gamble it is some errand that you put him up to," Cole commented. "I can tell by the way you act."

Tricot shrugged his massive shoulders.

"What would you?" he demanded. "This Berber, who is a good soldier, comes here and finds that you are away on duty, so he tells me his story. He goes to America and he wants information, so I tell him just a little—what I have read in the journals that you get—of the gangsters and the racketeers. Then, when he tells me of a plan, I suggest another. It would not do to have a good Moghrazny die on what you Americans so quaintly call the 'hot seat,' no? Ah, I knew you would agree."

With marked irritation Bill Cole ground out his cigarette and took a pull at his drink.

"Come, Tricot old boy, what's this all about?" he asked persuasively.

"Mohammed can explain it better than I," Tricot said, "but one of his family in America is a victim of these racketeers. Mohammed, being a Berber first, and also a Moslem, plans to fix up this matter according to the laws of the Atlas. The knife!"

In pantomime Tricot raised his clenched fist and struck downward toward his left side at the heart.

"And, as you said, either get the electric chair in Sing Sing or stop some dope-crazed gangster's bullet," finished Bill Cole. "Does Mohammed have any idea what America—and New York—are like?"

"He has seen pictures in the cinema," laughed Tricot, "but, being a good Berber fighting man, and young, he has no fear of anything that walks on two feet."

"That's a great help!" snapped Cole sarcastically. "And I suppose you told him to go ahead?"

TRICOT sat up and swung his legs over the edge of the bed and smiled down at his calloused toes. "*Mais oui, mon vieux,* to that I plead guilty," said the Basque solemnly. "But, as I told you, little cabbage, I, Tricot, suggested a plan. The knife or a pistol is all right in its place, but I do not want Mohammed Ben Moussa to die in the electric chair, so he will settle this little blood debt in another and quite as effective a way. As the Germans said in the Great War when their submarines were busy—*without a trace!*"

Cole stared at his friend. Those last three words, "without a trace," had been spoken with deliberation.

"Wait!" snapped Tricot as Cole started to speak. "Hear the rest, and then Mohammed's story when he returns. For more than a score of years I have been of the *Légion Etrangère.* In that time I have met thousands of men, some good and some very bad. I *know* men. *Bien!* I have read of these gangsters and racketeers, and now comes a simple Berber who wishes to

help his brother. If he carried out his plan he would either be killed by gangsters or by the courts. When he told me what he intended to do I reminded him of an old Berber revenge that I first heard of when I was a *bleu* at Sidi Bel Abbes. If this racketeer should die it will not be Mohammed Ben Moussa who does the actual killing, but only the racketeer's lust for gold. It is all quite simple."

"I can't see it," grumbled Cole. "You talk in riddles."

"When Mohammed returns you will understand," Tricot said with a quiet laugh.

"Have it your own way," snapped Cole, finishing his drink and pouring another. "Trying to get anything out of you is a useless task. But if Mohammed is about to wish himself for the walk down the 'last mile,' I'll put a stop to it so quick he won't know what happened. I'll have his leave rescinded and see to it that he goes back to the High Atlas where he belongs. He wouldn't stand a chance in American courts if they had him up for murder—even the murder of a gangster!"

An amused smile played over Tricot's face and he pulled hard at his big, handlebar mustaches.

"But if a gangster should die quite suddenly from no apparent cause, what then?" he asked. *"Mais oui,* I read the answer in your face, my old friend. The gendarmes would say, 'Good! One the less pigs to watch.' Often have you sat here in this very room and told me how the racketeers and gangsters sometimes buy their freedom from punishment. You have told me that the only way to fight them was kill them off. *Bien!* The family of Mohammed Ben Moussa of the High Atlas now has an affair with racketeers, and Mohammed intends to play his little part in the racket. All I ask is that you listen to his story and what I have suggested that he do. If you fail to approve, then forget what he plans to do in New York. It is simple."

Cole lighted a cigarette and looked at Tricot intently.

"I'll wait to pass judgment, but I won't make any promises," he said.

"Très bien!" laughed Tricot. "Always you can be depended upon to do what is right. When you hear the story just remember all the bad things you have told me of gangsters."

For perhaps five minutes they sat there quietly smoking. Then came the clatter of hoofs again in the courtyard, and the sound of slippered feet on the stairs. Tricot's eyes lighted with expectation and his lips quirked into a half smile.

Mohammed Ben Moussa, the Moghrazny, rapped on the screen door, entered and salaamed.

"Salaam! Keef halek, sidi!"

He touched forehead and heart with the finger tips of his right hand and bowed low. Bill Cole and Tricot returned the ancient Arabic greeting.

Mohammed Ben Moussa was young, tall, and handsome, as he stood there in the glare of the electric lights over their heads. His blue cape, with the Croix de Guerre ribbon at the upper edge, was pulled about him. Over his shoulder hung the ever-present carbine. The hilt of his saber showed out from the fold of the cape, and his dark, piercing eyes sparkled with pent-up emotion, for here was a Berber about to set out on a great journey.

"Pardon me for intruding upon your home, *sidi,"* he said in excellent French.

Cole hastened to assure him that he was welcome, and waited.

"I go by air from Casablanca to Toulouse in France on the morrow," Mohammed told him, first glancing at Tricot and slightly nodding his head as if to say that some mission had been completed. "From Toulouse I go to Cherbourg and then to your own country, America. It is of America that I

wish to learn some things of vast importance."

"Yes?" Cole asked.

"My brother Abdul, by my father's first wife, is a merchant in New York," explained Mohammed. "I am a son by a third wife. Abdul is much older than myself and for many years he has lived in your country. Now he is beset by robbers who wish to take his money. For many months he has paid them much gold, but they are not satisfied, so he has appealed to me, for I am of the fighting men of my family, to come to his aid. I, Mohammed Ben Moussa, as head of my clan in the High Atlas, must answer his summons."

THIS was a straightforward statement of fact, typical of the high-caste Berber. A call for aid by one of his blood must be answered, and at once. Mohammed was losing no time. He would fly by airplane to France and embark for the United States, this fighting man of the High Atlas.

The fact that his destination was thousands of miles away, meant nothing. An unknown land and people were secondary in importance to the honor of his family.

"Why do you come to me, Mohammed?" Cole asked.

"America is your home, and I wish to know the meaning of the word 'racketeer,' which Abdul mentions in his letter to me," the Berber answered. "I well understand a robber, for in our mountains men have lived through the ages from robbery, but this is a new expression to my ears. Abdul, no doubt, has lived among your people so long that this word is one to which he is accustomed, and he failed to explain to such an ignorant person as myself save that they wish his gold. For that I came to you, a brother fighting man, and learned in the ways of your country."

He paused a moment and glanced toward Tricot.

"The Captain Tricot, *sidi,* has told me that racketeers are like the robber Caids of the mountains who prey upon the caravans and make them pay great sums in order that they may do business without being molested. Is that true?"

"Yes, Mohammed, the racketeer is a modern version of the robber Caids," Cole told him. "But unlike the robbers of the High Atlas and of the desert, they do not fight in the open. They slay from ambush and by bomb and pistol, or capture their victims and shoot them in the back. They are not fighting men, as *you* know men of arms."

Mohammed Ben Moussa had squatted down on his heels, the blue cape ballooning out over the floor and the muzzle of the carbine protruding above his head blackly.

"The words of my brother, Abdul," he said, thrusting a hand inside the cape and withdrawing an envelope, which he held out toward Cole.

"You can read Arabic, *sidi?*" he asked.

"Yes," replied Cole, taking the letter.

The envelope was postmarked New York, and addressed to Mohammed in care of the Moghrazny headquarters at the native-affairs bureau in Marrakech. The letter itself caused Cole to sit up with a start when he drew it from the envelope. The paper was of the finest quality and the address was in one of the most expensive and exclusive sections of Park Avenue. He whistled aloud in surprise.

"There is something wrong?" asked the Berber, his eyes narrowing.

"No," Bill assured him, "only it surprised me to find that your brother Abdul has his establishment in the most expensive place in the United States. Abdul must have much gold."

He waited for Mohammed to reply, and the Moghrazny, his eyes lighting proudly, laughed slightly.

"Yes, *sidi*, we have much money. We send rugs from the Atlas, which even here in Morocco are most expensive, and leather goods of the finest to be sold in this store. Truly, our family is well placed. Perhaps we have not the money of the Grand Caids, but enough so that we must pay heavy taxes."

Cole understood. Abdul ran this exclusive oriental shop for the family, and must be making plenty of money to pay the rent that went with the address. Berbers are crafty traders and their workmanship, especially in rugs and the world-famous Moroccan leather, is the best obtainable, and also very expensive.

"Then why are you of the Moghrazny if your family is wealthy?" Cole asked.

Mohammed Ben Moussa sat back on his heels and squared his shoulders.

"I care nothing for trading," he said haughtily. "I am a soldier. The pay of a soldier is enough for my simple needs. At least one of our family always has been a man of arms. But, as you will see by this letter, our honor is at stake, and being the fighting man it is my duty to uphold that honor."

Bill Cole nodded his head and read the letter slowly, for Abdul's Arabic was mixed with colloquial phrases of the mountains that are not taught in the legion's school of native languages. When he had finished he replaced the letter and handed it back to Mohammed.

"I think I understand the situation," he said quietly. "It is a case of your brother paying twenty thousand dollars to one Bellerini on the first day of next month. Plain, everyday extortion. 'Racketeering' they call it now."

"That is what he has written, *sidi*," said Mohammed.

"But he says nothing about your coming to his assistance," Cole told him. "All he writes is that this Bellerini has held him up for various sums from two thousand dollars to ten thousand dollars over the past year or so, on threat that if he did not pay, Bellerini would see that importations were made difficult, and that Abdul's stock on hand would be spoiled and his store wrecked. That is all he writes, Mohammed—nothing about your going to New York and using tactics that might go well in the High Atlas but not in Park Avenue."

While he spoke Cole noticed that Mohammed Ben Moussa's facial expression had changed from one of eager interest to that of pity.

"The *sidi* lieutenant has been among us much. But has he failed to remember that a Berber never tells his troubles unless he has need of help?" he asked sonorously. "Abdul would not have written me until he had need. Then only does he state the facts so that I will know the reason. He points out that the jackals are howling and that it is time a fighting man rode to the defense of the family."

Cole nodded, and from the bed Tricot snorted.

"Name of a name," said the Basque, "Mohammed gets a letter telling him that thieves are robbing the family treasure. It is all so simple. Being a man he goes to protect what belongs to him."

"I understand all that," Cole retorted. "But, Mohammed, you can't plunge a knife into a man in New York and get away with it the way you can in Morocco, or shoot him either. What can you do? That's what I want to know."

FOR perhaps half a minute Mohammed said nothing, but looked first at Cole and then at Tricot. "At first I had planned to use a knife," he confessed, "but the Captain Tricot suggested another way. He told me that in America they have a chair of electricity that kills, and that if I used a knife I would be placed in this chair."

"No doubt about that," Cole told him, "or else these gangsters would kill you or the police see that you went to prison for the rest of your life. You are a Berber and wouldn't have any show with a jury."

"That is what the Captain Tricot said," Mohammed smiled. "He told me of cases he had read in your newspapers."

"What do you expect to do, Mohammed?" Cole asked quietly.

"This man Bellerini will come to my brother on the first day of next month for twenty thousand dollars," said the Berber. "On that day I shall be in New York—Allah be willing. Bellerini shall be given a little present which I bring from Africa. If he has a great lust for gold he will examine, and then all will be well."

A crafty gleam was in the eyes of the Berber now as he looked up from the floor where he squatted.

"And what will the present be?" Cole wanted to know.

With a half glance toward Tricot, Mohammed reached his right hand under the blue cape. A moment later he withdrew a battered and dirty leather bag and set it on the floor before him. The bag settled down in a shapeless mass.

"Good God!"

The words came from Cole's lips of their own volition as he stared with wide eyes at the bag. *Suddenly he knew!*

"A most fitting payment to a robber," said Tricot from his bed.

"Terrible!" Cole said in a hoarse voice, not from fear but from his thoughts.

"They will be two of a kind," retorted the Basque. "It will not be the fault of Mohammed if this Bellerini accepts this payment. It will be justice. Listen to me, my old friend."

For ten minutes the Basque spoke, and at last Cole nodded his head.

"It's poetic justice if it works, and none of my business," he said at last. "If the law gets you, Mohammed, it will be your hard luck."

"If this one lusts for gold as Abdul writes, it will be his own Kismet," said the Berber, once again placing the leather bag under his cape.

"Salaam, keef halek!" he said, getting to his feet. "May Allah guard your footsteps, *sidi,* and bring you great wealth and happiness."

A moment later he was gone, and they could hear the slap of his goatskin slippers as he strode along the veranda and down the stairs.

"If this man Bellerini is like the average gangster, God have mercy on his soul!" said Bill Cole fervently.

WITH a smirking grin on his fat and pudgy face, "Biff" Bellerini eased his bulky frame into the overstuffed chair behind the desk and lighted a cigarette. Maxie Daus, his muscle man and bodyguard, standing by the window, regarded him through narrow slits of eyes.

"You look like you connected," Daus said softly.

"Don't I always connect?" demanded Biff, with a show of irritation.

Maxie seemed to consider this for a moment, and took a deep drag from the cigarette he was smoking.

"Yeah," he admitted. "Yeah, you're goin' good, but I gotta hunch this here now A-rab is comin' across too easy. Them birds ain't like the others. He dont put up no squawk or make no squeals. That ain't natural."

Biff had reached into a lower draw of his desk and produced a bottle of Scotch and two glasses. Now he glared at his bodyguard.

"You afraid of a A-rab?" he demanded.

There was vicious menace in Bellerini's voice, and his pig eyes were glaring at Maxie.

"I ain't afraid of nobody," the other assured him, "but I'm just thinkin' that this bird agrees too quicklike to give us twenty grand, that's all."

After a moment or two Biff laughed, and swallowed his drink. The double chins that he had acquired since he climbed to the unsteady heights of a big shot, quivered as the liquid went down. The Scotch made him feel better.

"I'll make that damn A-rab come across or he goes for a ride with you, Maxie, and stays away until he pays up," he said with a harsh, anticipatory laugh. "I know how to handle these foreigners, see?"

Although he had been born in the Old Country and neither his parents or himself had been naturalized, Biff Bellerini considered any one with an alien name a "damn foreigner" if they were grist to his mill. Foreigners were his meat.

"Yeah, you're good," Maxie agreed heartily. "This is a better racket than chiselin' with beer or booze or any of the other regular stuff. Aliens can't squawk too much. You're a smart guy, Biff. We got 'em tied."

Biff's chest, under the gaudy but expensive suit, swelled at his henchman's praise.

"That's jus' what I told this A-rab," he boasted. "He knows we mean business."

"What held up his gettin' the money?" Maxie wanted to know.

Biff snorted and tossed away his cigarette.

"He's like the rest of these foreigners," he said disdainfully. "He don't trust our banks and sends his money to the Old Country, and he has to wait until a relative comes over here with it. He better have it to-day or he takes a little ride."

"I'm all set for him," Maxie said, with a cruel smile. "He better have twenty yards, that's all."

Biff looked at his ornate watch and then poured two more drinks.

"Here's to that A-rab!" he grinned, downing the contents of the glass. "It's suckers like him that keep us in limousines, Maxie."

"Yeah," agreed the bodyguard, setting down his glass.

Biff Bellerini got up and leisurely put on his hat and made his way to the door, Daus following close behind.

In the outer office a ratlike little man smirked at them and ostentatiously patted his left armpit: He was the outside guard—the sentinel at the door of the great racketeer, Biff Bellerini.

"S'long," Biff said casually, but waited for Maxie to precede him into the hall, then he followed.

OUTSIDE, Biff Bellerini hesitated for a moment and gazed back at the ground-glass door with pride. He was reading for the thousandth time the gilt letters that were painted there—the official name of his racket. They read:

GREATER NEW YORK IMPORTERS PROTECTIVE ASSOCIATION

It had been a long time gaining these heights and this suite of offices—from petty thievery, and an Elmira sentence, through the rolling of drunks for bank rolls that to-day were as small as Biff's tips to night-club check-room girls, and graduation from Sing Sing. Apprenticeship as a paid gunman and Tommy operator, and a reputation as a ruthless killer had followed his breaking into the booze racket, and then came the idea. The idea was a good one—extortion from the foreign shop keepers in exclusive lines of commercial endeavor.

Biff boasted, as a man will with plenty of notches on his gun, that he was the king of his racket. He had no partners. Maxie Daus was only his bodyguard—at a salary. Biff kept all the heavy sugar for himself. Salaries for

his sluggers, and bribes for his assistants, were his only expenses. The office was just as a front in case they got into any jam.

Out on the sidewalk a few minutes later, Bellerini, followed by Daus, climbed into an expensive limousine, whose glass was bullet proof, and gave the driver directions. As yet Biff had not needed the armored machine, but he took no chances. Dealing with foreigners like himself, he knew that underneath their apparent willingness to stand for extortion they were bitter and vindictive, and might hire some one to bump him off one of these days. That was the chance you took when you became a big shot.

The big machine purred through the traffic around the Grand Central viaduct and out into Park Avenue above. At last it pulled to the curb before an exclusive shop. In two small windows on either side of the entrance were draped single rugs of exquisite hand workmanship. A small plate in imitation Arabic letters announced that this was the "Souk Arab," the word "souk" meaning market or trading place.

"Want me to come, chief?" Maxie asked, as Biff opened the door of the car.

"Naw," Biff told him. "I can handle this A-rab all right. He ain't the kind that would put up no fight, and if he has the cops there I can fix things. He ain't got no vote!"

He laughed heartily at the last, and Maxie joined.

"Guess you're right," said Maxie. "He don't pay no district leader."

Biff walked to the door and entered the Souk Arab. Once inside he paused and lighted a cigarette, at the same time his pig eyes quickly taking in everything about him.

A dapper clerk in morning clothes approached, but from the rear of the store Biff saw hurrying toward him Abdul Moussa, the proprietor. Abdul said something to the clerk, who turned away.

"Good morning, Mr. Bellerini," said Abdul, but he made no move to shake hands.

"Hello, A-rab," grunted Biff with a leer. "I'm here to collect that fine the association laid on you for bein' late with your dues last time. You got the money?"

"My brother, Mohammed, has come from Morocco, and awaits you in my office," the shopkeeper answered, with a nod of his head toward the rear of the store, and turned, without another word, and walked back.

Biff Bellerini followed, for he felt that no one would try any funny business with him on Park Avenue—and, besides, Maxie was standing there in the doorway.

The office was rather large, with a big desk standing before a window, which was protected on the outside by iron bars. Soft rugs lay on the floor, and there were expensive hangings on the wall. Biff paid no attention to these, for he had been in the office of the Souk Arab before.

Standing in the center of the room was a tall young man in European clothes.

"My brother, Mohammed," said Abdul.

Mohammed nodded his head slightly, as the racketeer looked his way.

"Another A-rab," chuckled Biff.

"We are not Arabs, Mr. Bellerini," remonstrated Abdul softly. "We are Berbers of the High Atlas mountains. Arabs are beneath contempt to a Berber. We are white men!"

Bellerini snorted. He cared nothing about that. What he wanted was twenty thousand dollars.

"Did this brother of yours bring the money?" he demanded.

"Sit down," suggested Abdul, motioning Biff to a seat beside the desk, and the other complied.

ABDUL turned and spoke several sentences in high-pitched Berber to Mohammed, who walked to a corner where a rug had been carelessly dropped.

"My brother Mohammed, who has come here from our home, wishes me to tell you that a Berber always meets his just payments," Abdul told Bellerini. "You have asked me to pay you twenty thousand dollars that I may continue to do business, although I comply with all the laws of this country. Is that not so? What we call here a 'racket'?"

"Cut that talk or it will cost you five grand more," growled Biff, and his little eyes narrowed. "You'll pay and like it, get me? Come on with twenty thousand, or you'll go for a ride."

There was no mistaking the venom of this threat. Abdul shrugged his shoulders and spoke to Mohammed.

The tall young man left the corner of the room where he had produced a leather bag from under the carelessly thrown rug, and advanced toward the desk. Biff Bellerini's eyes lighted avariciously. This was something he could understand. The hoarded cash was of Europe and Africa, where banks are not often trusted by the simple peasant. This one would contain gold and cash, he felt, for it looked heavy.

Mohammed said a few words to his brother, although he was watching Bellerini intently.

"My brother wishes to tell you that he now makes proper Berber payment for your demand," said Abdul quietly. "It is in this bag of leather."

Biff Bellerini set forward and leaned on the desk. Mohammed laid down the bag and stepped back and stood motionless.

"You will take it with you or first examine?" suggested Abdul.

"I'll take a look," growled Biff, and untied the string that closed the sack.

With a sharp pull the neck of the bag fell loose. Biff Bellerini, gunman, with a score of murders to his credit, let out an ear-piercing shriek! He could only stare with horrow as he shrank back into the chair by the desk!

Coiled there, with its head two feet above the desk top and waving the hood from side to side gently, was a cobra! Not the great hamadryad of the Far East but the blue-black, vicious cobra of Africa, which is quite as deadly.

"One reptile meets another," Abdul said in a cooing voice. "I pay you in kind. A snake to a snake!"

Biff Bellerini's facial muscles were working desperately but words did not come. Deadly fear was in his eyes.

The cobra, its hood extended, swayed there, waiting for a movement from the man before him. African cobras do not always strike instantly, once their victims are within range of their fangs, but seem to await a hostile move, which differentiates them from their cousins of the Far East. The cobra knows when it is within striking distance and seems to aim for an effective strike.

Although speechless, the racketeer seemed to realize that fate had stalked him. For a few seconds he was rigid and then, as if to shut out the sight of that gently swaying head, he raised his right hand and with his left tried to shove himself away from the table.

The cobra struck! To those watching, the blow seemed to travel slowly, but in reality it was as swift as lightning. The fangs sank into Biff Bellerini's right wrist—held there for seconds while the poison sacs were drained. Not until the poison was leaping through the gangster's blood stream, did the cobra let go and drop to the table again.

Mohammed walked a few steps, grabbed the snake, no longer coiled in striking position, and thrust it back in the bag. Unconcernedly he walked to the corner and dropped the leather bag underneath the rug again.

Bellerini sat gazing at the tiny, pin-like pricks on his wrist, and at the little

drops of blood. He tried to speak, but he seemed to have lost his voice.

Abdul said quietly:

"I will call a doctor now, and tell him that you have suffered a heart attack. By the time he arrives you will be dead. Doctors in America know nothing of cobra bites. They will think nothing of those little marks on your wrist, and of course there will be no poison in your stomach in case of an autopsy, for this death came not from swallowing but from your grabbing for what you thought was gold."

Bellerini started to get up from the chair, but Mohammed leaped forward and pushed him back.

"You will sit there until I call the doctor," smiled Abdul. "And while you wait for certain death, remember that you brought it upon yourself."

THE deputy medical examiner shrugged his shoulders at the half-hearted questions of the two men from the homicide squad. "He may have been bumped off but there isn't anything to show it," he told the detectives. "You know how these racketeers live. His heart stopped on him. Too much high life. I found it was pretty fat around the old ticker. Something hit it a blow that halted him. I don't mean a physical blow, but something in the old human engine. This rug dealer Abdul Moussa and his brother seem O. K. Abdul Moussa has a pretty high financial rating and plenty of money, and he frankly admits that Bellerini was there to shake him down and showed us the twenty thousand in cash he had ready to pay the thug."

"Sure," said one of the detectives. "I guess you're right, doc. Anyway, I'm not goin' to waste any sleep over Biff Bellerini. It only means one the less to look out for. This brother of Abdul's is a cop, too. We took him down to headquarters and examined his passports. He belongs to some French native police in Africa. The consul told us they were real cops, like the Canadian Mounties, and you don't catch cops leaving any trails behind if they do a job. If he pulled one here it was a beauty, but I don't think he did. He has only been in New York four days."

"Just mark it off to heart failure," suggested the deputy medical examiner, who didn't like messing with gangsters' bodies. "No one will kick."

"Sure," said the homicide squad man. "I'm off to the Polo Grounds for the game. See you some more."

An orderly in summer khaki rapped on the door, and then entered and held out a telegram to Tricot.

"Merci, mon enfant," said the Basque, taking the wire, and running a big finger under the pasted-down flap and spreading it open. After a moment he glanced up at Cole, who lay under his netting, reading.

"A cable from Mohammed Ben Moussa, in New York," he said simply.

"What does he say?" Cole asked.

"It reads:

"Berber payment in full. Returning.
MOHOMMED.'

Bill Cole let his book fall and reached for a cigarette.

"There may be some justice in this world after all, Tricot," he said quietly, "even if it takes a slimy cobra and a Berber to administer it instead of the blindfolded goddess with the scales."

"The ancient ways may not be so nice, but they are effective, and you cannot buy a cobra off, or appeal his decision," Tricot said grimly. "And apparently he did not recognize a brother in Bellerini."

These superb stories by Captain Leighton H. Blood appear regularly in this magazine.

MAGNIFICENT FOOLS

By Hal Dunning

Tiny Tim Murphy, the wolf cub, haunted by the coyotes he has downed, makes a superb stand for the glory of the Outlaw Legion.

CHAPTER I.

TINY TIM RIDES ALONE.

THERE were an unusual number of Rangers gathered at headquarters in Carson that afternoon. "Doc" Tumlinson, "Bad Bill" Rodgers, the Cole brothers, the "Yuma Kid," and a dozen others were there listening to Jim Allen reading an account of a holdup in a neighboring county.

When he finished, there was nothing but admiration in their eyes.

"That there gent sure has sand in his craw," George Cole said with a fleeting grin. "What is his handle, Jim?"

"Bill Lawson," Allen replied.

"Nerve—he sure had nerve! That first holdup he made was done with a

glass pistol. A gent sure has to have nerve to pull a bluff like that," Bad Bill declared.

"Yeah, then he wrote the railroad tellin' 'em how he done it," Allen answered.

"An' when they have him cornered tother side of the divide, he just hops the Eastbound train when it slows on the grade, an' holds her up while the train takes him safe through the posse. Huh, that's sure the richest thin' I've heard in years," the Yuma Kid chuckled.

"Huh, that ain't nothin'," Toothpick said scornfully as he leaned back in his chair. "Now take what Allen done when Hopeful Harry had him——"

"Toothpick" broke off abruptly and made a wild effort to regain his balance, for Allen had slipped up behind him and jerked his chair backward. The lanky rider hit the floor with a bang. He climbed to his feet amid general mirth and ruefully rubbed the back of his head.

"I've sure warned you a hundred times that there tongue of yours will get you a harp an' wings if you don't watch it," Allen said severely.

"Sure, I know. I talk too much. It's a sort of disease with me," Toothpick admitted without shame. "Just the same, Jim, you know it was a nervy and smart trick you——"

But the door banged open and Toothpick was again interrupted. Bob Bolton appeared in the doorway. He was a big, slow moving, youthful Ranger. He glanced curiously about the smoke-filled room. Every one there, except Toothpick and "Tiny Tim" Murphy, were special Rangers and members of the Outlaw Legion, and each wore a tiny gold wolf on his uniform collar. The wolf pins had been Doc Tumlinson's idea. Various papers had abusively and derisively referred to the Rangers as wolves, so Doc Tumlinson had presented each member of the Legion with a pin which they wore as though they thought the nickname "Wolf," was given in praise rather than as a taunt.

"Lo, Bob, I'm plumb glad to see you," Toothpick greeted with his usual talkativeness, "'cause I feel right lonely among all these ragin' wolves. Even Tiny has turned wolf now."

Toothpick grinned broadly as he pointed to the wolf pins on Tiny Tim's collar. Bob Bolton's eyes clouded as he saw them. He and Tiny had grown up in the same village and had enlisted in the Rangers together. They had been the warmest friends up to six weeks ago, when Tiny and Allen had gone on patrol together. Bob never knew just what happened, but when the two returned he was quick to recognize the change in his friend, for Tiny Tim had lost his youth somewhere on that trip. Tiny Tim laughed as readily as ever, but only with his mouth and never with his eyes. Now he was wearing the wolf pin. That meant the Outlaw Legion had accepted him as one of themselves. This did not surprise Bob, but it saddened him.

"Yep, they're all wolves here 'cept me," the irrepressible Toothpick jeered.

"An' you're a bleatin' sheep," Allen snapped.

"Got a couple of telegrams for you," Bob Bolton said.

ALLEN accepted the two yellow envelopes. He ripped one open and read it. There was a strange light in his eyes as he finished and glanced about the room. All there understood the meaning of that light. It meant action. So the Rangers' eyes sparkled eagerly as they moved closer and waited. Bob Bolton looked at his friend and sighed. His eyes were also filled with that strange flickering light. Bob Bolton thought the Rangers resembled a pack of wolves.

"You gents ever heard of a big greaser who calls hisself El Lobo?" Allen asked.

"El Lobo? Sure. He's that big devil who claims to be a revolutionist and patriot and use that as an excuse to rob and murder," Doc said.

"This here is from Cap Stillman of the Rangers, over west in Northcliff," Allen said as he pointed to the open telegram. "Stillman says that El Lobo made a raid over the border day before yesterday and got clean away before he could get after him. He murdered two women and seven men."

A low growl swept around the circle of Rangers.

"The dirty coyote," Toothpick cried angrily.

"Huh, lobo! It's sure funny how these here greasers like to call themselves tigers, panthers, and wolves when the're only snakes or coyotes," Bad Bill snorted contemptuously.

"Stillman figures because this greaser had it so easy the first time that he'll try it again and suggests we keep an eye on the border in Bedford County," Allen continued.

"Let's hope El Lobo tries it, we'll learn him the right way to spell his name," the Yuma Kid said, with a wolfish grin which displayed his big buck teeth.

"It's a seventy-mile ride so we better get organized pronto," Allen said.

The men trooped in a body toward the door, but Allen halted them.

"Doc, you an' Bill have got to stay here with Toothpick and Bolton to sort of hold 'em down an' see that Laughin' Ed don't steal this here office while we're gone," Allen cried.

Both Toothpick and Bob Bolton offered noisy objections to this plan, but Doc and Bad Bill accepted it with a philosophical shrug.

"Hey, Jim, you forgot your other telegram," Doc reminded.

Allen nodded and ripped the second dispatch open. His face clouded as he read it. He crumpled it impatiently in his hand, then stared through the open door at the Rangers who were busily saddling their horses. Tiny Tim stepped through the door.

"I've thrown a saddle on Princess," he announced.

Allen nodded, then straightened out the telegram and reread it. Tiny Tim looked curiously at Allen.

TINY TIM MURPHY, next to Allen, was by far the smallest Ranger in the service. He was slender and straight, with reddish hair and very blue eyes. He was young, hardly out of his teens, yet he had a way of clamping his mouth shut too tightly and there were wrinkles about the corners of his eyes. He was young in years, but not in deeds.

"Bad news, Cap?" he asked.

"Damn it, I won't do it," Allen snapped, then he went on to explain. "It's from the governor. He says that holdup gent we was talkin' 'bout a while ago made a break across the State line farther up, an' when they headed him, he turned south toward the border."

"You mean Bill Lawson?" Doc asked. "That gent sure has nerve, so I hope he gets away."

"Me, too." Bad Bill agreed.

"The governor says that the B. N. T. railway is raisin' Cain."

Bad Bill interrupted Allen.

"Huh, the B. N. T. is nothin' but a jerk-water railway anyway an' doesn't run into this State, so let 'em cook their own supper," he cried.

"Sure the B. N. T. don't amount to much, but you can't tell the size of a dog by it's bark. A darn lap dog can sometimes yap the loudest. Besides, even if the railway is out of the State, old man Buddington is chief stock holder," Allen said with a shrug.

"Buddington, the gent what owns that string of newspapers and is the governor's chief backer?" Doc asked.

"That makes it bad," Toothpick cut in. "Buddington has been after the

governor, an' the governor wants you to catch Lawson."

"Now look a here, Jim, you know all of us gents joined the Rangers with a condition attached. We wasn't supposed to be bloodhounds; we're here to stop this dope runnin' an' nothin' else. So I tell you flat, that I won't have no hand in catchin' Lawson. Why, gosh darn it, look what happens. That railway cheats Lawson's dad out of a bunch of money. Lawson's dad dies of a broken heart; so what does this kid do? He takes a glass pistol an' holds up the railway to get some of his money back which they stole. Now governor or no governor, I'm not goin' to even try to stop that kid from gettin' safe across the border, if necessary I'll help him get over," Doc cried with unusual heat.

"Me, too." Bad Bill agreed.

"Huh, I never had any intention of tryin' to arrest him," Allen said with a shrug. "But it sure puts us in a hole; that's what's worryin' me."

Both Doc and Bad Bill subsided.

"Why don't you make him a Ranger an' give him a wolf pin to wear?" Toothpick jeered.

"We got to have that gent," Tiny Tim cried. "I know that country over yonder, so I'll go get him."

Then before any one could stop him, Tiny Tim vanished through the door into the court. The four stared after him for several seconds before any one moved. Then Doc strode toward the door, but stopped when the beat of hoofs reached his ears.

"He's sure traveling along Killer's Trail, plumb quick," Doc snapped.

"Jim, Tiny has turned killer, an' if he jumps Bill Lawson, why I'll——"

ALLEN interrupted Bad Bill Rodgers with a gesture. "You won't do nothin'," he said softly. "Somethin' is dyin' inside of Tiny. Just one more flicker to go out, then he'll be like us gents."

"Yes, but——" Bad Bill commenced, and then grew silent.

"You two misunderstood what Tiny said, an' I reckon you'll apologize the next time you see him," Allen pressed.

"Thanks, Cap," Bob Bolton said gratefully. "I know Tiny is not a killer. I'm sure he left here to help Lawson."

"He said, 'I'll get him,' " Doc insisted stubbornly.

Allen swung about and entered his office to get his rifle. Bob Bolton followed him uncertainly.

"Cap, I want to speak to you," he said slowly. "I don't know what happened when he went off with you that time, but it sure changed Tiny."

"Yeah, I know. I'm plumb sorry I ever let him go with me," Allen said sadly.

"Which is a mistake," Doc said from the doorway. "Tiny started when he dropped the Kid. There was nothin' to make him follow along our trail, so don't go blamin' yourself. For whatever it is that makes gents like us go bad, it is somethin' we're born with."

"I reckon that's true, Doc, for Tiny was always sort of different. When he got mad he was like another person." Bob Bolton spoke haltingly. "Cap, I wanted to ask you about this. Tiny doesn't sleep good. I think he sees things in the dark, for he keeps gettin' up to light a candle. Then he talks in his sleep. Up to a couple of weeks ago he kept talkin' about Big Foot Charlie, then he downed Soapy Sam, an' now he calls to him in his sleep."

Allen sighed and looked at Doc Tumlinson. The two gunmen's eyes were filled with infinite pity and understanding.

"What I wanted to ask you, Cap," poor Bob Bolton went on, "do you think it would do any good if me an' Tiny resigned from the Rangers and went away, a long ways away?"

"You could go a long, long way, Bob,

even to the end of the earth an' it wouldn't be far enough. A gent can keep ridin', but the specters he's tryin' to leave behind is like his shadow," Allen said softly.

"But if he had new friends, wouldn't he forget this Soapy Sam?" Bob Bolton asked eagerly.

"Not until the next gent he sees through smoke, blots him out," Doc cried harshly.

"Then Tiny ain't got nothin' to look forward to, except——"

Doc Tumlinson's voice rasped like a file as he interrupted.

"Except one minute of smokin' action," he said.

Doc patted Bob on the shoulder as they followed Allen into the courtyard, where they found thirteen Rangers mounted and waiting. Allen swung into his saddle, then nodded a farewell and led his Rangers into the street. The riders swung west toward Massacre Valley and the pass which led to the border of Bedford County.

"Huh, if Jim catches that greaser raider in his present mood, he'll sure learn him who's a wolf," Doc said grimly.

CHAPTER II.

A DEBT IS PAID.

TINY TIM MURPHY had no definite plan when he left Jim Allen and the other Rangers, but he had a hunch that Bill Lawson, the wanted man, would strike Skeleton Pass close to Pineville. If he hit the pass this side of Pineville, it might be possible to get news of Lawson's passing through that town. If he turned into the trail to the south, that would mean a further search. In any case, Tiny Tim intended to find him.

Tiny made good time after leaving Carson. Yet he rode warily and carefully, for he knew that most men's hands were against him because he was a Ranger, and Pineville was known to be largely inhabited by "Laughing Ed's" henchmen.

Tiny Tim laughed somewhat grimly. People might hate, yet few of them would have the nerve to pull trigger on a Ranger. Jim Allen and his Outlaw Legion had made that spell suicide. For when one of their number died the other Rangers became veritable wolves, and hungry ones at that, in hunting down the slayers.

Tiny Tim had covered half the distance through Massacre Valley by the time darkness settled down over the land. For a time he rode alone with the stars.

Then suddenly he half checked his horse, for he was no longer alone. He threw up his hand to shut out that specter. Then his head went up, his jaw clamped shut and his lips were thin, straight lines. At times he walked his horse, then when the trail permitted, he urged him into a gallop. But no matter what his pace, whether fast or slow, he was always conscious that he was not alone. He could see nothing, yet he knew, that picture, or memory, of "Soapy" Sam's agonized face, half concealed by the swirling smoke would be with him always until some other picture blotted it from his mind.

Then, stragely enough, he felt that he was no longer alone with his memory. Voices seemed to call to him the night. Friendly voices hailing him as one of themselves, welcoming him. He knew then that he was passing through the place where that emigrant train had fought and died, and so given the valley its name.

At first he thought it was strange they should be welcoming him, then he understood and was glad.

As he entered the straggly street of Pineville, he glanced at the dipper and saw that two stars of the handle had dipped below the horizon, so he knew it was close to midnight.

The town was in darkness, except for the lone saloon at the farther end. A shaft of light streamed from its open door and played on three horses at the hitch rack. That meant that there were three strangers in town. One of them might be the man he sought.

He dropped from his saddle and listened to the low mutter of conversation. Then he stripped off his uniform coat and fastened it to his saddle roll. There was nothing very distinguishing about his trousers, except their cut, and it was possible no one would recognize him as being a Ranger.

The bar was on the right and made of rough, unpainted planks. It was dirty-looking and smelled of stale beer. There were only three outside customers in the place. Two young cow-punchers sat at a table with a Mexican girl. A third man sat near them and stared moodily at the floor. At the rear there were several gamblers with their armed lookouts. Behind the bar there was a heavyset, thick-necked man, with a bulldog jaw, coarse lips, and small, bloodshot eyes.

"What you want?" he demanded of Tiny Tim.

"Whisky."

Tiny Tim filled his glass, then emptied it at a gulp. He tossed a silver dollar on the bar. The bartender wiped his powerful hands on his dirty apron, then picked up the money and tossed it into the drawer. He set his face in a scowl as he waited for Tiny Tim to protest and ask for his chance.

"Bull" Morgan was in an ugly temper. Earlier that evening he had received an unpleasant message from Laughing Ed; so he was looking for some one on whom he could vent his spleen. He growled in disgust when Tiny Tim made no objection to the overcharge.

As a matter of fact, Tiny Tim had not even noticed it. He had dismissed the two punchers with hardly a glance and concentrated his attention on the third man who sat by himself. Tiny felt that this one might be the man he sought.

HE was young and small, possibly a couple of inches taller than Tiny himself. He had a resolute face and would have been good-looking except for his unshaven cheeks and the deep lines of fatigue about his mouth and brown eyes.

"From the looks of his clothes, he's traveled fast and hard. He ain't had time to shave for a week, an' he's plumb tuckered out an' desperate. Huh, I bet that's Mister Bill Lawson all right," Tiny muttered with satisfaction.

Later events were to prove that Tiny Tim was right. Lawson suddenly looked up and caught Tiny Tim staring at him. A hunted look crept into the man's eyes. He licked his lips nervously. Then suddenly he got to his feet and walked straight up to Tiny. If Tiny Tim had recognized him, he wanted to know it at once. His hands were close to his guns when he stopped before Tiny. But the young Ranger hardly noticed his approach, for his interest had been attracted to another quarter. His eyes kept flickering from the two cow-punchers to Bull Morgan and then back again. It was as if he sensed the coming row and was waiting for it eagerly.

"Do you know me?" Lawson demanded bluntly.

Tiny looked at him directly for one moment as he replied:

"I want to talk to you later. Just keep still now."

Then he made a motion for Lawson to stand aside and his eyes flicked back to Bull Morgan. Tiny Tim's eyes were a deep, intense blue. But they were curiously eager, alight with something that made goose flesh race up and down Lawson's spine. He felt cold as he half swung about to stare at the table occupied by the two cow-punchers. The two were obviously drunk. Lawson saw

them lurch to their feet and start for the door.

The girl had attempted to wheedle a loan from them and they had displayed unexpected good sense in refusing, so she dropped her mask and gave them a momentary glimpse of her real self.

"You two cheap skates are goin' to pay," she squawked at them viciously; then she screamed at Bull Morgan, "They're tryin' to beat their bill."

Bull jumped at this opportunity. Laughing Ed had accused him, among other things, of being yellow, and a fake gunman. This was a heaven-sent chance of reëstablishing himself among the loafers. He would bully and browbeat those two young punchers and either make them crawl or go for their guns. He leaped over the bar, pushed the girl roughly aside, and placed his bulk in front of the two.

"Pay what you owe an' be quick about it," he growled.

"You remember we paid for every round as we bought them," "Skinny," the taller of the two, retorted.

"That's a lie," the girl shrilled. "Make 'em pay, Bull."

The two punchers' mouths suddenly went dry as they realized that they were up against a crooked deal. They knew that in the case of a fight, the gamblers would back Bull. But they were youthful and stubborn and objected to being imposed upon.

"Suppose you tell us how much we owe then," "Dusty" Rhodes, the shorter of the two, said sarcastically.

"You tell how much you got, then I'll tell you," Bull retorted with an ugly laugh.

THE gamblers and the girl seemed to think this a fine joke, for they threw back their heads and rocked with laughter. The two boys now realized what they were in for. They could deliver up all the cash or they could fight the whole gang. One of the punchers dashed his hand across his eyes as if to clear his brain from the fumes of alcohol. The other's face was white and strained as he looked from Bull to the gamblers.

Lawson took a step forward as if to interfere, then caught sight of Tiny's face and stopped. Tiny's eyes were shining, while his face was alight with devilish, inhuman joy. He looked like a terrier on a leash trembling with eagerness to enter a rat hole.

For the space of ten heartbeats there was an intense, deadly silence. The sneer widened on Bull's brutal face. Then the young cow-punchers' faces set and the indecision left their eyes. They would fight the whole mob before they would be played for fools. But before they could make a move, Tiny Tim shoved them gently aside and stepped in between them. This brought him face to face with Bull Morgan.

"You hornin' in, you lookin' for trouble? Who the devil are you?" Bull roared, as he let his hand drop, palm backward, close to his holstered gun.

"Me, I'm just wanderin' around the country." Tiny's voice was as soft as a whisper.

"Well, you'd better keep wanderin' or you'll run into trouble," Bull cried fiercely.

Tiny's lips twitched into a twisted smile. It was that smile which made Bull hesitate and take another look. He saw several things which had escaped his attention the first time. For one thing, Tiny's hands were burnt black, far blacker than his face, which meant he never wore gloves. Then, while he only wore one gun, there was a rubbed place on his trousers that told he was in the habit of wearing another one. Those almost black hands and the habit of wearing two guns meant only one thing—a professional gunman.

Then that strange smile. There was nothing forced about it. It was not nervousness, but eagerness which caused

that smile. The young man's eyes caught and held Bull's. An icy hand tightened about Bull's heart at what he saw deep down in those eyes. There was a hidden fierceness. Men got that expression from leaning forward to peer through smoke.

"Didn't I just tell you that I go wanderin' 'bout the country. What do you think I go ridin' for, lookin' for peace an' quiet?" Tiny drawled softly.

IF Bull had had any doubt before, he knew now. This fellow was something more than a professional gun fighter. He was a killer, looking for trouble and a chance to kill. Bull licked his dry lips and cast about desperately for a way to avoid the issue without knuckling under.

"I was jokin', the kids don't owe me a cent," he blustered.

"Yeah, it's all a joke. Now let's keep up the joke, an' you give the kids back the change from that last twenty they gave you," Tiny pressed softly.

"Give 'em change—I'll see you all in——"

The light which suddenly leaped into Tiny's eyes brought Bull to a stumbling halt.

"They bought a round of drinks, at two bits the drink, so you are holding out as a joke, nineteen dollars an' twenty-five cents."

The two young punchers were amazed, for they knew that Bull owed them nothing.

Bull choked. He understood what Tiny was about. He was putting up to him the same alternative he had given the boys a short time before. This was, put up or fight—and die. And Bull shivered as he realized that this devil of a man was hoping he would not knuckle under and would choose to fight. Bull, during his long years as a bartender, had seen many men with eyes like this stranger's. He recognized that little sparkle deep down in those cold, blue eyes. Those were killer's eyes. He shivered again, and with almost ludicrous haste, fished out a twenty-dollar bill and offered it to Tiny.

"Ha-ha!" he laughed loudly but mirthlessly. He tried to pass the whole thing off as a joke to save his face. "That's sure a horse on me. But I'm a sport an' can laugh when the joke gets turned around so it's on me."

A look of disappointment swept across Tiny's face. He nodded to the punchers to accept the money. Their eyes were wide with astonishment as they took the proffered bill. Tiny jerked his head toward the door and they stumbled into the street with their mouths still half open.

Tiny Tim, without taking his eyes from Bull, spoke to Lawson.

"Go on out, I want you," he said.

Curiously enough, Lawson obeyed without a word. Later he was to wonder just why he did so. He joined the two punchers in the street and watched Tiny through the door.

Then Tiny started to move slowly backward. His eyes glanced across the group of men. But there was no smile on his lips and he looked disappointed. He shrugged, then turned quickly and sprang through the door.

Bull Morgan mopped his forehead, then stumbled behind the bar and helped himself to a double drink. He tossed this down and breathed gustily. The girl recovered from her astonishment and gave a scornful laugh.

"That's a hot one. Givin' him twenty dollars. You don't owe those cheap skates nothin'. You're a swell gun fighter, that feller just looked at you an' you knuckled under," she jeered. "What was bitin' him? He looked all disappointed when he went out."

"He was," Bull retorted quickly, then added roughly: "Shut your mouth."

"Disappointed, why?" she asked.

"'Cause he didn't get a chance to kill me or some one," Bull growled.

"Bull, did you know or just suspect that feller was Tim Murphy, the Ranger?" one of the gamblers asked.

"Jim Allen's wolf cub," Bull gasped. "Was that him? Hell!"

Bull shivered as he understood the narrowness of his escape. He rubbed his eyes viciously, then poured out and downed another generous drink.

"They say he's crazy. He sees the spook of the last man he saw through smoke, then he has to go on to kill another to get rid of him," Bull mumbled, then he laughed harshly. "Me, I ain't anxious to haunt him or to relieve him of his last haunt."

Outside, Tiny Tim found the punchers and Lawson waiting. They swung on their horses together. The young punchers were almost hysterical in their thanks. They announced fervently that as they were riding around they would ride with Tiny Tim.

"If you haven't ever seen Carson, I reckon you better take a look, for it's a right pretty town," Tiny Tim said bluntly. "Me an' this gent are ridin' south."

The punchers made no protest, for they also recognized Tiny for what he was. They again mumbled their thanks, then spurred toward Carson. Tiny Tim and Lawson rode side by side out of town, headed south.

CHAPTER III.

TINY'S BATTLE.

TINY TIM MURPHY and Bill Lawson rode a considerable distance before either spoke. They were well through the pass, and the lights of the town had been lost in the darkness before Lawson at last broke the silence. He was both amused and bewildered as to why he had so readily followed Tiny Tim. He tried to puzzle this out and decided at last that it was because his brain as well as his body was physically exhausted, and so he was easily swayed by another's commands. Then he frowned and straightened in his saddle when he remembered the exact wording of Tiny Tim's command.

"Wait outside. I want you!" had been the exact words.

A thought came to Lawson which made him half utter a curse and pe through the darkness at Tiny Tim. "I want you!" was the customary phrase used by Rangers when making an arrest. Lawson's hand dropped to his gun.

"Who are you?" he demanded with sudden harshness.

"A Ranger," Tiny Tim replied easily.

"A Ranger!" Lawson's voice was a snarl now. "You want me, huh? Try and take me!"

Lawson's gun was half out when Tiny Tim leaned sidewise like a flash and his hand clamped tightly about its hammer. Taken by surprise, Lawson jerked violently in an attempt to free his weapon.

"Don't try and draw your left gun or I'll have to kill you," Tiny said conversationally.

It was Tiny's tone of voice as much as anything else which made Lawson relax. He looked bewilderedly at the white patch in the night which was Tiny Tim's face.

"Kill me, hell; I'd rather eat lead than stretch rope!" he cried bitterly and dejectedly.

"Why do either?" Tiny Tim returned with a faint laugh.

"What—what do you mean? Ain't you arrestin' me?" Lawson stammered.

"Not any."

"But you're a Ranger and said you wanted me." Lawson was becoming more bewildered.

"Sure I want you, but not that way," Tiny replied. "Suppose you and me turn off here and boil a pot of coffee."

Tiny Tim swung his horse and started up a draw. It came to Bill Lawson that here was his chance to cut and run for it, then he made a dispairing ges-

ture and followed Tiny. Tiny selected a place well off the trail where he dismounted and made a small fire. Then he took coffee and a pot from his saddle bag, and after filling the latter with water, placed it near the fire to boil. Lawson watched him like a man in a trance.

"Of course I ain't the boss, an' Cap Allen will have to check up on you, too," Tiny said with a friendly grin after he had fashioned a cigarette. "Suppose you tell me how come you went bad."

LAWSON hesitated, then started to tell his story. He spoke haltingly and diffidently at first, then gaining courage, spoke freely. After all, he and Tim were of the same age, and after the last lonely hunted days, it was a relief to have some one to whom to talk. And Tiny proved a sympathetic listener.

"Ma said I was just wild and not bad, but I reckon she was wrong. You see, this here Tully was a tomcat. He lost dad's suit with the railroad by lyin' black was white. Then after the trial the folks begged me not to tangle with Tully. But there was somethin' inside of me that was too strong for me. I just couldn't sleep at night from thinkin' about him."

"So you threw your gun on him and killed him," Tiny said with an understanding nod.

"But I gave him an even break, all the witnesses swore to that," Lawson said quickly.

"Sure," Tiny cried, then his eyes sparkled with eager curiosity as he leaned forward and asked: "An' after?"

"I got plumb restless an' decided to hit the trail," Lawson muttered. "I figured I would sort of forget things in a new country."

"Did you?" Tiny asked, and his voice was again eager.

Lawson made no reply. He stared at the ashes of the small fire in gloomy silence. But that was sufficient answer for Tiny.

He understood now that there are some things no man can outride no matter how far or fast he goes. He had feared that from his own experience and from certain things said by members of the Outlaw Legion. He understood now why these men fought so coolly and yet recklessly. He knew now what he had to face. He shook himself and looked at Bill Lawson. He saw the neglected cigarette fall from Bill's hand. He was still staring at the fire, which was nearly out. And Tiny knew that in the gloom of the camp fire Bill was seeing faces or ghosts of his past. Then Bill aroused himself, unbuckled his cross belts and threw them savagely away from him.

"I'll never wear them again," he said fiercely, yet as low as if he were speaking to himself. "Tully was a skunk, I had an excuse for that—I thought that was the reason I wanted to kill him. But I know now that it was somethin' inside of me that was usin' that as an excuse to get what I wanted. That gambler in Wyoming was cheatin', but it wasn't my business, I wasn't in the game. I fought against the urge, but not so hard as against Tully. And since then each time the desire's been stronger an' my resistance less. Then that last one—the railroad detective don't count—that fool puncher; he had a rep as a gun fighter so I had to see if he could throw a gun faster than me. If I don't stop lead pronto I'll just go on throwin' my gun on less and less provocation until everythin' in me decent dies an' I'll be a real sure enough killer—haunted by ghosts an' devils. The primitive man, the savage in me will be boss, like a ferret that kills just to satisfy its lust for blood. Killin' is like dope, it gets in your blood an' you got to have it. You can never let it alone."

TINY TIM watched him with a curious pity. He had known a few and heard of many killers who threw their gun because they didn't like a man's hat, or nose, or for no reason whatever. But he had never met one hovering on the border line of decency who still had the strength left to fight his passion. Bill Lawson looked up at him fiercely.

"I'll never wear a gun again as long as I live," he shouted.

"Suppose I show you how when you use one you'll be doin' good by it," Tiny suggested.

Bill Lawson stared at Tiny as if he thought him crazy.

"Why not join the Rangers?" Tiny went on with a smile.

"Me! Join the Rangers! You're crazy. I'm wanted bad in two States," Lawson cried bitterly.

Tiny then sketched the history of the Outlaw Legion. There was not a man in it who was not wanted in other States. Rewards had been posted for Jim Allen, dead or alive, in every State west of the Mississippi.

"You come along with me an' see Cap Allen. We'll arrest you, turn you loose on bail, an' no other State can touch you until you've been tried here, which will be never."

"If that was only possible!" Lawson cried, his eyes shining with a new hope. Then the light died away and he shook his head. "That railroad detective stops that."

"What do you mean?"

"It was just over the line in this State—I—I killed him," Lawson muttered fiercely.

"That's hard luck," Tiny said disappointedly.

"That damn railroad robbed my pa, I swore I would get that money back. But I had sworn I would never pack another gun an' wanted to hold up the railroad, so I used a glass pistol. I sent the money to an old minister for his poor. I was plumb reckless an' figured I would only be half even with the railroad unless I told them why an' how I did the holdup. So I wrote to them, made their detective the laughingstock of the country. They was so mad they imported a bunch of professional trailers. I was driven, hunted, shot at, and starved, but I managed to get across into this State. I was plumb exhausted an' that damn railroad detective caught me when I was asleep. He told me he was going to get even with me for makin' such a fool of him. He said he wasn't takin' me back, but intended to beat me to death. I tried to fight him, but he was too big. He knocked me down—kicked me. He wasn't bluffin'. I pretended to be unconscious, made a grab for his gun an' shot him plumb center."

"You done right, the dirty skunk!" Tiny Tim said sympathetically.

"Sure, but it was in this State, an' the law will call it murder. No one will believe a fugitive," Lawson said with quiet bitterness.

The two were silent for several minutes. Tiny threw more wood on the fire, and, when it blazed up, they talked of other things. At last Tiny tossed a blanket to Lawson and retired a short distance from the fire with a remaining one for himself. It was a pity that Jim Allen could not have arrived at that moment, to have brought order out of the chaos that was in their minds.

CHAPTER IV.

A RANGER'S PRISONER.

TINY resolutely attempted to sleep, but the place was occupied with phantoms. He lay still in his blankets, but was inwardly tense, staring into "Dutch" Anderson's heavy-lidded eyes. Seeking a warning that Dutch intended to draw. Again he felt that strange passion, that curious detachment as if he were some stranger.

That ferocious and stormy brain belonged to that stranger inside himself whom he had only known for a few short months. He heard the roar of his gun, saw the surge of white-powder smoke, and a man's face convulsed as he fell. Other men lay in the shadow, stark and limp, with white faces and bared teeth, forever still because of his ruthless gun.

He knew no fear, only a terrible pleasure that was bitter in his mouth.

"Dutchy was yellow, I had to taunt him to make him draw!" he muttered.

Something seemed to explode in his head. Memories and specters vanished. With a cry he threw aside his blanket and almost ran back to the fire, seating himself cross-legged, staring into it. He was inwardly shaking with horror at his new discovery. Bill Lawson came out of the darkness and seated himself on the other side of the fire.

"I couldn't sleep," he announced.

"When you feel as if some one was pushin' you on to throw a gun, you fight at first, then give up. Do you have a funny feelin' as if you was somebody else?" Tiny asked.

"Yeah."

"I reckon I've been usin' sympathy on you I had better have saved for myself," Tiny said soberly. "Because I just realized that I was further along killer's road than you. Dutchy sure deserved killin', but he wanted to surrender. But I wanted to kill him so I taunted him an' made him draw."

Tiny put on more wood and then placed a fresh pot of coffee on it to boil.

"Bill, I reckon you an' me are actin' like two women bein' sorry for ourselves. This here primitive instinct ain't our boss, we can master him. You say you'll never wear a gun again. That ain't the way to do it. When my old man wanted to go on the wagon he would carry a pint of booze in his pocket just to prove to himself that he was boss. That's what you an' me has got to do," Tiny said with rising cheerfulness.

They talked while drinking their coffee, scarcely noticing the gray dawn stealing over the divide behind them. Darkness gave way to gray gloom, then pink and red streamers shot up in the sky, and another day was there. A man can see for long distance in a clear, early morning. Unknown to the two, the dawn had betrayed them to five pairs of hostile eyes.

"I heard a lot about the Wolf. Ain't he a killer?" Lawson asked.

"Yes an' no. Maybe he was once, but he ain't that way no more. There ain't nothin' personal when he throws his guns. He kills like a wolf kills or like you kill a rattlesnake—because he's plumb sure the gent needs killin'. The Outlaw Legion is made up of the fastest gun slingers on the border, every darn one of them, except the Cap an' maybe Doc an' Bad Bill, is a killer at heart. You would think they'd be shootin' each other regular. It's plumb wonderful the way the Cap changes 'em. I reckon the Yuma Kid an' a few others think they throw a faster gun than Allen, an' bein' killers, you would think they wouldn't be able to sleep until they had settled the question. But they all know they couldn't make Allen go for his guns. Why' I seen him take everythin' from a fool kid who was puffed up with vanity an' figured he was a champion gun slinger. The kid threw whisky at him an' Allen just wiped his face an' walked out.

"The Yuma Kid an' t'others know Allen is like that, so they have no temptation to pick a fight an' see if they ain't quicker than him. But suppose that kid had shot a gent through the back, or was runnin' dope with Laughin' Ed's gang, why Allen would have rubbed him out just like you would have killed a snake. Nope, Jim won't never draw his gun for personal reasons. Why, he catched

Happy Dick after Dick had betrayed him, an' didn't do nothin'—just let him go."

"After he betrayed him?" Lawson said wonderingly.

"Yeah, Allen didn't hate him; he was just sorry for him, so he let him go."

"Allen must be a plumb wonderful an' unusual gent," Lawson said musingly.

"He is. An' you an' me have got to make up our minds to act like that. I hereby swear I'll never throw a gun on a gent unless its in self-defense or in line of Ranger duty. I see now where I was driftin'. I'm the boss of this here primitive instinct you speak about, so I never throw my guns unless I have to," Tiny said with complete conviction.

HE was sure he could conquer the devil in himself. He took out paper and tobacco and started to roll a cigarette.

"Up with them!"

Tiny Tim glanced to the left and saw three men covering him with guns, then he flicked a glance to his right and saw two others. Bill Lawson's hands instinctively shot upward. But Tiny Tim paid no attention to the command, for in that first swift glance he saw that two of the men had silver stars pinned to the lapels of their coats. That meant they were officers of the law and not members of Laughing Ed's gang. He knew at once they were part of the posse searching for Bill Lawson.

"Up with them!" the sharp voice repeated.

Tiny Tim thrust the cigarette in his mouth, then looked with cool, insolent eyes at the speaker. He wanted time to figure out a way to save Lawson.

"Feller, use your eyes and not your mouth an' you won't look so foolish," he drawled.

"Huh, a Ranger," the speaker, a big, burly man said. "I'm Sheriff Dowd."

"Gosh, you're sure bright, sheriff," Tiny grinned. "How you guess I was a Ranger?"

"Don't give us none of your lip," a tall, thin man snarled as he pushed by the sheriff."

Tiny allowed his eyes to travel from the man's dusty boots past his belted guns to his face. This was thin, swarthy, and hard. The mouth was cruel and the eyes small and bright. He knew the man at once as a professional gun fighter. Tiny's hands started to itch and prickles ran up and down his spine. A surge of fierce exultation ran through his brain. With an effort he controlled himself. No, he must not do that. He rose slowly to his feet, stretched, and patted his guns into place.

"That's the feller we want," the thin man said, and pointed to Lawson.

"Who's him?" Tiny asked the sheriff.

"Mike McTigue, a detective the railroad sent over to identify Lawson if we caught him," Sheriff Dowd replied angrily.

"An' we got him," McTigue said triumphantly as he started to slip a handcuff over Lawson's wrists.

"You the boss of this outfit?" Tiny asked the sheriff.

"Yes," the officer replied.

"Then tell that gent to turn Lawson loose and kind of explain it ain't safe to monkey with a Ranger," Tiny said softly.

"Hell, to hear you talk, you would think all the gun slingers in the world was in the Rangers," McTigue sneered.

"Are you one?" Tiny snapped.

"Maybe," McTigue jeered.

With an effort, Tiny fought down the savage within himself.

"Tell him to turn Lawson loose," he said to the sheriff.

"Like hell; I got him an' am goin' to keep him," McTigue shouted. "I'll learn him to make monkeys of us; I'll make him eat that glass pistol."

"Sheriff, he's my prisoner. If you

want to tangle with the Rangers, that's your business," Tiny said.

"Your prisoner! Rats; he was sittin' right close to his guns. You was talkin' friendly to him. Prisoner, hell. You was gettin' set to help him over the border," McTigue said.

TINY fought against himself. He had a right to keep his prisoner, but if there was a fight and he turned Lawson loose later, why, then Allen would be in a jam. No, he would have to keep his head in this affair.

"If this Ranger says Lawson is his prisoner, I reckon that settles it," the sheriff said regretfully.

"If he says that, he's a damned liar," McTigue cried.

Here was his excuse to kill the man, Tiny thought. He attempted to fight off that terrific urge. He tried to beat it away. Flicks of red danced before his eyes. The struggle within himself was so terrific that his face grew white, and he trembled as with ague.

Mike McTigue looked at Tiny's white face and shaking hands and laughed. But Lawson knew that it was not fear Tiny was fighting.

Then suddenly Tiny ceased to shake. His lips twisted into a grin. He was cool and strangely detached when he half turned to face McTigue. He was conscious of everything which happened, even more so than usual, yet he was strangely unaware of any feeling in himself.

"You called me a liar?" he asked softly.

"Sure I did," McTigue sneered.

"Don't, Tiny, for Heaven's sake, don't!" Lawson cried earnestly.

Tiny ignored this appeal, for it didn't seem to matter in the least now. The only thing which counted was that he intended to kill this boaster.

"You say you're a gun fighter," Tiny whispered. "Draw your steel an' prove it."

But McTigue saw something in Tiny's face that made him hold his hand. He licked his dry lips as he tried to gather up his nerve.

The sheriff lunged in between them and pushed McTigue away.

"You damn fool, come on. I want no mix-up with Rangers," he shouted.

McTigue allowed himself to be dragged up the gulch and only pretended to resist. The sheriff mopped his sweating face.

"Gosh, what a little hell cat you are. Lawson's your prisoner, but he's wanted for murder in this State, an' if you don't land him in jail, the governor will hear of it," the sheriff cried.

Tiny Tim did not even hear the sheriff. He just stood and stared at the ground for several minutes after the sheriff and his companions had gone. Lawson patted him on the back.

"But you didn't down him," he encouraged.

"But I wanted to," Tiny muttered thickly. "The bad in me is too strong."

CHAPTER V.

SADDLE AND RIDE.

JIM ALLEN received a second message from the governor before he left Carson. An excited telegraph messenger overtook him as he and his Outlaw Legion were swinging out of town. The man thrust a message into Allen's hand and sighed with relief.

"The dispatcher in the capitol said my job was gone unless I got that to you quick. So would you mind signin' a receipt," he said.

Allen signed and the man returned thankfully to town, while the Rangers trotted into the trail, leading to Massacre Valley and the Gap. Allen ripped open the envelope and read the message. It was a long one and even more peremptory than the first one:

LAWSON CROSSED THE STATE LINE STOP MURDERED DETECTIVE

STOP KNOWN TO BE HEADING FOR MEXICAN BORDER STOP DROP EVERYTHING ELSE AND CONCENTRATE YOUR FULL FORCE ALONG BORDER TO BLOCK LAWSON'S ESCAPE STOP FAILURE TO ARREST LAWSON WILL BE INTERPRETED BY ENEMIES AND SOME WHO HAVE SUPPORTED YOU UP TO NOW AS DELIBERATE NEGLIGENCE STOP MY POSITION WILL BE IMPOSSIBLE IF YOU FAIL.

Allen handed it to George Cole who read it, whistled softly, then handed it to his brother.

"Sort of means we're all fired," George said.

"Sure does, because I, for one, didn't join the Rangers to arrest any gent who has nerve enough to hold up a train with a glass pistol," George Cole agreed.

"You wouldn't give him up, Jim, would you?" the Kid asked.

"No, 'cause I would be plumb blind an' never see him," Allen said with a grin.

"It's a tough break 'cause we've got Laughin' Ed on the run," George lamented.

"Darn it, the governor's breakin' faith with us. It was agreed we wouldn't have to do any ordinary police work when we joined the Rangers," the Yuma Kid growled.

"You can't say the governor hasn't lived up to that until now an' backed us in everythin' we done. But he's a politician an' hasn't a free hand. He has to play the game with his supporters. This fellow, Buddington, is one of his chief supporters an' darn powerful politically. Buddington owns that railroad Lawson made a fool out of with his glass pistol, so he's darn sore. I bet he told the governor that if we didn't catch Lawson that his papers would turn on us and force us out."

"I don't mind quittin' the Rangers, but I would sure like to have Captain Painton's and Laughin' Ed's scalps before I quit," George Cole grumbled.

"Me, I was hopin' to bust up this dope traffic; after that I wouldn't care what happened," Allen said quietly.

THEY rode on in silence for over a quarter of a mile, watching Allen from the corners of their eyes. They knew that this was a hard blow to him. It was as bitter a disappointment as he had ever felt. Just when he had victory in his grasp, he would be forced to let go. Most men would have done violence to their consciences and arrested Lawson. But Allen never considered that. He had been hunted for too many years himself to ever hunt down another fugitive.

"Let's hope that feller El Lobo will make a raid over yonder that will give us an excuse for not catching Lawson," George Cole said hopefully.

"I'll sure be plumb polite to that greaser if he gets us out of this mess," Yuma Kid grinned.

"Sure, you'll be polite to him, with a gun," George said.

"Look here, Jim, everything ain't lost yet. We'll just close our eyes and not see Lawson, then Buddington can choke on his own cuss words," Tom Cole encouraged.

"But Tiny Tim's gone to look for him deliberate," the Yuma Kid reminded.

"Let's hope that little killer finds him then. We'll just ship back his carcass to Buddington," George Cole laughed.

"But you got Tiny wrong. I'm plumb sure he ain't huntin' for him to drop him," Allen said ruefully.

"Why for then?"

"To help him get over the border."

"Huh, if he does that our goose is sure cooked."

"Jim, a couple of us has got to push on and tell that kid to play blind if he sees Lawson," Yuma Kid urged.

"You're right, Yuma, you and me will go," Allen said quickly, then turned to the brothers and added: "We'll meet you fellows at Hasty Hugh's. When

was repeating the story of his meeting with Tiny Tim that morning. But if he expected sympathy from those hard-boiled Rangers, he was a sadly disappointed man. George Cole was the only one to make a comment when the sheriff finished.

"So Tiny bluffed five of you. Why don't you swallow that story?" he said.

"He didn't bluff me," McTigue snarled. "I'd like to see any downy Ranger do that."

Which under the circumstances was hardly wise. But McTigue was so angry that he lost all sense of discretion. The Rangers looked like a circle of bull terriers being challenged by a pug dog. The sheriff hastened to make a diversion. He turned to Hasty Hugh.

"Can I use your telephone?" he asked.

"What for?" Hasty questioned.

"To wire an account of this outrage to the governor," the sheriff exploded.

"Telephone's out of order," Hasty answered.

Allen moved through the crowd at that and smiled at his friend, the old cattleman.

"Let him use it," Allen said.

"You Captain Allen?" the sheriff asked.

"Yeah, an' I heard your squawk."

"You puttin' that Ranger under arrest?" the sheriff bellowed.

"Nope. Because I resigned my job right now," Allen said evenly.

The Rangers pressed about him and fired questions. He urged them to stay on and work under Doc Tumlinson until their job was finished.

"Won't do, Jim. Without you we would be fightin' each other like a bunch of tomcats. I reckon we all quit."

A murmur of assent went about at this. Allen attempted to argue, but they simply refused to listen. The Yuma Kid suddenly laughed.

"Hell, seein' we ain't Rangers we can talk to this gent," he said as he confronted McTigue. "Now you been talkin' hard. So just pick the gent you want to talk back to you."

"That's an idea," George Cole said with ferocious delight.

McTigue looked about at the circle of eager faces and licked his lips that had suddenly gone dry. He saw death in every pair of eyes.

But Allen suddenly leaped away from the group and started toward the southeast. The Rangers looked over their shoulders and promptly forgot McTigue.

For there in the distance was a series of smoke rings slowly mounting into the blue sky. Every one of them could read the message told by those smoke rings:

SADDLE AND RIDE!

The Rangers broke for their horses. Allen ran to Hasty Hugh.

"El Lobo has raided the Three X Ranch," he cried.

Before Hasty Hugh could frame a question Allen was in the saddle and followed by the Outlaw Legion was riding with loose rein toward those smoke rings.

Hasty Hugh bellowed an order at his punchers who made a wild rush to saddle their horses. It was McTigue's bad luck to be in the path of a big burly puncher, who pushed him aside and sent him sprawling and then lumbered on.

Ten minutes later McTigue was the only man at the ranch. For the sheriff and his Deputies had accompanied Hasty Hugh and his riders.

"We'll see what Buddington thinks about this!" he snarled and walked into the house to telephone.

CHAPTER VI.

THE RAID.

THIS chapter properly starts with Major Al Cribs. There were many witnesses of that magnificently foolish charge. But the major was the only living man who could tell

about the events which led up to it, and it was his story, when published in the papers the following day, which fired the imagination of the readers and filled them with both pity and admiration for those two young Rangers. Pity that life had condemned them to such an end and admiration that they had been able to face it with that joyous, fierce battle hymn of the old-time Rangers on their lips:

"The buzzards high, that sweep the sky,
Shall know the town alone."

The men who had first sung that song were long since dead, but the major, as well as many others, had heard his father tell the story of how the Rangers had sung it when they rode back to Goliad to avenge their comrades who had been slaughtered there.

"Gentlemen," the major told the reporters later, "I was a veteran of the Civil War at seventeen. I wore a Ranger's uniform for ten years, and fought with them against the Comanches, and helped them bring the law to the border. I have lived most of my life when Mr. Colt was the only law. I tell you this, not boastfully but only to make you understand that I know of what I speak. And I tell you that while the old-time Rangers came of a hard, fighting breed, who daily faced terrific odds, that they would have proudly welcomed those two boys among them, for they were worthy of the uniform they wore. Your papers say editorially that the Outlaw Legion is a disgrace to the State, as well as to the memory of the old-time Rangers. Maybe those who wear the wolf pins on their collars are killers and ex-outlaws, but, gentlemen, if they are all like those two boys, they are at least men. No, gentlemen, in spite of the wolf pins they wear so brazenly, they are not wolves, but magnificent fools."

It was not altogether chance that Major Cribs was visiting the Three X Ranch when El Lobo raided it. For he and Ted Waster had served in the Rangers together a half century before. In fact, he and Waster had been the only survivors in the bitter fight between the Rangers and rustlers which took place in the valley that stretched before the rancher's house. Later, Waster had retired from the Rangers and bought out the Mexican rancher who owned the place.

Waster had prospered while the major had continued to follow the path of adventure until age had forced him to give up the saddle for an easy-chair in Waster's home.

It was the major's habit to cross the valley to a clump of cottonwoods at the northern end. Here he would sit in the shade and dream the day away. He loved the spot, for it was from here he had first glimpsed the valley. That fight of long ago had taken place on the knoll which thrust up from the center of the smooth meadow. In fact, the Rangers who had died that day were buried on its crest.

He was dreaming of that fight when El Lobo and his men made their raid. They struck so suddenly that Waster and his riders were taken by surprise and they hardly put up any defense. A few scattered shots and the thing was over.

THE major's first instinct was to rush to his friend's assistance. Then he realized that his efforts would be wasted since he was unarmed and old. So he decded to do the sensible thing, go for assistance.

He arose, and spurred on by the screams of terrified women, started along the rough trail to the nearest ranch which was eight miles away. He drove himself unmercifully and made remarkably good time considering his age for the first two miles. But after that his strength failed and he staggered along like a drunken man. He was just

at the end of his endurance when he saw Tiny Tim Murphy and Bill Lawson coming along the trail toward him.

He stopped and stared, then rubbed his rheumy eyes and stared again.

"Rangers," he cried thankfully. "Heaven, I thank you. Rangers!"

He gasped out his story and Tiny Tim was building a smudge fire before he had finished.

Tiny Tim knew Allen and the Outlaw Legion were at Hasty Hugh's ranch. He calculated that it must be ten or twelve miles from the Three X. He threw a blanket over his fire, then jerked it aside with a peculiar motion of his wrists. A huge black smoke ring mounted slowly upward. With painstaking care he sent his message. Then he repeated it twice.

"Once I could do that, but I can't read your smoke," the major said.

"It's in Ranger code, but Allen will get it all right," Tiny assured him, as he hauled him up on the saddle behind him.

"Captain Allen! How many men has he got?" the major asked.

"Thirteen wolves."

"Thirteen! There must be sixty greasers," the major said in a disappointed voice.

"Thirteen's enough. They'll sure make El Lobo know it's an unlucky number," Tiny Tim said with confidence.

They dismounted in the cottonwoods and peered across the valley. Mexicans were swarming about the ranch house like bees. They were carrying everything of any value from the house and making it into great bundles. To the left there was a group of American riders and three women. The men's arms were bound securely and guards lounged near them.

Tiny's eyes traveled about the valley. It was hemmed in by low ridges on all sides, except to the south. Here the ridges closed in and formed a long bottle neck which opened into a plain beyond. That gap was the only exit from the valley to the south.

Then Tiny Tim's eyes traveled along the crest of the western ridge. Suddenly he grasped Bill Lawson's arm and pointed.

"Look careful right there. What do you see?" he asked eagerly.

Bill Lawson squinted long and hard.

"Dust cloud. Must be a lot of riders to kick up enough dust to show above the ridge," Bill said.

"Or thirteen gents coming hell bust for leather. That's Cap Allen," Tiny exulted. "He knows this country, so he swung south to block the gap."

"He'll be too late," the major lamented.

TINY TIM cursed as he looked at the raiders. They were hurrying their preparations to leave. He saw some of the Mexicans grasp hold of the women and start to drag them toward the saddled horses.

"Damn the skunks, they're goin' to take those gals with 'em." The major swore in futile rage.

One of the women was struggling and making a desperate attempt to break free. A tall, gaudily dressed man struck her savagely across the face.

"That's the devil who calls himself El Lobo," the major cried. "For Heaven's sake, do something. You can't let those devils take the girls."

"Not while I'm here," Lawson cried, as he whipped his rifle from its saddle holster.

Tiny Tim laid a detaining hand on Lawson's arm. That young man looked at him questioningly. There was a faint frown on Tiny Tim's face as he stared across the meadow at the groups of raiders who were milling about the ranch house. Then he looked speculatively at the faint dust cloud which moved along the crest of the bare ridge. His eyes roamed about the smooth,

meadow as if studying it. Finally his eyes became fixed on that small knoll in the center of the meadow.

If a man was on that knoll he might be able to put up something of a fight. But the raiders were a good quarter of a mile closer to it than Tiny, and could easily cut him off before he reached it.

A shot rang out, and again one of the women screamed in fear and agony. But while Tiny's face tightened and grew bleak, he made no move. Lawson moved impatiently and the major's faded old eyes grew hot with scorn.

"You call yourself a Ranger and you're not goin' to move a hand to stop those devils from murderin' and manhandlin' American women," he raged.

Tiny Tim shot one glance at the major, then went on with his study of the knoll and the hazy dust cloud which seemed to move all too slowly. But that one glance was sufficient to halt the major's further sneer. The old man made a hopeless gesture.

"I apologize. The odds are too great. There's nothin' you can do, but it's galling to be helpless and forced to watch that," he muttered brokenly.

"Mister," Tiny said, "Cap Allen sure taught me it was plumb foolish to jump in and waste yourself until you were positive there wasn't a chance of makin' your play really count."

He was silent for a moment, then his face cleared. He had found the answer to his problem. He edged the major forward, then pointed over his shoulder at the dust cloud.

"You say you know this country. That dust cloud is right behind those three fingers of bare rock that stick up from the ridge. Can you place them on the other side from that?" he asked eagerly.

"Yes," the major replied positively. "They ought to be close to Salt Creek."

"How long from there to Big Break Pass?"

"About forty-five minutes if they ride like hell," the major said promptly.

"I know 'em, they'll do better than that," Tiny Tim spoke with pride. "So we'll call it forty minutes. How long would it take the greasers to get from here through the break?"

"Twenty minutes."

"Which means if they start now they'll sure get through afore the Rangers show, an' they'll have a clear run to the border."

"Yes, an' they're getting ready to start right now. Your Legion will come too late," the major said despairingly, then added with futile rage: "They're takin' three of those gals with them."

Silently they watched the raiders preparing to depart. Bill Lawson studied Tiny Tim and suddenly divined something of his intention.

"I'm goin' with you," he said quickly.

"Nope, this is my job."

"You know this is your chance, but I'm goin' with you, for it's mine also," Bill Lawson cried.

"But it's my job because I'm a Ranger," Tiny Tim replied.

Bill Lawson waved this aside with a violent gesture.

"Ranger! What's that got to do with it?" he asked with a touch of bitterness. "I would have been a Ranger too if—if I had had the luck to drop that fellow across the line. You said yourself Cap Allen would have taken me in, but for that."

"You can make the border in just over an hour. You'll be free then," Tiny Tim persisted.

"Free! I'll never be free until I'm dead," the young outlaw insisted bitterly. "You know you've got a better chance to hold 'em if I'm with you than if you're alone."

This argument was unanswerable, so Tiny nodded. For a minute the two boys looked at each other steadily. Their faces were serious as they shook hands. There was no need for words as they

instinctively understood each other. Here was the chance for which each hoped and yet feared to find. They would wipe their slates clean with smoke.

Major Cribs watched the two with puzzled amazement, then partial understanding came to him. He never fully understood, but later when he heard of what happened, Jim Allen did understand.

CHAPTER VII.

A PLAY THAT COUNTED.

TINY TIM untied the pack from his saddle and allowed it to fall to the ground. Then he unbuckled it and took out his Ranger overcoat, which he tossed to Lawson.

"Put it on so it'll make it regular," he said.

Bill Lawson flushed as he slipped it on then raised a curious hand to the wolf badges on the collar.

"What's these for?" he asked.

"Huh, if we can hold those greasers for about seventeen minutes now, the Wolf and his pack will sure learn those coyotes what they're for—an' mean," Tiny said grimly.

"We'll hold 'em long enough," Lawson said with confidence.

Then Tiny Tim administered the short Ranger oath of service to Bill Lawson.

"Just to make her regular," he explained.

Then the two examined their rifles and shot guns. After that they filled the empty loops in their belts with fresh cartridges and swung into their saddles.

"What you goin' to do?" the major quavered.

"I reckon if we reach that knoll we'll be able to hold her until Allen and his bunch reaches the gap," Tiny explained.

"They'll cut you off before you get halfway there," the major protested.

"Maybe they will," Tiny replied with a careless shrug. "But the cap taught me that sometimes it's better to play fox instead of wolf. I aim to play the hand the way the cap would. Act in a way they won't savvy what we're up to until it's too late."

"But you won't be able to stop 'em for a minute; they'll overwhelm you. What can you two kids do against three score!" the major cried.

"We'll hold 'em for a time," Tiny Tim promised.

"Why not haze their rear, hold 'em back, delay 'em that way," the major insisted.

"If they wasn't takin' those three gals as prisoners, I'd play the hand that way. But they would send the loot an' prisoners on ahead; nope, I got to play her this way," Tiny explained carefully and added earnestly: "Tell Cap Allen that I don't want him to think I quit on him."

"Quit? What do you mean? There's nothin' yellow in what you're doin'. You're goin' to certain death," the major cried in astonishment.

The two boys looked at each other and smiled faintly. The major saw that their eyes were shining with a light which looked strangely out of place under the circumstances. Then he noticed how haggard their young faces were and the lines about the tightly shut mouths.

"Let's go," Bill said.

"Not yet. Watch the gent in the big silver sombrero and the fancy suit. I reckon he's El Lobo. When Cap Allen comes he'll sure show him who's a wolf. When he mounts it'll mean they're ready to go, then we'll make our play. Time is workin' for us so we'll hold off as long as possible," Tiny replied as he watched the Mexicans.

ONLY a few of them had mounted as yet, but most of the others stood ready beside their horses. A dozen were busily strapping packs of loot on the horses and trying to force the women to mount. El Lobo strutted

back and forth and barked out commands.

"This uniform will sure make it easy for folks back home," Bill said softly as he patted his Ranger's coat, then he asked anixously: "It's regular, ain't it?"

"The Cap will make it stick," Tiny promised.

"If he don't, I will," the major mumbled.

"It won't be long now," Tiny said softly, as he marked a bustling flurry among the Mexican raiders.

Just which of the two started that old time Ranger hymn of vengeance the major never knew. First one, then the other hummed it. Then they started to sing it softly:

"They bayoneted the sick abed,
They slaughtered all in Goliad,
At evening bell, their lances fell,
A-dripping wet and red."

The words of that savage old hymn recalled long-forgotten memories. The major remembered how he and a score of other Rangers had sung it as they galloped forward to charge a gang of border raiders half a century before. He recalled his thrill of fierce exultation as they pressed home the charge against great odds and sent the Mexican raiders flying back to the border. Now these two young Rangers were singing that song again as they waited to charge against hopeless odds. That song had thrilled the major in the old days and it thrilled him now. He clenched his hands in bitter regret that time had made it impossible for him to ride by their side. The two were going to certain death, but what mattered that! What was death compared to that fierce joy so soon to be theirs! The next five minutes would be crammed with far greater emotion than is known in a lifetime by the average man.

Tiny Tim's and Bill Lawson's shoulders went back a little, and the major knew the time had arrived. He looked swiftly away from them toward the ranch. He saw that the raiders were attempting to lift the struggling women onto the horses. He saw Waster and the other American prisoners struggle to free their bound arms, then surge forward, helpless, as they were, to aid their screaming women. Mounted raiders beat them back with savage quirts.

"Let's go," Tiny said softly and called over his shoulder to the major. "Don't forget to tell the Cap there was nothin' else I could do."

"An' tell him Tiny Tim swore me in," Bill said.

"I will," the old man promised, and choked when he realized those were the only two things worrying the boys.

The two shook out their reins then, as the horses started to move, they looked back over their shoulders and smiled. The major noticed that the lines of fatigue had left their faces. He remarked afterward that he had never seen a pair of faces that looked more peaceful and content. Their eyes were eager as if they were riding to meet their sweethearts rather than to keep a rendezvous with death.

THE two rode side by side as they trotted from the screening brush into that sunlit meadow. Neither had drawn a weapon, and they both rode easily, carelessly, yet they made a soldierlike picture as they trotted through the waving grass. The sun played on their sheathed weapons, buttons, belted cartridges and even on the wolf pins on their collars.

They were spotted almost immediately by the raiders. There was a hoarse shout of warning. Many of the dismounted men rushed for their horses. Those guarding the women ceased their efforts to place them on horses. There was a swirling, wild confusion.

The two Rangers had started their song again. But this time loudly, full

throatedly. The major joined in and sang the words of that old song in a thin, quavering voice:

"We're going back to Goliad,
We'll leave in Goliad no stone
To mark the town of Goliad.
The buzzards high, that sweep the sky,
Shall know the town alone."

As no more Rangers appeared, and the Mexicans realized the two were alone, they stopped their frantic efforts to prepare for escape and stood and stared. El Lobo cursed and raved at first, then grew silent as the Rangers, singing their song, trotted straight for him and his men. He was no longer a worried, but a vastly puzzled raider chieftain. The thought came to him that perhaps the two did not know that he and his men were raiders. The song carried easily to him. He did not understand the words, but there was something about that savage chant and the way the two sang it which filled him with a vague fear. He shook himself, and his heavy lips drew back in an animallike snarl as he glared at the two riders. He knew from their uniforms that they were Rangers.

"Hold your fire," he growled, "let the fool gringos come closer."

The prisoners had first been delighted, then puzzled at the appearance of the two Rangers. They were momentarily stricken dumb when they realized the two were alone. Then a big, burly cowpuncher mouthed a curse and bellowed a warning:

"Get back; they're greaser raiders," he shouted.

One of the raiders snarled and slashed the burly man across his face. The other Mexicans half raised their weapons, for they expected the two to swing about and make a run for it. But apparently the two neither heard the warning nor saw its quick punishment, for they never ceased their song or turned their horses. Nearer and nearer they came. They were within a hundred and fifty yards now. But they were no longer coming straight on, but slowly slanting off to the south. El Lobo was the first to notice this. He puzzled over it, then comprehension came with a rush.

"Madre di Dios," he roared. "It's a trick."

AT that the two ceased their song and raised their voices in the Ranger battle cry as they swung their horses, jabbed home their spurs, and drew their rifles. Before the startled Mexicans recovered their wits, the two were racing along their front straight for that knoll. As they rode, their rifles spat fire and lead into the crowded Mexicans.

Then the Mexicans' weapons started to crackle. But wounded horses were screaming and the others, frightened by the sudden commotion, started to pitch and barge into one another. Which made the Mexicans firing, which is notoriously bad, more inaccurate than usual. Even at that, one bullet in that storm of lead found its mark, for Bill Lawson's horse gave a frantic leap and almost went down. But Lawson managed to hold him up until he started to run again. Lawson looked at the knoll, it was still over two hundred yards away. He realized that his horse would never stay on his feet long enough to reach it, but he raised his rifle and coolly commenced to fire again.

El Lobo bellowed and shrieked out orders to his officers. Then something buzzed by his ear and caught a man behind him in the neck. The man pitched into El Lobo and almost knocked him off his feet. El Lobo shoved the dead man away with a curse. Then he cursed again, but in a different key, for he realized that both Tiny Tim and Lawson were using him as a target. His officers noticed this and instantly decided that they had pressing business

elsewhere. El Lobo discovered that he was alone. He promptly forgot he was a wolf and became a coyote. He gave a half snarl and a half squeal of rage and fear as he scurried for safety. He threw himself headlong behind a rock.

The burly puncher who had shouted the warning to the Rangers, managed to break the rope which bound his arms. He grabbed up a stick and sprang at the Mexicans who still clutched the three girls' arms. These Mexicans were so intent on watching the Rangers that the puncher managed to knock two of them sprawling before they realized they were attacked. The others freed the girls and ducked away from that swinging bludgeon.

"Run, run for the house," the puncher shouted.

The girls sped for the safety of the house. The puncher bellowed out an oath and charged the remaining guards in order to cover their retreat. The Mexicans threw up their guns to end the unequal combat, but before they could fire, a wounded horse, maddened by pain and fear, charged into them. The burly puncher picked up a rifle and shouted to the other prisoners to get inside. Only the fact that Bill Lawson's horse went down at that moment made it possible for the prisoners to crowd through the door without any casualties. For the shout of triumph which went up when Lawson's horse fell, turned the attention of the Mexicans to him.

The puncher glanced over his shoulder as he leaped through the doorway, he saw that one of the Rangers was down. He slammed the door behind him, then leaped for a window and looked out.

"One's down," he shouted. "Brave kid, there he's up again. Hell, he's hit bad. The other kid's turnin' to come back for him."

The puncher fumbled at the ropes which bound his friends and they crowded to the window to watch. They saw Tiny Tim swing his horse in a short circle, then coolly pull up close to Lawson. He gave Lawson his hand and the wounded man managed to scramble up behind him. Bullets buzzed by them and kicked up the dust about the horse's feet as it started to run.

The two raised their voices in the Ranger yell as they reached the knoll. It was as clear as a triumphant bugle call and cut through the roar of shots sent after them by the furious Mexicans. The two Rangers dropped to the ground and took shelter on the crest of the knoll.

El Lobo stamped and screamed orders at his men. A dozen men turned their horses and raced toward the knoll.

CHAPTER VIII.

NO OTHER WAY.

THE Americans within the ranch house could plainly hear El Lobo scream out his orders. They saw a dozen of the raiders draw apart from their companions, then start at a furious, headlong gallop toward the ridge.

"I'm helpin' those two kids," the burly puncher cried as he thrust his rifle through the window.

But old man Waster pushed the rifle aside and looked at his son sternly.

"Tom, how many shells you got in that gun?" he asked.

Tom Waster worked the lever and three shells flew out, then it clicked empty.

"Only three," Tom cursed.

"Which won't do no good to those kids, but which might do a lot of good here," old Waster said significantly.

Tom Waster looked at his three sisters and nodded.

"I get you," he whispered grimly. "That greaser will never get his hands on them again—alive."

Then he somberly watched the charge from the window. Not a shot came

from the mound until the dozen raiders were within two hundred yards. Then a pair of rifles cracked, and there were two riderless horses. The remaining ten pressed on, ten, twenty, thirty yards farther. The rifles cracked again and there were two more empty saddles. That was enough; the rest of the raiders swung their horses and came back even faster than they had charged. The rifles spat death once more, and one rider hit the ground like a sack of meal, while another swayed in his saddle long enough to fall at the feet of his friends.

"That's shootin'," Tom Waster admired.

"An' usin' their head," old man Waster said. "Deadly shootin' like that is harder to face than volleys. Because those greasers got to wonderin' after the second shot if they wa'r'nt the next to be picked off. If they was next to have those rifles lined on 'em it meant they was dead men. That broke their nerve."

"Oh, those brave boys," one of his daughters sobbed.

They could hear El Lobo raging like a madman. He cursed and abused the survivors for cowards. Told them that they were all dead men unless that knoll was taken, for other Rangers were arriving and those two boys blocked their retreat. Urged on by their fear of the arrival of other Rangers as well as by the abuse of their leader, some seventeen men were persuaded to attack a second time.

They started off with a shrill cry. This time the rifles spoke a little faster, but were almost as deadly as before. Only eleven raiders bunched at the foot of the knoll and spurred their horses up it. They were halfway up when Tiny Tim and Lawson arose to meet them. Lawson had two guns and balanced himself on one leg, while Tiny Tim had two good legs, but only one arm. His left shoulder had been smashed by a ricocheting bullet.

For a mintue the knoll was blotted out by swirling smoke. Then those in the ranch house gave a cheer as they saw the surviving Mexicans leap their horses down the slope and ride fiercely back.

El Lobo cursed and swore like a madman. He slashed at his men with a quirt and reviled them as only a Mexican could.

"I notice the brave El Lobo ain't leadin' 'em," Tom Waster sneered.

"Wait—listen! Good heavens, they're singin' that old song," Waster cried.

The others listened and faint but clear the words floated to their ears:

"We're goin' back to Goliad,
To Goliad, to Goliad.
We'll leave no stone to mark the town of Goliad.
The coyotes and buzzards will feed on what we leave in Goliad."

"Boys, I'm tellin' you those two kids are Rangers," old man Waster cried with a catch in his voice.

"Look! They're plannin' to make it sure this time," Tom said bitterly.

THE raiders had now split into three even groups. As the Americans watched, they saw the two outside groups streak forward together, then a few seconds later the middle group started. The outer groups made for the sides of the knoll, while the center one charged straight forward.

The three girls turned away and hid their faces in their hands. But the men stood and watched with clenched fists, and there was not one of them who wouldn't have traded many years of his life to have been by the side of those two indomitable fighters on the knoll.

The rifles cracked and took their toll. But no matter how fast and true they fire, no two men can stop the charge of many desperate men. And the Mexicans were desperate, for they knew the sound of the firing would carry a long

distance and arouse the countryside for miles. And those two on the knoll were blocking their only route of escape. The center group faltered and half turned to flee. But the outer two charged home and then turned in on the flanks.

The watchers caught a brief glimpse as the two arose to their feet to meet them. The knoll was a mêlée of horsemen. A crackling, smoky inferno. The smoke drifted away and Waster could see several Mexicans leaning from their saddles as they emptied their pistols into something on the ground. Then the Mexicans swung their hats and gave a triumphant cheer.

"Cheer, damn you, cheer! You sure won a swell victory," Tom Waster cried scornfully.

The raiders fastened their wounded comrades on horses, then some of the men galloped back to round up the horses with the packs of loot, and the whole gang went streaming down the valley toward the gap. Tom Waster watched them go as if he could hardly believe his luck.

"They've gone," he cried.

"I reckon El Lobo knew the firing would bring help pronto and figured his neck was worth more than any loot," his father said soberly.

"Those boys saved us. Those poor brave boys. I have got to go to them," one of his daughters cried.

But the old man shook his head grimly.

"It won't be fit for women up there," he said.

Then the men filed out and hurried toward the knoll. Halfway there, Waster saw his friend, the major, who had started running from the cottonwoods the moment the Mexicans had left.

"Twenty-six minutes. They held them twenty-six minutes, six more than necessary," the major panted.

"You crazy?" Waster asked, showing his perplexity.

THE major explained as they climbed the knoll. Both Tiny Tim and Bill Lawson were literally shot to pieces. Both were dead. But it was not the blood on their lips, faces, and uniforms which caught the two old-timers' eyes, but the expressions on the boys' faces. Both were lying on their backs and their sightless eyes stared up at the blue sky, but their lips were smiling.

"Yeah, they know they done their job," Waster murmured.

"An' done it damn well," the major said.

"An' those devils are gettin' clear," Waster cried as he pointed to the last of the Mexicans entering the gap.

"Not yet, wait—listen," the major insisted.

They did not have long to wait. Almost immediately they heard the crackle of gun fire. Then the Mexicans reappeared and started to gallop back along the valley as if the devil were after them.

Then a group of uniformed men darted into view. They spread out in a long line. They rode with loose reins and each one was firing his rifle at each jump of his horse.

"The Outlaw Legion," the major screamed, "come on, Wolves!"

The panic-stricken raiders spotted the group on the knoll. Some rushed to the ridge and attempted to climb it on foot. Others made a despairing effort to swing around the Rangers' flank. One group of five almost made good their escape. Then the Cole brothers leisurely dismounted and slowly raised their rifles.

They fired five times, then turned and grinned at each other. In ten minutes it was all over. The Rangers coolly and deliberately hunted down the last of the raiders and dispatched them like so many rats.

"Gosh, they're wolves," Tom Waster muttered.

Their work finished, the Rangers

trotted up to the knoll and dropped from their saddles. Tom Waster looked at their hard, cold faces and smoke-blackened hands, and repeated his last sentence.

Jim Allen glanced at the bodies of Tiny Tim and Lawson, then looked at the two old men and waited.

Then the major told his story for the first time. He told it simply and well. Allen and the others listened without a flicker of feeling on their faces.

"They're hard," Tom Waster thought.

The Yuma Kid looked at the sprawling bodies of those who had fallen in the assault, and gave a twisted grin.

"If Doc was here he sure would say that they had their hell firin' minute," he said.

"And he asked me specially to assure you that he didn't quit, for there was no other way," the major ended earnestly.

"I knew he wouldn't," Allen said simply.

Both of the old men wanted to ask for an explanation of this, but they held their tongues.

"An' Tiny Tim swore Lawson in as a Ranger. I hope you'll let that stand for the sake of the folks back home," the major said eagerly.

"I'll do what I can, but I ain't in the service no more," Allen replied.

Again the two old men wanted to question him, but held their tongues.

"Then by Heaven, we'll see to it. He saved my daughters an' died like a Ranger, so I'll see if those damned politicians still remember me in the capital," Waster snorted.

Tiny Tim and Lawson were buried on the crest of the knoll beside the other Rangers who had died there years before. The girls covered the graves with wild flowers. Allen looked at the two mounds for a minute, then he and the others rode away.

That evening, punchers from miles around galloped up to the ranch. Some came from long distances, for news travels fast in the plains country. With them came several reporters.

The major repeated over and over again his story and always ended with the words:

"No, gentlemen, in spite of the wolf pins they wear so brazen, they are not wolves, but magnificent fools!"

THE following morning, Governor Harrison sat in his office in the State government building. In front of him was a telegram and a newspaper with screaming headlines. The telegram was from Jim Allen. It was short, but to the point:

WE GOT LAWSON BUT LOST HIM STOP WHO SHALL I TURN OVER TO?
ALLEN

The newspaper belonged to the opposition. But, apparently, the story had made the editor forget politics for once in his life. Flaring headlines read:

TWO MAGNIFICENT FOOLS.
RAIDERS WIPED OUT.
Outlaw Legion Avenges Goliad.

The governor sighed and glanced at his office door. He was waiting for the hurricane. He had not long to wait, for Buddington banged into the office without waiting to be announced.

He was an irascible, nervous little man, with a thin, beaklike nose and a shiny, bald head. He had the reputation of being as sympathetic as a stone and of driving mercilessly hard bargains. He glared across the polished desk at the State's chief executive.

"Damn it, those pet wolves of yours caught that pup Lawson and let him go. I got a telegram from McTigue. There it is. Read it."

Buddington slammed a crumpled telegram on the desk. The governor did not even look at it, but stared out of the window straight through the gray walls

of the post office, into a sunlit meadow across which two boys were riding. He could hear them sing as they went:

"The buzzards high that sweep the sky."

Buddington banged the desk angrily, and the vision vanished. The governor blinked at his friend.

"Read that telegram from McTigue. Are you going to kick out those damned wolves or not? If you don't, every one of my papers will roast you!" Buddington cried furiously. "That Lawson made a jackass of me and my railroad, and has to pay for it."

The governor flipped Allen's telegram across the desk. Buddington grabbed it up and read it.

"So he's resigned. Good. Lost Lawson! He means he let him go," he snorted.

The governor shoved over the morning paper without a word. The anger slowly faded from Buddington's frosty eyes as he read.

"Huh, so they swore Lawson in as a Ranger. Damn bunch of outlaws," Buddington growled ferociously.

THEN he commenced to read. When he had finished, he carefully folded the paper and looked out of the window. He also saw a wide, sunlit meadow, with waving grass and two boys riding to their death. He blinked when he again looked at the governor.

"So they sang the song of Goliad. Fifty years ago, when I was a boy and playing Rangers, we used to sing it. Magnificent fools. Hell, thirteen wolves against what was left of the raiders. Bad odds for them. If they had been a hundred to one, they might have had a chance. You got to say those men are fighters," he shouted.

"I'm not saying anything. I suppose they'll all resign with Allen."

"Then I will."

Buddington raised his voice and bawled for the governor's secretary.

"Take a telegram," Buddington snapped.

He frowned, then dictated:

MIKE McTIGUE
CARSON HOTEL
CARSON
DON'T BE A JACKASS ALL YOUR LIFE STOP HAVE YOUR EYES EXAMINED STOP KNOW POSITIVELY THAT LAWSON HAS BEEN IN RANGER SERVICE FOR TWO MONTHS STOP SO HE CAN'T BE THE MAN YOU WANT STOP SUGGEST YOU GET BUSY AND CATCH REAL CULPRIT
BUDDINGTON

The little man glared at the big governor, then went on:

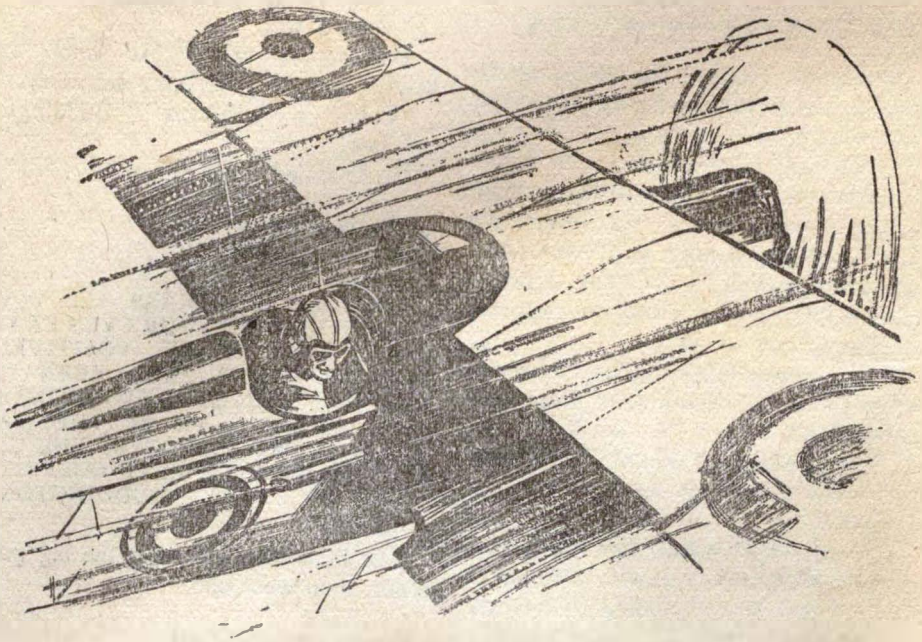
CAPTAIN JIM ALLEN
RANGER HEADQUARTERS
CARSON
RESIGNATION REFUSED STOP IF YOU CAN'T BE A MAGNIFICENT FOOL STOP TRYING TO BE THE OTHER KIND
GOVERNOR HARRISON

Buddington looked at his friend after the secretary had left the room and grinned slyly.

"You know, I've made a lot of money, but my most thrilling adventure was when I ran for a train and missed it and nearly had my leg cut off. I've always envied the man who goes riding around with a pistol in his hand."

"Unless it's a glass pistol," the governor grinned. "Come on, you old fool, I'll buy you a drink."

FRAMED WINGS



By Robert J. Hogan

A. W. O. L., but with honors.

SMOKE" WADE, son of the Arizona ranges, inspected his pinto Spad lovingly, but sadly. The mechanics had been at work patching the torn fabric where Spandau steel and Archie shrapnel had blasted away the shining covering.

Slowly he unfolded a note which he had found in the cockpit, and his eyes swept over the typewritten page:

A fine squadron commander you make. A great example to the pilots under you. Why don't you go out and take your turn of hell over the lines once in a while instead of sending some one else? Most of us think you're yellow.

The note was unsigned. Smoke Wade smiled a sickly smile. His lone missions

over the lines were launched in the strictest secrecy. They were against the wishes of the colonel. Colonel McGill had warned Smoke repeatedly about them. Still, Smoke couldn't keep from going on a wild, and to the Archies devastating, cruise now and then—just to get that something out of his system.

In spite of that smile, Smoke was hurt. The note was like a stab of a knife in his heart. If there was one thing on which Smoke Wade prided himself it was the fact that his subordinates enjoyed him as their superior—liked to soldier under him. And now this note.

His head dropped and his eyes were upon the ground in half shame. Who could have sent the note? And was it the opinion of the whole squadron which he commanded? He tried frantically to force the idea from his mind. No, it couldn't be. There had been no sign of it before. Still, he couldn't be sure.

A voice awoke him from his thoughts as he stood beside his pinto Spad. He'd named the Spad "Jake" after his favorite pinto pony back on the range. And painted the Spad like him, too—a pinto Spad.

"Colonel McGill wants to see you right away, sir," announced the orderly who had come down the tarmac unseen.

Smoke answered the salute, stuffed the note into his shirt pocket and walked in the direction of headquarters.

"Captain," announced the colonel, "there's a tough job ahead for some of your outfit. Just received the orders. Back at position"—he bent low over the order sheet—"the numbers of the location seem a little blurred. Oh, yes. I can make it out now. These orders arrived before I got in the office this afternoon. Stetson was on duty at the outer office and handed them to me when I came in."

Colonel McGill raised the paper with the orders again. "But to go on with the orders for to-morrow. There's a battery of enemy howitzers that are holding up our advance. Everything has been wiped out but that battery. They must go, captain. Orders. Ask for volunteers to-night at mess. Only two Spads are to go. We'd send light bombers, but they're too slow. We'd send more Spads, but the gorge where these howitzers are intrenched is heavily guarded by Archies, and I believe that two will have a much better chance than a whole flight or more. With what few light bombs two Spads can carry, the hits must be perfect. See that your best men go."

"Yes, sir." Smoke snapped a salute to his superior. "I reckon that battery won't be there twenty-four hours from now, sir. What time do these two take off?"

"At ten o'clock," announced the colonel.

Smoke hesitated meditatively.

"Why so late, sir, I wonder?"

Colonel McGill shook his head.

"Can't say, captain. Just orders. Evidently those higher up who issued these orders, think that will be the best time. That's the only explanation I can make for it."

"I reckon maybe they know best," admitted Smoke as he left.

But on the way to the mess that evening his feet dragged. There were two things that had him stumped. The first was the note. How many of his squadron really felt that way about him? The other was his curiosity as to why the orders had come through for ten o'clock instead of at dawn, which was usually the most advantageous time to strike at a position of that kind.

HIS towering bulk was framed in the doorway as his eyes swept the hall where the men under him were taking their evening meal. Often Smoke had stood in that doorway and wondered. Wondered how

many of those young, eager faces would be there at the next evening mess.

At the same instant that some one near the door shouted: "Attention!" Smoke boomed his command in a voice that was soft, but carried its sound to every corner of the room.

"Ease, men." Then, in his calm Western drawl that did not betray in the slightest degree the tumult within him, "I reckon we got a mighty tough job for to-morrow morning."

Men turned nervously, shifted from one foot to the other. Veteran airmen stood like statues. They knew it was for them. Tough jobs were for the best, the veterans of the air.

"Got a job for two at ten to-morrow morning," Smoke announced in that slow, drawling voice, "battery of howitzers got to be blown off the earth. Two Spads. The best got to go. I'm askin' for——"

"You would," snapped a voice to his right. Smoke turned his head sidewise slightly and saw the pilot who had cut him short.

"Stetson," Smoke's drawl hid his rage, "I reckon you better hop up here beside me and tell me what you're aimin' at by that crack."

"Sure I'll tell you," Stetson blustered, making his way toward his superior. "Just because I'm better than most around here and got to be a flight commander, isn't any sign that you're going to pin this job on me. Yeah, I know. I've heard it often enough. Your old line. 'I'm askin' for volunteers, and, Stetson, I'm looking at you.' Why don't you go out yourself sometimes? Do you think you're about the best thing around here? Or maybe you're yellow."

Smoke suddenly realized that he knew who had sent that note. Who had written it and dropped it into the seat of his Spad. It didn't matter so much now. Not as long as it was Stetson who had done it. He'd expect that of him. Especially since Stetson had been taken in several times by bets at which Smoke Wade had beaten him. And of course Stetson had been lying when he had written that the rest of the squadron felt as he did about their commander.

Smoke's eyes roved over the faces in the mess before him. He suddenly realized that there wasn't a friendly expression on the face of any pilot in the room, with one exception. That was Quinn. There was pity in young Quinn's face. Pity, but that was all.

"And I reckon all the rest of you birds feel the same way about me as Stetson?" Smoke ventured. Surely that would bring some one forward to stand up for him. His heart sank like a stone in a mill pond. Not even Quinn, for whom he had risked himself in the past, would stand up for him.

"All right. I reckon I'll take the job myself this time," ventured Smoke. He was hurt to the quick. "You fellows might's well get some sleep to-morrow. This is the only job that our outfit is pulling off, so take a vacation."

"I knew you'd take it like that," snarled Stetson with a sneering laugh. You always think you can do more than any two of the rest of us. Always have. Well, maybe you'd like to make a bet that you get that battery to-morrow."

Smoke whirled on him. A bet had been proposed. Bets were his meat, and he had the luck of the devil, usually.

"I reckon I sure will take that bet," he announced. "Name your stakes, Stetson."

"Twenty-five thousand francs," Stetson astonished him by saying. "Or maybe you haven't got that much money to your name?"

Smoke Wade did some lightning calculations in his head.

"I'll be takin' that bet, Stetson," he drawled in even tones.

"And just to give you a break," Stetson went on, "we'll make the bet this way. Twenty-five thousand francs that

not a man from this field gets that battery."

But, in so doing, Stetson overstepped himself. He had suddenly caused Smoke Wade to wonder by that last remark.

"Check," said Wade.

SMOKE pondered his predicament. From the acts of the pilots at mess that night it had been obvious that they were all in agreement with Stetson. They thought him unjust and yellow. But one thing Wade had missed. He had missed the hilarious laughter that had burst from the throats of the pilots in mess that night as soon as they were sure he was out of hearing.

Wonder and curiosity at that last remark of Stetson's caused him to leave the field that night in search of information. There was something about the whole affair that smacked of too much assurance on the part of Stetson.

Smoke spent most of the night wandering through several near-by towns, hanging about the various bars and asking questions of pilots from other fields with whom he came in contact.

Shortly after dark it began to rain. At first it began as a steady drizzle. Then it increased to a torrent, and throughout the night, it stormed continuously. And when Smoke Wade learned certain things he began to smile as he heard the rain making a regular morass of the surrounding country.

Long before ten the following morning, Smoke Wade, drenched to the skin, was seated in the cockpit of his pinto Spad, while the Hisso warmed throatily.

"It's takin' a terrible chance," warned the hangar sergeant, "havin' them guns taken off to lighten the plane."

Smoke grinned down at him.

"Now you have no cause to worry, I reckon. Got to carry just as many bombs as I can get into this crate. Don't worry. Jake and me, we'll be all right." His hand unconsciously caressed the old six-gun that hung at his right leg. "Mr. Colt, and Jake, and me. We'll get through all right."

Out in front of him was the vacancy to which the mechanic had referred. Smoke had taken off both the Vickers guns, so that he could carry as much weight in the way of bombs as possible. He'd need them all going over alone.

"And not a word to the colonel, remember."

"Yes, sir."

The Hisso was nearly ready for the take-off. Smoke caught sight of a figure running wildly down the tarmac. He recognized Quinn. He was running as though his very life depended upon it. Smoke waited a moment.

"Smoke, captain," Quinn blurted out, "I've been looking all over for you." His eyes were dark from sleeplessness. "I couldn't let you go without telling you. It's a frame-up. It was Stetson who got up the idea of framing you on a bet. I guess every man at the field has some money in on it. We're all for you, Smoke. But it was meant to be a sort of joke on you."

Quinn was panting for breath. Smoke's big hand patted him softly on the shoulder, and in Smoke's eyes was a light of thorough understanding. It had been a joke. The men of his squadron really didn't feel that he was yellow, after all. Just a joke. But there was the bet. He'd have to win that bet, anyway. Besides, it was mostly up to him to get the battery of howitzers.

"But—but, Smoke," pleaded Quinn. "You don't understand it all. The——"

"There now, Quinn," grinned Smoke, patting him again, "don't you worry about my not knowin'. What do you think I was rustlin' around in the rain for last night if it wasn't to find out all about it? Sure, I know. Orders came through, that the French field over at Ramou were to go after the same thing, only earlier this morning. Stetson must have gotten hold of that news in the

colonel's office yesterday and that's what he's making his sure bet on. We'll fool him."

Quinn tried desperately to hang to the side of the cockpit—to say more. But Smoke gently pushed him away as he batted the gun open and spun his pinto Spad. The world was a great place, after all. So it was only a joke.

DOWN the tarmac the pinto Spad rolled heavily, gathering speed as it tore. There was a tense moment when the overloaded Spad wouldn't come off, even under the skilled hand of Smoke Wade.

"Come on, Jake, old boy. Don't fail me now. Dig in your old toes and let's go, fella." He was talking to his pinto Spad like he had talked to old Jake back on the range when he needed urging.

Smoke felt the ship lighten. He tried the stick. The Spad wavered, rose sluggishly, came off a foot. But quickly he set her down and gave her more roll on the wheels.

Then, suddenly, as they neared the end of the tarmac, and it seemed that she would be mired forever in the mud beyond, he picked the wheels off the hard surface and, with the skill of an expert which he was, held her while she struggled to gain safe flying speed.

His great hand patted the cowling of the cockpit before him.

"There, old fellow. I knew you'd make it."

Smoke opened the map that the colonel had given to him and got his bearings. The ship seemed sluggish and reluctant. Slowly it climbed higher and higher, but it was battling all the way.

"Old bombs sure do hang heavy on yuh, don't they, boy?"

Faster and faster he neared the front and his objective. But one thing perplexed him. Smoke Wade knew that portion of the front like a book. What troubled him was that he could think of no gorge in the location mentioned in the orders. But perhaps he was wrong. He couldn't know every foot of ground on that part of the front.

As he roared toward the front, he turned and glanced over his shoulder. To his astonishment, another Spad was racing toward him—coming at him at a faster speed than his own overloaded Spad could fly. Curious, he watched it approach, throttled his Hissos back to allow it to come even with him.

Gradually it crept up on him. Archie guns grunted up at them both as they hurled themselves over enemy territory. But they were too high and they tore on toward the objective. Now, as the other Spad crept up on him slowly from the rear, Smoke Wade studied the orders and his map. He stared down at the blasted earth in search of the gorge, but even with his keen eyes he could not see any trace of a gorge that would hide a whole battery of howitzers.

Then the other Spad was pulling alongside. He turned and waved. It might be some one sent out by the colonel. Some one to bring him back to the field at the colonel's orders. He chuckled a little at the idea. With twenty-five thousand francs at stake and the getting of the battery himself beside, he could easily misunderstand the order.

Then he recognized the pilot. It was Quinn. The kid had come with him. The thought both angered him and made him swell with pride. The kid had guts—and liked him. He was willing to take a big chance to help. But Smoke Wade didn't want help.

At that very moment, however, Smoke Wade had not the slightest idea how much he needed help, if he was to gain his objective.

Quinn was waving wildly. At first, Smoke thought he was motioning him to turn back and shook his head vigorously. Then he realized that Quinn was motioning him to turn and follow him.

Smoke seemed in a daze for a time. He hadn't been able to find the location of the batteries from the orders. He took another squint at the location numbers on the orders and then at the map. The numbers on the map were a little blurred. He looked again. He was certain he was correct about them. Still, there was no battery or gorge down there where the orders said, and Quinn was highly insistent.

WITHOUT knowing just what decided him, Smoke Wade suddenly turned and followed Quinn as he finally veered east and raced along ahead of the heavily loaded pinto Spad. Minutes sped past. Minutes through which Smoke Wade flew in a perplexed haze of wonder.

Then Quinn was pointing. They were in rougher country now. Country that had gorges aplenty, and in another minute, Wade saw fire belching from one of the deeper gorges and knew his error. But how had Quinn known the correct location of those guns?

A flight of five Fokkers droned at them out of the north. Smoke saw them coming and shuddered. Shuddered not for himself, but for young Quinn. The kid who had so much guts and so little experience.

Wade half cursed himself for taking off his guns to lighten the ship and make weight for the extra bombs. If Quinn were shot down trying to save him, he'd never forgive himself.

Frantically he tried to motion Quinn back to the field. Tried to point to his gunless engine cowl to show him he was fighting a lone battle. But Quinn only answered with a grin and tore on toward the oncoming Fokkers.

"Good kid," ventured Smoke, as he saw him lunge toward them. "But a damn fool."

Desperately he tried to figure out the speed of his ship against that of the Jerry flight. Perhaps they would reach the gorge first—perhaps not. It would be so near that it wouldn't matter. And Smoke Wade left with only a six-gun at his hip to battle five opponents.

Down he plunged at the gorge that held the howitzers, with Quinn flying at the same level as before, ready to dive on the Fokkers as they came near.

Archie batteries that surrounded the gorge, let go with a deafening roar.

Smoke's thoughts came fast and furiously. He had but one chance. He must get down on the ground out of range of those Archies. Then, flying just above the ground, he must rush upon the battery and drop his bombs.

In this way the Archie batteries would have less chance of getting a correct aim upon that pinto Spad as he hurled at them in a wildly twisting course. But, in doing so, he would take up valuable time. Time which would give the Fokkers from above a chance to be there first and to intercept him.

He gritted his teeth, gripped the stick more tightly in a hand that did not tremble, and hurled down. The pinto Spad groaned from the strain of racing wind and overload.

Down, down he roared. He could see Quinn far above him, coming down at the diving Fokkers. Quinn had the advantage of altitude. That would help him—perhaps save him.

SMOKE glanced up for an instant at the fight. One lone Spad chasing five Fokkers. He thrilled at the sight and at the same time his hopes rose for Quinn. The kid had a chance now. If he took it. He must take it. Get all he could while he was on their tails.

White tracers fluffed out from Quinn's Vickers. Quinn was hot on the tail of one of the Jerry crates. Then the Fokker that he pursued so relentlessly, suddenly burst into flames and crashed downward.

Smoke saw Quinn dart instantly at

another Fokker before any of the Jerry flight knew fully that one of their comrades had gone to a flaming grave.

Again Quinn's Vickers belched death. There was a short pause in the firing and then a second Fokker nosed down like a dart.

By now the three remaining Fokkers had seen that two of their comrades had gone down at the flaming guns of that lone Spad that thundered at them from above. Smoke was down flat on the ground now and, for the moment, out of range of the Archie batteries. He hurled on, hugging the ground, and raced over that mile that intervened between himself and that gorge where the howitzers hid themselves, belching death across the lines.

Quinn was fighting like a demon, tearing down on the tails of those three closely bunched Fokkers. Back and forth he kicked his Spad, trying desperately to draw them away from Smoke who, without guns on his nose, was struggling to reach the howitzers first.

Suddenly one of the Fokkers whirled with surprising speed and executed a half roll. Quinn, taken by surprise, darted under him, and the next instant Smoke held his breath and prayed for the kid who had fought so valiantly.

All four planes lunged. The three Fokkers; two ahead and the other riding Quinn's tail, like mad. Smoke Wade had time to see Quinn whirl out of range and come in again, just an instant before he reached his objective. Everything under him suddenly seemed to blow up at once as the Archie batteries burst into action in one last wild effort to save themselves.

Smoke pulled his bomb release lever with all his might as he thundered low over the edge of the gorge. He was too busy to look back to see what damage he had done. Too busy with his work to see how Quinn was coming.

Again he let go with his bombs. Then, like a flash, he was whirling out of rage again and coming in to drop his remaining bombs from the other side of the gorge. One thing he had quickly decided. He could do more damage by blowing in the sides of the gorge on the enemy guns than he could with his light bombs if he directed them directly at the guns themselves.

He let go with everything he had on the return trip. The front wall of the gorge had tumbled in on the guns, but not so successfully that they couldn't be dug out in a short time. Now he was blasting in the rear wall of the gorge. It would take days to dig those guns and their crushed crews out of that gorge and make them fit for use once more. Long before that time the Allied troops, whose advance they had been retarding, would be in possession of the location.

AS he climbed, with every bomb dropped, and looked about for the Fokkers and for Quinn, he felt a sinking of his whole body. Two Fokkers bore down at him from above. But that wasn't so bad.

The worst of what he saw was that Quinn, prop stuck straight across, was steadily going down on the other side of a wood, apparently endeavoring frantically to land safely, while the plane with which he had been in combat when last he saw him was veering northward, black smoke pouring from its motor cowling.

One of the Fokkers lunged at him. The other turned and pursued the helpless Spad that was trying so bravely to get down, even though in enemy territory.

Smoke cursed aloud. His six-gun was in his hand, but below the cowling. He lowered his nose and tore in at the oncoming Fokker. Nearer and nearer they speeded at each other. The Spandaus were silent. The Jerry pilot knew that he would have little or no chance of killing his opponent from that angle.

He must wait. He must wait until Smoke swerved.

But Smoke hadn't been on the front for months for nothing. He, too, knew that the first man who swerved would be the dead pilot. His gun hand itched to be pulling the trigger of his six-gun. It was a chance in a million. He was a good shot. But circumstances like this took a lot of real shooting. The first one must count.

He waited desperately. Hang on until the very last chance he could hope for to pull out. No matter what happened, the other must swerve first. Smoke gritted his teeth and hung on.

Then, when it seemed that neither of the two planes could dodge each other, when Smoke himself had all but given up any possibility of escaping a crash with the other, the Jerry pilot swerved in a dizzy vertical that brought his landing gear almost crashing through the prop of the pinto Spad.

And, at that instant, Smoke's old six-gun was out of the cockpit.

The three shots that followed came so fast they sounded almost like the staccato of machine-gun fire. The lead slugs tore through the bottom of the cockpit of the Jerry crate, and in that instant Smoke Wade knew that he had gotten his enemy.

Without even waiting to see him waver, without seeing him turn and begin to spin down in a mad whirl, Smoke turned and darted toward the spot where he had last seen Quinn going down behind the trees.

In his first glance toward the edge of the trees he saw the one remaining Fokker dive down over the field and then come swooping sharply upward Smoke could hardly expect to get this fellow with his six-gun. That would be asking too much.

His heart sank and a lump rose in his throat as he roared over the field. He had maneuvered so that the Fokker was rising at the far end of the field. That would place Smoke in the place of advantage, or would have, had he had his guns still mounted on his engine.

Down on the field a mass of smoke and flame hid Quinn's Spad. He wondered frantically about Quinn. No use to wonder. He was probably down there in the cockpit of that inferno.

Tac-tac-tac!

Smoke whirled in his seat to see that the Fokker had come sneaking around and was tearing in at him from the side. The Jerry pilot, still pouring steel at him, was pointing down at the field. Nothing to do now but land. He was forced to. He couldn't fight when the enemy pilot had such an advantage over him. He must think of a way out after he landed.

Smoke Wade felt his wheels touch the ground. Heard the Fokker gliding in behind him and he waited any chance he might have. But why should he have a chance now?

The Jerry pilot was climbing from his cockpit, walking toward him with self-assurance as he held a revolver leveled at his body. He uttered an order in German that Smoke did not understand. He waited for an instant. The Jerry pilot was at his side.

Suddenly, as quick as light, Smoke ducked inside the cockpit for an instant The Luger spat, but missed wildly. Then Smoke Wade, six-gun booming, whirled and was shooting into the astonished Jerry pilot.

His prop still idling, Smoke shot a quick glance about the edge of the field. A sound attracted his attention on the other side of the Fokker. Cautiously he peered round. He could see a slight movement in the bushes at the edge of the wood that skirted the small field. Shielding himself as well as he could behind his motor, he shouted an order.

"Reckon you better come out before you get shot full of holes."

"Smoke, Smoke." A voice was groaning his name.

Smoke raced to the edge of the wood. His heart leaped for joy as he found Quinn lying there, well hidden. It was all clear to him now. Quinn's motor had been too badly shot up to get off again. He had fired it and then hidden in the brush.

"My leg," Quinn was weak, trying to smile. "Can't walk, Smoke."

"Sure you can't now, but before long you will again. Better ride for now. Can you hang on to my wing or had I better tie you on?"

"I'll hang on to it." Quinn's mouth twisted in pain as he smiled.

Then, as Smoke carried him tenderly toward his own pinto Spad, past the Fokker of the dead Jerry pilot, he suddenly stopped short with a sad shake of his head.

"Too bad, kid, you can't fly that Fokker home. It'd be a great stunt. But wait. I got an idea almost as good. He felt in his pocket for a match while he easily supported Quinn with the other. "Here, touch off that crate. That'll make four enemy aircraft shot down or destroyed by you this morning. Not bad. And I'm a witness, too."

And while the Fokker flamed as Quinn's Spad had done a moment before, and running feet and hoarse shouts hastened to stop them from taking off, the pinto Spad roared down the rough field and into the air.

SMOKE questioned Quinn eagerly as soon as they landed. "But what was there that made you think I didn't know where I was going this morning? What gave you the idea that you knew where the battery was?"

Pilots were clustered about them as they landed. They had money bet against Wade—bet in a joking way. There had been one grand frame-up to take him for at least one bet.

"It was Stetson," explained Quinn. "I tried to get you last night after I left. Stetson got tight over in town last night and I heard him bragging about hiding some of the information that came in yesterday morning and changing the location numbers and the time for us to go over on the orders that were given to you before the colonel got hold of them. Gee, Smoke, I hope you don't think the rest of us were in on that part of it. That's what I was trying to tell you when you took off and you wouldn't listen. So I had to come and let you know."

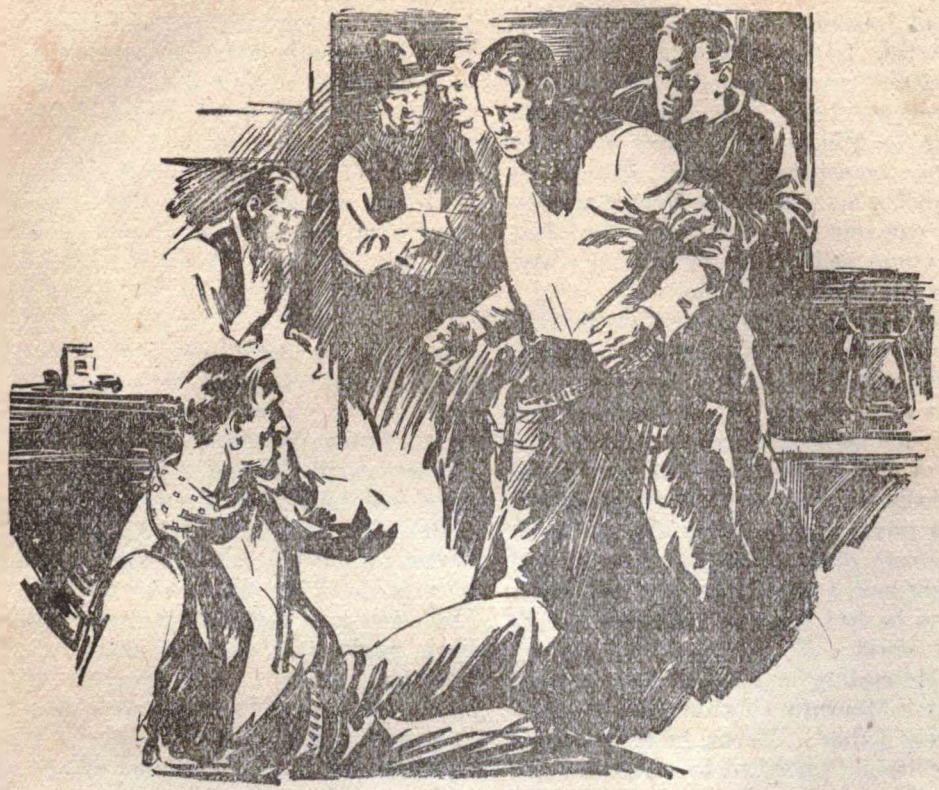
Stetson had come in upon the scene. Smoke turned to him with a peculiar, twisted smile.

"Pretty smart, I'll have to admit," he informed Stetson. "But you were exceeding your authority some by changing those orders, I reckon. And there's one thing you didn't figure on. That rain last night. Guess you don't know the fields around here. Those Frenchmen over at Ramou, whom you expected would get the howitzers before any of us, haven't any hard tarmac to take off on when it's like it was this morning early. Just a mess of mud, that's all. You couldn't take off of that field in a balloon after a rain like last night. Kind of slipped up on that, I reckon. And when you're ready I'll just collect on that bet."

Stetson's face was purple with rage. He was stunned.

"And if I was you, Stetson"—Smoke Wade's voice took on a graver note—"I'd just naturally go A. W. O. L. for the rest of the War, before the colonel hears about this messing with the orders."

"It's a little late for that," a voice snapped. No one had seen Colonel McGill standing behind one of the planes. "Stetson, you're under arrest. And as for you, Wade, once more you've gone out alone to do the work of others against my wishes. Damn you, Wade." Then, in a softer voice, as he laid his hand on Smoke Wade's shoulder: "But, boy, I'm proud of you, damn you."



NARROW ESCAPE

By Charles Wesley Sanders

Mournful Martin, the bragging waddy, doesn't see any good in a wheat farmer, and just escapes being bound hand and foot.

A RAINY twilight, through which he was riding home, dimly disclosed "Mournful" Martin's face as a little more somber than usual. He had become convinced some days ago that he was confronting a crisis in his life, and he was trying to decide now what he should do. He was going to continue as a free man or presently he was going to be bound hand and foot.

For the first time he was considering whether it wouldn't be kinda pleasant to be bound hand and foot.

A month ago Mournful had saved Harry McLeod from the machinations of a man named Arthur Lake. He had had to kill Lake in self-defense. He had sent Lake's wife to the Three D Ranch with Harry. She had been there ever since.

Mournful believed that Mrs. Lake

would marry him if he asked her. Recovering from the brutality of her association with Lake and blossoming into a renewed beauty, she had been mighty nice to Mournful whenever she came into contact with him. Instead of avoiding his society, she seemed anxious to cultivate it. Once or twice their meetings had had the effect of her having lain in wait for him.

Mournful had to confess, as he rode along now, that his feeling for Mrs. Lake was pretty soft. Young Danforth, son of the owner of the Three D, had recently married Margaret McLeod, and since that event there had been a decidedly different atmosphere about the old ranch house. Mournful, being an intimate of the family, had witnessed more love, and affection, and gentleness than he had had any notion existed in the world.

Heretofore nothing of that had entered Mournful Martin's life. Abs'lutely nothin'! Mebbe, he reflected, his life hadn't amounted to so much. He was past forty. If ever he was going to change his way of living, he would have to do it before long.

He believed he'd make a pretty fair kind of husband. He had a reputation more substantial than that of a gunslingin', ropin', ridin' hombre, who was forever stickin' his nose into other people's business. He had a reputation as a cowman. He knew cows. My Heavens, he oughta know cows. He hadn't never done nothin' but nurse them from weak-kneed calves to ripsnortin', red-eyed, fightin' ol' bulls. He could get a good job some place. The ol' man would make him foreman of the Three D, if Henderson ever quit.

An' yet looka what he'd miss. No more goin' to town, no more poker games, no more drinks. Why, he wouldn't, he supposed, be able to turn around without his wife's permission. His wife's! Mournful Martin's wife's! Gosh, Mournful sighed, he hadn't looked at it in that way. Bein' Mournful Martin's wife might not be anything to brag about. A woman might get tired, pretty quick, of a horse-faced husband.

When Mournful reached the ranch, he found himself weighed down by a depression new to him. He hung up his slicker in the bunk house, rolled a cigarette, and sat down on the edge of a bunk. Young Weldon, a good looking, capable fellow, passed him. Mournful, lost in his own thoughts, did not see the look of resentment, almost of hate, which Weldon bestowed on him. Weldon went to the far end of the room and stood with his back to the wall.

Bob Danforth came in. Mournful looked up quickly and hopefully. Bob lived in the ranch house with his wife. His coming to the bunk house at this hour might indicate that there was something doing. The prospect of strenuous activity would have made Mournful happy just now.

When Bob crooked a finger at him, he rose quickly.

"Mrs. Lake wants to see you," Bob said. "She's waiting for you in the house. Go on in."

Mournful took a long drag at his cigarette. He reckoned he faced strenuous activity, but not the kind he had hoped for. Mrs. Lake wouldn't have sent for him if she hadn't had some thing on her mind. And Mournful believed that what she had on her mind was hooked up with what he'd been thinking about. Gosh, he wasn't ready for no show-down yet. His strenuous activity would be mental.

However, he only said "All right" to Bob, left the bunk house, chucked away his cigarette, and walked to the front of the house. Through the window he could see Mrs. Lake sitting beside a table with a lamp on it. The lamplight shone on her bright hair and emphasized the smoothness and the roundness of her cheek. She was gettin' prettier every

day. That was the dangerous impression which Mournful carried into the house with him.

AS he sat down slowly opposite Mrs. Lake, he had a feeling of relief. She was a sound woman, he told himself. Even now she wasn't skittish. She didn't give a man a silly smile. She was calm and dignified.

"Mr. Martin," said Mrs. Lake, "I owe you a very great deal."

"Not a thing in the world," Mournful asserted.

"Since I've been here, I've heard a lot about you," she went on, ignoring his denial. "I've heard of the many people you've helped. I've heard how you've risked your life for others. You did for me, you know. I like you and admire you, Mr. Martin. I want to know, I must know, what your feeling toward me is."

It was, just then, an excellent thing for Mournful Martin that he wasn't facing an enemy whom he would have had to beat to the draw. He was close to complete paralysis. He had never proposed to a woman. Certainly he had never been proposed to by a woman. He was being proposed to now. On'y a man with no brain a-tall could fail to see that. He had but to speak a few, well-chosen words and Mrs. Lake would be his. The words wouldn't need to be so damn' well-chosen neither. "Marry me, ma'am," 'd do the business. But Mournful was incapable of speech, however brief. His tongue was like a piece of dried leather.

Mournful had heard and read jokes about widows. To a great many joke-makers this scene, he supposed, would be funny. He found nothing funny in it. Because her husband lay in his hillside grave, Mrs. Lake did not suddenly become a humorous figure. She was, for one thing, too intensely in earnest. She was a woman to whom life had been bitterly cruel, but in whom hope was not dead. She was not, grotesquely, the widow Lake.

"A man like you shouldn't lead the lonely life you lead," Mrs. Lake pursued. "You should have a home of your own. You should begin to look forward to peace and quiet."

Mournful, unfortunately, knew very little about women. He accepted Mrs. Lake's statements at their face value. He did not detect a lack of warmth in them. He did not see that Mrs. Lake was too grave. The little sigh that issued from her lips escaped him.

All he knew was that he wanted to be by himself. He rose on somewhat unsteady feet.

"Ma'am," he said, "I reckon what you say is correct, but I'll have to think it over. I'll see you to-morrow, ma'am."

And somehow he got out of the room and out of the house. He had to have a horse under him now. He wanted the beat of the rain in his face. This thing was breath-takin'. He hadn't known that a nice woman pulled a trick like that if she found a man slow. The only explanation that he could think of was that Mrs. Lake, having lived a tough life with that skunk Lake, wanted to get herself settled. Mournful's thoughts didn't dwell on love. Mebbe Mrs. Lake had had too much of what people called love. Mebbe his kindness, his stability, were more precious to her than somethin' gen'ally thought sweeter an' finer.

Mournful paused as he reached the foot of the steps. Somebody was crossing the space which intervened between the house and the bunk house. He was in a hurry. He opened the bunk house door. The light revealed young Weldon.

MOURNFUL stood stockstill for a space, looking with unseeing eyes into the rain. Young Weldon had been spying on him and Mrs. Lake, had he? Young Weldon thought Mournful's going in to see

Mrs. Lake funny, did he? Prob'ly all them punchers thought it funny. A horse-faced fella courtin' a pretty widow. That was all they saw in the situation. They didn't think an emotion which might come to them readily would come to him at all.

Anger rose in Mournful. He felt as if it started in his boots and rose, in an icy wave, to his head. It left him strangely cold and hard. He'd show a few of these shorthorns what range they belonged on.

Because of his iciness, his hardness, his steps were slow as he crossed to the bunk house door. He pressed the latch and opened the door slowly. His face was like granite as he stepped into the room and closed the door behind him. A line which ran down from his nose to the corner of his mouth was like a little furrow now.

He had expected that his entrance would be greeted with a burst of laughter. But only two men looked at him. One of these was Weldon: the other was Bob Danforth. Mournful saw fury in Weldon's eyes; only curiosity in Bob's.

But Mournful was in no mood to note differences now. He forgot that he had expected derision in Weldon's look. He strode over to Weldon and leaned to him. He topped Weldon by a head, but Weldon had much greater width of shoulder. He would weigh as much as Mournful. He was stocky—arms and legs were well muscled.

"What th' hell do you think you're pullin' off?" Mournful asked. "You can't spy on me an' my business."

Weldon did not open his lips to reply. In fact those lips only tightened. Weldon's right hand tightened, too, till it was a knot at his side. The fist came up. It caught Mournful under the jaw. The fist had traveled from Weldon's hip to Mournful's jaw at top speed. It had all Weldon's young strength behind it. Mournful, totally unprepared, made no move to block the blow. It sent his head back. His knees buckled. He dropped to the floor.

For a space consciousness was dim in Mournful, but it was there.. He could not at once rise. As his head cleared, he considered the situation. When Weldon had delivered that blow, he had known that it would have serious consequences. He had known that Mournful wouldn't calmly accept a knockdown. Then Weldon must have something on his mind.

Mournful looked up. Weldon was standing back from him. Bob Danforth was holding him by both arms. Apparently Weldon had been struggling against being held. His chest was rising and falling. There was a savage gleam in his eyes.

Mournful's own anger, rising suddenly now in a hot, not an icy, flood, was no nice thing. His impulse was to get to his feet and insist that Weldon face him with a gun in his hand. Mournful could beat him to the draw. He could beat any man in that bunk house to the draw, even Bob Danforth, good a man as he was.

And yet——

Mournful Martin was fundamentally a just man. The fights he had had never had been the result of rowdyism. They had always been caused by his inserting himself into some deeply human problem. He had never killed wantonly. He had to confess that if he killed Weldon now it might be a wanton act. He didn't need to hang a bluff to establish himself with these men. They wouldn't dream of accusing him of cowardice. They knew him too well.

So Mournful took another thirty seconds to get himself in hand. At the end of that brief time he rose slowly, dusted his clothing and his hands, fingered a jaw already beginning to be sore. All the while he kept his eyes on Weldon. Weldon gave no sign of regret. His eyes still held fiery anger.

He struggled anew against Bob Danforth and now Bob let him go. The other men had moved up a little. They were reasonably close to Mournful, Weldon, and Bob. Gravity marked them.

AND then hot young Weldon applied the ultimate, ugly phrase to Mournful. Mournful felt as if the searing winds of disaster were blowing against him. He couldn't stand for that phrase. He couldn't permit any man to apply it to him. And yet Weldon was young. He had always been a square-shootin' kind of a fella. It'd be a pity to snuff his life out. Mournful gave him a chance. He had, in his time, given lesser men a chance.

"You better take that back, boy," he said in a low voice.

"I'll take nothin' back," Weldon cried. "It goes double. An' I'm ready to give you any satisfaction you want."

And once more he spat out those words.

Mournful looked at Bob Danforth. Then his troubled, regretful eyes went over all the other men. He took a long breath, slowly exhaled it.

"You're standin' closest to him, Bob," he said. "You c'n fix up his end of it. I don't care who fixes up my end. I'll ride outa here at five o'clock in the mornin'. He c'n ride at five-thirty. By that time I'll be comin' back. We c'n do anything we wanta do soon's we come in sight of each other. We'll be about a mile from the house. If you wanta change any of the details, Bob, you c'n let me know."

With that he left the bunk house as he was, hatless and coatless, got his horse from the corral and rode into the night.

As he loped the horse over a lonely road he fought a bitter battle. His conscience whispered to him that he ought not to kill that young fella. Weldon had been hasty, out of a hot temper. Something had riled him beyond endurance. Mournful could go to town and stay away for a while. In the meantime Bob Danforth would send Weldon packing. Bob would understand what Mournful's absence meant. He wouldn't ascribe it to anything but common sense.

But all Mournful's experiences, all his training, were against such a course. Habit was too strong for him. He had always been ready to answer for what he did. Weldon was a man, full-growed. Weldon would have to answer. He had knocked Mournful down. He had called Mournful an unpardonable name. Deliberately he had repeated that name. Hell, he had knowed what would happen.

When Mournful returned to the bunk house, the men, except young Weldon and Bob Danforth, were asleep. Bob, Mournful knew, had been awaiting his return. He would try to argue with Mournful. Mournful wasn't going to stand for that. He stopped in front of Bob.

"I ain't been ridin' aimless," Mournful stated. "I've thought everything out. Gimme credit for that. All I want to know from you is whether there's been any change in the plan I su'jested."

Bob favored Mournful with a long look. Then he dropped his eyes.

"No change, Mournful," he said heavily. "It's too bad."

"You'd stand for that stuff, would you?" Mournful asked.

Bob lifted his head. Again he regarded Mournful. There was affection for the long man in his eyes.

"No, Mournful, I wouldn't stand for it," he said clearly. "Well, I've got to go into the house. I'll be out here in the morning. Shorty Sutherland will ride with you."

Mournful nodded. Bob left.

To reach his bunk Mournful had to pass Weldon. Weldon was carefully cleaning his gun. He was running a

rag through the chambers now. As Mournful went by, he glanced at Weldon. Mournful had a startled moment. Weldon's face, under its tan, had a sick look. There was a slight tremor in the fingers which manipulated the rag.

Mournful went and sat down heavily on the edge of his bunk. This was no kind of business. If Mournful set out to gun whip a man, he wanted that man to be prepared. He wanted him to be steady. He wanted him to have every chance. Only such a man was entitled to stand up before Mournful's uncanny swiftness and sureness with a gun.

Damn it to hell, why had Weldon pulled that rough stuff? Why hadn't he minded his own business? Mournful hadn't done anything to him. And then suspicion came to Mournful. Weldon had been watching through the window while Mournful had talked to Mrs. Lake. Mebbe——

MOURNFUL could easily imagine every man in this bunk house in love with Mrs. Lake. If Weldon was in love with her, Weldon's actions would be accounted for. Love for her could easy drive a young fella crazy.

"Son," said Mournful softly.

"Shut up," said Weldon.

"Is this here fight about Mrs. Lake?" Mournful asked.

Weldon had finished cleaning his gun. He had loaded it and was now balancing it on his right palm. With his left hand he drew it up till his right hand clutched the butt. He pointed the gun at Mournful.

"One more word about her an' I'll plug you, you rat," Weldon declared.

"I'll give you a chance to get outa this thing," Mournful said. "Apologize to me here, alone, privut, an' we'll call things square. You don't need to say nothin' in front of the other boys."

"I'll see you in hell before I apologize to you." Weldon asserted. "To-morrow mornin' I'm gonna blow your heart out, you skunk."

"I reckon I'm all kinds a things," Mournful sighed.

He waited till Weldon had lain down and then he divested himself of his wet clothing, blew out the light, and stretched his long frame in his own bunk. He waited for Weldon to fall asleep, but Weldon was a long time doing that. Occasionally he turned. Once he groaned.

Mournful guessed he knew what was the matter with him. He had succumbed to Mrs. Lake. Prob'ly he had proposed to her. She had turned him down. Mebbe she had said that Mournful was her man. Weldon had lost his head complete. He was out to kill Mournful.

At last Weldon fell asleep. Youth would not be denied rest in spite of worry. Mournful could not sleep. He raised his head and rested it on his hand. The rain had ceased. Mournful could hear no patter of it. The darkness filtered out of the room. Moonlight took its place.

The morning, Mournful guessed, would be bright and clear. A man'd be able to see a long distance. Mournful visioned himself a rocklike figure on his horse. He felt his hand dart for his gun. He would be sure and steady. That young Weldon—Hell, Mournful breathed. He began to turn and toss.

He did not know when he fell asleep. He was awakened by something hard being pressed into his side. He opened his eyes. Bob Danforth was standing above him, holding a gun against his ribs. Mournful glanced upward toward where his gun belt had hung from a peg. The gun belt and the gun were gone.

Without a word Mournful slid from the bunk and began to dress. He saw that daylight was seeping into the bunk house. Dressed, he stood up and confronted Bob. Then his glance went be-

yond Bob. Old Danforth stood by the bunk house door. He had a gun in his hand.

"Wake Weldon," Bob ordered.

Mournful looked at Weldon's bunk. Weldon lay supine in it. One arm was under his head, the other outthrust so that it protruded from the bunk. Sleep had erased passion from the young face.

Mournful trusted young Danforth. More especially he trusted the old man. The old man wouldn't be in on anything that wasn't on the square. So Mournful took a step toward Weldon's bunk to rouse him. Bob followed Mournful. The old man came in from the door.

In a moment the three stood above Weldon. Mournful reached down a hand to drop it on Weldon's shoulder.

"Don't move, any o' you three. Don't turn around. I got two guns. You're all covered."

"Shorty" Sutherland, who was to have accompanied Mournful in the fight between Mournful and Weldon, was, Mournful saw, doing his stuff. Mournful had a moment of amazement. Then his head cleared. Mystery cer'nly was pilin' up on mystery here. There had been the blow from Weldon. Then Bob Danforth had held Mournful up. Now Shorty was holdin' up the hull outfit. The mess was gettin' thick an' soupy.

SHORTY SUTHERLAND was as old a man as Mournful. He had been with Danforth for a long time. He was a grave, sometimes gloomy, man. You couldn't cross him when he had set his heart on anything, Mournful knew. Now he had set his heart on having Mournful and the Danforths do his bidding. The three stood still.

"You an' your son drop your guns, Mr. Danforth," Shorty ordered.

They dropped their guns.

"Hands up," Shorty said.

When the trio had elevated their hands, Shorty roared to the other men to pile out. Some of them had been wakened by the din, and all rolled out of their bunks. They clustered behind Shorty.

"I been noticin' signs of softness in this outfit ever since Bob Danforth come here an' got married," Shorty announced. "I ain't sayin' a word against Bob Danforth. He's a good man as men go, but you c'n carry politeness an' cheer too damn' far. Mournful Martin has took a wallop on the jaw an' a pet name. Weldon won't apologize. What th' hell! Bob an' Mr. Danforth comes in here an' puts a gun on Mournful an' tells Mournful to wake Weldon. Does Mournful turn servant for the man that insulted him? Not while I c'n snake a gun." Shorty waggled his gun at the old man. "We didn't do things this a way in the ol' days, Mr. Danforth," he bitterly concluded.

"You don't understand, Shorty," Danforth said. "You——"

"I ain't gonna listen to no argument," Shorty interrupted. "Argument never gits a man no place. The champeen argufier of the hull world is right here—Mournful Martin. What has his arguments ever got him? Nothin', by Heaven, 'cept fights that never landed him no place, though them fights helped plenty other people. Mournful Martin has arranged a show-down with Weldon. We're gonna have that show-down."

Weldon had awakened, and he now slipped from his bunk and stood up.

"What's comin' off?" he asked.

Shorty explained.

"Why, nobody don't need to interfere in this business," Weldon stated. "I got a date with Martin. I aim to keep it.

"Bob Danforth is sayin' it for you," Shorty said. He glanced over his shoulder at the men. "How you fellas linin' up?" he asked.

"Why, Mournful is entitled to his chance at Weldon," a man answered and the others murmured assent.

"Mournful," said Shorty, "you c'n take Weldon all by yourself. You an' him c'n ride. There ain't a man here, in spite of all your foolishness an' your thinkin' too much of yourself, but what knows you'll give the kid a square deal. Weldon, get your clothes on."

While Weldon dressed, other men slipped into clothing. Shorty asked one of these to get horses for Mournful and Weldon. By the time Weldon was ready the horses were outside. Shorty ordered the two Danforths to stand aside and he got Weldon's belt and gun and handed them to Mournful.

"He slugged you an' called you names, Mournful," Shorty said. "You c'n give him his gun when you get him out on the flat." He faced Weldon briefly. "You c'n see how things stacks up, kid," he went on. "Mournful has got a repertation. You've throwed your repertation away by your actions. You've pulled some of the rawest stuff that ever come under my notice, an' I've noticed quite a few things in my lifetime."

"You don't hear me kickin', do you?" Weldon snapped.

"What in the hell is on your mind?" Shorty demanded. "You ain't actin' natcherl. You oughta know you ain't got no chance with Mournful. You might jest as well take your own gun an' stick a bullet inta one of these here vital parts as to ride with Mournful. But you gotta ride 'less you apologize here an' now. The repertation of this here outfit has gotta be upheld. Disgraceful goin's-on can't be stood fer."

THEY all saw that Shorty was beginning to weaken a little. He didn't want to force Weldon to his death, determined though he was to act according to the code which had governed his long life on the range. He held it to be a shameful thing for one man to interfere in the just quarrel of another man, as the Danforths had interfered in Mournful's quarrel. Sufferin' Judas, what would the cow country come to if a whippersnapper like Weldon could punch and curse an ol'-timer like Mournful? The ol'-timer angle appealed to Shorty. Ol'-timers, in his opinion, were the salt of the earth.

Weldon was silent. He moved a little so that he commanded a clear view of Shorty and the other men. As he looked at Shorty, his gaze was icy. At last he spoke.

"I've got a chance with Martin. An' I'm takin' all the chance there is. That blowhard don't bear no charmed life, does he? I got a trigger finger, ain't I? He'll never git an apology from me as long as I live."

"Which," said Shorty, "won't be long. Get your gun, Mournful."

Mournful had been having a rather strenuous mental time. It was pretty tough to make him decide between these men with whom he had worked and played and the old man whom he admired beyond any man in the world. He had Weldon's gun. He could easily cover Shorty and take Shorty's gun. He was tempted to do it.

"I don't know where my gun is," he told Shorty. "It was gone when Bob woke me up."

"Where's Mournful's gun, Bob Danforth?" Shorty sharply demanded.

"Find it for yourself," Bob retorted.

Bob Danforth was still on trial with all those men. He had come here so recently that the men hadn't got him completely sized up. So far, they conceded, he had seemed all man, but you never could tell. Those men didn't make snap judgment. Time was needed to permit them fully to accept any man. They were generous, but they were not sudden in their likings. They had seen too much of human weakness, especially in unexpected places.

The murmur that rose among them indicated that they didn't like Bob Dan-

forth's retort. They had elected to back up Shorty. They would now back him, right or wrong, to the limit. Some of them moved over to their bunks and got their guns. Old Danforth observed that. With a little sigh of regret, he turned to his son.

"Give Mournful his gun," he said. "The boys has decided. We can't do nothin'."

"Men," Bob said in a low voice, "let me explain this whole business to you. I——"

"In a case like this explanations ain't worth a damn," Shorty interrupted. "Explanations would on'y mix us up. We got one clean-cut thing here: Either Weldon apologizes to Mournful or he don't."

"Fer Heaven's sake, apologize, Weldon," old Danforth pleaded.

"Not me!" Weldon ground out.

"But there's somethin' you don't know about," Danforth said. "We can give——"

"I've give Martin grounds for a fight," Weldon said. "I done it on purpose. I aim to put a bullet inta him. Who the hell is this Mournful Martin anyway? Is he a fella we all gotta bow down to, jest because he has pulled a lotta grand-stand stuff in the past? He ain't no better'n anybody else. Come on, Martin. Let's get goin'. The sooner this thing is finished the better."

Under Shorty's watchful eyes Bob had walked to the end of the bunk house and he now came back with Mournful's belt and gun. Mournful put on the belt and handed Weldon's belt to him. Weldon put it on. He and Mournful moved to the door. Shorty and three of the other men kept them covered.

Mournful reached the door.

"Mournful!"

Old Danforth spat out the word. Mournful stopped, his head bent as he listened.

"Mournful, I've give you a lotta leeway sence I've knowed you," Danforth said. "I'm askin' a favor of you now. Don't take Weldon with you. Leave him here with me. I'll bring him to his senses. You go on to town. Stay there for a week. Have some fun. Let your head clear. I'm askin' a favor of you, Mournful."

Mournful would have given almost anything to grant that request. He couldn't grant it. He admired and liked Danforth. His liking for Bob Danforth was growing. But essentially he was one of these other men. He was a cow-puncher—no more. The fundamentals of his life were hooked up with the fundamentals of theirs. They herded cows and they branded cows. They rode abroad in all kinds of weather. They took what came. Theirs was a common life, theirs, generally, a common fate. He had to stick with them.

Mournful therefore merely glanced over his shoulder and shook his head. The men accepted that negation in a profound silence of approval.

Anger flared up in Mournful as he and Weldon mounted. Mournful could again feel Weldon's blow. In fact his jaw was sore from it. He could hear those burning words which Weldon had applied to him. And again Weldon would not apologize. Well, he guessed Weldon would have to take what was coming to him. He would get every chance. Mournful could do no more.

THERE was a continued silence among the men as Mournful and Weldon rode away. The two riders followed the road for a while and then Mournful turned off across the flat. The sun was well up now and its light flooded across the land as far as Mournful could see. He lifted himself in his saddle and glanced at Weldon as he took a deep breath of the keen air.

Weldon was slumped in his saddle. His young face was twisted. It had a

hard and bitter look. Suddenly Mournful was sorry for him. He didn't want to leave Weldon's lifeless body lying in the sand. What if Weldon had punched him, called him a rotten name? Young people was likely to be hasty. They didn't see straight. Mebbe if he could get at the bottom of this thing now.

"Boy," he said, "what's been bitin' you? What'd you punch me for, call me that name? I ain't never done nothin' to you. If you was to set me right on this stuff, I might——"

A bark of laughter came from Weldon.

"Weakenin', are you, blowhard?"

"Why, you an' me has allus got along together pretty good, Weldon," Mournful went on. "What's happened to you all of a sudden?"

"Did we come out here to talk or to fight?" Weldon demanded. "You want me to call you that name again? I will!"

In speaking Weldon turned his head to look at Mournful. The angle of his jaw was clean-cut. A man could smash a blow into the angle of that jaw. Mournful wondered just how hard he could hit the stubborn Weldon there. As hard, he was sure, as Weldon had hit him. Mebbe a little harder. The prospect became inviting. The idea grew.

By Heaven, Weldon had called him a blowhard. He had rated him about as a pet calf around the ranch. It'd be pleasant to take some of that outa Weldon. It'd be right to make Weldon disclose what was bitin' him. Mournful was cheered. The ripple which, with him, passed for a smile crossed his lips. He suddenly drew his gun and loosely pointed it at Weldon.

"Gimme your gun," he ordered.

Weldon's eyes went so wide that the brown swam in the white.

"Why, you dirty coward," he cried.

"I'm on'y livin' up to your notion of me," Mournful said. "Gimme your gun!"

"I won't!"

"I'll stick a bullet inta you. I'm that kind of a fella, you know."

Weldon lifted his hands. His opinion of Mournful was so low that he needed no convincing that Mournful would indeed shoot him. However, he wouldn't hand over his gun to Mournful. Mournful thereupon plucked out the gun. Slipping to the ground he walked away twenty feet and put the gun with his own down on the sand.

"Come on down, Weldon," he ordered. "Drag your reins. If you're as good a man as you claim to be, we may be here for some time."

Astonishment gripping him now, Weldon slid from his horse and dragged his reins.

"Come over here," Mournful said.

He walked away from the horses for twenty feet in the direction opposite that in which he had gone when he had got rid of the guns. Turning then, he faced Weldon.

"Stick up your hands, Weldon," he said.

"Like hell I will!"

"You can't fight with 'em down," Mournful pointed out.

"Oh," said Weldon, "you lost your nerve about gun whippin' me, did you?"

"Yep. Get ready. I'm comin'."

Mournful went to him as soon as he had got his guard up. Due to his long reach, Mournful was able immediately to land a blow on that angle of Weldon's jaw. The blow staggered Weldon. Before he could recover, Mournful had smashed him again. Weldon had a rolling moment and then he dropped to the sand as if his body had been weighted. He lay still.

MOURNFUL squatted far apart from him and rolled a cigarette. He didn't know how long it would take, but he was going to have an explanation and an apology from Weldon. He had given Weldon's life back

to him. He guessed explanation and apology were due.

By the time Mournful had smoked his cigarette, Weldon opened his eyes and lifted his head. Presently he sat up.

"Take your gun an' gimme mine, you sucker," he whispered. "I ain't no match fer you this way."

"You knocked me flat once," Mournful said. "Try again."

Weldon got to his feet. Again they faced each other. Mournful peppered Weldon with rights and lefts, keeping Weldon away from him. One of Weldon's eyes became discolored and there were flecks of blood on his lips. Yet he circled and kept trying to get past Mournful's long arms. He succeeded at last and his right fist banged Mournful on the nose. Blood spurted. His nose, Mournful was aware, would swell. Oh, well, that didn't matter. A swollen nose wouldn't make him any homelier than he was.

However, he had no welcome for further punches, and he closed with Weldon, his long arms wrapping themselves about Weldon's body. He lifted the younger man, carried him to a hip, broke Weldon's hold, and slammed him down. Before Weldon could rise, he picked him up, brought him to his knees, and then he tightly gripped his throat with his left hand.

Weldon's face was just beneath Mournful's raised right fist. With a slashing blow he could terribly damage that face. But suddenly disgust took hold of him. Weldon was already rather severely hurt. Mournful couldn't strike him as he knelt there helpless. Mournful suddenly pushed Weldon from him and Weldon fell on his side. For a little his wind had been shut off and he lay there gasping.

And then there was the sound of beating hoofs behind Mournful. He turned his head. First he saw a dust cloud, and then as the horses came to a bit of harder going, a bunch of riders broke from the settling cloud. Well, the hull damn' Three D outfit was comin' hell-fer-leather.

Mournful stared. He gasped. In the forefront of the riders was Mrs. Lake. He couldn't be mistaken about her. The sun glinted on her bright hair. Her smaller body was crouched in the saddle. She was riding as Mournful had not frequently seen a woman ride.

The riders swept up to Mournful. Mrs. Lake spun her horse and slipped from the saddle. For an instant she stood staring at Weldon.

"Have you killed him, Mr. Martin?" she presently wailed.

"Not entire, ma'am," Mournful answered. "I think there's still a spark of life in him."

The Danforths and the other men dismounted and crowded up. Mournful held them back with long arms outthrust.

"Give him air," he ordered. "Him an' me was jest tradin' wallops. We thought we'd get up a little sweat afore we used our guns."

"Has he apologized, fella?" Shorty Sutherland asked.

"Not yet."

"Huh," said Shorty, "it takes a hell of a long time to teach that boy anything. Well, we got time."

MEANWHILE Mrs. Lake had passed Mournful. She knelt beside Weldon and raised his head and held it against her. Weldon fidgeted.

"Lie still," Mrs. Lake commanded.

Weldon lay still. She dabbed at his lips and eye with a handkerchief.

"I c'n get up," Weldon said presently.

She released him and he rose.

"I'm ready, Martin," he said.

"Be still!" Mrs. Lake ordered. "Mr. Martin, may I have a word apart with you?"

Mournful wasn't so sure about that. This was a new Mrs. Lake. She was

still beautiful. She was still a swell lady in every way. But wasn't she jest a little bit bossy? She had given her orders to Weldon and Weldon had obeyed them. Goin' apart with her, when a fella remembered how she had been last night, might not result in any good.

"Please, Mr. Martin," said Mrs. Lake.

"Go on, Mournful," old Danforth said. "Mrs. Lake c'n straighten you out."

"Oh, am I crooked?" Mournful asked as he followed Mrs. Lake.

"Mr. Martin," Mrs. Lake asked, "are you in love with me?"

Mournful didn't need, as he said, a ton of brick to fall on him to make him tumble. He reckoned he knew where Mrs. Lake's heart lay.

"No ma'am," he answered promptly.

"I thought you were," she said.

"Well, ma'am," said Mournful, and for once in his life he blushed, "I did think sev'rul times that it'd be kinda nice if you an' me was spliced. A man gits notions like them ever' so often, y' know."

"But it isn't going to hurt you too terribly if I——"

"Marry Weldon? No, ma'am. I like you. I'll miss you. But I reckon I'll keep right on eatin' three meals a day."

"I'd have married you, Mr. Martin, if you'd wanted me," Mrs. Lake said. "You did everything for me. You set me free. You restored me to what I was before I met that man, Lake. I'm grateful to you."

"It was all gratitood, then?" Mournful asked.

"I like you," she declared. "I knew I could depend upon you."

"But you like Weldon better. Well, that's all right. Why didn't Weldon tell me an' save all this fuss?"

"Why, I had to know about you first. I felt I had to give you first chance."

"Gosh," Mournful breathed, "women are queer, ain't they?"

"I suppose they are," Mrs. Lake agreed. "Weldon asked me to marry him. I told him I thought I was going to marry you. You seemed to like me and you were so lonely."

"Lonely? Why, I ain't a lonely man, ma'am. I got lotsa friends." He looked back at Weldon. "Ma'am, there's jest one kink here that ain't gonna be so easy to straighten out. Weldon owes me an apology. Mebbe I could get along without it an' keep on livin', but Shorty Sutherland has demanded it. An' when Shorty gits his mind made up, it ain't so easy fer somebody to unmake it. He's a stubborn kind of an ol' fella. Them ol' fellas gits set in their ways. They ain't like you an' me—kinda changeable."

MRS. LAKE promptly clasped one of Mournful's hands. She started to lead him back to the group. By gosh, her hand was soft and warm! Mournful looked down at her shining head, a foot below his. Nice hair, that. He could grab her, hop his horse, and bear her away. He dimly recalled that that was the way hemen done in olden times.

But, hell, she didn't want to go with him. She wanted to go with young Weldon, that jealous, onreasonin' fool. Once more youth was on the prod, an' once again an ol'-timer hadda high-tail fer shelter.

Mrs. Lake, still clasping Mournful's hand, faced Weldon.

"Tommy," she said, "you owe Mr. Martin an apology. You must owe him an apology, for he says you do. Are you going to apologize?"

Mrs. Lake's tone was sharp. Her eyes, Mournful perceived as he stepped back and freed her hand, were glowing. Weldon met her gaze briefly. Then his eyes wandered to Mournful's face.

"'Pologize," he mumbled miserably. "I had you wrong—if Mrs. Lake says so."

He and Mrs. Lake went to their horses. Mournful recovered Weldon's gun and handed it to him. The outfit reluctantly let Weldon and Mrs. Lake ride away.

"I reckon you paid him back with interest, didn't you, Mournful?" Shorty Sutherland asked.

"It was a misunderstandin'," Mournful said. "I'm sorry I hit him. I 'pologize right now—to the four winds of heaven."

"I had to get Mrs. Lake to ride with me to stop a fight," said old Danforth warmly. "I should have used the barrel of my gun on the top of your thick skull, Mournful. Well, it's settled now. Weldon and Mrs. Lake will be leavin' in the mornin'. Mrs. Lake's father has a wheat farm beyond the mountains. That's where Lake took her from. She says she has gotta go back there. Home of her girlhood—happy hours. All that sort of thing."

"Weldon is turnin' wheat farmer?" Mournful, aghast, asked.

"That's what's in the book."

"Mr. Danforth," Mournful asked, "you got 'bout ten dollars?"

"Yes."

"Give it to me," Mournful said. "I'm goin' to town by nobody's leave. I'll be back when the ten is gone. I wanta skin down a few poker hands an' see if that faro bank is as crooked as usual."

Danforth handed him a bill. He knew that Mournful wanted to be away till Mrs. Lake should have gone. The long fella was deeper'n most men thought.

Mournful hopped his horse and started for town.

A wheat farmer! Heaven above, that was a fate fer a puncher! Plowin' them hills. Breathin' their blown dust. Runnin' a combine. Sacks o' wheat—sacks, an' sacks, an' sacks o' wheat! A man'd have a nightmare about furrows, an' combines, an' sacks o' wheat.

"Close call fer me," said Mournful Martin. "Mrs. Lake is a nice lady. I'll never go back o' that. But I kinda think she is mebbe a little bit set in her ways."

A SUBMARINE RESCUE CHAMBER

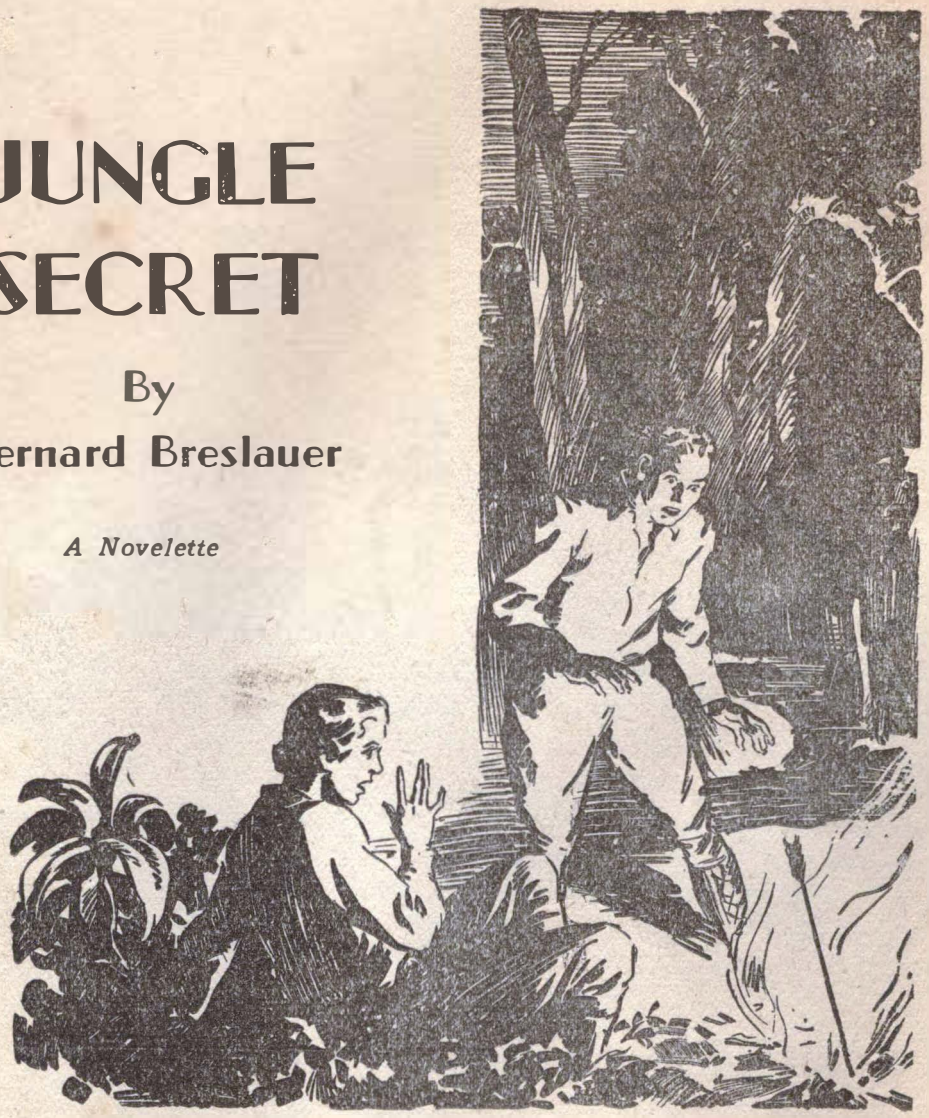
THE United States navy is making a series of experiments at various navy yards in a try-out of a new device, called a submarine rescue chamber, which is designed to bring crews from sunken submarines to the surface without injury. The new invention is a steel, pear-shaped chamber, divided into two compartments, which rises by its own buoyancy. It is fitted over the escape hatch of a submarine, and from six to ten men can ascend at one time.

The chamber is divided into two compartments. A cable from the lower chamber is attached to the sunken submarine by a diver before it is lowered into the water. The lower chamber is flooded by an operator located in the upper chamber; this operator also works the winch which pulls the chamber down. Air pressure from above empties the lower compartment when it is at the escape hatch of the submarine. The rescued enter through the lower compartment; then the bottom of the lower compartment is opened and, as the cable is unwound, pressure forces the chamber to the surface.

JUNGLE SECRET

By Bernard Breslauer

A Novelette



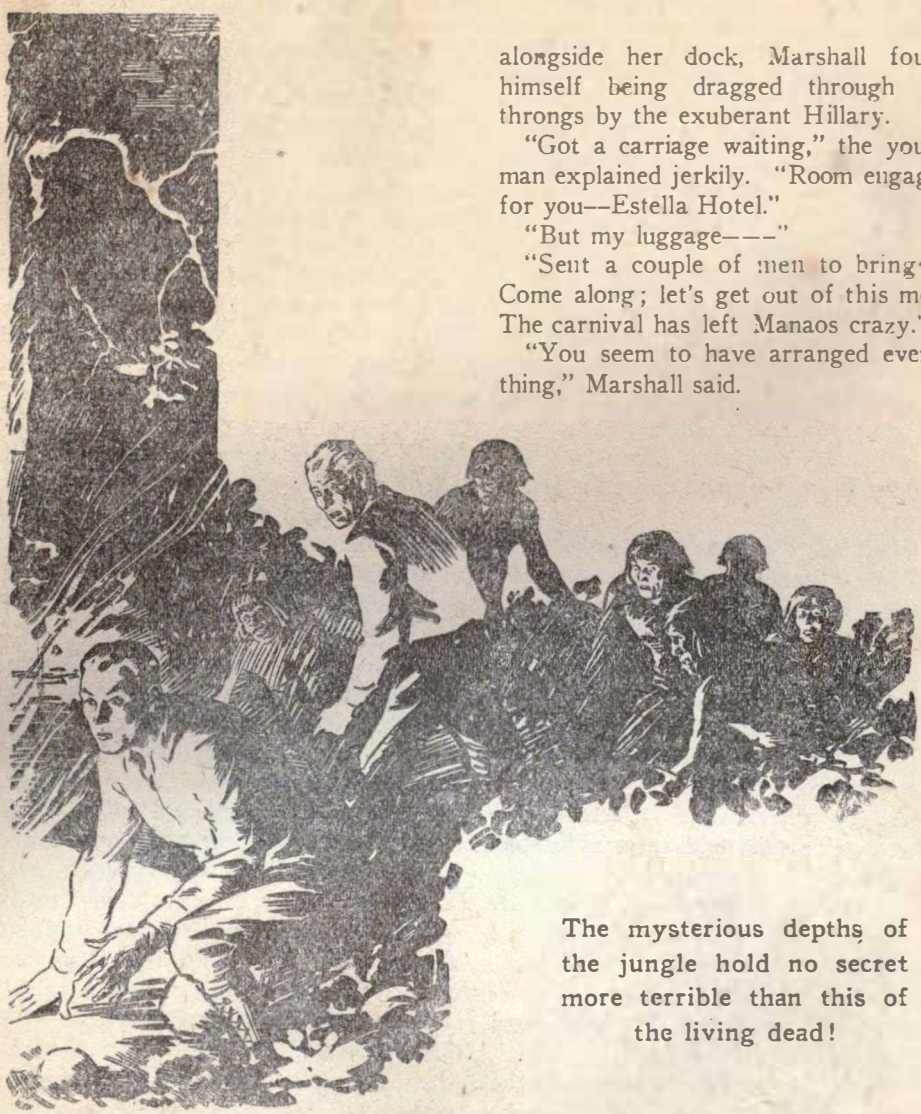
CHAPTER I.

AN INTERESTING DISCUSSION.

THE old cargo boat arrived at the jungle town of Manaos after a long struggle up the Amazon, puffing and fretting like an overstuffed goose and stubbornly refusing to approach her dock. A flaming Brazilian sunset lit up the town and the spectators on shore. It was carnival time in Manaos and the wine was flowing freely.

On the deck of the obstinate boat stood its only passenger, a tall, lean, unsmiling American who was smoking a very pungent *cigarillo*. He wore a suit of creamy pongee, immaculate because he had just slipped into it. And though his attire appeared new to the tropics, his strong, shaven face, shaded by a pith helmet, bore the bronze tint of many equatorial seasons.

Suddenly, out of the bedlam on land a clear, English-speaking voice cheerily shouted:



The mysterious depths of the jungle hold no secret more terrible than this of the living dead!

"Hello there, Banga Pu! How about jumping ashore?"

Banga Pu! Kenneth Marshall gave a slight start and peered down into the crowds with swift, eager eyes. Who was it that called him by his native name —Banga Pu—White Friend? He discerned the slim figure of a young man clad in white and recognized Philip Hillary, the Manaos representative of the American-Amazon Rubber Syndicate.

Twenty minutes later, when at last the river boat had come to a panting stop alongside her dock, Marshall found himself being dragged through the throngs by the exuberant Hillary.

"Got a carriage waiting," the young man explained jerkily. "Room engaged for you—Estella Hotel."

"But my luggage———"

"Sent a couple of men to bring it. Come along; let's get out of this mob. The carnival has left Manaos crazy."

"You seem to have arranged everything," Marshall said.

"Oh, plenty for you to do!" Hillary assured him. "Know anything about the job you're tackling?"

"Only what Cullin cabled me. He said I'd get details from you."

Sudden tropic night had overwhelmed the brief twilight. It lay upon the Amazon country like a caress, infinitely soft. But the town was alive and raucous. Marshall was aware of an irritation and dissatisfaction within him. Without knowing why, he was sorry that he had come.

"Years ago," he murmured, "Manaos was a pitiful group of thatch hovels—a dirty little village. Look at it now. Electric tramways, an opera house, public buildings—and noise!"

"Rubber did it," said Hillary. "Rubber brought wealth. Your job, old man; get more rubber."

Marshall leaned back, smiling oddly. "Suppose you tell me more about this job of mine."

"Little to tell—much to do. Know the story of the Syndicate's last expedition?"

"Vaguely. I was in Argentine at the time."

"Well, the Syndicate sent a party up the Rio Negro. Explored for rubber tracts. Prodded here and there without success. Finally started up the Rio Pajo. Left civilization behind—passed two plantations—plunged into unknown territory. Far up this Rio Pajo they found rubber. So far so good. But the discovery cost them four men. Attacked by natives and driven downstream. Returned with news of rubber and defeat. Sent two other expeditions up the Pajo. No headway. Told Cullin that if any man can pacify that country, it's you. Banga Pu didn't get his name for nothing."

"Thanks," muttered Marshall, and sank into silent meditation.

"Listen, Banga Pu, do you roam the jungle so that you can write books about it or do you write the books so that you can roam the jungle?"

"Damned if I know. I'm lonely. Nothing to hang onto. No family. Can't settle down. Thinking of quitting."

"What?"

"Yes." Marshall's jaw hardened. "Why not? I'm tired of it. Rubber, always more rubber. What for? What do I care if the world gets more rubber or not. There's too much of it anyway. I came to tell you that I'm not going in."

"What?"

"Don't fire that word at me as though I've just spoken blasphemy. I said I'm not going in. I'm through. Leave the natives alone, I say. Live and let live. Rubber be damned."

"I see," said Hillary softly.

But to himself he said, "Maybe when he's had a wash and gets a square meal in him, he'll feel different. He doesn't seem to be himself to-night. I'd better humor him. Strange cuss!"

WHEN they reached the hotel, Marshall went at once to his room and Hillary departed for the offices of the Syndicate.

Marshall gazed into the mirror over the chest of drawers. He shook his head.

"What a life," he meditated. "Nothing to do, no place to go. At loose ends. Maybe I ought to go in after all. No. I'm sick of playing Banga Pu to Indians if all it means is that some rubber baron three thousand miles away turns out a couple of million more automobile tires than the people can use. White men down here get their throats cut so that white men up there can cut the financial throats of their competitors. Where do I rate in this game? I don't even own an automobile. All I'm interested in is the way the natives live. I'm damned if I ever again stir a foot farther up the Amazon than I am now."

And punctuating his thought, Marshall brought his clenched fist down on the bureau.

The knock was echoed by a rapping on the door.

"Hello," he called. "Come in."

The knock came again.

He strode to the door and opened it. He was startled.

For, standing at the threshold, in a white frock whose utter simplicity accentuated the slim mold of her figure, stood an extraordinarily attractive girl.

She said nothing in reply to his surprised look. Instead, in one comprehensive glance, she seemed to look into him, to see clear through him and to appraise him, to convey the impression to him that she needed him.

"I am Iris Duvanel," she said at last in a low, pleasant, but slightly agitated voice. "You are Kenneth Marshall, I know. You are going up the River Pajo on an expedition. I have come to ask you please to take me along."

"Come in, please," Marshall replied, recovering his poise. "Be seated. Excuse me if I tell you that your request is a strange one. Incidentally, how do you know I am going up the Pajo?"

"Mr. Hillary told me. Everybody knows it."

"Everybody but myself. I am not going."

If this was a ruse of Hillary's, he thought, this ringing in a woman to persuade him to do what he had now definitely decided not to do, it wouldn't work. But he was troubled by the girl's sudden pallor. The disappointment in her eyes seemed genuine. He felt unreasonably angry and annoyed, yet attracted.

"Why do you want to go into the Indian country?" he asked.

"Oh, I don't. I want to go only as far as the second plantation on the river. I have to go. And I'd rather go with your expedition than trust myself to any *caboclos* I could hire. I want to go to the plantation of Cyrus Duvanel. I want to go that far with you. I must."

"Very well," snapped Marshall. "You seem bent on it and I can't somehow bring myself to refuse you. Hillary may have put you up to this to get me started. If he did, you're a mighty fine actress. But it won't work. Yes, I'll take you. I'll take the chance that your need is genuine, as it seems to be. But I'll take you only as far as that plantation. I have nothing better to do at the moment anyway. I'm through learning about Indians and rubber"—a smile curled his grim lips and brought forth an answering small smile from her—"I may as well start learning about women."

"Thank you." She grasped his hand, pressed it warmly, and was gone.

"Now what the devil made me give in so easily," Marshall muttered, resuming his unpacking.

Another knock sounded on the door.

Marshall admitted the proprietor of the hotel, a corpulent little Spaniard with the cherubic, amiable face of a babe. He brought a message in Portuguese which he clarified with ample gestures.

"There is a gentleman, senhor, who is most desirous of seeing you. All day he had been awaiting your arrival. And now he begs the privilege of coming to your room; for a discussion, he says, which is of the utmost importance to yourself, senhor."

Marshall replied to the ornamental flow of words with a simple: "Who is he?"

"It is the Dom Agosto Luis da Sylva y Ridoza!"

"And who is Dom Agosto?"

"Why, senhor, Dom Agosto is the owner of a great plantation on the Rio Pajo!"

"Really," thought Marshall, "the Rio Pajo seems to have entered very much into my life in the last ten minutes." Aloud he said, "Ask him to come up."

DOM AGOSTO was the possessor of a charm which, in its suavity and easy grace, seemed almost Oriental. He accepted the chair to which Marshall pointed as though it were a priceless gift and disposed himself in it as if it were a cushioned divan.

A big, fleshy man in his early forties, with a tremendous mass of raven-black hair that shone lustrously, he created the impression of Herculean strength enslaved by tropical lassitude. His

every move was languid, even lazy. His smile itself, revealing perfect teeth, seemed the result of grudging effort. He was wearing impeccable gray clothes which must have been donned in honor of the carnival. Around his waist was bound a vivid scarlet sash into which dipped the tips of a long, narrow necktie. And in his lap he fondled a beautiful sombrero from whose brim dripped a galaxy of sparkling silver spangles.

"It is a pleasure," he began, perhaps facetiously, "to meet a gentleman who has won so eminent a reputation as a student of Indian life."

"Thank you," said Marshall shortly, again aware of that irritation he had felt earlier in the evening. "You wished to discuss something with me, Dom Agosto?"

The planter chuckled so that his whole body shook. "You Americanos! Always jumping straight to business! Always hurried! You will have a *cigarillo,* senhor?"

Marshall refused courteously, but with a trace of impatience. He did not like this visitor. And he was hungry.

"We will come to the point," conceded the caller; but he paused long enough to light his *cigarillo* with deliberate care. When he had blown a cloud of smoke to the ceiling, he went on, "You know, of course, that I have a plantation on the Rio Pajo?"

"Yes."

"*Si,* there are two of us white men settled there." Dom Agosto hesitated, and his brows contracted slightly. "Senhor Marshall, you intend to lead an expedition up the Pajo—no? To try to make friends of those savages?"

"May I ask who told you?"

"Ah, it is not a secret. People in Manaos have been talking of it." Dom Agosto leaned forward, his eyes oddly brilliant as he narrowed them. "Senhor," he said quickly, "I have traveled into the city to advise you not to go!"

"Why not?" Marshall asked sharply.

"Because it is useless! Those savages, senhor, cannot be made friends. No! They are like jaguars—fierce and untamable! They do not come out of their territory and they allow nobody to come into it."

"That's fair enough. Do you know them?"

"I? *Dio,* no! How can I know them? To know them is to die!"

"Then," Marshall asked, "how can you speak so positively of their character?"

Dom Agosto frowned and wet his lips before he replied.

"I know them only through what they have done. When the American-Amazon Rubber Syndicate sent its other expeditions up the Pajo, the men passed my plantation. In truth, senhor, they did me the honor of spending the night as my guests. And I saw them again when they returned; heard the terrible tales of their experiences. The first group of explorers lost four men. But certainly you know that? Yes. And the others, too, were driven back; without loss, but not without wounds!"

"Their failures," Kenneth Marshall said evenly, "don't make the task an impossibility."

A QUEER smile spread over Dom Agosto's features; deep under that smile, Marshall thought, lurked a touch of sarcasm.

"I know, senhor, that you have done with the Indians what others could not do. You are Banga Pu to many of the Nhambiquaras—their White Friend. I know. But the men who preceded you up the Pajo were not fools. And they were repulsed!"

Quite suddenly Kenneth Marshall rose from his chair.

"Dom Agosto," he said, "why have you come to Manaos to warn me?"

"Eh? Warn——"

"Come! Why don't you want me to go up the Pajo?"

As though whipped by sudden resolution the Brazilian jerked the little cigar from his lips and sat erect. It was the first energetic movement he had shown.

"Good!" he said. "You want candor, senhor, and candor you shall have. We on the Rio Pajo don't want those Indians troubled!"

"Why not?"

"They are too close to us. Two-three days up the river, and one touches their territory. Until now we have never been molested by them because we have been content to remain on our own land. We didn't go to them, and they didn't come to us. But if white men will invade their land again and again, even after they have warned white men away——"

"You think," interrupted Marshall, "that in reprisal they will swarm downstream to attack the white man's land, eh? You think they will attack your plantations."

"Exactly!"

So eagerly did Dom Agosto leap to Marshall's conclusion that the American vaguely thought of a fish rising to the bait. He gave no sign of his thought. "As I view it," he said, "the safety of your plantations on the Pajo depends upon the good will of those savages. It's my job to go up and insure that good will forever. Why should you object? I shall be doing you a favor."

"But if you fail!" the Brazilian cried. "If you fail? They may pursue you downstream and wipe out our holdings!"

"Dom Agosto," said Marshall suddenly, with a harsh laugh. "I am not going on the expedition."

"Eh? You have been playing with me, I see. Ha, ha. You delight me, senhor. Splendid. So I have persuaded you, after all. Thank you, senhor!"

"I am going only part way up the Pajo," Marshall continued in even tones.

"Eh? What is that!"

"Surely you can have no objection to my going as far as the plantations?"

The Brazilian puffed rapidly on his *cigarillo*. Then he laughed, and Marshall thought he detected a forced tone in the mirth. "No, senhor. No objection at all. Of course not. But may I ask what the purpose of such a trip is?"

"There you overstep the bounds, Dom Agosto," Marshall replied.

"Your pardon, senhor. I was simply curious to know whether you would touch my plantation so that I might be ready to entertain you there."

"Thank you."

In the midst of the short, ensuing silence Hillary entered without the ceremony of knocking. He had come to announce that dinner had been waiting for fifteen minutes.

"Oh, I beg your pardon," he apologized, seeing the Brazilian. "Didn't know I was intruding."

"Not at all," Marshall assured him. "Dom Agosto and I have just finished our chat. We've had an interesting discussion."

Dom Agosto rose as if the act sapped all his strength. He shook his head.

"Senhor Marshall," he said, "has just told me that the expedition is canceled, but that he is going up the Pajo for a brief trip. I am delighted. Good night, gentlemen."

Marshall combed his hair. "I say, Hillary," he said, "did the Dom look as delighted as he sounded?"

"I don't get you."

"Oh, it's nothing. I only feel like a mangy hound on the scent of something without a meaning."

CHAPTER II.

UNUSUAL QUEST.

OVER the dinner, after giving Hillary the gist of his conversations with his two unexpected callers, Marshall said:

"I'm certain the man had some hidden reason for discouraging the expedition.

He journeyed into Manaos expressly to do it."

"Don't know why," murmured Hillary. "Unless, of course, he doesn't want the American-Rubber Syndicate to get a foothold in that territory. Unless the planters on the Pajo—the Dom and Duvanel—want that rubber for themselves."

"Know anything about Duvanel."

"No. Nobody seems to, either. Well, Kenneth, I never thought it of you."

"Thought what?"

"That you'd side in with a woman you had never seen before in your life and run out on me, your old and I hope best friend.

"So far as rubber is concerned, I'm through. So far as women are concerned, I've only just begun."

Marshall's tone was ironic and he strove to read in his friend's face some hint of collusion between himself and the girl. But Hillary's face showed nothing but natural disappointment at their not going on the expedition.

"Strange," said Marshall, "but when I told the Dom that the expedition was off, his relief didn't last long. As soon as I mentioned my intention to take a jaunt up to the plantations he seemed even more alarmed than at first, when only the expedition to the Indians was under a discussion. I call that queer. Who is this Iris Duvanel, by the way? According to her, you know her."

"I do, slightly. She came to Manaos with an elderly American couple, Mr. and Mrs. Charles Mordane. The man arrived sick. The Amazon heat was too much for him. He's been confined to his bed ever since he got here."

"I don't suppose you know why they came."

"Didn't have the faintest idea until you mentioned the Duvanel plantation. Duvanel must be Dom Agosto's neighbor on the Pajo. But let's forget all that for the time being and see what's left of the carnival."

For an hour they wandered among the hilarious throngs, under arches of paper lanterns that quite obliterated the starry beauty of the tropical skies. Girls threw flowers into their faces, mocked them when they smilingly declined invitations to a chase. They were almost overthrown by an intoxicated group of young men who plunged wildly out of a wine shop, shouting with all the strength of their lungs. And then, when they were getting ready to retrace their steps to the hotel something grim, and real, and altogether without the carnival spirit happened.

They were moving along a narrow, cheerless street. The only illumination fell from the stars. Turning crookedly back toward the heart of the city, the street was altogether deserted. Marshall and Hillary, exhausted after the hot day, walked along slowly.

They saw, suddenly, three men ahead of them; and their ragged attire proclaimed them, even at a distance, to be members of that flotsam half-breed class that drifts over Brazil as idly as seaweed on a calm sea.

With the silence of shadows the three figures vanished around a corner. Neither Marshall nor Hillary gave them a second thought.

BUT when they reached the corner, Hillary suddenly cried out a warning. Marshall, galvanized into action at once, dove forward as though he were making a tackle in a game of football.

For the three men, snarling something, had sprung out of the darkness at them! And each of them raised a cruelly slender knife!

The foremost of the attackers, clipped by Marshall's tackle, sprawled backward into the thick dust of the roadway, his knife hurtling away from him, the breath pounded out of his body.

At the same moment Philip Hillary's fist crashed full into the face of the

second assailant—a brutal smash with all the instinct of self-preservation back of it. The man staggered back against the wall, a groan escaping him. Blood gushed from his nose. He lifted his arm to deliver a knife-thrust, but the strength had gone out of him and his judgment of distance was destroyed.

The third half-breed, seeing the unexpected plight of his companions, hesitated in fear. Alone, he had no desire to leap upon these two white men. Marshall sprang for him. He gasped, spun around, and dashed off. For a hundred yards Marshall raced after him. But the naked, panting half-breed, lashed by terror, outdistanced him. Marshall, suddenly mindful of Hillary, rushed back to the scene of the attack.

"They're gone!" Hillary yelled loudly. "Streaked off like rabbits!"

"Which way?"

"Different ways. No use trying to find them."

Marshall regained his breath. "These streets are supposed to be policed."

"It's the carnival. Nothing is normal."

"That was a close call. Good thing you yelled at me."

"Thugs. We're not the first who've been held up in Manaos this year."

Marshall peered ahead into the darkness. Presently he said in low tones:

"We weren't held up."

"Eh?"

"Those three jumped to kill; not to rob."

"You think so?"

"They tried to murder us."

"But——" Hillary thought swiftly. Then he shook his head decisively. "No. You're wrong. They'd probably have grabbed our throats and held the knives over us until we emptied our pockets. That's the way they do it."

Marshall was unconvinced. In uneasy silence they walked on, glancing cautiously into each side street and keeping to the middle of the roadway.

"If it wasn't to rob us," muttered Hillary, "why should they have wanted to kill us?"

"Who knows?" Marshall answered. "Perhaps another attempt to persuade us not to start up the Pajo."

THE next morning they found Iris Duvanel at breakfast with Mrs. Mordane.

Mrs. Mordane, a plump woman with abundant white hair to whom Marshall was formally presented, appeared profoundly distressed. All the nervousness which had been Miss Duvanel's seemed to have flowed into her. Iris Duvanel smiled brightly at the men.

"I want you to assure Mrs. Mordane," she said, "that my going up the Pajo will be perfectly safe."

Mrs. Mordane interrupted her.

"It isn't that I question Iris's safety as far as the plantation," she exclaimed, her finger tips rapping the table. "It's after she's there! Do you know, Mr. Marshall, that she wants to go to a place full of fever?"

"Fever?" Marshall inquired.

"Yes. The Duvanel plantation is infested with it. They're having a real epidemic among the workers. She has been warned not to come. And I cannot allow her to go!"

"What fever?" Marshall demanded. "Yellow?"

"I don't know. They didn't say. But what difference does it make. I wish you could make Iris understand!"

"I've been inoculated against fever before coming up the Amazon," Iris Duvanel said. "I'm not afraid of that."

"Almost all of us have been inoculated, Miss Duvanel," Marshall answered. "But inoculations don't prevent all the fevers the jungle holds."

"I'll have to risk them."

"Will you be good enough to tell me why?"

"Because I've traveled from New York to Manaos on the chance of—

of——" For the first time she faltered. She finished softly, "Mr. Marshall, the goal is worth the risk."

With positive vehemence Mrs. Mordane interrupted, "Nothing is worth the risk!"

Iris Duvanel lifted her young face. She was flushed. She looked at Marshall accusingly.

"You're hesitating!" she charged.

"I am," he said quietly.

"But you promised me——"

"I didn't know about the fever then."

"Oh, if only you could appreciate the circumstances! I must go!"

"Why not tell me the circumstances?" Marshall suggested. "I don't mean to be overcurious, but I naturally should like to know why you wish me to take you into a fever epidemic."

"Very well," came the reply. "Mr. Marshall, I'm going up the Pajo to find my father!"

"Yes," said Marshall gently. "Go on."

"I have always believed he was dead," the girl went on quickly. "I was brought up by an aunt in New York who told me my father had died twenty years ago. And I never doubted it. He had left me with my aunt when he went down to Brazil. She told me he died the year he arrived there."

"Is the Cyrus Duvanel you mentioned your father?"

"Yes. I never had a hint of the truth until some weeks ago. My aunt died. That was last winter. Then, not long ago, a letter came for her. It was postmarked in Manaos. And I opened it. Mr. Marshall, there was money! And with the money a little note which said simply, 'The usual for Iris.' No signature—nothing else——"

She checked her rising agitation and went on more evenly:

"I knew of no one in Brazil who would have reason to send money for me. No one of our family had ever come here except my father! And—and I wondered if he could be alive! Alive despite what my aunt had always said; alive and sending money for me! Don't you see now why I had to come?"

"Quite natural," said Marshall.

"But my dear friends, Mrs. Mordane and her husband, wouldn't dream of letting me go to the jungle country alone. They—well, they came along. When we arrived, I investigated and I learned that Cyrus Duvanel lives on his plantation up the Pajo. Cyrus Duvanel is my father's name!"

"Yes, go on."

"I should certainly have rushed there immediately if Mr. Mordane hadn't become ill. Now he can't travel and Mrs. Mordane can't leave him, so I would have to go in alone."

"You're not telling of the letter," Mrs. Mordane interposed.

"Yes. When Mr. Mordane fell sick, I sent a runner up to the Duvanel plantation. I hoped my father would come here. But——" She stopped and bit her lip. "But my father answered by runner."

"He told you," Marshall prompted, "that you mustn't come to the plantation because of the fever."

"Yes. And for the same reason he couldn't come to me. But he's alive, Mr. Marshall! My father! And I must go to him. I must. Don't you see? I want to know why I've always been told he was dead. I want to know—oh, a thousand things! I can't go home without seeing him!"

Marshall nodded.

"And if you don't take me," she threatened suddenly, "I'll hire a canoe and some natives and go myself!"

Marshall smiled. "I believe you would," he said. "But there will be no need. You may come with me."

"Then it's decided?" she cried eagerly.

"It's decided."

"And there won't be any more talk about it?"

"No."

Yet Marshall could not help wondering why everybody, for one reason or another, was being dissuaded from voyaging up the Rio Pajo.

CHAPTER III.

A MAN WHO WAS DEAD.

KENNETH MARSHALL'S expedition, ostensibly on behalf of the American-Amazon Rubber Syndicate, was launched one hour after dawn of a dazzlingly clear day.

It started up the Rio Negro slowly, while a hundred early risers who had gathered to watch the departure waved farewell from the shore.

"Good luck, Banga Pu!" a man shouted across the water.

And a woman called. "Take care of my Tormino!"

Marshall held his arm high until the line of dugouts vanished around the first bend of the river, to be engulfed in that vast silence which is the heart of Brazil.

As an exploring expedition, it was neither formidable nor imposing. Yet if Marshall's intention had been to take it into the Indian country, he would not have made it any stronger. More often than not it had been his custom to journey in the Indian country alone. The only white members of the present expedition, with the exception of Iris Duvanel, were Marshall himself, Philip Hillary, and a taciturn, gray-headed old guide who called himself Dutt. He was employed as cook.

In addition to the white travelers, there were twelve native *camaradas* who, stripped to the waist, paddled the six dugouts.

"Don't you think," Hillary had suggested, "that we ought to have a larger crowd."

"No," said Marshall. "I'm not on a rubber expedition. You can't seem to get that idea out of your head." He lowered his voice. "I'm simply a man, helping a girl—nothing more, nothing less. The part is new to me, but I like it."

The journey affected Iris Duvanel profoundly. It was her first glimpse of the country beyond Manaos, her first venture into wilderness. She saw much that might well amaze a girl from New York. The twisting river was blinding in its brilliance. Its sides were hemmed by tall walls of green and brown vegetation so dense that her eyes could not penetrate their mystery. Long lianas drooped from branches like sleeping serpents, or swung from one tree to another as though they were crawling. Great palm fronds, bent with their own weight, dropped their distorted reflections into the water. And sometimes a monkey, perched among the leaves, hurled frantic chatter of simian indignation at these trespassers who had presumed to intrude upon his domain.

An hour before twilight of the second day they reached the Rio Pajo and pitched camp in a small clearing where a circle of sullen trees scowled upon their activity.

Supper over, Dutt, the old guide, had crawled off to sleep in his little tent. Around the edge of the firelight's glowing circle lay the exhausted figures of the *camaradas*, some of them staring up to the stars while they smoked, others already dozing. Their lean, brown faces, splashed with the quivering luminosity, resembled molds in bronze.

"I've never known—never felt—such absolute quiet!" Iris Duvanel murmured. She peered around into the opaque blackness. A slight shudder, like a chill, coursed through her.

"It doesn't frighten you, I hope," said Marshall.

"A little."

"Perhaps you'd better turn in. There's another hard day ahead to-morrow."

"Oh, not yet, not yet! I don't think I could bear creeping into the loneliness

of my tent until I become more accustomed to this silence."

Marshall did not protest. He remembered clearly enough his own first nights in the jungle and the unquenchable yearning for companionship they had caused.

HILLARY began to tell stories; humorous things and trivial, designed to counteract the pressure of the gloom on the girl's nerves. He was in the midst of one when from out of the hush about them there sounded a strange hiss. At almost the same moment something plunged into their fire and stood upright in the flames, its feathered tip vibrating like a wind-blown reed.

Hillary stopped speaking, his mouth open, his eyes fastened on the thing with dreadful fascination. Iris stared at it as though it were a snake about to strike. And all about her those bronze molds were jerked up to gape in mingled amazement, in comprehension, and slowly mounting terror.

It was an arrow.

"Get out of the light!" Marshall's voice, low, authoritative, demanded and received instant obedience.

He snatched the arrow out of the flames and darted away into the darkness. Listening, he held his rifle poised.

The jungle lay still. From time to time he detected the furtive ordinary sounds of the forest, the flutter of a vampire bat, the movement of a soft paw.

He glanced back at the crouching figures of his companions. Every man had seized his weapon and was waiting tensely. A quarter of an hour passed without movement.

Marshall became aware that the girl was standing beside him. She had procured her own revolver and was holding it ready. She did not tremble. Her young face was quite grim, hinting of a strength not discernible in her slim body. Marshall felt an unaccustomed warmth stir his heart. It was strange yet pleasant to have this girl by his side, revolver in hand, ready to face a common danger with him.

Finally she bent forward and whispered in his ear:

"What does it mean?"

He could feel her agitated breath against his cheek.

"That," he told her, "is the Indian's way of warning white men to go no farther."

"You mean the Indians are telling us to go back?"

As she spoke Hillary crept up, his features hardened by anxiety. He heard Marshall answer:

"I think it's a fake."

"It's an Indian arrow, isn't it?" Hillary demanded, taking it from him.

"Yes. But this isn't Indian country. We're days from hostile territory. We haven't even reached the plantations."

"Then——"

"Somebody is trying to frighten us back. Some one doesn't want us to proceed up the Pajo even to the plantations!"

"Well, what are we going to do about it?"

"Nothing. We're going up. Unless"—Marshall turned to the girl—"unless Miss Duvanel prefers to turn back."

She lifted her head almost contemptuously and retorted:

"I'm going on!"

That night, although they maintained an alert guard, they neither saw nor heard any one. The arrow might have dropped out of the sky. In the morning the trip was resumed under great tension.

SLOWLY, through the searing heat of the day, the expedition moved up the Pajo. Constantly there were new impressions for Iris to gather. The aspect of the jungle itself, bulging out over the river did not change. But

now they slipped past quiet lagoons from time to time; and each of these held some wonder.

She saw great water lilies more than three feet in diameter floating in hushed coves. She saw long-legged herons strutting near the banks in comic dignity, their heads disdainfully high. Twice she spied the bizarre color of egrets sprinkled in the dark foliage. And always there was the raucous din of brightly hued parrots and parrakeets that squawked and screamed as they flew from tree to tree; darts of yellow and crimson and green flashing through the somber background.

Of a sudden she stifled a scream in her throat.

There was a frightful whir, and flapping, and confusion that swept by within a foot of her head. Instinctively she bent forward. But nothing struck. And when she looked up again, she saw a tremendous bird lifting itself to vanish over the treetops.

"A jabiru stork!" Marshall cried to her.

He had intended to be merely informative. Seeing her colorless cheeks, he suddenly realized that the girl's nerves were on edge. That she had been so easily frightened made him see her as she was; poised in nervous expectation, as uncertain of the future as himself, tensed every second. He smiled at her and she smiled back weakly, and the invisible bond between them was immediately stronger.

He shot a small tapir which had come to drink at the river's edge, and this they broiled for lunch. As they ate on the banks of a shadowy cove he told Iris:

"We'll reach your father's plantation by to-morrow evening."

"And then," she asked quickly, "you'll go on?"

"I told you I was through with rubber," he said.

"I know, I know, but since we've started, I've seen you change. The jungle seems to have cast a spell over you. I feel that you will go on, into the darkness. You will go into it as other men go into their homes."

"Would it make any difference to you," Marshall asked bluntly.

She had turned away so that he could not see her face. "Of course it would," he heard her say. "You've done so much for me. If you go in, we shall never meet again. It seems strangely like a dream."

"I'm through with rubber," Marshall repeated harshly. "It's taken the best years of my life. I've never had time to play. Maybe you're right. Maybe that damned darkness is my home. Maybe the old medicine is brewing and the old spell is working in my blood. But a man can leave his home; can leave his home and find another, perhaps a better one."

She was silent, and he did not pursue this conversation, the strangest he had ever had, any further.

The Rio Pajo offered them no more mysterious rebuffs, and on the following afternoon, true to Marshall's prediction, they abruptly emerged from the jungle walls to gaze over a fertile tract of land at their right.

THEY saw acres upon acres of thriving mandioc, beans, maize; on lower grounds grew sugar cane. And like scarecrows, many *caboclos,* the half-breed workers, wandered over the fields.

A quarter of a mile up the river stood a well-constructed house that dominated the shore front. As they approached it, a crowd of ragged women and children ran down to the water to gape stupidly at them.

Marshall asked if this was the *fazenda* of Cyrus Duvanel. It was not. This land belonged to Dom Agosto Luis da Sylva y Ridoza. Senhor Duvanel's plantation lay two miles upstream.

"We won't stop here," Marshall decided curtly, "despite the Dom's invitation."

He looked at Iris Duvanel, leaning forward in the center of the dugout. Her young face was pale, her eyes unnaturally brilliant. She sat constricted, unaware of anything save the two miles intervening between her and her father. She was to see a man who had been dead.

In appearance the Duvanel *fazenda* was almost a replica of Dom Agosto's plantation. It was vast and seemed to be thriving gloriously in the glaring sunshine. *Caboclos* roamed about the crops, but swiftly deserted their duties when they spied the line of canoes on the river. They came running shoreward as if a feast awaited them.

The house, Marshall noted, was in a rather bad state, despite its impressive size. It lacked the neatness that characterized Dom Agosto's dwelling. There were windows from which the netting had been allowed to fall away in tatters; even the veranda screening was ripped in places.

They landed amid a throng of gaping half-breeds.

Iris was the first to leap ashore. She stood erect, a trim figure in her khaki attire, utterly unmindful of the staring eyes fastened upon her. She did not know that she was the first white woman ever to come here. Her gaze, going beyond the amazed heads, darted straight to the house. Where was her father?

Unexpectedly the mob of *caboclos* scampered aside to leave a lane for a fat, ugly brown woman whose loose flesh bounced with every step.

She halted directly in front of Iris, leering at the girl with a mixture of anger and contempt. She was dirty beyond credibility. Her long, unkempt black hair was filled with dust. She wore a shapeless garment of sackcloth smeared with a hundred stains. And her legs and arms were covered with festering little sores and welts.

At the astonishment of them all, the woman spoke in a mongrel language that contained much English.

"You tol' not come!" she rasped accusingly. "Why you come?"

Iris, with Marshall and Hillary at her sides, ignored the challenge.

"Where is Senhor Duvanel?" she demanded.

"He no wan' see you!"

"Where is he?"

"Sick!"

Iris started, caught her breath. "Fever?" she exclaimed.

At this the hag snorted in derision. "No fever. Jus' sick. He no wan' see you!"

The girl looked at her companions in bewilderment. It was scarcely the sort of welcome any of them had anticipated.

"We had better go directly to the house," Marshall said. "There's nothing to be gained down here."

They walked up the hill. Behind them trailed the *caboclos* in murmuring awe, much like a crowd of children following a circus monstrosity. The old hag came, too, her eyes blazing, bubbling vile invective in native from her pendulous lips.

On the barren veranda of the house their progress was again impeded—this time by a girl whom the ugly fat woman addressed virulently as Chita.

She stood stanchly in the door, a splendidly proportioned creature of perhaps eighteen, with smooth, lustrous skin of a golden-brown hue. Her eyes were as black as her wealth of flowing hair, and they flamed. In his travels Marshall had seen many pretty women of the jungle, but this one approached beauty. Moreover, she was clean.

She eyed Iris Duvanel with a kind of haughty defiance which none of them could understand. She was as perfect a type of brown woman as Iris was of

white. She assumed the attitude of one who ruthlessly refuses to yield ground.

Yet, when the old hag snapped something at her, she stepped aside and allowed them to enter.

They found Cyrus Duvanel in a bedroom buzzing with insects; found him in a way that forced Iris to halt on the threshold and emit a short cry of anguish. One hand leaped to her lips, the other involuntarily seized Marshall's arm and held it tight. All the color ebbed from her cheeks, leaving them peculiarly lifeless.

For Cyrus Duvanel was sprawled on a broken cot whose single sheet was tattered and soiled. One arm dangled limply to the floor. One knee was bent upward. He was a tall man with a stubble of disreputable gray beard growing out of horridly yellow skin. His eyes were shut and he snored loudly, while flies swarmed around his open mouth.

But it was not because of sickness that he lay there. His trouble was apparent at once. The room reeked with alcohol. An empty bottle rolled on the floor under his hanging hand, insects greedily clustered around its neck. No, he was not ill. He was drunk.

CHAPTER IV.

THE SECRET TRAIL.

AN hour later, standing in the serenity of the magnificent tropic night, Philip Hillary muttered bitterly:

"The swine—the contemptible swine! I wish I had an excuse to hit him just once the way I hit that killer in Manaos!

Marshall, leaning against a tree and smoking his pipe, answered:

"Hitting Duvanel isn't the main thing to be done here."

"Imagine traveling six thousand miles to find a father you've believed dead; and then finding him in a den of filth, surrounded by animals like that snarling hag, and tanked up with gin!"

"It isn't gin," Marshall corrected. "It's *giamanchi*."

"What's the difference what it is?"

"*Giamanchi* is an Indian drink. The women chew it out of the roots of herbs, and the men drink it. It's the most stupefying stuff I know. It will keep Duvanel unconscious for at least twenty hours."

"That means that Iris won't be able to talk to him in all that time?"

"Hardly."

Both of them, comprehending the strain under which the girl would wait, stood silently staring across the river. Starlight glimmered upon its surface. Beyond it loomed the jungle, black and inscrutable. From somewhere down among the *caboclos'* village of thatch hovels floated the chant of a weirdly rhythmic chorus.

"We're not going to leave this plantation until Iris Duvanel does," Marshall said.

"I'm with you."

"There's something strange, very strange, going on up here. Did you know that the report of the fever epidemic was a lie?"

"Perhaps it's down in the *caboclo* huts."

"No. I've been down there. There is no fever." Marshall spoke in a low, flat voice that was beginning to get on Hillary's nerves. "No," he repeated. "The letter Cyrus Duvanel sent his daughter was a lie. He wanted to frighten her off."

"But why?"

"That is precisely what I should like to learn. Why? Why did Dom Agosto try to discourage this expedition? Did he know of Iris's visit to me? His visit followed hers. Why were we attacked in the Manaos street? Why was a warning arrow shot into our fire? Why wasn't Iris Duvanel wanted up here by her father? Why?"

Neither of them slept soundly that night. They were given a barren room

in whose walls were hooks from which they suspended their own hammocks. Dutt, the ancient guide, swung his hammock up on the veranda. In this home hospitality was far from a marked quality. The place seemed to be managed by Chita and the old hag whose name, they learned, was Janeta; and neither of the women seemed at all disposed to make the guests comfortable.

Long after Hillary had dozed off, Marshall lay thinking. He was, he knew, in the room adjoining Iris's, and he was relieved when at last her restless pacing ceased. The girl was going through a difficult emotional strain; and no one could help her save that drunken sot sprawling and snoring in the front of the house.

He watched the stars through the screened windows, saw them slowly travel across the heavens toward the west. Sleep was beginning to flow into him like the tardy effect of some sweet drug. His lids drooped. His thoughts became confused, jumbled. He began to breathe more evenly.

And then, instantly, he was awake.

From outside his window came the sound of hasty steps.

He rose, crossed the room with the silent swiftness of a jaguar. He looked out through the netting. For a moment he saw nothing, no one.

But his searching gaze traveled across the clear ground. And suddenly he distinguished two figures which flitted from his sight almost immediately.

He had perceived them for a second like smudges against the black wall of the surrounding forest encroaching on the cultivated ground. Then the wall had drawn them into itself.

He had an impulse to follow and would certainly have done so, had not the thought of Iris Duvanel, alone in the next room, checked him. It was too late now to awaken Hillary.

Even in that short glimpse he was certain he had recognized Janeta. As for the other prowler, he could not be sure. Janeta's ample body had concealed her companion.

He returned to his hammock. It must be long after midnight. Why, at this unearthly hour, had those two slipped into the jungle?

Half an hour, an hour passed. Again he heard the sound of quick steps. This time he could almost be sure who it was by the tread. It was Janeta returning.

IN the morning Marshall said to Hillary, "Stay about the house. Iris will want some one to talk to when she comes out."

"But where are you going?"

"I'm going to take a prowl."

At the side of the house Marshall waited until he thought himself unobserved. Meanwhile his eyes hunted the jungle's curtain; and he discerned, behind a screen of lianas, what seemed to be the black entrance of a narrow cavern.

It was the mouth of a trail; the trail into which Janeta had vanished during the night.

Marshall penetrated the trail with rapid strides. It was exceedingly narrow, so that twigs and brambles plucked at him like fingers trying to hold him back. In its serpentine course the trail seemed to seek the avenues of least resistance. It had been hacked out by machetes. In the bark of some of the trees Marshall discerned the hatchet scars.

Over his head the foliage closed completely, so that he walked as though in a tunnel. He had proceeded for less than ten minutes when he heard the clatter of running footsteps behind him.

Abruptly he halted. At his hip swung a holster which held an efficient Colt. Almost of its own accord his hand curled over its butt. He turned and waited.

It occurred to him that he might withdraw into the brush until whoever was

following had passed. But the growth was so dense that to press into it without noise was impossible.

He decided to confront his companion of the strange trail.

It turned out to be Janeta. Fury transfigured her. She was making directly for him, a keen-edged hatchet gripped in her raised hand. Two paces from him she halted, brandishing her weapon menacingly..

"You go back!" she shrieked.

Poised in the jungle trail, trembling, she was more animal than woman. Never before had Marshall looked into eyes of such terrible malignancy. Her loose lips had curled back to disclose blackened teeth, decayed and jagged. She leaned forward, the machete held high.

"Go back!" she shrieked again. "Go back!"

One hand she flung wildly in the direction of the house. The other flew higher and shook angrily.

Merely a second Marshall hesitated. Whether or not he had learned something from this venture, he did not know. He thought he had. Therefore he nodded and started back.

He had his revolver, but he had no wish to shoot a woman, however repulsive. Nor did he desire to engage in a physical struggle with the repellant creature. Still another thought impelled him to obey without a struggle. Rashness on his part might bring calamity crashing down on the others—on the girl. The girl was much in his thoughts. Slowly, pervasively, she was beginning to overshadow everything else.

He walked unhesitatingly, determined that at night he would try the jungle trail again. At its end, he now felt convinced, lay the secret he ought to know.

Along the entire way back to the plantation, the horrible Janeta, her machete raised, stalked him. But not once did he glance back at her.

Near the mouth of the trail she unexpectedly relented. She stopped, allowing him to go on alone. Marshall did not look around. He emerged from the jungle and saw Iris Duvanel and Philip Hillary awaiting him on the veranda.

As he approached he could tell by the pallor of the girl's features that she had experienced some fresh shock.

She stared at him as though she wished he had come earlier—as though she had been waiting for him. Marshall ran forward.

Sweat was streaming down his bronzed face when he halted before her on the veranda. In her eyes he saw lurking a haggardness that verged on despair. When he came up to her she seized his hands.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

Her voice was hoarse. "I have just learned," she said, "why my aunt always said my father was dead; Chita told me."

"What do you mean?" Marshall demanded.

"Chita," she answered with a hollow laugh, "is my father's daughter. Janeta is his wife."

CHAPTER V.

NO TIME LIKE THE PRESENT.

IN the terrific heat of the early afternoon, when even the *caboclos* abandoned work for a few hours slumber, Iris Duvanel was persuaded to retire to her room. So alarming a change had already been wrought in her young countenance by the emotional disasters she had encountered that Marshall felt nothing could be of greater benefit to her than rest.

"Your father," he assured her, "won't be awake for several hours at least."

When she was gone Marshall sat down heavily on the veranda step, drew off his helmet and wiped a forearm across his soaked forehead. Hillary

sank down beside him. And together, in the shade of the porch, they gazed off through the blazing sunlight, through the sea of trembling heat waves, across the prosperous plantation of Cyrus Duvanel. In the hammock behind them old Dutt drowsed heavily.

"So Iris's father went native," Marshall muttered. "She would have been happier if she had never come."

He understood full well how the discovery of her father's depravity must have broken the girl.

"It makes one thing clear, anyway," said Hillary.

"What does?"

"This matter of Duvanel having taken Janeta to wife. We know now why he didn't want his daughter—his white daughter—on the plantation. I can't say that I blame him much."

"Phil," Marshall said in slow doubt, choosing his words out of a nebulous maze of thoughts, "I'm not quite certain that you've hit it."

"It seems obvious to me. There's nothing to be done but for Iris to go back and forget she ever had a father. That's about all I can see."

Marshall recounted his experience with Janeta. Among the trees a parrakeet screeched. It made a rasping, piercing sound—jungle laughter, harsh and premonitory.

For no apparent reason they sat as tense as though they were expecting an attack.

Iris rejoined them at four. Although she had been unable to sleep, she seemed more composed. She had been with them less than five minutes when the veranda door crashed open before the kick of Cyrus Duvanel!

Instinctively the three of them rose. Even old Dutt lifted his head in the hammock to get a better look.

Duvanel staggered across the veranda and leaned against one of the wooden posts. His hair, already graying, was abundant and unkempt; his shapeless beard clung to his yellow skin in a hopeless tangle.

It was the unhealthy color of that skin which first horrified Iris. Then she saw the eyes and forgot the skin. They, too, were yellow, a feverish, unclean tint, as if some gelatinous fluid had been poured into them.

A queer expression distorted his features; it might have been a grin or a leer, and he fastened it upon his daughter. She drew back from his stare as it slowly rose from her toes to her short-clipped, russet hair. She drew back toward Kenneth Marshall.

DUVANEL'S clothes, which must once have been white, were in an irredeemable condition—crumpled, buttonless, and torn. And yet, paradoxically, this man was the owner of a vast and thriving plantation!

He spoke.

"Iris, eh?"

His voice was hoarse, rattling through some obstruction in his throat. He regarded Marshall and Hillary, then slowly looked back at his daughter.

Iris was unable to speak. Pallid, quivering in revulsion and disillusionment, she could only stare. She saw Chita come to the door and languidly recline against the jamb. Chita was smiling. Her smile was one of mocking triumph. She had cause to smile. Was not her father visibly aligned with her against this white interloper?

Suddenly Duvanel barked, "I wrote you not to come!"

Iris steadied herself.

"I think I understand why," she said in hushed tones.

Duvanel, propped against the porch post, appeared only dimly aware of what she had said. Obviously the *giamanchi* had not yet worn off.

"I know now," quietly continued the girl, "why Aunt Caroline always said you were dead. It was because you were—dead to her and to me."

That prodded Cyrus Duvanel. He jerked himself erect and scowled. Through the yellow film in his eyes sudden lights flashed.

"How is it she let you come?" he cried.

"She is dead."

There was an interval of quiet. She turned to Marshall and the words he was expecting came from her.

"When can I start back for Manaos."

Marshall glanced at the sun.

"I think it will be wisest," he replied, "if we leave early in the morning."

"Why not at once?"

Marshall saw that she was on the verge of hysteria, but he said, "There is too little daylight left."

"At dawn then," she said tremulously.

She wanted to rush away from this house; far away where she might cry out her anguish without being heard by her evilly reeking father, by her contemptuous, smiling half sister, by the black hag who was her stepmother.

To her precipitate departure Cyrus Duvanel seemed to have no objection. He seemed neither aggrieved nor relieved. He merely hung against the post, a sodden creature, unmindful of his white daughter's existence.

But suddenly he darted a long, discolored finger at Marshall.

"You!" he said harshly. "You are the rubber people's man, hey? Why don't you go to look for rubber, hey? What are you doing, meddling around here. Banga Pu! Indian lover!"

The man seemed about to have an apoplectic stroke. His face grew purplish, the veins in his temples distended. His voice raced upward to a dramatic pitch, vibrant with drunken anger. He choked suddenly and stopped.

The arm he had lifted slowly sank. His gaze went past Marshall, across the stretch of ground to the brink of the river. He seemed to have sobered up in an instant.

Every one on the veranda turned.

A man had disembarked from the dugout paddled by two sweating *caboclos*. He waved a hand in greeting and started slowly up the hill to the house.

It was Dom Agosto Luis da Sylva y Ridoza.

DOM AGOSTO had lost none of the elegance of manner which Marshall had noticed and distrusted in Manaos. To Iris he bowed with formal grace and greeted the men as old acquaintances whom he was happy to welcome to this nook of the world. He was wearing khaki clothes whose neatness, in contrast with Duvanel's slovenly attire, was almost foppish.

He had come, it appeared, to discuss a matter of business with his American neighbor; and promising to keep the sodden planter only a few minutes, he induced Duvanel to enter the house with him.

To those who remained on the veranda it seemed absurd to expect Cyrus Duvanel to discuss anything intelligently. More than ever did Marshall distrust the Dom; the man's suavity could not mask his absolute lack of sincerity. Marshall would have given much to hear the conversation in the rear chamber of the house.

"You needn't jump on me," Cyrus Duvanel growled. "I don't see that you accomplished much."

"One can't be responsible for the bungling of ones underlings."

"Want a thing well done, do it yourself. You bawl me out for hitting up the *giamanchi*. Well, listen, Dom Agosto. I've accomplished more by getting drunk than you have with all your plans. The girl took one look at me and it was enough. She doesn't want to know me. She disowns me as a father. She's going back. What's more important, the aunt is dead."

Dom Agosto leaned forward. "Which means——"

"Which means that the rest is up to you. For twenty years I've done your dirty work. You'll put the finishing touches on yourself. Understand?"

"When?"

"When? To-night."

"Why not wait until they leave. They're leaving to-morrow. The girl for Manaos and Marshall for upriver. They know nothing, suspect nothing. You are a disowned father. The girl is thoroughly disillusioned. The aunt is dead, so there will be no further need to send letters to her. Hence we have no further need of the letter writer. Let our visitors depart and we can attend to the rest at our leisure."

"There's no time like the present," said Duvanel, his face all at once brutally contorted. "Do it to-night. I'll go with you."

Dom Agosto shrugged his shoulders. "Just as you say. To-night then. It is time. Had I known before that the aunt was dead, it would have been done sooner."

CHAPTER VI.

ONCE IN A LIFETIME.

HILLARY was talking to Iris Duvanel late that afternoon. His tones were anxious. "Have you seen Mr. Marshall?" he asked.

"Why, no. Not since four o'clock. Isn't he in his room. He told me he was going to take a nap."

"He isn't there now. In fact, he isn't anywhere on the plantation. I've looked."

"Where can he be? Oh, I wish we had left to-day. But Kenneth, I mean Mr. Marshall, was so insistent about staying the night."

Hillary looked at the girl closely. He had noticed the slip and wondered what it meant. Marshall and the girl had speedily become good friends. He wondered whether the tie had become even stronger in that short time. It sounded strange to him to hear a girl call his friend by his first name. He smiled grimly. Youth, he thought, could withstand any shock. The girl, losing a father, had perhaps gained some one to take his place.

"Kenneth," Hillary said, using the first name quite naturally, "usually knows what he is doing. If he wants to stay over, he has some good reason for it."

"There is something evil in this place," the girl murmured, "something beneath it all that makes me nervous. I seem to be expecting something, but I don't know what it is."

"So you feel that way, too. Kenneth got it right away. He's almost like an Indian sometimes, the way he senses things that can't be seen."

"Where do you suppose he can be?"

"He's in the jungle."

"But why?"

"He's looking for something."

"That's what I felt, too," the girl answered in a lowered voice. "He's in the jungle, looking—for something."

It was true. Kenneth Marshall was in the jungle and he was looking for something.

Twilight came, and night, and Kenneth Marshall at last found himself at the end of the trail.

The trail led into a grotto. Trees overhung it, shutting out the sky. At the end of the grotto was a cavernlike place out of which came the glow of firelight. Within that cave, Marshall knew, was the thing he had come to seek. Guarding its mouth were two figures, *caboclos,* sitting cross-legged, with rifles across their knees. They were revealed by the firelight. He, Marshall, was hidden in darkness. He could see them. They could not see him. They were armed, but so was he. He carried a Springfield rifle and two revolvers. The thing was like a setting on a stage. There was no action—only

three statues fixed in perfect silence, the two oblivious to the presence of the third.

But Marshall's brain was active. It went back over all that had happened since he had left Manaos. He had been warned not to come. He had been attacked by assassins in the street. An arrow had been shot into the camp fire. Why?

Because in this place, the Duvanel plantation, something was being concealed.

What was that something? Was it that Cyrus Duvanel had gone native? Marshall's brain answered, "No." That something was not on the plantation proper. It was in that cave, guarded by two *caboclos*. It was that something which Dom Agosto and Cyrus Duvanel wanted to conceal from the outside world. It was that something which they had concealed from the outside world for twenty years. And Marshall knew what it was. He knew so positively what it was that, had it not been for one circumstance, he would have started back at once, that very day, for Manaos, and returned with the police. That one circumstance was that Iris Duvanel had told her father that her father's sister, Iris Duvanel's aunt, was dead. That was why Marshall had decided to act to-night. And that was why Marshall now knew that he was going to kill two men, that no other course lay open to him, that he would have justification for his act, terrible as it was.

HE crouched on one knee and drew a bead on the *caboclo* sitting on the right of the entrance to the cave. The man was naked to the waist. The bullet reposing silently in the magazine of the rifle was pointed for the pulsing heart. Marshall's finger tightened on the trigger and pulled back. The bullet sped home, into the life spot, and the *caboclo* pitched over, stone dead. The grotto reverberated to the crash of the rifle and the shout of the other *caboclo*. The second guard sprang to his feet, but before he could bring his rifle into firing position Marshall had pumped two bullets into him. Then, out of the cave, as Marshall advanced cautiously, a figure came crawling. It was that of an old man, with long white hair and a white beard. The strange figure rose. Marshall advanced. It was like a dream.

"Who are you?" Marshall asked simply.

And the answer came, the answer he had been expecting, in a high, cracked voice.

"I am Cyrus Duvanel."

"Right," said Marshall. "I've come to set you free."

He lowered his rifle. The old man grasped his arm, then sank to the ground and clasped his deliverer about the knees. Low sounds, like sobs, came from him.

"Back into the cave," Marshall ordered. He carried the old man back. "If I'm not mistaken we can expect some visitors yet."

In the cave the old man burst into a wild fit of sobbing.

"Quiet," said Marshall sharply. "It's all over. You're free. You don't have to tell me what happened. Dom Agosto imprisoned you twenty years ago; robbed you of your plantation; put another man in your place; kept you alive to write letters to your sister so that no one would suspect the crime. Your sister is dead. They have no further need of you. That's why I'm expecting them here to-night. They will come to kill you. But they won't succeed. To-night they will pay for their crime. Quiet now. Put out that fire. I'm going to build another at the end of the trail. I'll need it to see by. I'm glad to see you look in fair health and your wits are unimpaired. There

will be no arrest, no trial, no conviction. They are convicted and they will be executed—to-night. Your daughter is here. She has come to see her father, whom she believed dead. Everything will be all right. The plantation is yours again. Six months in civilization and you'll be a new man. Don't thank me. Get to work now."

A quarter of an hour later Marshall crouched at the mouth of the cave, his rifle leveled at the entrance to the trail. A small fire glowed there to light him in his self-appointed task. He had no qualms, no fears. Justice would be done. The fire glowed, he crouched, the rifle pointed, waiting, waiting.

MEN wait whole lives for such a moment as Marshall experienced three hours later when, in a low voice, simply and steadily, hiding the agitation within him, he spoke five words:

"Iris, this is your father."

When at last the storm of resultant emotion had died away, Marshall said:

"We leave to-morrow. I've got to make a detailed report to the police. We'll have no further trouble here. My *camaradas* have the plantation under control. They will remain here in charge of Dutt. I've spoken to him and he agrees to look after things until everything is put in order. Janeta is bound and harmless now, and will be turned over to the police. Chita will go along, but I dare say she will not be held. The Sisters in Manaos will take care of her. As for myself, nothing that I've done to-night will fall foul of the law. Those two, Dom Agosto and the other, came to kill. What I did was justifiable homicide in defense of Mr. Duvanel. Come outside, Phil. I imagine Mr. Duvanel and Iris want a few minutes alone."

Outside Hillary said, "Listen. I've followed your reasoning clearly enough, but you say that there was something else that convinced you, that made you certain. What was it?"

"I had Duvanel's last letter to his sister. I made it my business to get hold of a specimen of the imposter, Duvanel's handwriting. It was on a bill of lading, covering a consignment of rubber to the river steamer *Estrella*. The two were not the same."

Hillary nodded. "The old man seems to be in good condition."

"He is. They simply took away his liberty, but as for the rest, they took good care of him. It was necessary that they keep him alive. If he had died, there would have been an investigation. But so long as his letters kept going out, with their yearly remittances, Iris's aunt was content to let things remain as they were. Iris was told that her father was dead because Duvanel had written to his sister that he had gone native. That was sufficient to convince the aunt that her niece must be kept away from the plantation. It was better for her to believe that her father was dead. Had the aunt not died, and had not Iris got hold of the last letter, no one knows how much longer the scheme would have run on."

Hillary drew a deep breath. "Kenneth," he said, "I would have given ten years of my life to be in your boots when you led the old man up to his daughter and said: 'Iris, this is your father.'"

"Yes," said Marshall, meditating. "I don't suppose such moments come to a man more than once in a lifetime. It was a big one, I'll admit. Yes, damned big."

Hillary smiled. "I guess you'll soon be saying: 'This is my father-in-law.'"

"Maybe," said Marshall. "Maybe."

HAVE YOU FOUND YOUR JOB?

By Harry Black

The purpose of this department is to give valuable service to the readers of Popular Complete Stories. There is nothing more important to you as an individual than finding the right job—the job into which you can put your interest and your best efforts, and at the same time make as much money as you can fairly earn.

To help you find such a job this department will appear as a regular feature of Popular Complete Stories. Mr. Black will give you the facts about each trade and profession, and then you will be able to choose for yourself. If you inclose a self-addressed, stamped envelope he will be glad to personally answer any question you care to ask.

All letters should be addressed to Mr. Harry Black, care of Popular Complete Stories, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

PROSPECTING

AFTER numerous letters on the more regular occupations and along the more usual lines an occasional note will come in requesting information about the more hazardous, and more romantic means of making a livelihood.

One of these is hunting for hidden treasure. A certain reader assures me, for example, that he knows where Captain Crossbones, let us call him, the old whaling captain out of New Bedford or San Francisco, returned from a successful catch and being no friend to landlubbers' banks, hid the rich income of this voyage. But somehow I doubt whether many of those who need only capital to form a company and get out the treasure, would be any the richer were I able to direct them to persons who have money to venture!

Another means is prospecting. Now prospecting is in the realm of the actual and the following is a usual type of letter, which we would not attempt to answer had not one of our readers volunteered the necessary information.

DEAR MR. BLACK: Is there any chance of prospecting in these days or is that a thing of the past? If there is, where do you prospect? I am not in need of prospecting

for a living, and if I cannot support myself in that way I shall not be up against it.

What equipment should I get? The sporting-goods stores and other places where I have inquired know nothing about it. The books have scientific discussions of it, but no practical hints, and the latter are what I need. If you have the "dope" I should be glad to learn it. MARK G. E.

Boston, Massachusetts.

Mr. Jack Cross of Utah gives the information which Mark G. E. and many others would like to know. Mr. Cross, I happen to know, has had long experience in prospecting and is considering the writing of a book on the subject. So the information which he gives can be considered entirely authoritative for those interested in this topic.

The first thought probably of one who was determined upon a prospecting trip is: Where can I prospect? Mr. Cross declares that every state in the West offers opportunity for prospecting. One must decide on the general section from factors personal to himself, such as distance away, climate, etc.

Having decided upon the general locality, the next question is "grubstake." Grubstake means money. The amount needed is dependent upon accessibility, the duration of the expedition, and the distance of the prospect from the man's home. The first cost is the expense required to reach the point from which one wishes to prospect. Naturally, the farther away the higher the cost. If one intends to prospect within one day's radius of where he can reach by car, then it is very simple. If he intends to leave the road then the cost will be greater and his preparations must be more elaborate.

FOOD AND UTENSILS

IF one wishes to prospect where his chances are best, he should get off the beaten path. To do this he must acquaint himself with the equipment necessary for such a venture. For a venture it certainly is. The first element of equipment is food. Mr. Cross gives a list of some fifty, more or less, which I shall gladly send to any one who wishes it. As he says, it would apply to a camping or hunting expedition as well and may be changed in parts to meet individual appetites.

Take few canned foods—one can get more food value per pound in the dried stuffs and tin is heavy; your pack animals will thank you for decreasing the amount of metal which they have to carry. Tenderfeet need to be warned to leave the frills and the caviar behind. One doesn't give teas!

For handling the food keep this advice in mind: every morning on starting out put a few loaves of bread and lunch stuff where they can be got at without unpacking at noon. At times one has to travel for several days before reaching a place suitable for prospecting. "I have traveled over one hundred miles with pack outfit down on the Colorado River in southern Utah before doing any real prospecting and was about two hundred miles from a railroad. That is probably the farthest one can get from civilization in the West to-day," writes Mr. Cross.

If one is in a favorable region it is possible to get game and fish for the pot. But do not depend on that! It may fail and the results might be disastrous. Leave nothing to chance that can be avoided.

Suitable utensils make a sizable list and I shall send that to those who may request it. One should take a small tepee or pup tent; two or three wool double blankets, two quilts and one heavy waterproof duck tarpaulin, long enough to reach under and over the bed lengthwise, makes a good bed. A folding stove, or two flat irons on stones make a serviceable stove; or one can build a bonfire and when it burns down cook on the coals.

Clothing will depend somewhat on the

part of the West chosen. Usually carry both wool and cotton shirts, underwear, and socks. At least two pairs of good shoes are necessary. Rattlesnake-infested country demands high-top shoes, puttees, or leggings. Also include a coat or mackinaw, overalls, a good hat, raincoat, and gum boots or shoes if in a rainy country.

Naturally you will carry your toilet articles and a few simple medicines, plenty of bandages, a good salve, disinfectant, and laxative.

EQUIPMENT AND ANIMALS

FOR the actual business of prospecting, on which you have come, you will need a pick and shovel, prospector's pick, axe, magnet, compass, pan, mortar and pestle, a bottle of muriatic acid, one of nitric acid, and a pound of mercury. A camera and binoculars should be added for those who can afford them. For the more experienced a blow pipe, spirit lamp, charcoal, test tubes, and platinum wire should be packed as they are useful in determining the relative value of field samples.

Of course you will need pack animals. Close to most mineral districts in the West are sheep or cattle ranches or towns from which may be rented a pack outfit for a modest sum. If it is not possible at your outfitting place, pack stock can usually be secured at from $15 to $50; pack saddles $8 to $10; kyaks or pack bags $15 to $20 per set; saddle pads, pack cinches and ropes for a few dollars extra.

In these districts, too, one can find men who will demonstrate the intricacies of the squaw, square, and diamond hitches.

Horses or mules can carry from 200 to 250 pounds all day; a burro or donkey from 125 to 175. Above all don't overload. And if you don't want sore-backed animals, balance your load well. In the southwest desert country the burro is unquestionably the best animal: it can do better on sparse vegetation and can do with less water than the other pack animals.

"I place pack animals in this order of intelligence: the burro, the mule, and the horse. Old Dick, who once traveled with Buffalo Bill, said to me in a discussion of pack animals. 'Don't take burros. They'll leave you and they're smarter than a man and I'll have nothing around me smarter than I am.' He was right as to their intelligence. But I took burros just the same and got a kick out of trying to outguess them. If one is going to the Middle West or Northwest, however, I recommend the mule or the horse," writes Mr. Cross.

Hobble the stock every night and take some grain with you. A handful or so at night and in the morning helps keep them near camp and strengthens them. It is better to have one pack of boxes, such as coal oil crates with ropes attached. They are better in which to carry opened foods and cans or anything which might upset or break in the canvas bags.

If one can afford a saddle horse it is a more comfortable way to travel on a long trip. But after the prospector gets to the mineral country, walking is the only way to do any real prospecting. Some sections can be looked over quickly; others require weeks and even months to do justice to a single mile. Traveling or running around is not prospecting.

The novice should acquaint himself with the use of the mortar and pestle and the pan. He should learn all he can about geology, formations and the appearance of minerals and rock so that he can recognize them at sight. Books on mining and mineralogy are found at all libraries and samples of minerals are found in many museums and mining bureaus, especially in the schools of mines of the Western State universities. Don't expect to learn it all in a few

months. "I have been prospecting and mining for almost twenty years and I am aware that I am still a student," says Mr. Cross.

In staking out a claim—should you find something truly worth while—some States require a post at each corner others six posts to bound your claim, and there are other intricate requirements. So one should acquaint himself with the mining laws of the United States and of the specific state in which he intends to prospect. See that anything valuable is well marked, that you have thoroughly complied with the law of the state in which you are prospecting and avoid litigation.

Finally, after the stock is packed and you are ready to start, there is one burden that you must carry yourself, which cannot be placed on the pack animals, and that is heaps of tenacity, persistence, patience, knowledge, and common sense.

For further information address Harry Black, in care of *Popular Complete Stories.* He will also be glad to tell the prospective miner where he may secure a copy of the helpful pamphlet entitled, "Field Tests for the Common Metals."

Your Handwriting Tells

Conducted By Shirley Spencer

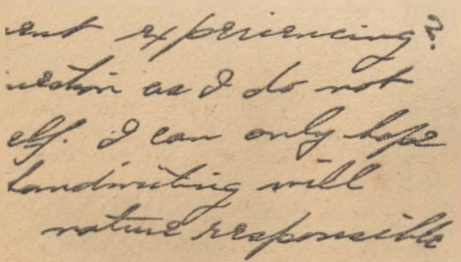
If you are just starting out to find your first job; or if you are dissatisfied with your present occupation and are thinking of making a change; or if the character of your friends—as revealed in their handwriting—interests you; or if, as an employer, you realize the advantage of placing your employees, in factory or office, in positions for which they are best suited—send a specimen of the handwriting of the person concerned to Handwriting Expert, Street & Smith's Popular Complete Stories, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y., and inclose a stamped, addressed envelope. All samples submitted will be analyzed by Shirley Spencer, and her expert opinion will be given, free of charge.

The coupon, which you will find at the end of this department, must accompany each handwriting specimen which you wish to have read. If possible, write with black ink.

Your communications will be held in strict confidence. Only with your permission will individual cases be discussed in the department, either with or without illustrations. It is understood that under no circumstances will the identity of the person concerned be revealed.

Miss Spencer will not assume any responsibility for the specimens of handwriting, though every precaution will be taken to insure their return.

L. N. K., California: Handwriting reflects the mental and nervous condition of the writer, and your writing shows that you surely are not up to standard or normal. I suggest that you have a



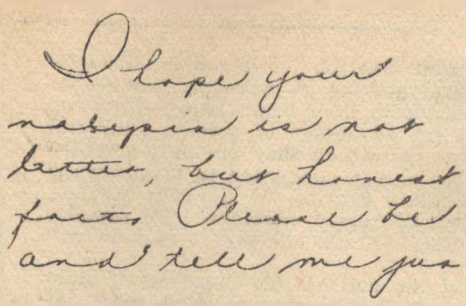
physical examination. While I can see ill health and conditions of the heart in handwriting, I cannot tell you from what causes or advise you. That is for your physician to do. However, handwriting gives the warning if we wish to heed it.

Those thickened, jerky strokes, uneven base line, and breaks in your words show a very decided chronic physical condition and a complete shock to the nervous system. You must take care of yourself; avoid excitement or stimulants, and do not strain yourself with overwork or worry.

As for literary ability, you have a vivid imagination, but do not seem trained artistically. Until you are in

better health, I should not advise you to try anything new.

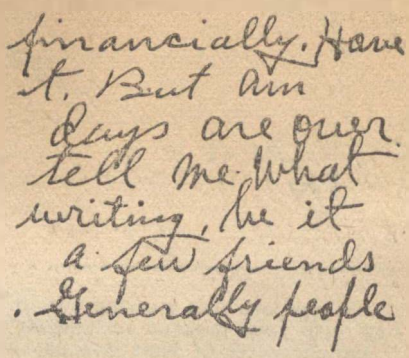
C. M. M., Ohio: Your writing is the uniform commercial script which is based on a system of writing. This always takes out the personality of the writer. In your case, however, the writing is lighter, the capitals a bit higher, and the formations rounder, which tell me that you certainly are good-natured, have a sweet disposition, and are very proud and independent in a quiet, gracious way.



You have good taste and love pretty clothes. I am sure that you would be happier in a home of your own, because you are not hard-boiled enough for commercial work. You would make a lovely mother and wife, so I hope the right young man comes along soon. You are ideally fitted for domestic life. If the man seems slow in turning up, you might take up teaching kindergarten. You could even start a small group in your own home.

Mrs. B. W., Oklahoma: After the smooth, flowing script up above, your rather hectic writing presents a sharp contrast. Your writing slants in every direction, varies in size, and pressure, and base line, and is heavy and thick. This shows that you are a very restless person. I believe that your bad health has everything to do with this condition. You lack poise and your nerves are unstrung.

Intelligence in handwriting does not depend on whether or not a person has had education. You have a natural intelligence, and if you were not in such a nervous condition, your writing would

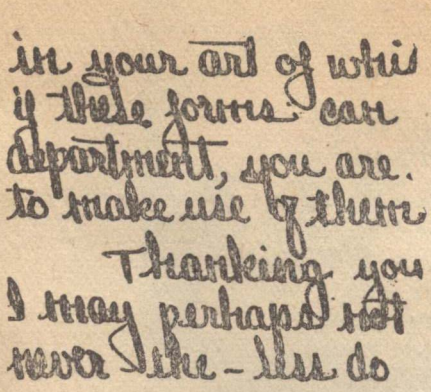


not be so badly formed. I suggest that you take care of yourself rather than worry about making money at some job just now. Your condition makes you irritable, stubborn, and temperamental.

R. J. M., Michigan: You certainly need not fear failure if you go into business for yourself, because your writing shows that you are the type that should work alone. There is a very strong streak of independence in you, and this, in combination with talent that is above the average, makes you resent being told what to do.

The very heavy pen pressure shows that you have strong materialistic instincts, that you are creative, luxury-loving, passionate, and very magnetic. Perhaps you are inclined to enjoy comfort too much, and this makes you hesitate to make any definite moves or strike out for better things. With your talents you should be very far advanced on the ladder of success. What you need is more fire—more will power and driving force. Let all that unrest

within you come to the surface and make you uncomfortable; then you may expect results. The trouble is that you hate being uncomfortable, and I am sure that you would give me plenty of alibis if you were talking to me. I know that underneath you will agree with me—you lack some of the courage to master the situation. I hope this will give

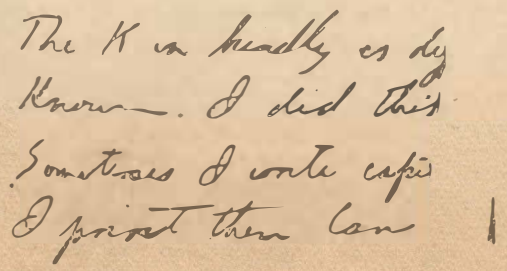


it back to you or be the little push that you needed. You don't need much, for you really have everything within yourself to build on. You have a very constructive mind, love to build and mold things, have artistic talent, as well as the instinct for money. Have you ever thought of advertising as your medium? Certainly you should not be in an ordinary commercial business. You are a marvelous engineer in the sense of being able to plan. I suggest industrial engineering—taking hold of a business and shaping it up.

You ought to paint, though as you are in business, you may not have developed that talent. You sense color deeply, and have a natural instinct for interior decorating and architectural construction.

Remember that your weaknesses are indolence—though you have plenty of vitality—and stubbornness. The latter amounts to this: taking no action when action is indicated; keeping still when you should be decisive, and fight the thing through to a finish; good-naturedly letting the details take care of themselves, or stubbornly refusing to budge an inch. Take up the colors which your real nature holds aloft, and keep them flying while you advance steadily. Don't say, "That's what I would like to do, *but*——" Being positive in your way amounts to a stubborn attitude—a passive one—make it aggressive, but flexible. You shut out all growth of mind when you keep to your very deliberate way of thinking. You are conceited, also very proud, very desirous of appreciation, and a supreme egotist, but that doesn't matter. You have cause to hold yourself in good esteem, but don't be blinded into complete satisfaction. You see, I rather enjoy giving you a little jolt—it won't stir you up much, but every little bit helps! I'd like to see you step out.

W. R. K., Pennsylvania: What a contrast your writing is to the extremely materialistic one just analyzed. You are the very sensitive type, with fine feelings. You are not robust, and are nervous and high-strung. I couldn't speak as frankly to you, for you would be hurt by criticism, while to the man from Michigan it will be merely a pin prick, which he won't even notice.



You are versatile, adaptable, and work by inspiration. For this reason

you are fickle in your interests, and not very dependable. Sometimes you have a strong will, but at other times you are careless—a form of selfishness very different from the cold indifference of that shown in the preceding script. You are affectionate, quick-tempered, quick-witted, and very expressive.

Don't forget the stamped, self-addressed envelope and coupon. Canadians may send coin. Those in foreign countries send just self-addressed envelope.

Handwriting Coupon for Street & Smith's Popular Complete Stories

This coupon must accompany each specimen of handwriting which you wish read.

Name .....

Address .....

GREASED LIGHTNIN'!

By JAMES EDWARD HUNGERFORD

HO, fer the days when herds ran free
On the open range immense;
The golden West as it used to be,
'Fore they hemmed it in with *fence!*
Ho, fer the days when mustangs loped
Where the longhorn cattle grazed.
An' mavericks runnin' wild were roped—
On the range where I was raised!

Ho, fer the song o' saddle-creak;
The music o' jinglin' spurs,
As down them paths o' the past we'd streak—
Lord, how the memory *stirs!*
Like lightnin' over the range we'd whirl,
A-splashin' through creek an' stream,
O'er twistin' trails, that would swift unfurl—
Through the old West o' my dream!

Ho, fer the rarin', tearin' broncs,
With spirits unbroke, to tame,
That ruled the land before auto honks,
An' the roarin' motors came!
Ho, fer the rollin' range again,
Unfenced to the horizon;
The tinglin' zest o' the days-o'-*then!*—
O' the West that's drifted on.

Zip! In the sky a plane zooms by,
As swift as an eagle's flight!
A passenger train flits on the fly
Down the rail trail, through the night!
Ho-hum!—an' we 'lowed that we knew *speed,*
When we rode them ol' West trails,
Or drove our broncs in a wild stampede—
But Gosh, we were only *snails!*

GET TOGETHER!

WHEN the editor of Popular Complete Stories read the following letter, he was slightly jarred for a minute, not because he felt any uncertainty about the things this magazine stood for, but because he was slightly peeved by the superior air which the writer assumed toward the subject of fiction. Here is the letter which ought to interest you a lot since you are all readers of this magazine:

DEAR EDITOR: You say that your magazine is a magazine for discriminating readers. You also advertise that your stories are the cream of modern fiction. I am not writing to dispute your claims; in fact, I agree with you, because I have tried a lot of magazines. While some of them have a story now and then that I like very much, I have to acknowledge that not one of those which I have sampled has so many and such really good stories in every issue as Popular Complete.

I am writing to you because my brother says I am not a discriminating reader. If I were a discriminating reader, he insists that I would not read all fiction magazines. He always argues with me about the influence of fiction and ends our clash with the question: "Well, what does Popular Complete stand for? Answer me that."

I left high school two years ago and have a good position with the telephone company, but I still find there is nothing finer to fill in an evening than a good story. In fact, I haven't found any fiction that I like as well as the stories of James Clarke, Bernard Breslauer, and Jack Hulick. I think Clarke is the best writer you have in Popular Complete, though Carse's stories are almost as good.

What answer can I make to my brother's nagging question: "What does Popular Complete stand for?"

Yours truly,

JOHN WALLACE.

Of course, we know there are some people who don't like stories—some people who think all fiction is so much hooey. History and biography, they say, tell the reader about things that have actually happened and give the lives of people that have really lived. These people have no patience with fiction because they think fiction is false, and history and biography are true. What they are after, they say, are facts, not fancies.

THIS attitude toward fiction is an old one, but we supposed there were few people left in the world who were so ignorant of modern psychology as to argue for the truth of facts as opposed to the falseness of fancy. No fact in itself has any real value until the mind and the imagination have interpreted and given it some significance. It remains an isolated experience until our human fancy plays upon it and gives it a place in the pattern of our lives. To suppose that a man's imagination spins only falsehoods out of the fine web of his fancy, is to be ignorant of the principle that there is a truth of imagination as well as a truth of fact.

History is the record of actual facts, or the chronicle of events which have taken place in historical time. But the chronicle of fancy records a type of events that are eternally true.

The life of Napoleon records a stirring series of events which culminated in the early part of the nineteenth century. Napoleon's triumphs and troubles are dead and buried with the man, but the history of *David Copperfield* by Charles Dickens is the record of a young man's life which never actually happened as an event in historical time. *David Copperfield* lived only in the imagination of his creator, but *David Copperfield* will live forever because the facts of the life of *David Copperfield* are not historical facts, but are the eternal and truthful facts of the human imagination. Facts may be stranger than fiction, but certainly they are not truer. The truth of fancy is a higher kind of truth than the truth of fact. Fiction deals with this kind of imaginative truth and is therefore much more appealing to sensitive and imaginative men than the bare narrative of historical facts. Even these historical facts of history have to be passed through the fine fire of the historians' imagination before they become really glamorous.

Not for a moment would we contend that a man's imagination is left cold and unresponsive to the stirring facts which history is able to present. But we do contend that the great writers of fiction, with their imaginative facts, have influenced the lives of men much more than any chronicle of history.

SO much for the value of fiction. As to the specific question, "What does Popular Complete stand for?" we can answer briefly and emphatically that Popular Complete stands for action and adventure stories in which we all touch those deeps of emotion and drama to which we are denied access.

Not many of us can drop out of our present situation and go in quest of adventure among the wide open spaces in the West, but our thwarted ambitions and hungry urges find an outlet in certain stirring stories of the West where men jeopardize their lives in the interests of fair play and a square deal. Popular Complete Stories stands for a gentleman's code of conduct and a young man's distaste for safety, security, and dullness. This magazine believes that life can be stirring and eventful if men are not too cowardly or afraid to take a chance.

Give Me a Name

We Will Pay $500.00 Just for a Baby's Name

COSTS NOTHING TO WIN

Nothing to Buy—Nothing to Sell—No Puzzles, "Lucky Numbers" or "Guessing Contests" to Win this Cash Prize

JUST SUGGEST A BABY'S NAME

Here's an amazing opportunity to win a big cash prize for just a moment's time. Simply send us a name for this happy baby—either a boy's or a girl's name—a name that you think would sound nice in a Magazine advertisement. We have chosen this baby's picture to use in advertising for our new Baby Soap. We must have an attractive name. We are going to pay a big cash prize just for a winning name. Think of a name—send it to us TODAY! Win $500.00 cash and qualify for an opportunity to win further prizes of $2,600.00 or Buick 8 Cylinder Sedan and $1,100.00 Cash for promptness. . . See rules below.

YOU CAN'T LOSE

Nothing to lose—costs nothing to win. Nothing to buy or sell to get the cash prize for naming the baby. It is easy to think of a name. Some name that may flash into your mind this very instant may win the prize. It doesn't have to be fancy name—maybe the name of your own or a friend's baby would be the very one we want. Just some simple name such as "Baby Jim" or "Mary Anne" may be chosen as the prize winner. Don't let this opportunity slip through your fingers. Think of a name NOW—send it TODAY.

Picture and Name to Be Used in Advertising

This smiling baby's face is to be featured in all our advertising for our new Baby Soap. For a fitting name for this baby we will pay $500.00. Name may be for either boy or girl. Send name today. Win $500.00 cash!

JUST SENDING A NAME QUALIFIES YOU FOR OPPORTUNITY TO

Win $2,600.00 Cash

or Buick 8 Cyl. Sedan and $1,100 Cash

This huge prize is *Extra* and in *addition* to the cash prize for the Baby's name. No wonder we say that here is your opportunity to win a fortune. Think of it! $2,600.00 all cash or a big Buick 8 Cylinder Sedan and $1,100.00 in cash besides—all coming to you at once! Many work a lifetime without ever getting together such a magnificent sum. Hundreds of prizes—over $4,300.00 in cash will be given in this huge prize distribution. Some yet unknown person is going to win a fortune—why not you? You have just as good a chance as anyone. *Every single person who takes an active part will be rewarded in cash.* Just send a name suggestion to qualify for this opportunity of a lifetime—nothing more to do to qualify. But act at once—remember $1,100.00 Extra is given winner for promptness.

SEND NO MONEY You don't have to send any money—you don't have to buy anything or sell anything to win the Name Prize. Just send the first name you think of—it may be a winner—it has just as good a chance as any. But do it NOW! Rush letter with name suggestion or send coupon at once. I will answer at once giving you all the details and telling you just how you stand in points for the distribution of $4,300.00 cash prizes. Here may be the means of making you financially independent for life.

TED ADAMS, Manager

906 Sycamore St. Dept. 1095-JJ, Cincinnati, Ohio

NAMING CONTEST RULES

Contest open to everyone except employees of our company. Only one name may be submitted. Sending more than one name will cause all names sent by you to be thrown out. Prize of $500.00 will be awarded to one name of all those submitted. In case of duplicate winning names, duplicate prizes will be given. Contest closes midnight, December 25th, 1931. Every person sending name qualifies for opportunity to win $2,600.00 or Buick 8 Sedan and $1,100.00 cash for promptness. Use the coupon or write letter for all details.

COUPON

TED ADAMS, Manager
906 Sycamore Street, Dept. 1095-JJ, Cincinnati, Ohio

My suggestion for the Baby's Name is:

.....

My Name.....

Address.....

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

I am interested in winning $2,600.00. Rush me all information and tell me how I stand.

Have you tried Camels?

THE steady increase in the sales of Camel cigarettes proves one fact beyond a doubt.

If you try Camels, the odds are very much against your ever going back to your Old brand.

So great is the contrast between the delights of perfectly conditioned Camels fresh from the protection of the new Humidor Pack and the harsh, hot smoke from stale dried-out cigarettes, that your decision will be immediate.

The quality is there in the first place, for Camels are a blend of choice Turkish and mild Domestic tobaccos.

In factory-prime condition, with their rare flavor and their natural moisture still intact, they are a joy to the smoker.

Now this flavor is air-sealed-in by an outer wrapping of moisture-proof Cellophane, so that no matter where you buy Camels, in any land, in any climate, you are always certain to get fresh cigarettes in factory-prime condition.

And there are other advantages as well. For the Humidor Pack also protects the cigarettes within from dust and germs and weather conditions.

Start the day on Camels. See how much milder they are, how much more flavorful they are, how cool they are to the throat.

No peppery dust to irritate delicate membrane. No harsh, hot smoke from dried-out tobacco to burn the tongue or scar the throat.

Switch to Camels for a day, then leave them—if you can.

Tune in CAMEL QUARTER HOUR featuring Morton Downey and Tony Wons
Columbia Broadcasting System—every night except Sunday

CAMELS

***Mild* . . NO CIGARETTY AFTER-TASTE**

● *It is the mark of a considerate hostess, by means of the Humidor Pack, to "Serve a fresh cigarette." Buy Camels by the carton—this cigarette will remain fresh in your home and office*