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The Popular

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1932

Complete Stories

THE WEB

by

ROBERT CARSE

*A grim novel
of an ex-convict
who beat
GUIANA*



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FOREST RANGER

By JACK ASTON

HIGH on a timbered mountain slope
His tiny cabin stands;
The castle of a lonely king
Who built it with his hands.

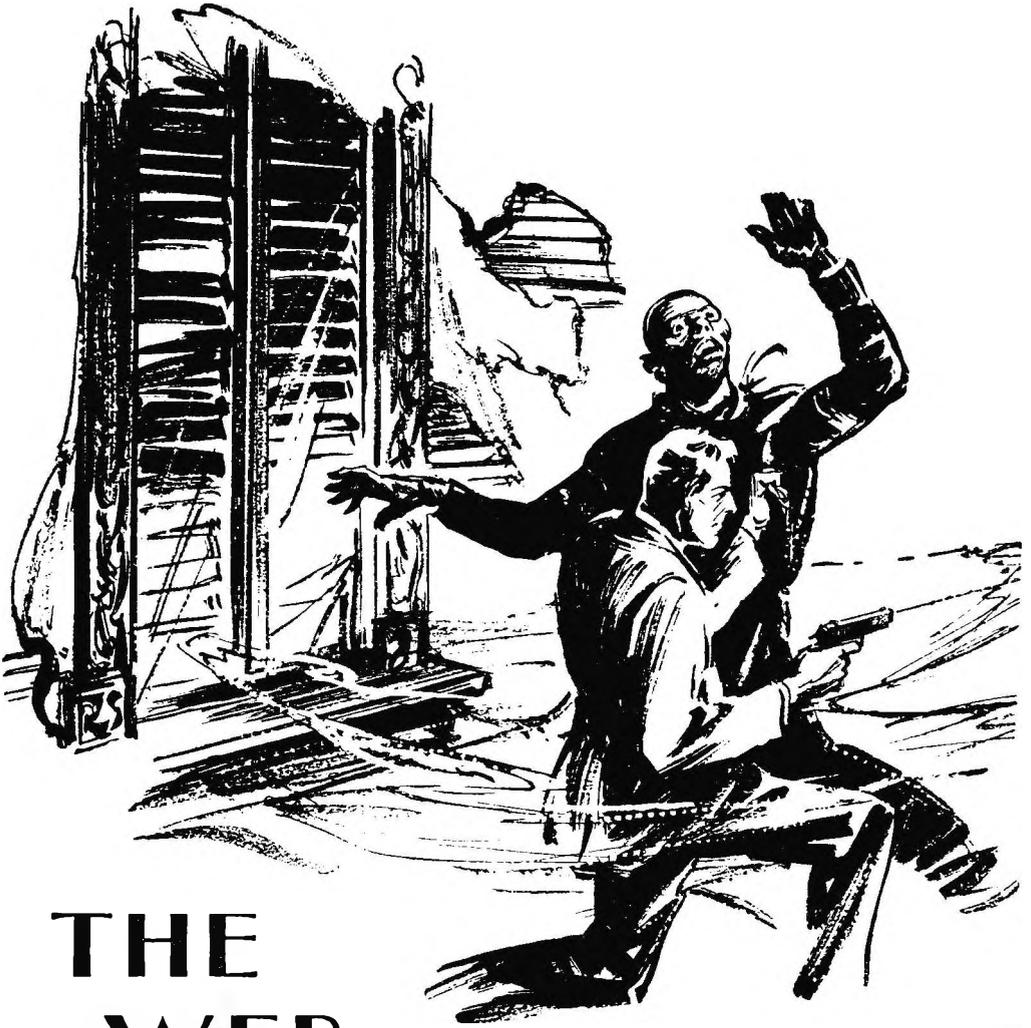
All day he rides or hikes the trails
That traverse his domain;
His only enemy a fire,
His greatest friend the rain.

From lookout points on rugged heights
He scans a world of trees
In search of dreaded wisps of smoke,
And tests the passing breeze.

A million feet of lordly spruce
Toss, oceanlike, below;
Across a verdant valley floor
That bear and wild cat know.

Far off, he marks a dark-green ridge
Where cedars pierce the sky;
And nearer, round a monarch pine,
He sees an eagle fly.

A lonely life? Perhaps it is;
Yet when the night shuts down,
He sits beside his hearth, content
To smoke and dream of town!



THE WEB

By Robert Carse

CHAPTER I. A VOICE FROM THE PAST.

WITH a sound that was like a human scream, the wind struck down from the Alps to the north, upon Villefranche and the starkly rugged French coast. The wind roared through the cobbled streets of the little port, then out over the black wildness of the Mediterranean.

Where he sat behind the zinc-covered counter of the Hello Sailor

Bar, James listened almost eagerly to the unceasing stridence of the storm. There was luck in that for him, he told himself quite calmly. It kept people from the streets tonight; kept them from coming to the bar. It gave him a chance to think, some illusion of security, in which he could find a way out of this thing which had so swiftly and inexplicably closed in upon him.

Although he consciously willed against it, his body trembled slightly as he pondered that thought. Aware that he trembled so, and closely held



Betrayed by his liberators, James, an escaped convict from the hell of a Guiana prison, finds a strange ally in an American reporter.

by this new, great fear, he looked up, over the bar and into the room.

There was only one other man, a customer, in the barroom. That man was Rand, the American newspaper correspondent. And he, as usual, was drunk, and asleep in his chair. For many minutes, motionless there on his little bar stool, his nerves still jangling, James studied the man to see if he truly slept.

Rand, the best customer of the Hello Sailor Bar, sat far back in his uncomfortable wooden chair, his face raised full to the rays of the overhead light. On the small table beside him was a brandy bottle and a glass, both empty. An hour or so before, when Rand had come in, during the first of the storm, the bottle

had been full, and he had sung and talked brilliantly, loudly, all alone except for James behind the bar.

But now the man's long, thin legs were stretched widely out before him. His heavy ulster was flung back, as were his hands, which hung as limp as wet cloth by his sides. On his chest, half masking his face, was his crumpled felt hat. But above that, James could see the eyes, and the high, white sweep of the forehead. And those heavy, darkly veined eyelids were tightly closed; from under the brim of the hat issued snores that could be heard through the noises of the storm. Rand slept; no one could doubt that.

A kind of whispered curse, half relief, half eagerness, came from

James. From his pocket he brought out a small, crumpled slip of paper, and spread it on the bar. It was a cheap piece of white note paper. The kind any one could buy in any stationery store in France for a couple of pennies. The message upon it was in ink. It was printed in square block letters just as commonplace as the paper itself. But—his body became rigid as he thought of it—he had no need to trace the paper or the handwriting. None.

Swiftly, he reread the message, painfully and sharply driving the words of it into his brain. It was written in French, in the language of the prisons. It said:

No. 273744. Come to-morrow at three o'clock to No. 51 in the Rue Pastiglosi, Nice.

That was all. There was no more to it. There was, the slow, painful thought came to him, no reason for there being any more to it. They had him. That—

The thought broke right there. With the swiftness of a startled animal, he looked up, warned by some instinct he could not name. The one customer was awake and was sitting up. As he did so, his hat slid from his chest to the floor, and rolled there on the wet and muddy tiles. But he did not look at that; he blinked at the glass and the bottle on the table. He motioned toward them with a hand that was nearly steady.

"Fill them," he said in a clear, almost musical, voice. "Bring me another bottle, same kind of brandy. Quick-o!"

From the bar, leaning forward across it, his folded arms over the slip of paper, James studied the man's white, lined, and emaciated face for a moment without speaking, without moving. Rand, an Ameri-

can, had spoken to him in English. And— But he checked that thought, that fear. Rand was an American, and unless he was forced to, always spoke in English. Almost any foreigner who came here into the bar did so; it was the international drinking language. Oddly, still standing motionless, he smiled, for he remembered that that had been one of the major reasons why the owner had hired him when he first came here; because he could "speek leetle beet Engliss for coos-tomair."

WITH a conscious and tremendous effort, he did so now. He broadened that sharp, wry smile and nodded to the man across the room:

"I breeng it queeck."

He rolled that "r" as he would roll a barrel. Then, facing around with his back to the room, he reached up with one hand for a bottle of brandy from the shelf, his other hand flat on the zinc of the bar, and flat upon the slip of paper. He turned, bringing the bottle down, wadding the paper in his other hand and into his pocket, swiftly. But there was a film of sweat on his forehead, and the hand that held the bottle was trembling.

He bent down once while he drew the cork, and pulled the sleeve of his heavy woolen fisherman's shirt across his forehead and looked at himself in the mirror. "Steady, you sap," he told himself savagely. "Take it easy. This bird is drunk, and didn't see anything. Take the bottle out to him, now. You look all right; your act's still good. Come on!"

Rand was sitting up more or less straight in his chair when James came around the end of the bar with the bottle on a tray. Walking so,

James was aware of Rand's eyes upon him, searching his face, his eyes. An immediate and fierce anger that sprang blindly from fear came over him, and as he put the tray down, his own eyes, savage, darkly searching, met the eyes of the man in the chair.

Rand's were hardly open. From under their red-rimmed lids, set far down in their dark and bony sockets, they seemed barely to see him, barely register his presence, and he lifted his own glance up, and rapidly away. He could watch, though, the sort of smile which came over the sharp, high-boned angles of Rand's face as he took the bottle into his hand and poured the liquor into the glass.

"Drink, yourself?" The glass was lifted up, absolutely full.

"No, t'ank you." James said it carefully, now quite still, quite calm.

Rand looked up then, and as he drank, he laughed. It was a musical and short sound. He put the glass down. Once more, he raised his eyes.

"You," he said slowly, his fingers laced in affection about the glass, "do your best, I imagine. But your imitation French-English is really pretty foul. Yes—foul. Your French itself is excellent." Not looking up, he drank, set down the glass. "You should practice; you should— Oh, what the hell!"

The man standing before him had just made a silent and swift movement. One of his brown hands had slid from his hip, and around his hip, to the back of his high-waisted corduroy trousers, and rested there, out of sight. Rand did not speak any more. He no longer smiled, and both his hands were in full sight, laxly held on his knees.

It was after perhaps several minutes or so that he said: "All right.

You needn't show it to me; I know you've got it. But, sit down. Yeah, and have a drink."

But again he was silent; made so by the silence, the awful and strained rigidity, of the other man before him. Rand shook his head slowly at that.

"Don't be a silly ass," he said. "You're just tearing yourself all to pieces inside, standing there like that. To put that knife through me would give you practice, maybe, but no more. Sit down and drink. No reason for me to tell anybody. You're Wallace James. But that's your business. It just came to me as I saw you walking forward from the bar. Remember your face. Saw it once, three or four years ago, in some American paper's picture section. Might have been my own paper. But, sit down. Drink. That's it. Thank you!"

His hand was admirably steady as he held out the glass and he smiled. "No," he shook his head, "this drink will do me. Strange; I can appreciate just a bit how you feel. I wrote the story in Paris when Dreyfus came back."

He was still, lifting his glass in salute. They sat quietly for a time, the little marble-topped table between them, the only sound the howl of the storm outside. Rand sat, his legs stretched out comfortably. The man across the table was wholly motionless, his lean, almost thin body forward on the chair, small knots of muscles jerking at the corners of his jaws, his knuckles showing white through the brownness of the skin where his hands rested hard against the table edge.

It was he, James, who spoke at last, and he knew that this other man had planned to do so.

"And what are you going to do about it?"

"What?"

"Me—Wallace James."

"Nothing." Rand lifted one hand in a short gesture. "My only reason for letting you know was because I was a bit drunk, and the fact that if I could discover your identity, some other sap could very probably do the same thing. Tell me, I'm drunk and I'm curious, and if you don't want to, don't, but why did you pick such an exposed place as this? Can't you see it isn't safe?"

The answer came completely without intonation, without emotion, from the man seated across from him:

"I couldn't get any farther. I have no money, not even now. And Louie, the owner here, fixed me up with identity papers instead of wages. So——"

"Wait a minute." Rand leaned a little forward in his chair. And he had put the glass down upon the table. "Wait a minute more and I'll be cold clean sober. Yes. Your boss, Louie, won't be back to-night again. Go and lock up for the night, so that we can be quiet here. Please."

JAMES rose with strange stiffness to obey that request. He locked the big front door.

Rand was again sitting loosely in his chair, watching him, when James came back. Rand spoke:

"How long have you been out of Guiana, out of the prisons?"

The other man stopped, and stood utterly still at that. His body became very rigid. He made as if to reach up for the knife which Rand knew was hidden in a sheath inside his trouser waistband. In that moment, fully then, pity and sympathy came over Rand, for he could read this man before him, read his face and eyes, and the terrific mental

combat between fear, logic, and hope that was going on in his brain.

So, knowing that some one must speak and break this silence, aware that he must free this man of the almost insane fear that held him, he spoke again quite slowly and softly:

"I know how you feel, I think. You want to trust me; you're telling yourself you must trust me or kill me. But, down there in those prisons you learned one thing: not to trust any man. Isn't that so?"

"No." The words came in a swift rush. "I learned to trust one man down there. That's why I got this way, again, just now. I just thought of him. They'll get him, too. And he got me out. Here—look!"

With a movement he did not realize was intensely dramatic and startling, he spilled the little, crumpled piece of paper out from his pocket and upon the table before Rand. Rand was silent as he spread, smoothed, and read it. Then he looked up.

"Now I do understand," he said. His own face had suddenly changed. It had become hard and savage, marked with lines about the nose and mouth. "That's your *numero de matriculation* they've mentioned there; your convict number. Some rats are trying to blackmail you, shake you down with the threat of exposing you to the cops and sending you back to Guiana. To that place."

"Yes." James whispered the word. "That place." His body and hands were shaking again, although, saw the other man, he was trying desperately to keep them still.

"All right!" In a sudden and odd gesture, Rand reached out, and caught the other man's hand loosely by the wrist, as he would hold the wrist of a man torn by almost unbearable physical pain. "You're not

back there yet. And, very probably, he can— But I make no promises. Truly, I have seen worse situations." He looked down at the piece of paper, and tapped it with his finger tips. "'Three o'clock,' he read aloud. 'No. 51 Rue Pastioglosi, in Nice.' Well, that gives us quite a bit of time. Sit down. Please—sit down."

Slowly, as if his brain and body were still numb, James sat down. Rand lifted the piece of paper from the table. "We don't want this?" he asked. "I'll burn it then."

It burned slowly, making a black little crisp on the floor which Rand ground to a fine powder with his heel. He looked up after he had done that.

"I think," he said quietly, "that I can help you with this thing, James. I'd help any man to get out of going back to that terrible place. I don't know what you've done, and I don't much care. All I know about you is your name, and that a couple of years ago, you were sentenced to Guiana. But, you might as well tell me; it'll help us get along with the thing."

JAMES stood up. That odd numbness of horror and of fear did not seem to be upon him any more. His voice was clear. He seemed almost boyish, and quite handsome, standing there. "Thanks for thinking about me, but I wouldn't draw any other man into this. All I care about is my partner, the man who got me out of Guiana and escaped with me. As long as he's all right, I can take care of myself." He smiled, and with that smile the boyishness, the youth fell away from him. "They taught me how down there, and I'm still able to remember."

"Yes." Rand nodded, looking

down at the toes of his muddy shoes. "But, if you'll take the opinion of an—'impartial observer,' I should say that this thing is a whole sight bigger and tougher than you think. I don't know who your partner is; it doesn't matter. But, common logic, after forty years of banging around the fringes of a lot of things, tells me that this business"—he pointed down to where the piece of paper had burned—"is too good to be wasted on one man, by whoever invented the idea. You understand me?"

"Only partly."

"I thought so. You're still too close to it; you haven't got a perspective on it yet. Which is to be understood, readily. But, how did you get out of Guiana? How did you escape?"

"Through the back country. Down the Dutch rivers, and out through Paramaribo. It's a regular route. We paid an established price for it; Jules—my partner—paid for it."

"And then how did you get here?"

"Stowed away on a ship bound for Marseilles, from Paramaribo."

"Did you stow yourselves on that ship, or were you taken care of?"

"We were taken care of. That was part of the price, too."

Slowly, up and down, Rand moved his head. "I thought that, too." He took a cigar from his pocket; lit it. "How much did it cost you to get out?"

"A thousand francs—forty dollars, apiece. But, I don't—"

"Wait a minute, and you will understand. That was too cheap. It seems like that was just the beginning. And whoever figured it out was a very smart guy. This is big stuff. Have you got any idea who was running the system when you pulled out? Who made the dicker; you, or your partner?"

"My partner. In the prisons, they said that some Negro in Cayenne ran the system. But, we escaped from St. Laurent; I was in the main jug there, and my partner was outside, serving his *doublage*. He was a *relègué*, a lifer, and so he could move around the town; that's how we did it. He made the deal with some Chinaman there in St. Laurent."

"All right." Rand looked up at him, over the end of the cigar. "Just one more question about that. Have you got any idea how many men had used that system to bust out of Guiana?"

"No. I'm not sure at all. Quite a good many, though. A lot escape every year, but whether they die in the bush, or drown at sea making for Venezuela, or do get back to France or somewhere else, nobody really knows. Over a thousand—that's about three men a day—try for it every year. That's the figures the officials admit to, down in Cayenne."

"So," said Rand slowly and softly, "out of all those men, there might be perhaps a couple hundred, or a couple thousand, that have had the ultimate great misfortune to get back to France, create a good false identity, and settle down. They might be rich, poor, honest, or crooked now. But, they surely make an extremely rich field for a black-mail ring to put the squeeze on. And that thousand francs you and your partner, and the rest of the lads paid, was only meant to be an entrance, an initiation, fee. 'Oh, come,' said the spider——"

THEN that seeming casualness abruptly left Rand. He flung the cigar far from him, and leaned over the table toward the other man, who sat completely silent, watching him with narrow,

staring eyes. When he spoke, his voice was hoarse, his words very swift:

"James, drunk as I am, rotten as I am, I'm a newspaperman; have been, all my life. My first reaction to this is: 'what a swell story, if I could break it and print it.' That's just because I'm a newspaperman, and can't help myself; it's in my nature to find and report the tragedy, the misery, and the drama of peoples' lives. But, my second reaction is that no dog's dog, no matter how low, should suffer from a thing such as this. You understand me? You understand what I'm trying to say?"

"Yes."

"Good! Because whoever wrote that note to you, two hundred chances to one, also wrote one to your partner also, or is going to do so. Where did you find the note?"

"Under the door of my room, when I came in, on my way to work to-night."

"Where's your room? Why didn't you duck then? Why did you come here?"

"My room's upstairs, here. I wasn't sure what I was going to do. I didn't quite understand all the implications of that note; I was kind of dazed. All a man gets for turning in an escaped convict is something like fifty francs, and that didn't seem worth while. So, I came here, kind of mechanically, half knowing it was a rainy night, and many folks wouldn't be here."

"I see. And now, if you were left alone in this, your natural first step would be to go to your partner, join with him, talk with him, see if he has got the same business put up to him. But, that would be a very bad thing for you to do. Maybe they haven't found out yet where he is, discovered his new identity. Maybe they sent you your note with the

hope that you would go to him, and thus put the finger on him for them. You see? I'm very glad you do, because my advice is to rest easy, stay undercover until to-morrow, and then go and keep your date at three o'clock at the Rue Pastioglosi in Nice, and see what you can find out there."

"You mean——"

"I mean, don't do a flaming thing up until that time. Keep quiet, and let me see what I can do for you. This thing interests me, it interests me a whole lot. I've been feeling fed-up, anyhow; I called Paris today to ask them for a vacation, and somebody up there said something about 'not being silly,' and they gave me an assignment to cover something—playing tennis. So I got drunk. But let's talk about you!"

He swung his chair a bit, flung out his long legs at another angle, pulled three black, twisted cigars and a box of matches from his jacket and put them on the table.

"You've got to talk now," he said, unsmiling. "You'll have to tell me about yourself before I can really try to do anything to get this jam shaken apart. You know what I know about you. Tell me the rest. Simply, but fully. If I have to, I'll ask you questions. Maybe it would be better if I did it that way, anyhow. You understand? All right, let's have it: you, an American, who's escaped from a French prison in Guiana, what are you doing here, working in a semipublic place, a dockside café, in Villefranche? Tell me that. Huh?"

"Yes." James's voice was very low as he spoke, and as he did so, he looked away, toward the end of the room. But, watching him, Rand knew from out of his own deep knowledge of life, that this other man was not clearly seeing those

things at the end of the room. He was staring back into all that which was behind him, all that Guiana had meant and done to him. And all that was again rising up about him, like a vast, terrible and irresistible sea to claim him, suck him back. All because of that one little piece of paper, which now itself did not even any longer exist.

CHAPTER II.

TOLD IN THE HELLO SAILOR.

RAND, who had run away from grammar school to work as a copy boy on a metropolitan paper, and since then, for some forty years, had sought out, probed into, and reported the varied and tremendous tragedies of the world, stirred uneasily on the edge of his chair. It was not, the thought ran through his brain, that this man was young, intelligent, obviously courageous, obviously honest, which made him, Rand, able to see and clearly understand the tragedy which faced the other. It was just that no man who had suffered such a thing as those Guiana prisons should be forced to return to them for any reason. That, down there, in the vile and horrible kennels they called prisons, life was worse for a man than death itself.

"Listen!" His voice was very harsh. "I can get you out of here to-night. Right away. I can get you where they'll never find you. I know; you want to stay, and stick with your buddy. But, that's not the sort of thing you learned down there, and it's not the thing for you to do. I'll——"

But the other stood up. He came around the table toward Rand and stood over him, staring at him with eyes that flamed darkly.

"No, I'll stay here. And, if you can help me here, you may do it. It

looks like I'm trapped, and I don't know how to get out of it. But I stay, until I know I can't do anything for my partner, or until he's all right. Any freedom, any chance of real escape I've still got now, he got for me. I know of you. You're Phillips Rand. I've even read the articles and the stories and the book they've written about you. You've seen too much of life; that's what you thought just now. Your idea is that no man is worth any other man's chance at freedom. Maybe you're right. But, that doesn't make it right for me."

He stopped, turned, and looked away. Rand sat watching him, absolutely silent. And at last James turned back, and stood before him, and talked down at him in that same swift, harsh voice:

"I've got to let it out. I've got to tell somebody. If I kept it in any longer, the way I feel now, I'd go nuts—right out of my head. Listen: You say you don't know me; just my name, and my face, and the fact that I was sentenced to Guiana a couple of years ago. Did you ever hear of Malcolm James? Do you know who he was?"

"Yes." Rand said it softly. "You mean the mining and oil engineer; the fellow who made the big strike in the oil fields down in the Maracaibo Basin in Venezuela."

"That's it. That's the man—my father. He died, down in French Guiana, three years ago. And before he died, he found, tested out, surveyed, and bought what will be, sometime, one of the finest oil fields in the world. I was there with him; I did a lot of that survey work for him. He sent for me from the States, right after I graduated from college, to come down and join him. And——"

James stopped again. He ran his

hands up over his face, up over his eyes, and held them there for several minutes. Then he dropped them down to his sides, and tried to smile as he went on:

"My old man was a smart engineer. He knew tropical countries and how they are run. He'd spent almost all his life down there, made almost all his money down there—all the money he put in to buy that French Guiana field. He knew all the complicated graft, the maddening slowness and stupidity of a foreigner or a foreign company, trying to get leases, permits, operation rights, and anything like square taxes in a country like that. So, just before his final trip into the jungle, he went to Cayenne, and looked up a fellow there named Gravidiere. Did you ever hear of him?"

"Yes." The word came slowly. "Maximilian Gravidiere. The half-breed representative from Guiana to the French senate. But, go on."

"That's the man—Gravidiere. Anyway, he could hold French Guiana in the palm of his hand like you can hold a glass. He ran that place; he could do anything down there. So, my father went to him. He showed him what he had, out in the bush there, and what potential wealth was there, if Gravidiere would become his partner, and fix things, the long-time leases, the permanent rights, and excise duties, the port charges for the tankers in Cayenne—the whole thing."

"I see." Rand did not look up as he spoke. He was making odd, crabbed little notations on a dirty letter back with a pencil. "And Gravidiere said, 'Yes.'"

"He said, 'Yes.' He held out for a full half interest, and knowing of him, knowing that if he wished to he could block the whole thing, my

father made Gravardiere a full partner. I was back in the bush, finishing up the last details for the survey out to the coast. The rainy season was coming, and we wanted to get out of the country before it came. So my father came back in to help me finish up. He shouldn't have done that. He already had the fever then. Anyhow, he got it worse when he did come in. He died of it before he could be transported to Cayenne."

JAMES'S voice broke abruptly. He half lifted his hands up, then lowered them again, caught them about his stout leather belt. It was quite a time before he spoke again:

"I came back to Cayenne with the body. Things were in a mess. I was my father's heir, automatically; nobody else in the family—my mother died when I was a kid. I started to straighten things out with Gravardiere, there in Cayenne. And then——"

His glance had been directed toward the floor, toward the little black stair that note had made when it had been burned, there on the tiles. He looked up and straight in Rand's eyes.

"And then one night, when I was going back from the little office, I had hired, to the hotel, a couple of big Saramacca bushmen jumped me in the dark. I packed a gat; I had been hep to that much. They were packing big hatchets; we had quite a time." Again, he tried to smile, and could not. "I killed one of them, and the other got away. And Gravardiere——"

"Gravardiere did the rest."

"Yes. He did it well. He fixed it so that I was sentenced for life to a Guiana prison, and so that I nearly got the guillotine. He fixed it so

that the American consul, or the American government, wouldn't touch my case with a disinfected pole. He had me tried, right there in Guiana, and he brought all the perfect, perjured witnesses he could find, and he filled the jury box, and fixed the judge. I never went out of Cayenne. I went from the town jail to the courtroom; to the penitentiary."

"Here." There was the sound of glass clinking against glass. "Drink that," Rand held it up. "Drink to yourself; he's dead now, and you're here, alive, and not back in that place, yet."

"I know." It was a whisper. "I read that last month, about him. He lost out somehow with his people down there, and they wouldn't reelect him to the senate. The French paper I saw said that he tried to make a political speech in the street in Cayenne, and that they turned against him, the mob did, and chased him. And that all his pals—all but one poor dog—backed out on him, deserted him there in the street. And that the mob got him finally, and burned him, lashed with wire to a bamboo trunk, out on the edge of the bush. And that when the police got there, they found nothing but bones and wire and—— Fill that again!"

"I understand you now," said Rand quite softly. "I understand things about you I couldn't get before. When you found out that Gravardiere had been taken care of like that, you called it square. You figured that he had got it for all the rotten, consistent crookedness he had been pulling all his life, and that you could, sometime, straighten things out, and get what belonged to your father, and belongs to you."

"Yes. You're right about that. Then this thing"—he jerked a hand

down toward the mark on the floor—"came, and I saw it all rolling in over me again, all of that, back down there. And I almost killed you, when you spoke out, and said you knew me. But, now it is back, and they'll probably have me, and they'll probably have Jules, too. For both of us are broke; we've got no money; nowhere near what any gang who would do a thing like this would take to keep them permanently quiet."

RAND looked up at him and slowly stroked long fingers down his long nose.

"Who's this guy, Jules, you talk so much about? Where's he now? Where does he fit—in all this?"

"It's Jules Monteuil. The lad who shot down the thirty-eight enemy planes in the War. The lad whose father was the president of the Banque Credit Generale. Yes, the lad who was drunk and ran down and killed a Paris policeman who was riding along a main boulevard at night without a light on his bike. That's the one. He got me out of Guiana. He saved me, down there. I was all through when I met him. I was just coming in when he was going out; he'd finished his actual prison sentence and was going out to serve his *doublage*. I was a kid then. You understand?"

"I think I do. But, tell me. Go right on."

"Well, they'd hung it on Jules, too. They'd called it 'murder,' and said he was drunk at the time of the accident. A couple of Radicalist papers turned against him; it was around the time of a presidential election, and he was held up as the 'rich man's son,' despite his War record, and everything else. Out of it all, he got 'life' in Guiana. His father was forced to resign from the

bank, or, so he thought. And a couple of months after Jules went to Guiana, his father died, of what the doctors called heart failure."

James stopped, reached for the bottle. As he poured, he looked at the other man.

"Understand? See why I like the guy? The only thing that didn't go wrong on him was his girl—his fiancée. She stuck along. He's here with her, now, in France. He married her, right after he got back. But, down there, when he first came, the thing almost got him, just like it almost got me. He'd pulled out of it, and he showed me how. And, after he'd gone out, to serve his *doublage*, he worked for eighteen months, about eighteen and twenty hours a day, and he starved himself, to make the price for our escape. Not only his own. Mine, too. Get me?"

For the first time, James smiled. It was not a pleasant thing to watch. "They can have me, they can send me back, if that guy goes free. He fixed the whole thing; he worked it so that we got here, when the ship from Paramaribo brought us into Marseilles. He fixed it with the boss here—Louie was a mechanic in his squadron at the front—so that I could get this job. And then, after he had done all that, he holed back in a little mountain town near the Italian border, where his girl was waiting for him, got himself a job as a stone mason and some good false identification papers, and married his girl.

"That's all. Or almost all. He partnered for me, down in the prisons; he stuck with me. I figured I'd do him the same service here, if he ever needed me. He isn't forty kilometers from here now. There was no reason for me to go back to the States; I've got no family

there, and no money. I'm known there, and might readily get picked up by the American cops. Here, I'm not known; every policeman who ever asked for my identification papers has been more than satisfied, and you're the first guy to break through and find out anything at all. Except—except—"

From his chair, Rand leaned forward and reached out a long, thin arm and placed it upon the other's shoulder.

"Now," he said quietly, "you'll have to listen to me. It may seem strange to you, but I like you, and I like the way you feel about this lad, Jules, and what he did for you. This thing is all pretty tough, and pretty complicated. Looking at it from where I sit, I think that the boys who sent you that note have got a pretty fool-proof system. We'll know more about that to-morrow. If you'll allow me the great pleasure, I'll help you what little I can. I know this country, and I know most of the mugs, the guys in the jails, and the guys who should be there, and the guys who should put them there."

Slightly, he tightened his grip and smiled.

"I just decided, about five minutes ago, that my association with printer's ink and a typewriter have been far too close, and that for the last couple of years I've had too little to be said with either. To hell with the boss in Paris, and the same with the bosses in New York; there's lots of good kids they can shoot out for the crumbs they've been wanting me to pick up. A stupid business, three hundred and fifty days out of the year. But now I've got to get to bed, or my head will fall off and just roll all over this floor. To-morrow, though, I think it'll be on better, and we can answer the in-

vitation and go over calling in Nice at the Rue Pastioglosi. I'll meet you here, out in front of this place, at two. So now you might as well open the door."

Rain still slipped in shining drops from the eaves as they stood there for a moment together in the street. But the winds had sobbed away, and, out over the sea, a dim moon broke through a dark cloud, to place a fragile finger of light on the flat waters.

Rand pointed at that, his other hand still on the younger man's shoulder.

"Clear to-morrow," he said. "If either of us were saps enough, we might take that as a good omen. I am, but I'm sober, too. Good night!"

CHAPTER III.

THE SNAKE RING.

THE Rue Pastioglosi, they found, coming there the next afternoon along the coast from Villefranche, was a small street that ran on a broken oblique from the Place Garibaldi right into the heart of the old section of Nice. It was a dark, dirty, and narrow place. Over the cobbled way, the old buildings leaned crazily in toward each other, supported here and there by arches that spanned the street. A few cats lurked in the shadows, but, in the time they spent there, they saw no other person in the street.

They walked slowly; Rand a yard or so behind the younger man, his hands jammed down deeply into his rumpled jacket pockets, a half-smoked and dead cigar in his teeth, his eyes seemingly intent on the cobbles. James walked upright and nervously, in quick little rushes, stopping every few feet to stare around him and to wait for the other man.

James had not slept all night and he was extremely nervous. Overnight, his clearly cut face had lost its natural tan, and was now white and drawn. His eyes had seemed to gain permanently that fixed, brightly searching stare they had held the night before. He had been wearing, when Rand met him earlier that afternoon outside the Hello Sailor Bar in Villefranche, an automatic pistol in addition to his knife. Rand had forced him to give up both those weapons, and leave them behind. Rand was glad now that he had made the other do so: the Rue Pastioglosi was all that he had imagined it would be.

It was he who found No. 51 after James had gone rapidly past it in one of his nervous little rushes.

"That's it," said Rand quietly in English, and shrugged a shoulder toward it.

It was a high and narrow building of rubble and plaster, very much like all the others in the street. Through the film of dust and grime that covered the narrow door, they could read the faintly legible inscription: No. 51.

Slowly, Rand pushed the door with his hand. It gave, and he entered unhesitatingly, James right behind him, his rapid, uneven breath hot on Rand's neck. The place they stood in was a small and very dirty sort of entrance hall. There were no mail boxes on the walls, no sign of who or what was within. Beyond, through a half-open door, they could see another and far longer hall, just as dirty, just as deserted and as silent as this one.

"All right," whispered James, staring into that hall. There was sweat on his face and on his hands, and he wiped that off with the sleeve of his coat. "I'll go ahead now. Yes, if they ask about you, I'll say

I won't talk without you, that you're my friend, that I have no money—as they can easily find out, and that you have. And that you must be present when they talk with me. Right?"

Rand nodded. They moved on to the end of the hall and came to a dark staircase. They climbed that, their footsteps echoing hollow and loud behind them. They came into another hall, just like the one below, and started along that, past rows of locked and blank doors. But suddenly one of the doors opened, and a man stepped forth.

He was small and bald. He was also, they saw, quite fat, and very neatly dressed, and wore gold-rimmed eyeglasses. He stood silently there, halfway between the door from which he had issued, and the other wall. They did not speak, and he did not speak, but, as they came close to him, he bowed, quite low from the waist, and pointed with a plump, ringed hand to the door from which he had come.

As James started slowly across the threshold the fat little man spoke, in French:

"This other? He is a friend of yours? He has a very good reason here?"

"Yes." James stopped and turned, bent forward just a little bit. "He has."

"Good!" The fat man's voice was soft and very calm. "He may enter then." He lifted his hands, in a rather explicit and eloquent gesture. "But your hands; out of the pockets, if you please!"

THEY entered then, the fat man sidling close after Rand. The room they came into was bare, empty, and dusty. And, as they stared around it, the door into the hall was shut with quiet swift-

ness and they heard, equally swift, the words of the fat man:

"Do not turn toward the door, please. There is just another man there, as a protective measure for myself. Just look at me, and listen to me."

The fat man walked toward the far side of the room now and stood by a tall and shuttered window which, through a broken board, allowed a pallid shaft of light into the room. That light fell at the feet of Rand and of James, and nowhere else. The rest of the big, square room was in a gray shadow.

"Please stand so," suggested the fat man in his surprisingly quiet voice. "I must ask that you let me clearly see you while I speak with you. *Mais, certainement*, you are the man who was asked to come here, and you"—his eyes passed briefly over Rand's expressionless face—"must be a very good friend of this young man, or you would not have bothered to be here, also. It is good."

The fat man stopped. He rubbed his hands down over the plumpness of his stomach. He seemed to look at them, but Rand and James knew that he did not, but was looking at the man they could not see, the man who stood so quietly between them and the door, the one sure avenue of escape from this place.

Then the fat man spoke again, his pale little eyes sharply on James's face:

"You understand why you have been asked here. It is a matter of necessity. Within forty-eight hours, without fail, you must have the sum of fifty thousand francs, or two thousand American dollars, in cash, here, at this address. One of you must leave it here, in plain sight, at the door of this room. I might suggest that to try to bring the police into

the matter would be a rather foolhardy thing. Is it not so?"

His pale eyes passed to Rand's gaunt face as he asked that question. It was, Rand told himself rapidly, a direct appeal for answer, an open demand for his reasons for being here.

"Yes." He answered in the French which he spoke as fluently and colloquially as he did English. "I agree: the police are bunglers. It is my belief that this thing can be settled without their intervention. But this man has no money of his own; you must know that, or you would not have permitted me to enter with him. And I have little or no money; that you can easily discover. You cannot make that ninety-six, instead of forty-eight, hours?"

"No." The fat man said it with no particular emphasis or emotion. "You may go now. Please back out, facing me, as you go. The door is right behind you." He had made no sign that they could see or suspect, but, without noise, as it had shut, the door opened behind them, and slowly, watching the fat man, they backed through it.

And they saw no one as they stepped into the hall, no one but the fat man, who stood in the door of the room they had left, now bowing to them, as he had bowed when they had arrived.

"A thousand thanks, gentlemen," he said in that oddly flat voice, and stepped back into the room and out of sight.

JAMES stood motionless for a moment, listening. But there was no sound, none in the hall where they stood, none from the room they had left, and no sound anywhere in this dark building. His hands and muscles flexed; it was, for him, as if he were emerg-

ing from some sort of a very bad dream. Only partly conscious that he did so, he swore aloud, and wheeled suddenly, as if to reënter the room, and there discover the truth of what had just happened.

But Rand's hand caught his arm and held him back. And he looked at that man and partly read what was in Rand's eyes, and then slowly stepped forward with him, along the hall, and toward the stairs that would lead them out, into the street, and into sunlight, clean air.

They walked in silence to the end of the Rue Pastioglosi and the edge of the Place Garibaldi. Sunlight that was as sharp as a knife was upon the broad square. Many people were about them, jostling, talking, laughing. Under a café awning across the street, a little four-piece orchestra was bravely banging forth a melody, the fat violinist puffing happily over his bow.

James brushed a hand across his eyes. In a kind of strained, harsh mumble the other just barely heard, he asked:

"You think—Jules——"

"You need a drink as a medicinal measure," said Rand, taking him by the arm. "Come over here. Keep quiet! Wait until you've had the drink."

They sat at a sidewalk table near the violinist. Rand drank beer; James, brandy. The younger man did so mechanically, muscles quivering in his hand and wrist as he lifted the little glass. "For fifty thousand francs," he said slowly. "For two thousand dollars they do this to a man. Do it to——"

The little brandy glass snapped in his hand. Barbs of it stood jaggedly forth from the flesh of his palm. But he did not seem to be aware of the pain, or of the blood. He rose to his feet and reached out to the

next table, where a customer who had now gone had left a newspaper.

"Look!" He spoke in English. "Look!" He pointed, so that Rand might see, with a finger that dripped blood. "I—it was the only article I could see from my chair. I read the headline three times before I— Jules. They——"

He stopped speaking and was silent, as if further speech was impossible. Vaguely, he looked down at his injured hand. As a very drunken or badly drugged man might, he began to jerk the glass particles from it and stop the flow of blood with his handkerchief.

The deft and silent waiter had come with a wet napkin. The other customers had turned back to their newspapers, glasses, and conversations. The orchestra was thumping into a new piece. James sat low in his chair, head down, dabbing slowly at his hand with the wet napkin the waiter had given him. Rand noticed those facts, then looked down, and read the article which was marked for him by the blood of the man who sat beside him.

It was a single paragraph tucked, in the inimitable and inexplicable French fashion, between a vermouth advertisement and the list of the daily Paris Bourse closings at the bottom of the front page. Its heading was:

FATAL DOUBLE ACCIDENT.

It reported that between the mountain towns of Martin-la-Pierre and St. Raoul, within six miles of the Italo-French border in the Maritime Alps, a man and a woman had lost their lives the preceding night by crashing through the stout guard rail of the military highway and plunging to their death in a ravine some ninety feet below. Their small

car had burned, badly defacing the bodies and making identification difficult. It was doubted by the authorities of St. Raoul that the woman would be identified at all. This was not so in the case of the man, for, obviously, in the terrific fall of the car from the highway to the ravine bottom, his papers of identity had been jarred out, and away from the burning machine.

They had established him as one Michel Lebroul, a stone mason who had, until the night of his death, been employed in the quarries at Martin-la-Pierre. His reasons for leaving his job and the town were unknown. He had been a steady workman, and liked by his employers. He had been married, and had lived with his wife in Martin-la-Pierre since his arrival in the town about nine months before. Probably the woman who was with him at the time of the accident was his wife, although this was uncertain, as no one had seen him or her leave the village, and no one had seen them upon the road leading to the Italian frontier. The official report of the local authorities was one of "involuntary death."

RAND'S hands were steady as he placed the paper back on the table. His voice was calm as he spoke to the man seated beside him. "We must go now," he said in English. "We have work to do; both of us. Just stand up quietly and come with me. That's it. Good boy." He dropped a ten-franc note on the table for the waiter. "Come on," he urged, quickly taking James's arm. "Quick-o!"

No one looked at them as they rose to go. And as they moved away from the café they heard only one man comment upon them. It was the waiter who had served them.

He spoke to the violinist, staring at the blood-marked page of the paper James had held: "Crazy Americans. The younger one, badly drunk, and aroused over the accidental death of two people, French, he very probably did not know." He wiped off the table. "And the older one, he leaves me a four-franc tip for a six-franc order! Is it that one is to think what?"

James did not speak as Rand led him across the Place Garibaldi and to the bus stop; he did not ask where they were going, or what they were going to do, as they climbed in. He stared about him with blank, uninquisitive eyes as the bus bumped along the winding shore road to Villefranche. Silently, when they descended there, he followed Rand, and they started to climb up the mountainside road and away from the lower town and the Hello Sailor Bar.

He spoke once while they toiled along that hot, steep way, but it was only to murmur Jules Monteuil's name aloud, then stagger on quietly. That same sort of dazed mood seemed to still hold him when they came to the broad, arched door of Rand's little two-room house, for he did not speak, and did not look about him as Rand ushered him in and motioned him toward the couch in the corner by the fireplace.

He sat down quietly, his hands and his body lax, staring out through the great window which ran the full length of the house and faced the sea. Below, right outside the window, was a wild and gorgeous tangle of orange trees, now in full bloom. Far down, beneath the red-roofed town, stretched the austere, dark magnificence of the headlands and the sea beyond.

But he did not clearly see or comprehend those things. He looked

into the long and shadowed room. A piano, he understood vaguely, was there, and many books, many photographs and paintings, most of them stacked in piles against the walls or upon the floor.

Something probed into his side and he reached down vaguely. A bottle was stuck in between some cushions on the couch. He lifted it slowly and looked at the label. It was brandy and the bottle was half full. He pulled out the cork and drank until the bottle was empty. As he put it down he heard, blurred by the pounding inside his brain, the jangle of a telephone bell in the next room, and close upon the sound Rand's voice caustically commanding in French.

THEN the door of the bedroom swung open and Rand strode toward him, between the piles of books, and sat down on the couch beside him. He placed a firm hand on James's shoulder.

"Listen to me," he said. Rand's voice was sharp. It cut through the thick pounding inside James's brain. "We're set. I just got hold of my man in Monte Carlo; he'll be here with the car in less than half an hour."

"For whom?"

"For me. To take me up there to St. Raoul."

"Why? Jules is—dead."

"Yes." Rand nodded, his lined face grave. "That's just why. Don't you understand?"

"No."

"I'll have to tell you then. Why do you think that gang pulled you in?"

"For two thousand bucks."

"The devil. That's as ridiculously small a price as the one you paid to get out of Guiana."

"I know." James's eyes were

clear, and wide and intelligent now. "But it is impossible, absolutely, for me to get that. It might just as well be twenty thousand."

"Surely. You're absolutely right. But, why do you think they let me into that place in the Rue Pastigiosi, after only asking me a question or two?"

"That I don't understand."

"Simply because they knew fully who I was, and what my connection was with you. To make it brief, they want to use you, and they want to use me. They know I'm a newspaperman; they know that I can see and make news out of this. And they want just that, just as they want you powerless, and unable to pay anything like fifty thousand francs, within forty-eight hours, or forty-eight days."

"You——"

"You'll have to listen to me; I've got a lot to tell you and little time to do it in. I've been on a lot of stories, in a lot of countries, since they first gave me a police card and a kick in the pants out of the city room. But, this is one of the best bets I've seen come up yet, all your personal element, and all of mine, left aside. This is one of the smartest, best-executed ideas I've ever encountered."

Suddenly, with a nervous and quick movement, Rand rose, strode to the window, strode back, to stand before the other man, staring down at him with bright, wide eyes.

"There must be literally hundreds of escaped convicts here in France whom that gang has spotted and whom they have under the screws. That's why they want you, and want me, and why they went to the crude extent of killing your friend, Monteuil. That was as a warning, to the rest, the other escaped men, those who have had the bad luck to con-

ceal their real identities and to buck the game, start all over again, and well, here in France. They want me to exploit Monteuil's death; smear it across the newspapers all over the world. And I will, because it will help you and me, as well as it will help them."

"I don't see how."

"For us it will give me a chance to see just how they did that job. It was murder. No doubt about that. Last night, up there in Martin-la-Pierre, your friend got a similar warning, one probably just like yours, and probably at about the same time. And he did, what was for him, an intelligent and courageous thing: he tried to make a break for the Italian border with his wife. Of course, they caught and killed him, but he almost won. Do you understand me?"

"I begin to."

THEIR idea is that their job was so clever that I can in no way find out how they pulled off what the authorities have already written down and closed as an accident. They want me to hint at murder, they want me to expose the facts of Monteuil's true identity, and the fact that he was an escaped convict from Guiana, and was trying to escape again, very probably because he was threatened by blackmail and exposure. You see?"

"Yes. You mean that this gang doesn't want us to go back to Guiana; that that means little or nothing to them. That they want us to pay, pay them, and would almost rather kill us than have us get away, out of France. But——

"No, hell, no! Of course not. Of course they can't go on bumping off their cash customers, or the guys they want as cash customers. But, they want, if they can, to create that

impression. They want to put the fear of a lot of things in your hearts; they figure, and right they are, too, that you'll be a pretty desperate lot of babies. For instance, they want to whip you into such a state with this thing that, when your forty-eight hours are up, you'll crack, and go back to them there, and tell them you'll do anything they say, as long as they hold off the Guiana thing on you. Then you'll be right in their bag, and they'll probably use you, as a 'runner,' in any number of dangerous and dirty jobs, shaking down the other poor 'marks,' arranging appointments, carrying messages, doing anything right up to and through murder. Work that a more intelligent—or more fortunate—mug wouldn't do. That's what they think and hope, and its no new or novel idea, either. Lots of smart crooks have been working that system ever since Pompeiian Rome.

"But, as for me, these guys think they'll let me pull this little job for myself and for them now, for the simple reason that they'll get a whole lot more out of it than I will. How else can they put it over to the other 'marks' that it wasn't suicide up there in St. Raoul, and that the guy who died wasn't a common peasant and a stone mason? Of course, they're taking the chance that I may find out something up there which will lead back to them. But it seems to me that they figure if I do, and crack smart about it, they can easily handle me."

"All right." James had stood up. He faced squarely toward the other man. "You've told me enough right now. I don't want to hear any more."

"Maybe you don't. But you're going to. I can tell you plenty, but I've not got the time. Catch this and tag second with it: I recognized

our fat friend of the Rue Pastiogliosi. His name is Louarges, or was, and he was one of the smoothest and best con-men and blackmailers in France until the *surété* nabbed him about fifteen years ago and sent him down the chutes to Guiana."

"You're sure?"

"Absolutely. But, wait a minute, will you? There's the car coming up the hill for me now. It's going to take me to St. Raoul. Yes, and you're going back and do your evening's bit in the Hello Sailor Bar. Funny, isn't it, how guys repeat themselves, in their clothes, the cigarettes they smoke, and even the music they like or play. I covered Louarges's trail about fifteen years ago. A homely, plain little rat; he was wearing a wax mask and a bald wig to-day when we saw him. But, during that trial, years ago, he kept fiddling with a big platinum ring, made in the shape of a cobra, with chip diamonds for the eyes. And the jailers must have taken that ring from him even before he left France. But since he's been back, and gotten into the money again, he's tried to duplicate that ring as closely as he could. Nothing but vanity, of course. I don't think I could have recognized him otherwise; the make-up, even the faking of the voice, were swell. But the snake ring—damn strange."

"Yes," said James slowly. "But that's not the word I'd use for it."

"Maybe not. But I can tell you something funnier than that. How do you think that gang has got all its personal and very accurate information about you and about me?"

"I don't know. Probably they've had some rat hanging around here in Villefranche, watching us. Some guy——"

"Some guy who must hang out around the Hello Sailor Bar. Some

guy who even now must be ordered to keep watch on us. All right; now I've told you enough. If I told you any more, you'd flop yourself right into a whole lot of unpleasant trouble. You go and take over your trick in the bar and wait for me to come back, and, meantime, try to figure out which guy it is who's squealed on you and on me. But give me your promise you won't jump anybody until I get back. Right?"

It came very slowly:

"Right."

"Let's go then. I've got to stop in Monte Carlo and send a wire to the office in Paris warning them that I might be working for them again, and, if so, to hold open the paper for me. I'll probably be back here around midnight; it isn't far, and this guy I've got drives like no other living man in France, and he won't live much longer doing it. Come on!"

CHAPTER IV. MARTIN'S STORY.

IT was a quarter of one when James again saw Rand. That man was grimy, happy, and whistling when he came into the Hello Sailor Bar. But his loud and abrupt entrance caused small interest in the place. Over in one corner, very drunk and equally as beligerent, three strapping sailors off a Finnish freighter, which had entered the port that night, were arguing with each other in their incomprehensible native tongue as to who should have the honor of purchasing the next drink. Bunched in silent expectation across the room from the trio, and next to Louie, the owner of the bar, were the pilot and the tug crew who had entered the ship. As Rand took his place among

the spectators, the argument was brought to a sudden conclusion by the smallest Finn. He suddenly screamed and violently brought together, his arms vied about their necks, the heads of his two companions. He then pushed from him their loosely unconscious forms and strutted forward to the bar, where he ordered himself a grog and, with the glass in his hand, asked the room in very bad English if it possessed any man better than himself. In English almost equally as bad, James answered him from behind the bar. The Finn swung, quite agilely. But James held a rum bottle by the neck, and James's dark, steady eyes held something that the Finn understood, even if he did not, at the same time, admire it.

"Shove off." James's voice was flat. "Beat it, sailor!"

"Ja," said the Finn. He grinned, paying for his drink. "Ja."

He strode across the room, reached down and caught his two unconscious shipmates by the collars of their jumpers. He tried to drag them upright. The attempt was unsuccessful. He grunted, grinned, then tightened his grip and started forward, dragging them behind him on the floor, as he would drag sacks of meal.

The feat appealed to the French patrons of the bar. They applauded loudly, and remembering the long and cobbled way between the bar and the docks, they followed the Finn into the street, uttering cheering words of advice.

Even Louie, the owner, waited just to lock and pick up the cash box, and yell an order to James to close the place for the night. Then he followed the crowd in the wake of the turbulent Finn.

Only one of that small group of spectators did not run out into the

street. Rand approached this man and said, very quietly:

"I would talk with you, fellow. I would like to buy a drink in your honor, to your success. What do you say?"

The man he addressed was broad-shouldered and thickly set. His hair, a coarse, heavy mop, grew down over his brow to within an inch of his beetling eyebrows. His eyes were round and dark, like pieces of metal that had been forced into the roundness of his face, whose plainness was unrelieved by the flat nose and long gash of a mouth. He straightened as Rand stood before him, and one of his tattooed hands came up along his thigh, and under his short fisherman's jacket.

Rand smiled at that. "I asked you to have a drink from my own bottle." His hands were loosely by his sides, and he stood quite still. "I would like to see your knife, but there is a cop out there in the street now, and you would not get very far if you showed it to me. Come then, let us sit here. I am dusty, and I am thirsty, and I am tired. I have been to St. Raoul, way up near the border, since six o'clock, and back again. You know St. Raoul? No? A dull place; no lads of vision, of ambition, such as there are here. But, what will you drink?"

James brought Rand's special bottle of cognac and two glasses on a tray. He was, as he stood by that table, transferring the contents of his tray to it, the only man of that trio who seemed at all nervous or held by any undue emotion.

RAND sat in his favorite position, way back in the chair, his long head over on one side, his hands hanging lax, his feet and legs stretched far out. The man he had asked to drink sat stolidly

but a little sidewise and forward on his chair. One of his hands was on the table, near the glass of brandy that had been ordered for him; the other was almost out of sight, resting down upon one thigh, and close to the high waistband of his trousers.

Raising the bottle, Rand poured out the dark, strong liquor. "*Santé*," he said, and lifted his glass. The flat-faced man seated across from him did not stir or speak. Rand looked up at James. "You know Martin, here? Of course; Martin comes here almost every night. Yes, he has been here every night this week, except last night and the night before. There is a reason, Martin? Is it not so?"

But the man he called Martin did not answer. He raised the hand that had been upon his thigh closer to the waistband of his trousers, and his small, metallic-looking eyes lifted up from Rand's face and passed to the open door, as if measuring it, and the steps a man who went at the full run would have to take to reach it.

He only took his gaze from that when Rand spoke once more. Even so, Rand did not speak to him, but to the brown, lean man who wore the apron of a bartender and still stood beside the table:

"Martin, here, is a friend of the man we saw in Nice this afternoon. Yes, of Louarges. But that one, Louarges, he is no friend of Martin's; that I found out, up in St. Raoul, where I have just come from." Slowly, Rand's voice droned off into a silence. All his attention was openly now upon the man called Martin. For Martin had pushed back from the table, kicked his chair away from him, and in Martin's right hand was a long, straight, wood-hafted fisherman's knife.

Rand nodded. Softly, he asked:

"You think you could kill both of us here with that, and then safely get away? You would add one brace of murders to another? Do not be so stupid, Martin. Sit down. Do you think that I would come here, like this, if I did not know that they would surely catch you if you tried what you are considering now? They would find many things if you did that, Martin, many things that they will not find, if you sit quietly here and talk with me. Put the knife there, on the table, or back into your belt; it doesn't matter. Drink; and this time to my health!"

His quick, quiet smile came over his face. With a shrug he indicated James, still standing in a strained sort of rigid silence beside them:

"It would be better if that man closed and locked the doors while we talked. It is late and past the closing hour, anyhow. Come on, lad; close 'em up as Louis ordered. And you, Martin. If you have any fear of the two of us here, alone with you inside this locked room, I will go and call a policeman, and he can come and sit here while we talk. No? I do not think so myself. Just like friends, the three of us. That is it. And now——"

He stopped and turned on his chair. James had shut and locked the door. He was now walking back across the room, and toward the men at the table. He came slowly. His head was down, and his neck and shoulders were arched forward slightly. There seemed to be no flesh on his face; the skin appeared to be tightly drawn right over the bones, even pulling back the lips from his teeth, the lids from his intently staring eyes.

Rand saw that. And the man he had called Martin saw that. And then, very swiftly, the man named Martin sprang up, uttering a deep,

guttural cry, whipping out his knife in the same manner and the same moment that James brought forth his.

RAND stopped it. It was not at all an easy thing for him to do. Very silently now, crouched down, those two men were circling each other, their knife hands up and back toward their shoulders, their free arms rigid and bent out protectively before them. Rand was forced to haul out the automatic that he had gotten just before he had started on his trip to St. Raoul.

He yelled at them, and let them see the pistol. He warned James that he would step in behind him and batter him over the skull with the barrel; and Martin that he would shoot a number of large holes in him if he tried to come forward after he had knocked the other man out.

"It's you," he accused James. "What's got up your back? If you think this mug here murdered your friend, Monteuil, you're wrong. He had something to do with it sure, but he didn't pull the actual job or anything like it. Now, drop that knife, or I'll let you have it over the knob with this. I'm no blinking good with these things; I haven't even held one since the Boer War, and I might do you a lot more harm than I mean to. Drop it, you hear me? I know you feel a lot for that partner of yours, but don't forget he's dead and you're alive. Try to remember that—will you?"

"Yes." After a moment James whispered it, then turned his back on both those other men, to stoop down and snap, then snap again, the blade of his knife. When he finally straightened up and swung back, Rand and the man called Martin were seated once more at the table,

and the blade of Martin's knife shone dully in a far corner.

"Come over here," ordered Rand. "Sit down. Martin here is going to listen to reason, and he knows why he's going to do so. You know him; you've known him around the town ever since you've been here. But I don't think you knew that Martin served about fourteen years as a guard in Guiana.

"Fifteen years five months," said Martin heavily, his eyes on the table, and was then silent again.

"For fifteen years," corrected Rand gravely. "During that time, of course, he met a lot of prisoners. Louarges was one of them. And, as Martin knows, Louarges bribed Martin to let him and two other men escape. How long ago was that, Martin?"

"Eight years ago; just before I could retire and come home."

Rand nodded, rolling a cigar between his fingers, his eyes half closed.

"That's what I thought. But how long ago was it that Louarges wrote you that letter and told you to come and see him, or he would let the cops know what you'd done, in aiding him out of Guiana?"

"Three months ago, Thursday."

"And he told you he'd make you rich if you would join in and play with him in this blackmail game and, if you didn't, he'd put the screws down on you."

"Yes."

"And when you went to see him again he told you that James, here, was working in this place, and that Monteuil was up in Martin-la-Pierre. And he asked you about me and anybody else who James here might possibly turn to for aid in getting his blackmail money. Then he gave you the warning notes to give to James, and to Monteuil, and he

told you to watch Monteuil, and, if he tried to get away, to kill him. Is that right?"

"That's right."

"But you were still more of an honest man than you were a crooked one, and you couldn't see doing that murder job yourself. So you hired a couple of renegade Italians hiding here in town. And you described Monteuil to them and what road Louarges thought Monteuil would probably take if he did try to get away, and you gave that pair of killers almost all the money you had, and you got them an old Gras carbine, one like you used to carry down in Guiana. You sneaked them up there and they did the job."

RAND halted. His gaze shifted quietly from face to face. But both men were silent, both men were watching him, waiting for him. He shook his head at them. "What am I," he asked, "a pipe organ?" They did not answer, did not even appear to have heard, as if too deeply interested by the recital he had not finished to even think of answering him. He moved jerkily on his chair and cursed them and reached over for his bottle. From it he filled his glass. He drank, shuddered, and finished the glass. He looked at the man he called Martin.

"But those two wop killers you hired weren't overly careful; they'd forced you to pay them in advance, and, although they did the job the way Louarges planned it out for you to do, personally, they left a couple of marks behind. Oh, they did a sure enough job, all right. But I found one of the carbine slugs, where a shot had missed, and gone through the panel and into the woodwork of the car frame. The bodies were fixed up all right so nobody

could tell they had been murdered by rifle fire.

"But when they drove the car through the fence, one of them left a footprint in the soft earth of the road shoulder, and he didn't cover it up. And farther on down the road, about three kilometers from there and almost to the border, I found the carbine, down in a gully. No finger prints but, up on the bank, the same footmark. Of course, I thought it was you until I got back here and saw how really big your feet are. And then there had been two men up there on the job, and I traced them as far as the border, right up to the barb wire, where they crawled through that night."

The man called Martin was trying to speak. His throat, his face and lip muscles were working convulsively. Finally it came forth in a cracked, whistling sort of whisper:

"They got away—back into Italy?"

"It looks like it. You didn't think they could, or would try, did you? That's why you thought they'd do a perfect job for you, instead of such a sloppy one. They got over, but the guards caught them; they were holding them on the Italian charge for the Milanese police when I got there, and they were pretty surly, and all they would tell me was 'look up a mug called Martin, in Villefranche.' The French won't try to extradite, there's no French charge against them, anyhow, and, now they've been caught, back on Italian soil, they'll probably get life sentences for the job they pulled over there. But that's lucky for you, hey, Martin?"

If Martin knew an answer he did not make it. He sat staring with those small, metallic and absolutely expressionless eyes, straight before him.

"I said," repeated Rand wearily,

leaning a bit more forward in his chair, "that it was lucky for you. Maybe you don't understand. Maybe you will when I tell you that I and James, here, will let you slide out, get away from France, if you can make it worth our while."

Martin spoke then. The words rushed from him:

"I got no money. I got nothing. My pension for a year, I gave it to those two for—that. There is——"

"Shut up," suggested Rand. "We know you haven't got anything like fifty thousand francs, and, if you did, it wouldn't do us the hell of a lot of good, anyhow. We're not after that; we're after more than that. What we do want to know is what you know about Louarges; is he the guy running this ring, is he the guy who put the screws on you, on James, on Monteuil?"

"I don't know. I am not sure. I think so, and then again, I do not think so. Louarges, when I saw him once, spoke of the 'others,' but he spoke of them as though they were not many. Then one other time he spoke of the boss. That was the last time I saw him, when I promised to do that job up there for him. He was quite happy when I said I'd do that. He laughed, and he told me he had been talking about me to the boss, and that if I handled this first job all right, there would be a lot in it for me on the others. And he told me to come back in two days—that's to-morrow—at ten o'clock in the morning, and he would see about another job."

RAND smiled a little then and lifted up in his chair.

"That's what I meant when I asked you if you had anything for us. Tell me this: do you know where Louarges lives?"

"No. Always I have met him in

empty rooms, in old, empty buildings, and always in a different room in a different building."

"And there have been other men with him?"

"Always one man who steps right behind you and shuts the door, while you face that one, Louarges. And I think more, although I have never seen them."

"Quite possible. Where were you going to-morrow?"

"To a place in the old quarter of Nice, a number in the Rue Pastiglosi."

"Yes, No. 51. Well, you're not going, or I wouldn't advise you to. We were there this afternoon, and it's not a very nice place to go to. Yesterday there was a Spanish coaster, a schooner, anchored out here toward the port side of the breakwall, which was supposed to pull out for Bilboa and the north coast to-day. Has she left yet?"

"No." It seemed to be increasingly difficult for Martin to speak. "I have been thinking about her, watching her. She was late in getting some of her running gear. But she will leave very soon."

"Catch her then. You should have caught one like her before, and not fallen so flat for this guy, Louarges. But I know how you felt and feel. Consider yourself lucky now, though; more lucky than myself and this boy, here, for we'll always have to remember how we all but killed you, and should have, but didn't have the heart to do it. Get out now; James will let you."

Martin stood up then. He tried to speak, he tried to thank them, but the words he sought choked in his throat. He turned finally and walked away where James stood rigidly by the open door.

Martin did not look up at him as he went through the door. He stag-

gered as he turned down the cobbled, steep way which led toward the harbor. Standing stiffly there in the doorway, James could hear the clumsy slur of his feet over the cobbles, and from time to time see his dark shape pass through the pale patches of street light.

Patiently, intent on nothing else, he waited there. He saw a lantern being lit in the darkness of the dockside, and he saw the familiar stoop of Martin's shoulders in that light as the man reached down and grasped for a dory painter made fast to a ring in the old stone dock. He watched that lantern being waved slowly to and fro, and he saw another lantern waved back in answer from the after deck of the schooner. He stood there until he saw the dory come up under the schooner's quarter, and, in the light cast down from on deck, Martin's form outlined as it swarmed up a sea ladder and on board.

James smiled. It seemed that some indescribable but awful weight had just gone from him. "The poor rat—it's not him. It's Louarges, and those other guys." His whisper broke off. He turned slowly back into the room, closing the door behind him.

RAND sat there as if asleep, his head low on his chest, when James got back to the table. Blinking, he raised his head and eyes as the other sat down.

"What do you think of that?" he asked thickly.

"I don't know. I won't be sure for a very long time. You're positive he'll make out all right, that they might not catch him and make him squeal?"

"Not very positive at all, no. But he's bound for Spain now. And if he was caught and did squeal, it

wouldn't make much more hell for us, anyhow. No, things are as bad for you and for me as they possibly could be. Called up my office in Paris when I got the Monteuil story in my pocket. They suggested that I was drunk, and I countered with the idea that they were a flock of flaming liars. Quite a bit of long-range invective. It ended when they told me they wouldn't print a word of mine until they'd had 'police proof' or sent another man down from the office to check up on me. Then they cut me off. The dogs!"

With the complete accuracy of many years of practice, he reached out for the brandy bottle. James's voice came to him as he poured his glass full:

"Well, what now? That guy is gone; you made me let him go. And we got little or nothing from him, except a lot of talk. I've heard so much of that I'm going goofy with it. Talk—nuts! I want action; I want to get to that guy Louarges!"

Rand nodded up at him.

"I imagine I know quite how you feel. I just realized now that I've been talking so ruddy much in the last twenty-four hours that I haven't had a real drink. But as for you, actually, the only thing to do, as I see it, is to wait. That's an old and not a bad stunt; let 'em come to you. Let 'em find out that their old buddy, Martin, has unsociably severed connections, and that my story giving the gang their needed publicity has not been published. Let 'em come and knock on the door. Yes, my door. Good place for you; take a hundred gendarmes, with bloodhounds, to catch a man up there on the mountain behind the house, or on the slope this side of it, toward the town."

Rand reached out across the table for his hat.

"Don't know," he said hoarsely, "if the idea holds any attractions for you, but I'm going up to my house now, and have a bit of food and maybe play the piano. Might as well come on along. What else you going to do now?"

"I don't know."

"Good, because you might help me in getting up the hill right now. I'm either a little bit drunk or awful tired, as I stand. But, no matter. Close up this joint."

THE first soft colors of the dawn were on the far rim of the sea as they climbed the road up to Rand's little house. The sun, the hue of tarnished copper through the clouds that banked it, was just showing as Rand weaved in toward his door, the big, hand-wrought key in his unsteady fingers. Broad daylight came, across the sea and up through the misty olive and orange orchards, while they sat there in the long room, Rand slouched over the piano, the younger man on the couch in the corner.

Rand desultorily played the piano. Dully, sitting there, James realized that the other man played well, even brilliantly. Then, through the slow, tremendous pressure of his weariness, his hopelessness, one thought came clearly to him, and he got up and went over to the piano. Rand did not look at him; he was trying some difficult passages with his right hand.

James tapped him on the shoulder. "Listen," he said hoarsely, "you can't fold up. Not now. They'll rub you out, just as quickly as they did Monteuil, for what you've done already. Snap out of it; let's have a little food, and try once more to dope this thing out. You're still sober enough for that."

"Don't be silly." Rand began to

play loudly with both hands. "I'm drunk now. Nicely so. And, as I told you down in the bar, I'm fed beyond the ears with conjecture. As you said, 'to hell with it!' Let's have a little—action—"

His hands slipped on the keys, his body on the stool, as he spoke. He tried to catch himself, and James tried to catch him. Neither was successful. He landed, full length and limp, on the dusty carpet. He rolled over once so that his face was up, and he could dimly see the other man. "This is just as good an idea as any other," he muttered. "Think I'll sleep." Then he rolled over, once more, so that he was completely out of sight beneath the piano.

James stood there for what was possibly five minutes, looking down at Rand. Then he laughed, not at Rand, but at himself. He turned, moving swiftly, and went through the door into the other room and to the little alcove that served as kitchen. There he found bread, cheese, black French coffee. He ate all the bread and the cheese; drained the pot of coffee he made.

A mirror, for no good reason, was fastened above the little stove as he stood there eating, he looked at himself in it. He nodded at himself.

"You look nuts," he whispered. "You look like some thing that would send children screaming to their mothers. And you look just like a guy who's had the guts scared out of him by a lot of silly talk, and hasn't had the strength, or the savvy, to do what should be done. Haven't you waited long enough now—waited too long?"

He strode back into the living room. Rand still slept in the same position beneath the piano, his snores resounding regularly through the room. James bent briefly over him, and, when he straightened,

Rand's small .22-caliber automatic pistol was in his hand.

He examined that carefully, turning it over, withdrawing the cartridge clip from the butt, scrutinizing the cartridges, testing the action.

"O. K." He spoke very softly, sliding the gun into his side trousers pocket, under the overhand of his loose jacket. "If he wasn't an outright liar, my pal, Martin, was due in the Rue Pastioglosi at ten o'clock. Yes, and I'd hate like hell to see that bird, Louarges, disappointed in anything. Maybe I'll be a rotten substitute, but, who knows?" He looked down at the sleeping man, and he smiled. "As for you, thanks a lot. When I come back, if I come back, or even if I don't come back, you'll have your action!"

CHAPTER V. ACTION.

A CLOCK he had seen in the Rue de la Republique when he got off the bus from Villefranche, had read a quarter of nine. But it must be now, he knew, well after ten o'clock. For he had wandered for what he knew was over an hour, seeking the Rue Pastioglosi. Rand, the other time, had come directly onto it from the Place Garibaldi. He had tried to do the same thing to-day, but, somehow in his blurred mental condition, he had missed.

"Like you miss everything, you fool," he whispered to himself, standing there at a street corner. Then he looked up and the blur of fatigue upon his eyes cleared. High on the wall of the corner building, printed in neat characters, were the words: Rue Pastioglosi. A kind of grin came to his face. He wiped one hand, his right, down along the back of his jacket, then rapidly took out

and transferred to his right jacket pocket the little automatic. "So," he whispered, and started forward into the Rue Pastioglosi.

He walked slowly. He stumbled and occasionally slipped as he walked, very conscious that he did so, and extremely glad that he could so without deliberate acting. His clothes, he knew, were rumpled and spotted; they had not been off his body for nearly forty-eight hours. Against the drawn whiteness of his face, his unshaven beard was a dark, dirty smear that accentuated the glaring wildness of his eyes and his matted hair. "You look nuts," he told himself dimly. "Not much kidding about it; you almost are."

Then he was at the door of No. 51. He stopped and swayed before it. He lifted his hands and pawed them over his face. He uttered low, guttural sounds. He staggered toward the door and butted saggingly against its grimed panels. It was open. He half fell, half walked, in.

The little entrance hall, and the hall beyond, were just as he had seen them the day before. They were wholly deserted and silent except for himself and the noise he made. His dragging, heavy footsteps reverberated through the place. The stairs as he mounted them creaked under his unsteady tread. And when he went into the upper, second, hall, he fell three times, sprawling across the floor, to lie there in the dust, babbling to himself, repeating little broken bits of curses and incoherent sentences.

But, slowly, each time, he dragged himself up and went on, until at last he came to the door from which the bald, fat man had issued yesterday, and which he and Rand had entered. He stood before the door, uncertainly pushing back the tangle of his hair from his red-rimmed eyes

and haggard face. Then, as if he hardly saw it, he reached out a hand and pushed against it, with the violent suddenness of a man whose strength is fitful and uncertain.

The door swung back silently. That same shaft of light, smaller now, though, because of the difference in the hour, fell into the room through the broken shutter in the high window. Forward, into that path of light, he staggered.

The room was empty. He muttered to himself, then cursed, in what was now a sharply hysterical voice.

"M'sieur," he said thickly aloud; "M'sieur, it is I—No. 273744—I——" Then he almost screamed, for only his own voice came back to him. But, finally, he turned and left the room and went along the hall.

In the hall he repeated the same cry, those same words of identification and appeal.

There was perhaps a dozen rooms. He went in and out of all of them, stumbling and calling thickly. Then he came to the far end of the hall and the staircase. He mounted that, and came to the third floor and continued along it, just as he had done below. That place was just the same. All the doors opened to him, but all the rooms were empty. Even the last one, right below the rickety little ladder which pointed up toward the dusty and cobwebbed skylight overhead.

He stood for a time in silence in the last room. He faced the blank walls, his hands slackly by his sides, his breath coming unevenly. Then, shambling very slowly, talking in an incoherent and half audible mutter to himself, he started to turn around and toward the door.

But it was shut. And at each side of it stood a man. One was Louarges. The other was a head taller than Louarges, and his skin was al-

most exactly the same color as the blackened automatic he held steadily and straightly at his right hip. Those two did not speak. They stood in silence and unmoving; Louarges's plump hands caught lightly over the gold watch chain he wore across his waistcoat. They just stood looking at him, waiting for him.

HE lifted his haggard and colorless face and held out his shaking hands to them.

"Been all over," he mumbled. "Been all over since I was here. No money—no chance my getting money. Haven't eaten, slept. Looking for money, your money, all over. Last night, police started to look at me in the streets. One followed. Ducked him. Ran until I fell down and couldn't run any more. That's why—why I'm here. Do anything you want, but don't send me back, don't send me——"

He uttered a sort of sob. He fell limply forward and toward them, one arm caught peculiarly under his body, the other out and up, as if to protect himself from some blow he could only dimly expect.

How long he lay that way he could not afterward remember. It was, he knew, many minutes. During that time he did not move, and he did not open his eyes, or lift up his face from the dust on the floor. And, for a great part of that time, those two stood above him, just as silently and as motionless. He could hear their even, regular breathing, and that was all.

Then one of them spoke. It was the black man, the Negro, he who held the automatic:

"You think he's faking?"

"Shut up!" It was like the hiss of a snake.

A curse came back. "A *bas* with

that! Outside with it!" James could sense the big Negro's bodily tension. "The boss is waiting outside now, and he won't wait forever!" There was a slurring sound as the Negro stepped forward, then kicked James—heavily and almost half upright. James let his body and head roll loosely, he even blankly opened his eyes part way, but he rolled back and into the position he had first been in, one arm, his right, under his body, his left sprawled out before him, the fingers wide.

"He's out." The Negro spoke. "And that other—the old man—has not yet come." There was the very faint sound of stealthy forward movement again. But, this time, the Negro did not kick once; he kicked and kicked—brutally and savagely. James made no movement, no sound. His teeth were pressed against his lower lip until the blood trickled. And, above him, he could hear the quick, nervously rasping intake of Louarges's breath, then Louarges's voice:

"Enough of that. He did not say kill him. Go get the boss. Let him see for himself. He wants this one conscious, and he won't be conscious, not for a long time. Move!"

The black man made no audible answer, and James could hear no other sound. Little eddies of dust stirred and rose about his face, and he knew that the door of the room had been opened, shut, and again opened, and that now there was a fourth man in the room.

"*Voici.*" It was the big Negro speaking. "You see? Completely out."

"But yes." That voice was deep and, to James, like a terrific electric current through his body. It was the voice of Gravardiere, the man he thought dead. But, Gravardiere was

dead. That same voice spoke once more: "Pick him up, Bidaine! Hold back his head and pour cognac into him. Quickly! Is it that I am to stand here all day, waiting for rats like you to do such a simple job? Straighten him up!"

JAMES could hear the whistling of the big Negro's breath, feel its warmth upon his neck as the man advanced and stooped down over him. With a last definite effort of the will, he held his body motionless, but he could not hold shut his eyes. He opened them, just a very little bit, in a flickering glance.

The Negro who had entered with Louarges was bending down over him, his hands reaching out for James's body. But behind the black, in that fractional part of a second that his eyes were open, he saw the man who stood behind him. And that man was Gravardiere; the great, hooked nose, the thin, pale-lipped mouth, and the deep-socketed eyes, those were Gravardiere's.

James screamed. It was a physical reflex, the pouring forth of the surcharged air held in his lungs. His body and his head lashed up and out. He struck with his skull, almost as he would strike with his fist. He caught the black man above him across the mouth and nose. He wriggled away and from under the man, and his right hand, where it had been strainingly locked for so many minutes, brought out the little automatic from his right jacket pocket.

But he did not fire first. Either Louarges or Gravardiere fired first. Only one of those bullets hit James glancingly in the left shoulder. The others hit the big body of the Negro who was between him and the other men. James held him, his left hand locked with a mad, terrible grip in the other's clothing. The Negro

screamed; he bit and kicked; then his body stiffened, collapsed, right over and upon James's.

A slapping stream of bullets hit the Negro then. They lurched and moved it, and enabled James to see. Louarges stood crouched down in the doorway. It was Louarges who was firing as he backed out the door, and behind Louarges, dimly, was Gravardiere. Seeing him, seeing him move then, Louarges stopped and fired at him point-blank.

His first shot flecked flesh from James's scalp. His second ripped a path of fiery agony through James's thigh. His third smashed into the ceiling. Then James swayed up from behind the dead black man and shot Louarges cleanly through the brain.

That was James's last conscious effort. His strength and his body gave then, and he toppled sidewise, seeing, through the spectral blur of his pain, the dead body of Louarges, beyond the doorway, and hearing a wild, pounding sound that he could not clearly understand. But, he knew, lying there, fumbling at his gun, trying to lift and fire it in a dim sort of mechanical gesture, that Gravardiere was no longer here, that Gravardiere had escaped.

James sat slumped beside the dead Negro for a long time. In that time he was not very sane. He dropped the gun he held and loosely clasped his hands about the ragged flesh wound in his thigh. He laughed, in a strange sort of hysterical relief and triumph, and the faint, spent waves of his laughter were echoed back to him from the dark hall.

But after a while the slow bleeding of his torn leg stopped, and a consciousness of what he had done and what had happened came fully to him. He stood up, supporting himself along the wall. Louarges

lay on his back, his hands and his mouth open.

James turned the negro over with the toe of his shoe. He stared for many minutes at the twisted face. "Your name," he whispered harshly, "was Bidaime, and you perjured yourself against me, in my trial at Cayenne." Then he stood silent, remembering Gravardiere. But there was no sound. "He's gone," he told himself in that same harsh whisper. "He's got away. Somehow, he always does."

That thought made him silent. So he's not dead, he thought. That was some other man they burned for him, down in Cayenne. Gravardiere—then he's the "Negro from Cayenne" they talked of down in the prisons, the one that ran the escape system. It must have been his system that got me out, and Jules. But, he was in France then, still in good standing, and in the senate, and some of his partners, some big, black boy like Bidaime, here, ran us through, and either double-crossed Gravardiere or never knew my real name.

HE swayed down and squatted in a sort of crouch beside the body of Bidaime. He went systematically through the clothing and over the body. He found money and three extra clips for the man's automatic pistol, and a packet of heroin. But he left all those things there and turned and went out into the hall, to where the body of Louarges lay.

He looked up. The skylight hatch was open; through it he could see the blue, cloud-flecked sky. There were fresh marks on the rungs of the rickety ladder leading up to it. The steps, he thought, of a heavily and hastily running man—of Gravardiere.

"I don't understand," he told him-

self. "He could have stayed and probably killed me. But he ran; and I don't think he fired a shot. Maybe, though, he's coming back. But before he does——"

He looked down at Louarges. The slug which had killed him had knocked away his cleverly arranged facial mask, and the bald wig he wore.

James's teeth clicked as he searched that body, and he was taut with a nausea he could hardly control. But it was upon that corpse that he found what he dimly, stubbornly sought; some sign, some indication, that would lead him on from here and to Gravardiere.

It was a small piece of white paper, folded several times and thrust into one of Louarges's vest pockets. It was typewritten, and sopped with blood. Only one small fraction of it, right at the bottom, could James read. That was nothing but a number, two numbers. Both he recognized and understood. One was a *numero de matriculation*, the number some man had received when entering the Guiana prisons. The other, written opposite it on the little sheet, was a telephone number, with the abbreviated letters of a departmental telephone exchange in a small town in the mountains in back of Nice.

James tore away all but that little strip which bore the two numbers. "That's the identification of some other poor devil," he whispered. "Louarges was probably putting him through the squeezer for Gravardiere. But maybe this poor guy here"—he looked down at the slip of paper—"over in Bejan, will fall in with me. Maybe he'll listen to me, and maybe he knows a lot more than the little I know. Together, we can——"

He became silent, to turn and hob-

ble toward the shuttered window at the end of the hall. Through the small crevices in it he looked searchingly down into the street below. As far as he could see, the Rue Pastioglosi was quiet and deserted. As he had always seen it, he told himself. Like a street of the dead. He smiled grimly at that.

"You don't know," he told himself, "why Gravardiere left. But, also, you don't know why he hasn't come back."

He looked up at the skylight; he studied the ladder leading to it, and realized his strength was not great enough, and his wounds too great, to permit him to climb it and go that way. He turned and faced down the hall. With his shoulder and one hand supporting him against the wall, his gun held waveringly in the other, he moved slowly but steadily forward.

It was steady and acute agony for him to move so. But somewhere he found strength and courage that somehow kept him upright and moving until at last he stood at the door which gave upon the street.

The Rue Pastioglosi was no longer deserted. A man stood there in its gray stillness, four or five doors up the street from No. 51. And that man was Rand, and had seen him. He was starting toward him now. In an odd sort of half panic, half anger, James cursed and turned, starting to run the other way. But he could not; his wounded leg gave beneath him and he sagged over, to lie still, listening to the dull beat of the other's approaching steps.

He tried to speak to Rand when that man leaned over him; he tried to curse him. But the words would not issue from his throat and then, quite fantastically, Rand's gaunt figure, the Rue Pastioglosi and the small strip of blue sky overhead all

seemed to swirl with a dipping, uncontrollable rapidity about him. He knew he was fainting.

CHAPTER VI.

TURNUED DOWN.

IT was the swift motion of the car, the cold wind against his face, that awoke him. He blinked and sat up, groaning just a little with the effort. Rand sat beside him, far down on the seat, his long knees up near his chin. He looked over and smiled quietly.

"Feel better now?"

"A little."

"You should; we had to wash you, bandage you, shave you, get you all new clothes."

"Who's 'we'?"

Rand indicated the hunched, broad form of the man at the wheel.

"Fritz. The guy who drives for me. He's the lad that took me up to St. Raoul; driven for me ever since I've been on this coast. Great guy; served three hitches in the legion. Was staff chauffeur for a couple of generals. Then he got winged in the leg in a little raid up near Colomb-Bechar, and they had to discharge him as 'physically unfit.' If he is, I would have hated like hell to be around when he was 'fit.' But how about you? If you're rational enough to listen to all this idle talk you're able to tell me what happened to you. Got your bit of action, didn't you?"

"Yes. I did." James had sunk back in the seat, his eyes all but shut, his brain and body lulled by the cool wind against his face. "I met Gravardiere. He's alive; not dead." He spoke slowly and calmly, as if in recital of some facts that had happened a long time ago. "I went to the Rue Pastioglosi. Louarges and a big Cayenne Negro who had perjured

himself against me in my trial were there. Then Gravardiere came. We fought. I killed Louarges and the Negro. Shot them. They're both dead. But Gravardiere got away; he was behind Louarges. Where are we going?"

"Bejan."

"That was the place marked on the piece of paper I found there."

"Yes. Who had that?"

"Louarges."

"What was Gravardiere doing there?"

"I'm not sure. Those others, before he came in, said something about his wanting me 'conscious.'" He turned to look at the other man. "I was lying on the floor, acting as though I were unconscious; that's how it happened."

"I see." Rand nodded. "I understand now."

"What do you understand?"

"A lot of things. First of all, why Gravardiere took such a chance as to be there. Perhaps you have forgotten—and I know I had—that you, through the death of your father, were automatically made full partner with Gravardiere in those oil lands down there. Of course, we both know that that property was his reason for railroading you into prison. But why didn't he have a dozen Negroes jump you in Cayenne, instead of two, when and if he wanted you wiped out? Why didn't he push it through, when he had the local political power to have you sent to the guillotine, instead of letting you receive a life sentence?"

"I don't know. My head is still giddy. Why did he?"

"Yes, 'why did he?' And why did he show up in the Rue Pastioglosi to-day, taking such a chance, and with only two of his own lads to back him up, and want you brought to 'consciousness'? For

only one reason: he wants the absolute right and title to those oil lands of your father's. I'll lay you all the money I've got and the next bottle of rum I see that he had quit-claim papers in his pocket when he came to the Rue Pastioglosi to-day. It all points to it; he wanted you to assign, clearly and fully, all your partnership share to him. He's a French citizen, and a renegade now, but, with that clearance by you, he could sell those oil rights through some third party and pick up a tremendous fortune. But even in his good old days, when he was in good standing in Guiana and put over the original job on you, he didn't want you killed."

YOU mean he was trying to force me into relinquishing my share to him, my fortune, by trapping me into a prison sentence; then, later, after I'd served a bit, coming to me with the proposition that he would get me out if I made over my share to him?"

"Just that. And he must have been so sure of you, and that you would do that, that he got a little careless. But, anyhow, at the time you escaped, he was back in France. Probably some one of his black understudies in Guiana double-crossed him cheaply for the price of your escape money. Anyhow, you got out and away from him, and now he's trying to get you back in again. This is how he works. He slowly builds clever, complex webs. You see, despite all that's happened to you, you're an American citizen, and he's a French one, in very bad standing. If you died, even if you had been murdered there in Cayenne or officially guillotined, he would have a long, costly, and dubiously successful legal battle through the American courts before he could get any-

where near a clear title to that oil property. So——"

"So he's done this."

"Yes. The patterns fit. You're not the only one in the web; there are probably hundreds of others, too. But you're one of his richest prizes, and he's after you as hard as he can go. You didn't surprise me an awful lot when you told me just now that he was still alive instead of dead, as advertised. For when I came out of my drunk this morning and crawled from under the piano, I found a sound amplifier, a regular, high-power microphone, in the corner of the room, and, outside the house, telephone wires, buried under the ground. I was to—fragile—to walk, so I called up Fritz in Monte, and he came over and got me in the car. On the way into Nice we stopped at the foot of the hill and I dropped in on the Hello Bar and your old boss, Louie. Same thing there, only two microphones. It seems from that, if my powers of deduction are any good at all, that ever since the first afternoon, when we put on our brother act in the Rue Pastioglosi, they've been listening to every important conversation we've had."

"But——"

"Now you wait a minute more and listen to me. They were fully warned you were coming this morning, after having heard our conversation with Martin last night in the Hello. But from that conversation, and the following one up at my house, they gathered you were almost out of your head and due to crack. Just as Gravardiere wanted you to be. You must have played that part well, too, or you wouldn't be here now."

"No, I wouldn't." It was said with no particular degree of emphasis. "And what you have just said must

be so. For otherwise, Gravardiere would have killed me; he knows me enough and hates me enough for it. But where are we going now and what is this going to prove?"

"I'm not sure of what it's going to prove. But we're going to Bejan, and I am going to see a guy there named Viselmi. He's the answer to the two numbers on that piece of paper you found in the Rue Pastioglosi. I checked up on him in Nice this morning, while Fritz was getting you straightened out in a hotel we took you to. This bird, Viselmi, must have escaped from Guiana quite a time ago. For he's a big boy up in Bejan; I had no trouble at all finding out about him in Nice. He's a man about sixty now; got a family, sons, and daughters, and a big vineyard up in back of Bejan. Gravardiere has undoubtedly got him down on the slate to be tapped for plenty. He's just the sort of man Gravardiere's after. With the exception of yourself, Louarges, Martin, and even Monteuil, were just the small stuff in our personal knowledge. Gravardiere is after big money. What for I can only conjecture; maybe to make a comeback in Guiana, or start a crookedness of some sort here. But we'll find out soon, somehow. We've got to find out."

"Yes." James's voice was slow. He stirred a bit. "I think I'll sleep now." Promptly he shut his eyes and did so.

IT was almost dark and the car had stopped when he awakened. Rand awakened him, gently pressing against his unwounded shoulder. "Sit still and right where you are," Rand whispered clearly. "This is Bejan. We just got here. We're parked right across the road from Viselmi's villa. And it looks

like we're a little too late; there's a cop in front of the door now.

"Fritz will take you for a ride. And in an hour I'll meet you across from that joint, Le Haute Monde, down there on the main square." He stood back from the car and jerked a hand at the big man in the driver's seat. "*Fou le camp, Fritz! Beat it!*"

Afterward James was never clear as to how he spent that hour. He remembered that, during it, he tried to talk occasionally with Fritz, the driver, and that Fritz answered him promptly but tersely. He recalled narrow and dangerous mountain roads, along which Fritz whipped the big car, and the bluish-white blur of the snow-rimmed mountains right up behind the town.

Then they were back in the main square of the town, and Fritz was slowing the car across from the Café de le Haute Monde, and in the broad shafting of light from its doorway was outlined the gaunt, slow-moving figure of Rand—whistling happily. To James, waiting there in the car, his bandaged hands gripping tightly about the handle of the door, it seemed an age while Rand crossed that cobbled square, grasped the opened door and stepped in.

But his voice was sharp as he spoke to Fritz:

"Bang it for Nice! Make this buggy jump!"

Then he turned toward James, and James could see that the other's eyes were bright points of flame and that he was smiling:

"I've got it! By George, we've got it!"

"What the hell do you mean?"

"The whole show—practically everything. We beat Gravardiere to it this time. It was suicide in there. Viselmi came in from the vineyards this afternoon about five o'clock. There was a note waiting for him

that a man—that was the best description his wife or the servants could offer—had left during the afternoon. Viselmi took the note, went into the room he used as his office, and shut the door. About ten minutes later they heard it and went in. Shotgun. Both barrels. Whole top of his head. Wife in bed now, prostrated, sons and daughters sobbing on each other's shoulders, local police half awake and waiting for national bureau detectives from Cannes when I got there. Where the deuce are my cigars?"

He found one. It shook in his hands. He was minutes lighting it. "Sorry." He went on swiftly:

"Police and family entranced and overwhelmed by all my papers and formal language; they may have gathered the idea that I was from the *gendarmierie nationale* myself. Anyhow, I got into where what was left of Viselmi had been left. Untouched. Good superstition, that, even though the eldest son was frank to admit that he thought the job was self-inflicted. Suicide seated at desk. Desk full of papers. That's what took most of time. Had to go through those. But I found it there."

"What?"

"This."

"What the deuce is 'this'!"

Rand almost smiled:

"A blank piece of paper, the note Viselmi had received this afternoon. Blank, understand? There was an oil lamp there and, although I had found the paper stuck way down, among some others, I found a small kind of brown stain on it. So I held it over the lamp chimney, and the stain almost fitted with the top of the lamp chimney. I lit the lamp. I held the paper over it, and the stuff came out; just as clear and just as nice——"

RAND stopped, he turned on the seat, so that he could look more clearly at the man beside him. His long hand reached out, and he tapped the other sharply on the knee.

"We've got 'em now; they're yours, or whoever wants 'em. That was a map on that piece of paper. A map of the coast off Nice. On it is marked, in detail, that big hunk of rock they call L'Ile des Orphelins. Do you know it; about four miles out from shore, the place that was a monastery one time? That's it, and, obviously, Viselmi was supposed to come there, with his money. The whole route is marked, even to the exact spot where he was to land. But not a word of writing."

"That sounds like Gravardiere."

"That is Gravardiere. I'm sure of it. That old monastery is a regular rat warren; its been deserted for a couple of centuries. It's all tumble-down, and no one goes there, but it's still quite strong and full of hidden rooms and passages. I wrote a piece for the Sunday magazine about it one time. It would make a swell smugglers' hang-out; it's far enough out to sea so that it would take a gunboat or a destroyer to catch 'em. It's my personal bet that Gravardiere is using the place as his headquarters, and that, being a Negro, and through with Guiana, he's planning now to go over when he's wrung his blackmail racket dry here and start raising hell with the blacks down in French Equatorial Africa. He wouldn't be the first man to think of it."

Nervously, James cursed. Then he leaned closer toward the other man:

"But that's some more of your conjecture. Do you know when this poor slob, Viselmi, was supposed to come through with his money? You found nothing else there?"

"No. It looked like Viselmi had destroyed every other communication if there were any. Probably, though, he was warned verbally by some guy in your former position. Maybe Louarges was sent to do it; he was only a sort of halfway boss, anyhow, and Gravardiere had things on him like all the rest."

"Yes, that's all possible. What do you plan to do now?"

"Me?" Rand grunted a curse and flung the butt of his cigar in a cascading stream of sparks from the car. "I'm going to burn up the telephone wires to Paris and burn up the ears of those apes in the Paris office. This is the biggest human-interest story since the sinking of the *Titanic*. I'll smear this one from here to Yokohama; I'll break this as a front page, banner head exclusive in every English-speaking paper right around the world! All I want to do is get in that hotel in Nice and on the wire. Then——"

"Wait a winute. How about me?" James's voice was very quiet, but his body was crouched tensely forward on the edge of the seat, and his sharp, dark eyes burned at Rand's eyes. "Where do I come in?"

"You? When I've got that story on the wire to Paris, when it's all filed, and that won't take long, I'll go over and see the boss of the detectives in Nice. I know him. He's a smart guy. He and I have worked on a couple of jobs together up and down this coast, and I've done him some favors, and he's done me a couple. I'll just show him this map and tell him what I know, and what's been going on. Then he can collect all his men and all the gunboats he can lay his hands on and go out and bring back M'sieur Gravardiere. And you won't come into it, you won't even be mentioned; there'll be no reason for your being men-

tioned or even thought of. How does that sound to you?"

He repeated that last question twice. But he got no answer to it. For James had sunk down in his corner of the roaring, jumping car, and pulled the thick lap robe high up about his body and face. As far as Rand could see, his companion had once more slipped off to sleep.

THAT same stupor seemed to be upon James when the car screamed to a stop before a small hotel in Nice and Rand nudged him awake. "Come on," he urged softly. "Got to get up now. It's all right here. This is the place Fritz and I brought you to this morning; we're going back to the same room." But James did not make any answer as he rose, crossed into the lobby and the little elevator and so up to the bright, neat room. He just sat vaguely and silently on the bed, watching the other man.

Rand had stripped off his hat, his jacket, and his vest; ripped open his collar. He stood before the telephone, sweat already dripping from his chin, whipping an amazing mass of French invective, cajolery, and command into the mouthpiece. That went on for minutes at a time, broken by short pauses, during which Rand cursed in English. Then, abruptly, the line was clear, and Rand's voice changed. It became suave, quiet, contained. He talked slowly and in English:

"Bakin? . . . Rand calling. . . . Yes, from Nice. . . . No. Sober. . . . What? . . . Repeat that. . . . Well, what's the difference? Hire me again, right now. Now, listen, Bakin; do you want a swell story? Will you let me give you a quick flash on what it's all about? . . . All right. Set? . . . What? . . . Now, wait a

minute, Bakin, don't be a darn fool. Didn't I. . . . How about that last one I called you up on, the one at St. Raoul? . . . You didn't? . . . No man came down. . . . All right. So long, you. . . ."

Very slowly, his hand shaking as he did so, Rand hung up the receiver. He turned around more slowly. James was no longer seated on the bed. He stood by the door. One of his hands was upon the doorknob; the other was dropping the automatic he had just taken from the bureau top into the side pocket of his jacket.

"Wait a minute." Rand seemed to be having difficulty in speaking. "Don't you go and be a sap, too. That was Bakin, the No. 1 man in the Paris office, I was speaking with. He turned me down; turned down the story. But that's all right. It can all be printed at once, instead of as a running story: the truth of the St. Raoul business; the truth of this thing to-day; your case, the fact that Gravardiere is alive; and the other big story when they raid that island out there."

"Yes?" James had already more than half opened the door. But he stood there for a moment while Rand came over to him; what he saw in Rand's face and eyes made him stay.

"Yes. Wait just a bit. Don't let all this foolishness"—he waved his hand toward the telephone—"throw you off. Just ride along with me a bit longer. I know just how you feel and what you think. You think that I'd be a sap to go over to the chief of police here and spill all I know to him, and that if I did, you'll surely get sucked into it somehow, and that Gravardiere and his yeggs would get away before the police got into action. Isn't that right?"

"Almost completely."

"All right. Shut that door, then.

Take that gat out of your pocket and sit down. Here's another way of doing it. Gravardiere's wanted, for various charges, in Guiana, a French possession, himself. Well, how would it be with what proof we have now, if we caught him, brought in him and his gang, and presented the whole works—in your name—to the French government? Don't you think they'd feel they could square off whatever charges they have against you for that bit? Don't you think they'd almost kiss you on both cheeks?"

"And how do you figure you, or I, or anybody else, except a flock of police, is going to accomplish that?"

"It's not at all as difficult as you think. I know a lot of hard birds in Marseilles; ex-legionnaires, fellows like my lad, Fritz. Old buddies of his, men who have been retired out of the legion for one petty physical reason or another. Men who scrap just because it's a scrap, or for the price of a good drunk afterward. Fritz and I could round up a dozen men like that, with all the guns they'd need to pluck off Gravardiere and all the Guiana gunmen on his blinking island. How does that idea strike you?"

"Not badly." James spoke very slowly. "How long would it take Fritz and you to get them together, with all their guns, here in Nice?"

"It's late now. Probably not before to-morrow night; they'd have to come in by car, and it's a good six or eight hours' drive. And then we'd need a fair-sized boat to get out there with after they got here. That's got to be arranged for. I'll do all that, start it going right away."

"I see." James nodded, but he again opened the door. "But we're still not sure of two things: that

Gravardiere actually uses that island as his headquarters; and, if he does, that he's still there." A bleak and short smile came over his face. "I think I'll go and find out; it's kind of coming to me. Send for your tough boys from Marseilles; maybe you'll have use for them; if I come back, or if I don't come back. Either way, as I see it, will be all right for you." He dropped the automatic he had been holding into his jacket pocket. He raised that hand in salute. "Good luck, and thanks. See you later!"

He opened the door wide. He stepped through it and shut it quietly behind him. Standing there, Rand could hear his even footfalls diminishing along the carpeted hall.

CHAPTER VII. TRAPPED.

THE Café of the Crossed Anchors was being closed when James got there. It was the last place open around the wide square facing the little harbor of Nice. Inside, he found only the owner and two surly and sleepy-looking customers. He approached the owner and nodded to him.

"It goes well?" asked the owner with formal curiosity, but leaning backward a little bit so that he could quite easily reach underneath the bar.

"Yes. It goes well." James put both his hands on the bar and partly opened one of them so that the owner could see the wadded hundred-franc notes there. "I want a boat."

The owner's gaze had lowered to the bar; his formal curiosity had left him. "And what kind of a boat would that be?"

"A boat with oars."

"Ah, a boat with oars. And it is

where that you would take a boat with oars?"

"Fishing."

"Fishing," repeated the man quite amiably, covering with his own hand the hundred-franc note that had been flicked toward him. "It is a dark night and a good one for fishing. And now, if you will pardon me?"

He walked toward the end of the bar, and one of the two customers had already risen from his chair to come and meet him there. James listened to the blur of their low voices for a moment, then the owner was back:

"It is that Vincent, here, has a boat with oars. But it makes a late hour now, you understand, and it is dark, a very good night for fishing. Vincent has told me that he must have five hundred francs for his boat with oars."

"Good! I will pay it to him when I have seen the boat and when I am in it. You have seen that I have the money with which to pay? Good! I thank you." He turned. The man, Vincent, stood right behind him, eyeing him with no great curiosity. "Your boat is here?"

"Right alongside the wharf. You want anything else?"

"Nothing else."

"Come, then."

They went silently and side by side.

The boat was small and old, but dry and trim.

"It is a good boat," suggested Vincent, unlocking the chain which held it and the oars. He took the hundred-franc notes, lifted off his tight black *béret* in salute, and then he was gone, merged in the darkness of the night.

It was quite close to dawn, and James's body and hands ached when he saw rising before him out of the

night mist on the sea what he knew must be L'Ile des Orphelins and the place he sought. All he could see of it as yet was a darker shadow against the general darkness of the sea. But through the hoarse call of the fog siren at Cap Ferrat Light, he could hear the splash and play of the small waves against the rocky shore.

For a time, content that he had found it, he just rested there on his oars, trying to distinguish some sound or sign that would guide him, help in his landing. There was none. He cursed silently, slid the oar leathers over the tholepins and bent to it again. He made little or no noise, and that he himself could hardly hear through the monotonous calling of the big siren on the cape.

He came within what might have been a hundred yards of the shore, shipped his oars, and let the boat drift. He could make out the sharply jagged piece of shore toward which he was being carried by the wind. And, behind it, but quite dimly, he could see the long, tumbled, lightless shape of the old ruin.

"Hide a battalion in that place," he whispered. "Runs almost the whole length of the island." He stripped off his shoes and socks, knotting them about his neck. The boat was within a few feet of the shore now. He climbed up into the bow and caught up the coiled painter.

One last little wave caught the boat. James jumped, landed cleanly and without sound. Great sea-beaten boulders were about him on both sides; underfoot, was a rough sort of shale. For a moment he stood there, listening and watching. The only sounds were those of the sea and the hoarse voice of the siren on Cap Ferrat.

He moved swiftly. He fastened the painter around the nearest boul-

der. Then, taking the little automatic in one hand, he started slowly up between the boulders—walking upright and without hesitation.

WHEN he had gone perhaps thirty paces he heard the murmur of voices to his left and saw the small, infinitely swift flash of light. He stood absolutely still. That light, he thought swiftly, had come from the ruins of the old monastery, and had been directed out to sea, and not toward him. And there from the sea flashed one back in answer; a strong search-light ray turned on, then immediately cut off.

For no reason that he could then consciously name, he turned in the direction that shore light had come from, and from where he had heard the low murmur of voices. But he dropped to his knees now and crawled. He moved slowly, stopping to listen, to stare keenly into the darkness, and only then, sure that there was nobody near him, going on. The stir of bodies and the sound of voices warned him again, and he halted, lay absolutely flat, close in under the rubble of what had once been a strong wall..

There were many men within a few yards of him, perhaps a dozen of them. They were in front of him, and moving down from the silentness of the ruins and toward the shore. There was no flash of light again, but offshore he could hear the carefully muted throb of a powerful gasoline motor, and he could make out the voices of the men in the group ahead. Most of them, if not all of them, spoke with the peculiar and familiar thick liquidity of French Guiana Negroes. Gently he reached up and pushed off the safety catch of his automatic. Perhaps, he thought swiftly, Gravar-

diere was among this group. And, if so, he could— But, with an extreme effort of the will, he drove back that thought so that he could concentrate on what was going on before him.

The launch whose motor he had heard was close in to the shore now. He could hear the grate of her keel on the shale, and the slap of a hurled heaving line. The powerful motor had been cut out. Men waded, splashing quite noisily, out into the shallow water, and there was the creak and clatter of heavy boxes or crates being lifted, and grunts from the men who carried them.

Then, suddenly, a dim light was made, an electric torch which was held under a canvas jacket, and James saw that file of men walking up from the shallows, along the beach, among the boulders and toward the ruined building.

"Guns," he whispered to himself. "It must be rifles or machine gun parts they're carrying. Nothing else worth Gravidiere's while would be so heavy."

His whisper stopped. His body arched up a little, and he lifted his left arm, and crossed it in, so that he could prop and hold his automatic steadily upon it. For in that dim splotch of light he had just distinguished a great, fat, round-shouldered figure, and recognized the cast of the cone-shaped head, the shining, almost lemon-colored eyes of Gravidiere.

Gravidiere stood thigh-deep in water, beside the bow of the launch. He was talking with a small, squarely set white man clad in dungarees, who stood slouched against the launch's anchor davit. James could hear clearly what Gravidiere said, and the replies of the white man. They were talking about the shipment of guns that were being

carried into the monastery by Gravidiere's man. The white man was stating that he could not bring the final shipment of the guns for two days, at which time he would want a complete and final payment.

The man spoke in bad French, with a strong accent, but forcibly. He told Gravidiere that he had almost been captured by the police when he left Trieste, and had somehow bungled past a French torpedo boat off Mentone during the night. He lowered his voice, and James was unable to hear any more of the conversation.

Then, calmly, concentrating entirely upon what he was doing, James brought down the muzzle of his automatic, drawing a target square upon Gravidiere. But some small movement of his feet must have dislodged a stone, for there was a little grating, clattering sound, and then the quick, harsh hiss of withdrawn breath from a man hidden in the darkness somewhere near him, followed by a red slash of pistol flame.

The bullets fanned closely past James's head. He swung instinctively, ducked, and fired back at the spurt of flame which indicated the gun from which it came.

From behind, from in front, and from the shore side, guns fired at him, and lead ricocheted from the shale and boulders about him. But he did not stay there any longer. It was as if the whole thing had been planned for him. He wheeled around, crawling rapidly, slid over one boulder, bumped harshly against another, then came to his feet and ran forward, toward the gaping, pleasantly solid blackness of the old monastery.

Several times he tripped and fell, tearing his clothing and his flesh. But, always, he got up and ran on,

the screeching whine of bullets about him, the excited and hoarse cries of many men behind him and in front of him. It was those voices from in front which warned him and told him where the door of the old monastery was, for there was still no light anywhere, except the thin stabbing flame of the guns.

HE found the door; found the wide, uneven steps which were beyond it, and it was there, as he ran through, that he came very close to being killed. Utterly without warning, squarely into his face, flashed the blinding brilliance of an electric flashlight. It seemed as though that blaze of light lasted for an eternity, but afterward he realized that it had been for only a few seconds that he was caught in it. He flung his body sidewise and down. He rolled over and down steps, down into darkness, where lead whined sharply about him, but there was no light to point him out.

Men were behind him and on two sides; he could hear the movement of their crouched bodies over the stone floor, and see the bright flashes of their gunfire.

But he did not fire back at them; he kept blindly on, across the stone floor of the room. Suddenly he felt a cool, sharp flow of air against his body, and he knew that somehow he had come to a door and the entrance to another room. He went forward toward that cool current of air. His hands and half his body went out into space. Only with his knees and feet did he save himself from hurtling down into that darkness below. But he could not go back, and he must go on. Gravarriere—Gravarriere must wait.

He went on. He swung around where he lay. He jammed the automatic down into his belt. He caught

out with his hands at the cool, slick stone of what must have been a doorway. Then, slowly, almost in perfect silence, he lowered himself down, into that void of darkness whose bottom he could in no way know.

As he did so, lowering his body inch by inch, all his weight upon his aching hands and fingers, his knees brushed in, against the wall he hung against, and knocked little chips of dried, incredibly old cement from between the joints of the stones. His abnormally sharp senses swiftly registered the fact that the mortar did not fall far, and when it landed the sound was that of falling upon soft earth. A ricocheting bullet lashed past his fingers, and he could hear the bang of near-by footsteps just as he released his hold and jumped.

He landed on his hands and knees, and upon soft, sour-smelling earth. He stood half up, involuntarily panting and sobbing with relief. He reached out his hands on each side; he could touch moist stone. He must be, he thought dimly, in some sort of passage.

Flattening against one wall, he went on. Then, behind him, as he had expected, light sprang down, and the flame of a powerful electric torch gashed the darkness, caught on his hunched body. Straight down the shaft of light he fired the automatic he held. There was a high, short scream of pain. That light smashed out. Other voices shouted. He could hear the thud of some one dropping down into this passage. He stood utterly still, straining to hear. But whether one man had dropped down, or several he could not tell. But not more than two or three at the most. There must be a dozen up there in the room. Then they were sure of catching him. Or they knew

that he had no weapon but the automatic, and but few more shells. But that did not really matter now. What did matter was that he must move on, keep going and get away. Yes, he must get away and then come back and get Gravardiere. After that he would not care.

He stopped to listen. His own breathing blurred out any other sound there may have been. Violently but silently he cursed himself. He brought up the automatic and released the clip. It held two snub-nosed bullets. He smiled and rubbed the barrel against the sleeve of his coat. Two might be enough, although he did not know how many men followed him. But he must find a better place to fight than this. He must go on.

He did. He came to what seemed to be a turning in the long, narrow passage. He nodded to himself, standing there with the fresh draft of air upon his sweating body. This was the place for him. Here the turn in the passage allowed him cover and a place from which to shoot safely the men behind him. He crouched down against the wall and waited.

HE thought he could hear the faint brushing sound of a man's body dragging along the way he had just come. Slowly he lifted the pistol. He held the index finger of his right hand about the trigger until the finger ached and trembled. He had to take it off. He did that perhaps a dozen times when the whole of this world of darkness whirled, and trembled, and vibrated as a strange and awful thunder crashed out beyond.

He slid down against the wall, hands to his ears and eyes, unaware of anything. He sat there for a long time. When his sense of hearing

returned to him he realized that the place was utterly silent. He moved his numb body. He turned around and crawled back toward the room from which he had come.

His hands and knees encountered a ragged mass of rock. He choked upon a fine dust of dry earth and cement. Suddenly he understood; the men who had followed him had come for one purpose; to smash this passage after him. They had collapsed its walls with either dynamite or a hand grenade. The walls and roof were caved in completely. How much rock there was he did not know nor was there any way of finding out. The way was blocked.

He turned back and went along the passage. He staggered and weaved from side to side, but he kept going somehow. Suddenly the temperature changed. It was very damp and cold. A sort of scum was on the rock, and he heard and felt bats flap thickly past him. The passage seemed to slope down where he first came across the scum on the wall. Then he found he was walking in water—salt water—and he could hear the low lapping of the sea.

He stood still for a moment. Then he lifted his hands up and out. Then met the roof of the passage. The rock was slimy, and not the even ordered blocks of walls and roof. These blocks had been smashed loose during the years by the slow, constant pounding of the sea.

"He meant to trap me here," he whispered to himself. "Gravardiere. Maybe he has. He did it cleverly enough. He just backed me into this place and shut me in as soon as he was sure who I was. Just like he did down Guiana. And now he means to hold me here until he's ready for me."

His brain became quite clear as he brooded over these thoughts. Gra-

vardiere must have known of this place and explored it fully before. This passage must once have been open right to the sea. It had probably been a hidden way of retreat for the monks who had erected the original building on the island. The slope of the passage floor went to show that. But all that had been many centuries ago. The sea had been constantly at work since then. And the sea had slowly undermined the walls of the passage and tumbled them down like this.

Now the place was a trap—for him—and for Gravardiere. He laughed aloud at that thought, not quite sanely. But then he was silent. From above upon his matted, filthy hair, suddenly fell moisture. Not the slow drip of moisture sweated from slimy rocks, but clean, sharp drops of rain.

HE reached up his hands. At last he found the crack through which the rain fell. That crack was about three inches wide. It was formed by an oddly tipped chunk of hewn rock which had all but slid from its original resting place and plunged down to the floor of the passageway. It was jammed there, the other three sides caught tightly about the stones which still locked it.

He sprang. He jammed one hand through that opening, and his fingers just caught upon the upper, outer angle of that stone. Straining so, he got his other hand up and through. Then, hanging with one hand, he cast up with the other and pushed against the rock that locked it on that side.

He could not work for long. He had to drop back and rest for many minutes at a time. But he could see the soft, rain-washed grays of the sky above, and the sweet, cool drops

of rain fall upon his face and into his mouth as he worked. And after what he knew as only an eternity of torture, the suspended stone began to tremble and slide, and he was forced to drop down and just watch it dully and helplessly from one side.

Then it fell. With a slow, grinding noise the rocks began to drop. He jumped back, his whole body trembling.

As they fell, they made an echoing thunder, and he laughed hearing it, for he could recall the thunder of the grenade that had locked him here, and the sounds were almost exactly the same. For some four or five minutes those flat stones fell, making a barrier of stone waist-high in front of him. How he escaped being killed he did not know.

He looked up. The roof had given in a ragged triangle. Soft light and fine rain, then a bit of breeze off the sea came in to him. He smiled, scrambled over those fallen rocks and reached up. His hands caught over the upper edges of those stones which rimmed the hole. His entire body tensed and strained. Slowly, very painfully and only a very little bit at a time, he drew himself up. His chin was level with the upper level of the stones he clawed at. His shoulders were out now. He had his elbows locked over the sides, and was thrusting wildly with his knees and feet. They caught. They gave him power, impetus, and he was up and out—free!

He lay still, pressing his hands over his mouth to hold back the sounds of his spent breathing. Then he looked up and around him. He lay on a shelving bench of rock. In front of him opaquely stretched the sea, mist and the fine rain curtaining it close in. Beyond him, on the island, the rain and mist also laid obscurity closely down, and he could

see nothing but the black, shiny reach of barren rock right near him.

Through the mists and the soft beating of the rain, he could hear many sounds. Abruptly staccato, he heard and recognized the wide-open roaring of a motor. It was that of the launch which had been in, along shore when he had landed on the island last night. And now, roaring up in joint crescendo with it, was the high wail of several machine guns fired simultaneously. Then that crescendo diminished, broke, and stopped for a moment, and he could hear the motor of another launch, and vague cries, from the island, and from the sea. Some in the Cayenne dialect came almost directly from behind him. Slowly remembering, he moved his hands over his body and found the automatic, then started that way.

CHAPTER VIII. TWO VICTORIES.

JAMES had not gone more than a few yards when there was that series of sharp but indistinctly merged explosions out to sea. They were ended by one vast smash of sound which he did not understand until he saw, dimly through the mists, the flame-wrapped shape of a motor launch, and caught the sharp odor of burning gasoline, wood, cloth, and flesh.

He mumbled a kind of hoarse curse in his throat, and turned back toward the island. But it was silent. And out to sea there was the sudden stridance of another launch motor, and he could see the craft now, lunging through the mists, her bow wash leaping in beautiful curves of silver.

He did not recognize the launch. The men behind him, the handlers of those machine guns placed in the ruins of the old monastery, seemed

to recognize it. A voice hoarsely rasped a command. One gun fired, then another, and a third, winging lead in a flat, screaming screen of death right over his head. Then they stopped.

A man knelt on the dimly seen, violently bucketing foredeck of the launch. And he held in his hands a French army issue Lebel rifle, which bore upon its muzzle a grenade-throwing attachment. He was firing it. James could see him throw back, then forward, the bolt and slide another of the grenades into place on the muzzle, to steadily take aim and fire. As far as James could see, those last two shots were unnecessary. The first one had been a direct hit; landed squarely before the reddened muzzles of those machine guns, smashing and silencing those guns and gunners forever.

Somewhere farther on down the island, on the other side, other machine guns began to chatter into action. But the launch had grounded on the beach; the men in her were leaping out and ashore, ducking low over the stones, their weapons in their hands.

James recognized two of those men. One, the man who had sat on the bow of the launch and handled the rifle grenades, was Fritz, the ex-legionnaire chauffeur. The other was Rand. Rand without a hat, a coat or tie, with what looked like the last half of a cigar between his teeth, and what looked like a French double-barreled fowling gun in his long, thin hands. The other men James did not know, or why they had come, or how they had got here. But, vaguely, he knew their type. Somehow, they all looked like the chauffeur, Fritz. Then he smiled understanding. They were the group Rand had talked of last night—the retired legionnaires from Marseilles.

All of them were quite convincingly acting that part now. Along the bare, utterly exposed face of the rock, those eight or ten men were crawling forward, quietly, slowly, yards from each other, but all taking advantage of each minute little protection in the rock and in under the small curve of the shelving bench itself. Rand was the only one not to do that. He lay just where he had landed when he jumped from the bow of the launch. He was attempting to load and fire his fowling piece and, obviously, it was jammed, and would not fire. Where he lay, James could hear Rand's curses through the cracking smash of the machine guns.

Then his gaze jerked from Rand to Fritz. Fritz had just slid another rifle grenade into place on the muzzle of his Lebel, taken slow and delicately deliberate aim and fired. Tautly, all of those men there watched the dim, short flight of the grenade through the mists as it rose to the height of its small arc, then began to fall. It showered beautiful flame and instant death where it struck. Where those machine guns had been was now a silence.

James got unsteadily to his feet. He wheeled around, his hands over his head, so that they could see them. "Rand!" he yelled. "Fritz! Here I am—James! Come here!"

Then he dropped his hands and tried to run toward them. But that was something he could not do. His legs buckled slowly beneath him and he slumped down, his hands breaking his fall.

SO it was that Fritz, Rand, and the hard-faced, quiet group of ex-legionnaires found him. But his eyes were clear and his voice steady when he spoke. He spoke to Fritz and to Rand:

"Listen. That place in there is packed with all sorts of guns. And it's strong; some parts of it you couldn't get to with your grenades. They'd get you, I know. But there's another way into the place. There's a passage. See that hole? I just got out there, and that's the end of the passage. They trapped me in there hours ago, blocked off the other end with a grenade. Half a dozen of you birds could pull it down in about twenty minutes work. Go down through that hole and keep along the right wall until you come to it. I'd go with you and show you"—he looked up at them, speaking very slowly—"but I'm just too damn tired, too weak."

He did not speak any more. He only half heard what Rand, Fritz, and the other legionnaires said. He could not hold back a smile though when Fritz and five more of the big, easy-moving men crawled off over the rock and toward that dark, triangular hole he had made. Then he turned his head; the other legionnaires, squatly built, muscular men, were moving off also, separating from each other and going in different directions toward the darkly mist-set ruins. He stared after them until they were from sight, and only then swung around to look at Rand.

"You're a swell-looking warrior," he said in a hoarse whisper. "Those machine gunners almost winged you while you sat there, trying to fire that blunderbuss you've got. Of course, I'm just as glad they didn't, because I imagine I must thank you for coming."

"Don't be silly!" Rand twitched nervously as he said it; somewhere in the opaqueness before them, other machine guns had started up and there was the faint, dull slap of a hand grenade. "We had to come. We all thought you were dead, if

you had even gotten here. After you left, a couple of things happened all at once."

He jerked his head up and for a moment was silent. The firing ahead was getting more intense; the machine guns screamed with a sound that was nearly human. But, slowly, Rand went on:

"About an hour after you left, a dumb local gendarme came around to the hotel room there, and tried to pinch me on the suspicion of aiding and abetting an escaped convict. You, of course. He was pretty stubborn about taking me to the station house, so finally Fritz had to beat him on the knob and knock him out. Just then the mob got in from Marseilles, with the small dash of news that their car had been stopped for going too fast as they came into Nice, and the gendarme who stopped them saw some of the guns in the back of the car. The only way they could duck arrest was to let him have it and knock him out. It was quite logical, after that, that we all fled the hotel together."

Rand stopped. The firing had died away now. He smiled:

"We thought we'd follow your solitary and heroic tracks; in fact, we darn well had to. Down at the old port, at a dump called the Crossed Anchors, I found out that you had actually shoved off. So, while Fritz was bargaining around about getting a motor boat, I called up my friend, the chief of police, and told him who I was, and just what had happened, and what I had been forced to do to his gendarme, and in just what hotel room and state he would find him. As I say, the chief is a lad I know pretty well; he held back his wrathful curiosity to the last. Even answered me a question: he said the letter identifying me with you, and accusing me

of aiding and abetting you, was mailed in to him, signed anonymously, and postmarked locally early yesterday morning. And that's about all. Can you walk?"

"A little, I think."

"Come on, then." Rand had picked up his fowling piece. "I want to fight. I've got a rotten hang-over from yesterday. I haven't had a chance to get more than two drinks in the last three hours. I'm so sober, I'm damn near ready to fight anybody for any reason. And if this thing here won't fire, I'll use it like a baseball bat and rap out a couple of good base hits. Where's Gravardiere—here?"

"I think so."

"Then you didn't get your chance at him?"

"I got my chance at him—missed him. He may not be here now. He trapped me down in there for hours. He may have gotten away from the island."

"No. Nobody got away from the island. We've been cruising around this dump since about an hour before dawn, trying to find the right spot to land. They must have heard us, for that launch put out and let loose at us. We sank it. You know what's happened since then."

"Yes. You think these lads can take the place?"

Rand almost smiled.

"They'd better clean it out. If they don't, we'll all take a ride to the jug. For I know very well indeed that my friend, the chief of police, will trace the phone call I made from the Crossed Anchors, and will come out here probably with two or three battalions of *chasseurs d'Alpins* and a mountain battery mounted on a flat boat. If we deliver the goods to him, all right. If we don't—Hey! Listen to the mugs yell! They must have—"

THE rest was an incoherent shout. He was running forward, the useless fowling piece in his hands, toward the vagueness of the old monastery. Cursing, James started to stagger at a slow run after him. Flame, screams, the slam of hand grenades, rifles and automatics came from within the place now.

It was quiet, and thoroughly over, when James got there. Rand leaned just inside the door, his face very white, his body sagging, his hands loosely holding the smashed and bloody fowling piece. Inside was a low-hanging blue smoke, the acidity of explosives and the smell of hot metal. Hand grenades had smashed against the walls, the floor, scored great gashes along the stone. Men lay huddled everywhere. And one, James recognized, was of that group whose members all looked like Fritz, one of the old legionnaires from Marseilles. But then that one great, dominant thought which had been held in the back of his brain for a moment, came to him, and he turned, grasping Rand's arm with his fingers:

"Gravardiere?"

Rand slightly shook his head. "No. I really don't know, or much care. He can't get off the island, anyhow. And the police are coming. The launches are out there now. You stay here, you sap!"

But James had turned and was gone. He staggered along the side of the building, that side which led toward the end of the island where he had torn his way through the tunnel roof. There were many launches coming inshore as he worked toward that hole he had made. And some of the men in the launches, police in dark-blue uniforms and soldiers in light blue, yelled at him and waved rifles and revolvers.

He did not stop; he only barely saw them. He was obsessed by one thought, by one idea he knew somehow to be a certainty. He slid down by that dark, roughly triangular hole he had torn in the loose rock.

He waited for what seemed to him to be an eternity. It was perhaps a minute, two minutes. Then he saw Garvardiere.

The great, fat man slumped from side to side of the passageway below as he came along it. He panted terribly, and he made harshly guttural animal noises when he came to the opening and looked up. There he saw the man who crouched above, waiting for him.

All the color ebbed back from Garvardiere's face. It left his eyes dark, distended pools of fear and madness. His hands were half reached up and he did not lower them. He seemed caught by a weird kind of paralysis, which locked all his fat, gross body, but allowed his voice to operate.

"*Mais vous,*" he whispered "*Vous êtes—*" He jerked down one hand. He raised a gun, leveling it at James.

Then James shot him dead.

HOURS afterward, when it was all over, James could see and remember it all quite clearly. Practically in detail, he could revision the jostling, jabbering policemen who had closed in on him, and who had brought back from the shattered building Rand, Fritz, and the old legionnaires. Rand, he remembered, had been laughing.

He could recall, as they crossed from the island to mainland, the sun breaking copper-colored and hot through the mists upon the sea, and the clear beauty of the bay, with the long lines of boats and the blunt, brown corner of the cape.

The hours of investigation afterward in the stuffy, airless office of the police in Nice he did not remember so clearly. That was too long, too confused. He remembered his own answers, and Rand's almost constant laughter, and the fact that the chief was a good guy, with intelligence and a sense of humor, and that no matter what happened, he liked him.

Just what Rand did do, and what the chief did, he never did fully understand. Perhaps, he thought afterward, during some of that time he must have slept, or been in a kind of exhausted stupor. For his next sharp impression was of being in the street, and welcoming the fresh, cool air, and realizing that he was in a taxicab, with Rand and the chief, and that Rand was giving the address of a hotel.

There were a lot of managers and assistant managers and clerks in the lobby when they got there. But, when they got in the room, there were just the three of them, himself, and Rand, and the little, bearded, bow-legged police officer. He sat in a big red plush armchair, facing him, where he sat on the bed, and where Rand stood at the telephone, putting through a call to Paris.

Rand's call came through. He

spoke first in French, afterward in English.

"Hello, Bakin?" he asked. "Yes, you're right. . . . Rand. You've heard about it already, hey? I see. And the man you sent down is waiting to see me. He can wait. . . . Who? . . . James his name is, Wallace James. . . . Yes, an escaped convict from Guiana. No, the chief of police has been in communication by telephone with the head office in Paris. James is unconditionally given his freedom until his case can be heard by the senate; which, literally, means that he is completely cleared, and free. . . . What? . . . No. The chief is here; he's promised me to give an exclusive signed statement to the paper. And now I want a rewrite man. You can—wait a minute!"

Rand turned. James was standing up. He was lurching toward the phone. "Give me that," he said. Then he took it.

"Bakin? . . . Wallace James. Rand's sober, and too damn polite. Yes. . . . I just wanted to tell you that, and to tell you he not only got this story for you, he all but made it. You understand? . . . All right; get off the wire then, and give him his rewrite man. Yes . . . let a real newspaperman talk!"

PRISONS HERE AND IN ENGLAND

TO the people of Great Britain, who have long been told that the United States holds the best of everything, the now famous Wickersham report brought a sense of superiority. English police methods and English courts certainly are superior to our American courts and methods. The London metropolitan police records for 1930 showed only twenty-one murders; nine of the slayers killed themselves and eleven arrests were made in the other twelve cases. There was only one unsolved murder for the year.

A British official, however, who visited many American prisons, declares that the English cannot criticize the United States, because no English prison official ever has had to face the great difficulty of the overcrowding of American prisons.



The Canary Kid finds that to pull a "safe" job in London

FOG IS NECESSARY

By C. S. Montanye

JOE TRAILL was complaining loudly as the elevator came to a stop at the fifth floor. "What a place! Even the goats run the wrong way here. Boy, if I ever see Belmont Park again, I'm going to get right down on my knees and holler out for the world to hear: 'Widener, here I am!' London? I'll sell you the whole works for a dollar twenty-nine!"

The "Canary Kid" smiled as he fitted the key to the door of their small suite. He opened the door, switched on the light, and watched

Trall wander morosely in. The Shaftesbury Hotel, on Great St. Andrew Street, north of the Strand, was unpretentious. The Kid had selected it for their brief stay because it suited his purpose; which was to be as inconspicuous as possible.

"Even the dough here," Trall continued, "is cockeyed. Imagine calling a crown a 'dollar' when it's only worth five shillings. Listen, when do we shove off? Another week around these parts, and I'll be ready for a pine raglan. I don't mean the kind with buttons, neither."

The Kid lighted a cigarette, and drew the shade at the window of their small parlor. The glass reflected him darkly. The tweeds he had worn to the races at Hurst Park that afternoon had come from a tailor on Moorgate Street. In them the Kid, slender and blond, looked not unlike one of the wealthy idlers who exercised their mounts on the bridle paths of Rotten Row.

He turned away and dropped into a chair. Traill and he had lost nearly three hundred dollars on the races. The Kid smiled faintly. The unfamiliar thoroughbreds, on the turf course, had run the wrong way for them. Like Traill, the small, wizened little crook suffering so acutely with nostalgia, he, himself, was homesick for New York. A profitless fortnight in London had made him anxious to press on.

"Tell you what I'll do, Joseph." The Kid spoke deliberately. "If we don't get a break by Wednesday, we'll run across to Paris, look that slab over, and sail from Cherbourg on the twenty-first. Fair enough?"

"Twenty-first? That's a long way off. Paris, you say? Why go there? —'at's only a city of dressmakers." He shrugged. "You're the head man, so I suppose I gotta keep my face shut and sit up on my hind legs whenever you snap your fingers. But get this, pal," he added fiercely. "When I plant my dogs on Forty-second Street, they're going to stay there permanently. On the level, you can pick up more mazuma in five minutes on the main stem than you can over here in five years. No wonder this Scotland Yard place packs such a heavy rep. The elbows don't have to arrest nobody. Why? Because there's nothing to steal!"

"I wonder," the Canary Kid murmured thoughtfully.

"While you're wondering," Joe

Traill stated crisply, "I'm gonna wash up, hop out, and grab me off a music-hall show. I think I'll nod in at Daly's. Don't you want to string along?"

The Kid shook the golden head from which his nickname had been derived. "No, I think I'll stay here a while. I expect a visitor a little later. You go and enjoy yourself, but remember this: pockets over here are sewed up tight. Don't make the mistake of trying to get your fingers in any of them."

Traill grunted and left.

The Kid, alone, picked up a sporting magazine. He turned the pages idly, his attention straying. He began to think about Sir Wilfred Parish and the office at the Croyden flying field, where, the previous day, he had first glimpsed the man. Deep within him the Kid's intuition stirred. He had no definite way of reasoning out the feeling, but he was almost certain he had one of his old, lucky hunches. The Canary Kid shrugged well-tailored shoulders and looked at his watch. It was nearly nine o'clock.

Discarding the magazine, he took a nervous turn or two around the room. Sir Wilfred Parish. Croyden to Le Bourget. After a minute the Kid went into the adjoining bedroom, and strapped on his rubber shoulder scabbard. Into the holster he pushed a flat automatic revolver, after a glance that made certain the ammunition clip was filled. Somehow the familiar feel of the weapon close to him had a soothing, inspiring touch. Once more he was the adventurer, the lone wolf prowling the danger trail. He trusted his hunches, believed implicitly in his own luck, was a fatalist in all matters of chance. And chance, he was confident, had dealt him a new hand there in the flying-field office, where

he had gone for information concerning the plane schedule between England and France.

SOME fifteen minutes later a knock sounded on the door. The Canary Kid opened it. The man he admitted was a bluff, florid individual, whose bowler hat, umbrella, and shabby serge suit hinted of Bloomsbury. He selected a chair while the Kid looked his guest over speculatively. He had met James Mandeville that afternoon at Hurst Park. Mandeville had acted as his betting commissioner and, once the Kid had broached his subject, had agreed to assist him for a certain remuneration.

"Well, saying good evening to you, sir, here I am ten minutes late," Mandeville began, uneasily fingering his bushy, dark mustache. "I hurried, I did, but I was delayed a bit."

"What did you find out?" the Kid inquired.

Mandeville unfolded a piece of note paper. With a cough he spread it out, fumbled for silver-rimmed nose glasses, and read sonorously:

"In the matter of Sir Wilfred Parish, 29 Mount Street, Mayfair. Sir Wilfred is the son of the late Marshall Parish, of Lincolnfield, and the former Betty Hammersmith. He attended——"

"I know," the Kid interrupted. "I read that much myself this morning in Burke's *Peerage*. What has Sir Wilfred been doing since five o'clock this afternoon? What have you been doing with your time and the money I gave you? Come, Mandeville. You know the sort of information I want. Let's have it."

The Kid's visitor removed his glasses and coughed again. "That I do know, sir. But why you should want Sir Wilfred investigated is beyond me. Quite. Such a fine gen-

tleman, sir. Why, as the senior partner in his counting house on Dysart Street and with a summer place at Brighton, there don't come no finer than Sir Wilfred, sir. Still, a job's a job." He sighed ponderously. "I've been observing him for you, sir. I've written down a few things here, and with your permission I'll read them."

He polished the glasses, set them astride his nose, and turned to his notes. While he read in a precise tone, the Kid's mind leaped on in advance of what his caller said. Out of Mandeville's statement the Kid seized upon certain facts. An inner satisfaction warmed him pleasantly. After all, the idle fortnight might not have been entirely wasted. One thing was certain. His old ability to recognize a thing of importance wearing the mask of triviality was unchanged. Yesterday's hunch, he was sure, had not been false.

"And so," the Kid said, when the other completed his reading, "Sir Wilfred Parish has reserved an after-theater table at the Hertford Gardens? I presume evening clothes are obligatory there."

"Quite, sir."

The Kid nodded. "Fair enough. I think that will be all, Mandeville. You might look in on me to-morrow morning. One thing else. Be a good fellow and call up the Hertford Gardens. Reserve a table for John Alden as close to eleven as you can make it."

"Right-o, sir. Anything else?"

"You might," the Kid said, "tell me why you carry an umbrella on a perfectly clear night."

"It's the fog, Mr. Alden," Mandeville explained, using the Kid's latest alias. "You never know when the blinking fog is going to come. Clear nights don't mean a thing, sir. Why, I'm willing to risk a bob it will be

foggy before midnight, sir. Midnight to-night, I mean."

"You can't get odds from me," the Kid smiled. "I don't know your London weather well enough. By the way, are fogs worth anything? What good are they?"

James Mandeville coughed for the third time. "Fogs," he declared, "are necessary."

THE Kid showed him out and switched on the bedroom light. A table at Hertford Gardens meant a complete change of raiment. He turned to his steamer wardrobe trunk and laid out the necessities of evening apparel. About to shut the top drawer, from which he had taken a dinner tie, the Kid hesitated. He removed what appeared to be a flat, hammered cigarette case. For a minute he toyed with it. Once, in a New York speak-easy, the contrivance had served him well. The Kid tucked the thing into the pocket of his dinner coat and set about the business of changing his clothes.

Dapper and elegant, the Kid had slipped on a topcoat when he heard a familiar footfall in the hotel corridor. A key scraped in the lock. Joe Traill, an inch of cigarette in one corner of his thin, furtive mouth, opened the door and came in. He stared at the Kid, who, tucking a cane under his left arm, pulled chamois gloves on his well-shaped hands.

"Strike me pink," the small crook said in his best cockney accent, "what 'ave we 'ere? A blinkin' toff. I say, what's hit all about?"

"I'm suppering at Hertford Gardens," the Canary Kid said briefly.

Traill stared harder. "Yeah? Stepping out, huh? You plaster yourself with swank and circulate around, while all I get is a load of

punk vaudeville, and now the pad to sleep it off on. What a break—for me! Look. Don't you need some one to go along and hold your horse or something?"

"This," the Kid informed him, "is a one-man job."

Joe Traill's deep-set, gray ferret eyes widened. "Job?" He moved closer to the Kid. "Job? No fooling. What's the lay, pal?"

Smiling, the Kid buttoned his gloves and shook his head. "I don't know myself—yet. It's one of the old hunches, Joseph. Do you recall yesterday, when we asked about the plane schedule at the flying field? Do you remember the man we had to wait for?"

"The big punk with the high dicer, the puppy canopies, and the trick eyeglass? Let's see what kind of a memory I got. I'll give you eight to five I can spot him. The clerk there called him Sir Parish. Do I win or lose?"

"You cash, Joseph, my bright fellow."

"And he's the bloke you're checking up on? Come clean, Kid. What is it—jewelry or currency? Better let me play ball. Only a couple of days ago I oiled up my heater. Boy, what a slippery trigger that cannon features!"

"The setting for to-night's drama," the Canary Kid pointed out coldly, "is the Mayfair district of this city and not Chicago."

"Then you won't wish me in on it?"

"I'm afraid not, Joseph. For you I recommend your downy cot. Early to bed and early to rise. Don't forget we're flying to Le Bourget any fine morning now. I have a feeling you'll need all your strength for the journey."

"I ain't even decided if I'll go in one of them cloud crawlers," Traill

retorted. "Still, it looks like I'm out of luck either way. I heard them tell how the channel boats are as rough as a gangsters' convention. This is only putting a turn on the subject. Do I go with you to-night or not?"

"Not," the Kid replied, letting himself out of the suite.

Outside, in Great St. Andrew Street, the Canary Kid saw that the wager James Mandeville had proposed would have won the other his bob. The clarity of the London night was obscured by fog. It bulked close, misty, thickly opaque, so damp the Kid felt it on his face like rain. The Strand, viewed through the yellowish curtain, was a wall of splotchy lights. To the visitor from America the night took on an eerie, strange character.

Yet, for the watchful cabbies, the lowering of the fog helped rather than hindered their trade. With eyes long accustomed to the mist, a cabby drove his vehicle to the curb. He addressed the Kid from his box:

"Keb, sir? Tyke you anywhere you want to go, sir."

He leaned and opened the door of his conveyance. The Kid gave him his destination, and they joined the ghostly legion of traffic wheeling across the Strand. A round of minutes, and the Canary Kid exchanged the fog-ridden night for the lighted, music-filled Hertford Gardens.

THE place was a smart supper club, a rendezvous for wealth and fashion. A New York jazz orchestra played the latest Broadway hits. For a minute the Kid fancied himself back home again. He had seen London, walked its streets, attended its theaters, dined in its celebrated chop houses, and visited one of its race tracks. In all, his first five minutes within

the crowded confines of Hertford Gardens made him imagine he was back, close to the throbbing heart of Broadway, more than any other thing.

The table Mandeville had reserved by telephone proved to be in a fairly desirable location near some windows. A waiter seated the Kid and took his order. It was, the Kid saw, not going to be an easy task to find Sir Wilfred Parish in the crowds. Still, the Kid was accustomed to crowds. He had a systematic way of checking them over. He began his close scrutiny of those at the tables near the main entrance. His glance ranged to the dance floor, and traveled along the far side of the place. Suddenly the Kid saw the man whom he had come to watch.

Sir Wilfred Parish's table was the third from the last in the line almost directly opposite. Parish was alone. He sat with a glass before him, and a long cigar balanced between his fingers. One elbow rested on the edge of the table, and in the mellow light the Canary Kid saw the same strained, odd look in the man's face that had first caught and arrested his attention the previous day. The Kid could not analyze or define the expression. Somehow it hinted of sinister matters secret in the one on whose pale, aquiline face they were so deeply engraved. For the rest, Parish was a man apparently in the late forties, a tall individual with dark, gray-sprinkled hair, a black mustache, and the poise of the true aristocrat. His evening clothes were in perfect taste. He sat watching the animated throng of dancers, and the Kid, surreptitiously regarding him, again remarked Parish's extreme nervousness.

As the Kid moved his gaze he became aware almost at once of the fact he was not the only person at

Hertford Gardens that night who watched Sir Wilfred Parish. A half dozen tables beyond, a youth, who was accompanied by a pretty, blond girl, divided his attention between his escort and Parish. The young man made a show of giving the girl his entire consideration, but every other minute he darted short, quick glances at Parish. What was there about Parish, the Kid mused, that had aroused him? Mandeville's dash of biography cribbed from Burke's book was not revealing. Sir Wilfred Parish differed but little from any other descendant of an old English family who, at the moment, held down the eminently respectable position of senior partner in his own counting house and private banking establishment. The Kid recalled several of the high lights in James Mandeville's oral report. Again he was confident he was on the right track; that, with any degree of luck, the night would yield him a nice profit, and that his sojourn in London would not be entirely wasted.

Of a sudden, Parish signaled for his check. The Canary Kid shot a glance at the man with the pretty, blond girl. He was paying his bill, making ready to quit the place without delay. The Kid waited no longer. As luck had it his own waiter was close at hand. The Kid was hard on the heels of the two at the other table when they passed through the entry foyer and reached the fog-swept street outside the Hertford Gardens. The two conferred together in low tones. Then the youth engaged a cab and handed the girl in.

"Good night, Lucille," he said, and shut the door.

The cab melted into the fog. The youth turned left and disappeared. A pace back from the entrance into the restaurant the Canary Kid

waited. In no more than another minute Sir Wilfred Parish, draped in a voluminous waterproof, appeared on the top step. The doorman ran out and blew his whistle. A black sedan slid to the curb. Parish stepped into the car, which moved away with a purring motor.

Now, the Kid saw, the prologue to the real work of the night was over. He knew he had to move, and move rapidly. He swung around and addressed the driver of the next cab in line behind the one the blond girl had taken.

"Mount Street, No. 29," the Kid rapped out. "Double fare if you hurry."

The driver replied cheerfully. His whip snapped, and the vehicle rolled off. The Kid realized the advantages of a horse-drawn vehicle on such a night. Where a taxi would have had to make slow progress, due to the fog blanket, the animal between the shafts possessed some instinct of direction. They rounded a corner, clattered down an avenue, and made several more devious turns, while the Kid impatiently urged the driver to greater speed. After a time the conveyance slowed.

When the Kid looked out, he found the driver climbing down off his box. "This is Mount Street, sir. If you'll wait, I'll find the right house for you. It's on this street, I'm sure. Blast the fog!" he added, with a good British oath.

"I'll find it myself. How much do I owe you?" the Kid asked.

THE cab went on, and the Canary Kid, walking Mayfair's very exclusive pavements, presently found his destination on the corner beyond. The residence of Sir Wilfred Parish was a large stone building, behind decorative iron grilles. To the passer-by it pre-

sented an unlighted façade, standing serene in the fog as if representative of the neighborhood's solidity. Yet, the Kid was quick to observe, the house contained the person who interested him, for, waiting at the curb was parked the black sedan that had taken Parish from the Hertford Gardens.

The Kid turned into the vestibule. The fog had its advantages. There he might work without being observed by any one in the street. He bent to the lock on the inner door, turning the knob, listening to the sound of the latch's mechanism. There was nothing very difficult to the lock itself. The master-key he always carried with him solved its intricacies. Cautiously, he pushed the front door to an aperture large enough to glide through.

The Kid closed the door behind him, and waited until his eyes grew accustomed to the murky darkness of his surroundings. Warmth enveloped him. He strained his ears. After a long minute he heard sounds of movement on the floor above; the opening and closing of drawers, rustle of papers, a low cough. The Kid's hand reached for and felt the flat bulge of the rubber shoulder scabbard. Then, urged on by a desire to learn how incorrect or perfect his hunch had been, he mounted a wide staircase that went up into the dim regions above.

On the first landing the Kid marked his destination. An edge of light came from under a shut door at the end of the passage. From behind this door the sounds emanated which he had heard while downstairs. With one hand on the balustrade, the Kid kept his ears attuned to the quiet of the mansion. Besides Sir Wilfred Parish, he had the servants to reckon with. James Mandeville had neglected to tell him

how many inhabited the house. With a shrug the Kid moved closer to the door. He tensed himself, his automatic sliding out and into his hand. Then, after a short pause, the creak of a door opening behind him whirled the Kid around.

At the same moment something hard and ominous prodded and came to rest at a point between his shoulders. A low voice gave a sharp, quiet command:

"Stand exactly where you are! Don't make the mistake of moving! I'll take your weapon." The Kid allowed his fingers to be emptied of his gun. "Now walk forward, and remember I will not hesitate to shoot if you attempt trickery. I want a look at you."

The man behind him opened the shut door at the end of the passage. The Canary Kid passed into a lighted study. Its oak-paneled walls and antique furniture gave it an old-fashioned charm. But the Kid was more interested in the man who, covering him carefully with his revolver, backed him to one wall. Sir Wilfred Parish considered the Kid with a frown.

"I saw you from the window. My dear fellow, just what is your business here to-night? You're no house-breaker. At least you do not appear so."

"You flatter me," the Kid murmured.

"Come, come," Parish cut in quite crisply. "I'm in no mood for procrastination. Who are you?"

"One," the Kid replied, "with a hunch. A rather indifferent hunch at that, it would appear."

"Explain yourself."

"Stop me if I bore you," the Kid requested. "My explanation is rather whimsical. It begins yesterday morning in the office of the Croyden flying field. I had to wait quite a little,

while you made inquiries concerning the first plane leaving Croyden tomorrow morning for France. I noted your look, your agitation, the care with which you booked passage and the name you gave. Perhaps I would have never thought about it again had I not seen you in the parking space when I left the office. If you remember, a limousine drove up. A stout gentleman who wore a monocle such as yours, hailed you. He addressed you as Sir Wilfred Parish."

"Go on."

"That," the Kid continued, "struck me as odd. You book passage under one name, and I hear you called by another. While waiting for my taxi, I overheard the stout gentleman make a luncheon date with you at your club for to-morrow noon. Again, I thought it odd. You were flying to Le Bourget, and yet you were making luncheon dates."

Parish smiled thinly. "You Americans," he declared softly, "are observing chaps. What else?"

The Kid shrugged. "Nothing of any importance. I wanted to play my hunch through and find out what you were up to. That's about all."

The other, without relaxing his vigilance, rested against a table in the center of the study. Parish's brows drew together in thought. He glanced at his watch and looked at the Kid meditatively. At length he spoke.

"I don't know whether to turn you over to the police or not. Your story is ingenious. It just happens I might be able to use you."

THE Canary Kid was struck by Parish's musing tone. He didn't like the sound of it. There was something almost sinister in the other's expressive face. Sir Wilfred Parish laughed under his breath.

"Yes, you might be useful to me. It would be rather amusing to have you arrested and held on a charge of bank robbery. A bit thick for you, my good fellow, but fortunate, perhaps, for me. It so happens the safe in my Dysart Street establishment was opened and cleaned out late this afternoon. If you were arrested with some of the securities and money on you——"

He broke off abruptly. The Kid, motionless against the wall, tightened his lips. All at once a ray of understanding flashed through his mind. Parish's alias at the flying field, the luncheon date which was impossible for him to keep, his expression and nervousness. The Kid told himself it needed no high order of intelligence to put the facts together and arrive at an accurate conclusion. Sir Wilfred Parish, preparing for flight, had robbed his own safe!

Even as the Canary Kid reached his deduction he saw that the man confronting him knew that he knew. Parish's face darkened. His gaze involuntarily flickered across the sombre study. For the first time the Kid glimpsed the small, neat pile of luggage in one shadowy corner of the room. He drove his thoughts faster. Once, back home in the States, he had served a penitentiary sentence. All during the long, grim, gray months in that city of silent men he had vowed that never in the future would he again hear steel-barred doors clang shut behind him.

He studied Parish through narrowed eyes. The man was a worthy adversary. Parish, recovering himself, would think up some clever way to pass the buck. The Kid's hands closed. What would his word—the word of an American crook with a prison record—avail against that of the man who faced him? The Kid

realized the tightness of his predicament. There was obviously one chance in a hundred left. He decided to put the thought of gain away, and seize the slim chance of escape.

"I'd like to think it over. Holding the bag is not always pleasant. May I smoke?"

Parish, in reply, ran a hand over the Kid's person. When he found no further weapons, the man assented. The Kid produced his hammered-silver case. Before he could open it, there was a quick and unexpected interruption. A shadow fell across the study floor. A step sounded on the threshold, and a voice uttered a sibilant command:

"Put down your gun, Sir Wilfred! Please don't misunderstand me. It would afford me a great deal of pleasure to shoot you where you stand!"

Parish's gun clattered loudly to the floor. The Kid, the silver cigarette case in one hand, felt a quickening beat of his pulses. After all, he told himself, there was nothing startling in the appearance of the youth who moved leisurely in from the outside corridor. He was the same individual who, with the pretty, blond girl at the Hertford Gardens, had watched Parish so intently.

"What does this mean, Morrison?" Parish asked stridently.

The intruder glanced briefly at the Canary Kid before answering. The automatic in his hand glinted in the lamplight. It was a new, shiny weapon.

"What am I doing? I am about to make my fortune. You thought you were alone this evening at the office, but you weren't, Sir Wilfred. It happened that when I finished my accounts I had to go into old Hager's room. I heard you in your office and, being of a curious nature, it was

impossible to resist the impulse to glance in. Fancy my surprise when I saw you transferring the contents of the safe to two open bags on the floor before it. I'm quite certain I would not have thought anything of it, had it not been for your furtiveness, the look in your face."

PARISH said nothing. The Kid met the youth's stare. Morrison, as Parish had called him, went across to the corner. Out of the luggage pile he selected two small Gladstone bags. He placed both on the table, the automatic in his hand still leveled, and spoke again:

"I believe these are the bags with the money and securities. Sir Wilfred, I might add that during the year of my employment with you I have been fully aware of your losses in the rubber market, as well as your cleverness in using your clients' money to speculate with. I have been patient, Sir Wilfred. Patient and persevering, as one should be when one plans to leave England with a small fortune."

"You'll never make it, Morrison," Parish said. "In the morning the police will be watching every vessel."

"You would have made it," the youth replied. "I don't know how, but you would have gotten away. Don't worry about me. By tomorrow night Lucille and I will be far beyond the range of Scotland Yard. Besides, Sir Wilfred, you really owe me a debt of gratitude. By relieving you of what was in the safe, I am keeping you partially honest. I think that's about all. Oh, yes. When I leave here it might be best for you to let me go as quietly as I came in, through the front door, so obligingly left unlocked for me. Any call for the police would be as

embarrassing to you as it would to me. I imagine I make myself quite clear."

While Morrison tested the weight of the bags and arranged them so he might carry both with his left hand, the Canary Kid's eyes wandered to the gun Parish had dropped. The Kid gauged the distance to the door and placed the position of the lamp in mind. Then, turning the silver case over in his hand, he spoke for the first time since Morrison had entered.

"Won't you have a cigarette before you go? Nothing like a smoke to relieve tension. Sir Wilfred gave me permission, and I'm sure he'll have no objection——"

The Kid walked across to Morrison, the case in his outstretched hand. The easy smile on his lips covered the rushing beat of his heart, the pounding pressure informing him of the split-second climax in wait. Would Morrison fall for the ruse? Would, after all, the Kid's hunch, directed by a twist of the same capricious fate that had taken him to Mayfair, work out successfully?

"I don't care for a cigarette," Morrison said. "Step aside. I've got to be on my way."

But the Kid was close enough now. His thumb pressed the tiny silver trigger. The lid of the case snapped open automatically, sparking the flint that exploded the case's charge of photographer's flash-light powder. It flared up in a greenish-yellow flame. As it went off in Morrison's face, the Kid's left fist smashed against his jaw. The youth tumbled back and fell across the desk. The Kid twisted the gun from the other's hand and straightened Sir Wilfred Parish up with it. The other man's attempt to snatch up his own discarded revolver left him with

both hands elevated. The Kid reached for the two small Gladstone bags, switched out the light, and made for the door.

He had reached the front door below, and was opening it, when he heard the scream of the police whistle blown from the study window. The Kid plunged out into the swirling fog. The shrill summons of the whistle had brought results. The neighborhood was evidently well guarded. Answering whistles responded, and the Kid saw smears of approaching light through the yellowish fog.

Parish's car was still at the curb. The Canary Kid climbed into the front seat. The somnolent chauffeur at the wheel straightened up with a gasp when the Kid's gun nudged him.

"*Drive!*"

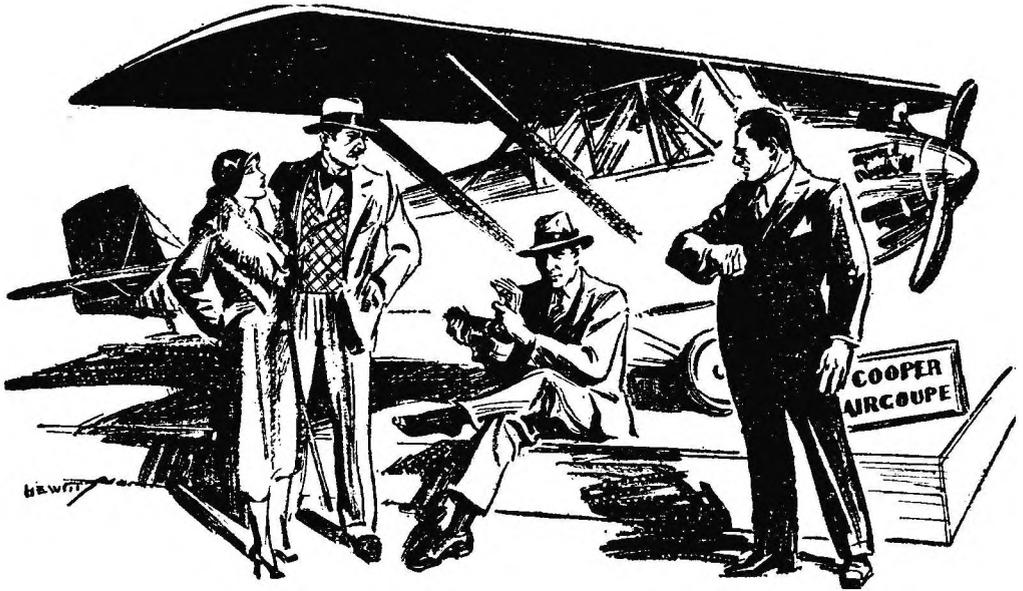
The engine coughed and sputtered. It seemed an eternity before the gears meshed. The sedan sprang away. Dim figures, running toward the house, shouted for it to stop. The Kid pressed his gun closer to the chauffeur's side.

"Keep the gas pedal all the way down!" he ordered. "You're taking me across town as far as the Strand. Whether or not you eat breakfast to-morrow morning depends on your intelligence. Grasp the idea? You'll find you better do as I say."

"I—I'll do anything you say, sir," the other assured him.

The Canary Kid settled back in the seat, the two bags on the floor at his feet. The full measure of his luck, and the narrowness of his escape, were too recent to be fully appreciated, but something Mandeville had said earlier that evening echoed in his mind. The Kid looked back, thinking of his get-away.

"Fogs," he told himself, "are necessary!"



FLYAWAY CLEVELAND

By Ross Annett

Too much "hot air" sometimes causes a blow-out.

TALK about casting pearls before the proletariat! Picture Pete Salem and me tossing sales talk to the crowds of air-minded fivver owners at the Cleveland Air Show. Wasted effort. Because, even if he was as good a salesman as Pete thinks he is, a man couldn't sell the Morgan yacht to a bookkeeper's assistant.

I don't have to tell you that old man Cooper turns out some nice crates. We had a Lansing Limousine there in our exhibit and a Cooper Aircoupé with a Lansing frame suspended from the ceiling and labeled "The Eagle's Skeleton."

Also slides and movies illustrating the Cooper line, and literature and everything.

It was a nice layout and got lots of attention, and we handed out enough literature to decorate every home from there to Walla Walla. People go in for air-show literature nowadays instead of collecting picture post cards of Niagara Falls and the soldiers' and sailors' monument at Higgins Harbor, Maine. But the first three days we didn't sell any more airplanes than you could count on the fingers of a man who'd had both arms cut off in a railroad accident.

Crowds! They plumb wrecked

the Lansing to pieces climbing in and out of it. Swarms of kids played "I'm the king of the castle" on the tail plane and it had more names written on it than the *Spirit of St. Louis* after Lindbergh's national tour. You could take a juvenile census of Cleveland and vicinity by just writing down the names scribbled on that crate.

You'd get hold of a likely looking fellow and talk performance and pay load till you were blue in the face, and when you'd stop for breath he'd admit that he was a sort of air-minded chambermaid at the local roundhouse. Then you'd separate him gently but firmly from the Air-coupe's joystick which he had unscrewed to take away for a souvenir and he would stagger off with an armful of Cooper literature. They must have had trucks waiting outside to load the stuff onto.

Of course you didn't mind the women so much. Boy, there were some frails there that'd revive anybody's interest in aviation. But flirting don't pay old man Cooper no dividends, so I laid off them mostly. Anyway, Pete Salem usually horned in and talked me out of them, leaving me to shoo the reigning king of the castle off the Lansing's tail plane with a little tap on the royal seat just to keep him air-minded and a threat to crown the next little king that ascended the throne.

You don't know Pete? Well, I can give you two portraits of him: Picture somebody a little more handsome and dashing than Doug Fairbanks, a little better pilot than Lindbergh, a little better salesman than the Prince of Wales, and you got the picture Pete sees when he looks at himself in an Aircoupe's rear-vision mirror.

Then try to imagine somebody a little less graceful than the fat man

in Barnum & Bailey's, a little shorter of breath than Trudy after she swam the Channel, with bigger feet than the traffic cop at Seventh Avenue and Thirty-fourth Street, and a mug that's a little muggier than the rogue's gallery average. If you got that you got the picture the world sees of P. H. Salem.

I'LL give you the real low-down on P. H. The "P." stands for Percy, although you couldn't get him to admit it, and he tries to make you think his last name is "Sell 'em." He'd make a hit selling cosmetics house-to-house because, although it ain't saying much for the intelligence of American womanhood, they fall for him. Well, anyway, most of the less-discriminating women.

On the fourth day I was getting pretty well worn out, what with the crowds and Pete's wheezy blah in my ears all the time. I was leaning wearily against the Aircoupe's fuselage when somebody touched me on the elbow. I didn't even open my eyes. By that time I'd got so that almost anything would set me going like a phonograph record or the guy with a megaphone on a sight-seeing bus.

"This is the Cooper Aircoupe," I droned, "fastest-selling airplane in the medium-price range. Business man or sportsman, you'll like it because it's faster than planes selling for three times as much. Yet it lands like a kitten's paw. On your left, ladies and gentlemen, is the fifty-story Oompah Building. With its sturdy construction, beautiful appearance and unexcelled performance, it is to-day America's easiest-to-buy, easiest-to-fly airplane. Especially designed for the private owner. And the fleet is in the Hudson, girls."

I'd got so I used to put things in like that just for variety.

"Isn't it a darling!" said a voice at my elbow.

A voice like trilling bird notes when it's apple-blossom time in Maryland. A thou-beside-me-singing-in-the-wilderness kind of voice.

My eyes popped open and I stood there blinking like stout Cortez himself when he first beheld them celebrated Spanish beauties at Tia Juana. Was she the little queen of all the glorified American girls? Boy, I'm telling you.

She's hanging on to a fellow's arm and admiring the Aircoupe, and the fellow says:

"Nice little job."

And I says: "In the trade, mister, she's known as a Lulu."

I had my eyes on the dame, of course, and she says:

"Quit your kiddin'." With a look out of them snappy blue eyes that sent my heart over into a half roll and from there into a spin. When I came out of it the fellow was asking me about the Aircoupe, and I had a hard time recalling the sales patter I'd been talking day and night for three days.

"Perfection of line," I say dreamily. "The last word in style and stream lining."

"Don't get fresh, Freddie," she croaks in a voice that was suddenly as coarse as a crow's in a cornfield. But the fellow just laughed it off and says:

"He's talking about the ship, you dope."

That little interchange sort of sobered me up. I could see that she might be a sweet little kitten, but her claws weren't manicured. And anyway, I don't like slangy women. They don't appeal to me any more than bearded ladies in a side show. So when Pete horned in and grabbed

her attention like he always does, I just tootled off and kicked a couple of kids off the Lansing Limousine.

FROM a distance she didn't look so hot. Honest, her eyes had a kind of hard look like you associate with dames who argue with bookmakers at the races, or welcome butter-and-egg men at cabarets. And her hair had a metallic sheen like the sun glistening on an engine cowling. Metallic, that was the word to fit her—a subtle something in her manner. But you wouldn't expect Pete to notice it, him being anything but subtle.

He sure fell for her hard, helped her in and out of the cabin and explained all the little gadgets to her while she sat in the pilot's seat and tinkled and cooed. And, mind you, that Aircoupe is some sweet little job for anybody to coo over.

The fellow with her liked the ship, too. When you got a chance to look him over like I did he was pretty snooty himself. Clothes that would have roused Pete's inferiority complex if he'd been able to see anybody but the frail. And in the matter of clothes Pete thinks he's old man Brummel himself. This bird wore spats and a stick and gloves, and he had a wrist watch set with diamonds that flashed expensive rainbows at you whenever he raised his arm. And speaking of diamonds, that dame had a couple of rocks on her as big as hub caps.

"Oh, Arthur," she calls to him from the cabin. "I just love this little ship. You've simply got to buy me one."

"Now, now," he says. "Where would we put it? Haven't we got Pullman reservations and everything through to Hollywood?"

"We could fly there," she gurgles. "Please let's."

Arthur shrugs and looks sadly at Pete.

"I should have known better than to bring her to the air show," he says. "She's as full of whims as a humming bird. Trouble is, she's got plenty of money to indulge her whims."

Pete couldn't see anything in that to be sad about.

"Can she fly?" he says.

"No, but I can. I'm her husband. Just one of her whims."

Pete figured another little whim like an Aircoupe at four grand wouldn't do her any harm, and they argued the point until finally this Arthur took the dame away. But it was like dragging a pouting kid from a candy counter.

"Sweet little bit of femininity," Pete wheezes enviously after them. "Must be nice to be him."

"Him or whim?" I says.

"Him."

"Oh, I dunno. There's lots of hims I'd rather be. She's too kind of whimsy. However, every her has her whim."

"Imagine!" Pete dreams on, "Imagine being able to give up work and having nothing to do but indulge the whims of a girl like that! He was a pilot, too, before he married her. Why can't something like that happen to me?"

"There's several reasons," I says. "Two of them being a coupla flat feet and another a discouraged waistline."

WELL, we back talked for a while over the heads of the air-minded visitors, and then Pete went out for a spot of something at a near-by speakie. He hadn't more'n got out of the building before this dame was back with her whim dragging reluctantly behind.

"Where's Mr. Salem?" she asks, smiling.

"He fell down a sewer and broke a coupla legs," I says, knocking another king off Lansing Castle with one fell swoop of my mace.

"Don't be like that," she says. "Be nice and I might learn to like you. I just dote on homely men."

"Oh, yeah?" was all I could cover that one with.

"Yeah. But to go from the ridiculous to the sublime, what's the fly-away price of this crate?"

"Huh!" I says, derisive as a door-keeper to a newsboy. "Four thousand berries."

"Huh yourself," she says. "You got another just like her on the line? Or do you have to take this ship off the floor?"

"We got two just like her on the line."

"How soon could you have one ready?"

"Fifteen minutes, with a bill of sale and everything. How soon could you get four thousand bucks?"

I admit that that was no way to talk to a lady, but she sure had me riled.

"Insolent!" she says. "Pay him the money, Arthur."

Arthur didn't want to do it and they argued about it. But finally he took out a morocco bill fold and handed me four new bills.

"What's this?" I sneers, "a deposit on a scooter for little Junior?"

"That's four grand, Homely," says the frail. "If you'll just cast your weary eyes on it."

I looked at the bills and each one had figures on it that said one thousand dollars, and the words didn't contradict the figures. I'd heard tell that they made them that big, but I never got any off the news stands in change, so I couldn't tell whether it was stage money or what. And

the dame kept grinning at me, so I says in an offhand way:

"Take it away and gimme some legal tender."

"That's legal," she says, "and as tender as anything could be and still be legal. Ask anybody about it."

"Nobody around here ever saw one."

"Listen, Homely," she says coldly. "Here's a cash sale slipping because you doubt my money. If you get me sore you won't sell that crate and your boss'll hear about it and then where'll you be? Back on the old air mail."

Arthur breaks out then, sore as a boil and I had an uneasy feeling that maybe they weren't kidding me after all. Maybe this was genuine money and they actually meant to buy the ship.

"Be reasonable," I says in a friendlier tone. "You can't blame me because I never saw one of them de luxe editions before. It won't take me two minutes to slip out to a bank and see are they all right."

"The idea!"

Boy, was Arthur indignant! But the girl argued him down.

"Let him go," she says. "I've got my heart set on that little ship and I want it now."

THERE was a bank seven blocks away and I walked all the way. Reason I didn't hurry was that the minute I got outside the building I tumbled to the fact that I was being had. I figured that Pete had framed up something to kid me about. Likely they were watching me from a window and laughing heartily.

So I set the bills up on a letter box and took out a pill. They fell off on the sidewalk and I just put my foot on them casually while I

lighted the cigarette. Then I picked them up carelessly and sauntered into a restaurant. But I slipped out the back door into an alley and so to the bank, because I just wanted to be sure, that's all.

"I got some bills here," I says to the teller, "and I want you to tell me if they're K. O."

"What denomination?" he says.

"Methodist," I says. "But what's that to you? This is a bank, ain't it?"

I pushed the bills in to him and says:

"Is this money? Or are they just Confederate chromos or Mexican piastres?"

"These are genuine thousand-dollar notes," he says.

"Go way t' hell!" I whispered hoarsely.

I slunk over to a bench along the wall, took off my shoe and slipped the folded bills down into my sock. Then I put the shoe back on and hustled out and called a taxi.

"Give her the gun, buddy," I hollered, "and set me down at the air show in ten seconds or the czar of all the gushers will walk out on me and you'll catch hell."

He was headed the wrong way and the light was against him, but he did a half roll right under the traffic cop's coat tails, caromed off a big eight sedan and climbed over a couple of flivvers.

"Ne'mind the flatfoot," I yelled. "You got the whole U. S. treasury back of you. Gun her, buddy, gun her!"

So we went charging ahead while fenders to right of us and fenders to left of us crumpled and sundered. When he S-turned in to the main entrance I did a pancake onto the sidewalk and told him to wait there because I couldn't keep Miss Rothschild waiting.

But when I galloped up to the Cooper Aircraft exhibit, there was the dame and Arthur, the lucky ex-pilot, in an indignant huddle with Pete Salem, who had come back from the speakie with a breath his worst enemy wouldn't hesitate to envy.

"You don't want to mind Denny," he was saying. "He's so dumb he thinks the Basin of Minas had porcelain handles."

"He's certainly no gentleman," says the frail.

"Even at that, you flatter him," Pete retorts.

Then they caught sight of me slinking in with all the élan of one of them moth-eaten hound dogs in a sixth-rate Tom show. If you never been in a jam like that you don't get the essence of the word crestfallen. Was I punctured? Huh, boy!

"Well, Homely?" says the frail, awful sarcastic.

I just sat down and took my shoe off. There was a hole in my sock, too, which didn't add anything to my air of sang-froid.

"They're all right," I says, taking out the bills.

"You're right, they're all right," snarls Arthur, grabbing them out of my hand. "And now that he has satisfied himself about that we'll be on our way, Lou."

The dame started to argue, but he silenced her with a look. Was he mad? Huh, boy!

PETE salaamed and wheezed and blatted needle-beer breath until the flies dropped off the pillars and went staggering around in circles. But Arthur and his frail just walked out on him while I sat there with my shoe in my hand, wiggling my toes.

"Now see what you done," whimpered Pete when they had gone. "You double-perforated sap! Know

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who that dame is? She's Lou Laramie, the movie actress. She told me so herself."

"All right, all right," I said wearily. "I thought she looked familiar. I've seen her plenty in them cabaret comedies, but I didn't recognize her."

"Boy, when old man Cooper hears about this you'll find yourself drafted into the army of unemployed. Cash sales these days are scarcer'n sea serpents in Arizona."

"Aw, go fan yourself," I says. "How did I know it was cash? And what if I did think the Basin of Minas was a pewter beer mug? Wouldn't I have looked like a sap if I'd sold that crate for Russian rubles or something?"

"You can't help looking like a sap and you might as well stop taking precautions against it," Pete replies. "Nobody but a sap would take a movie queen for a cheap crook. Nobody but a sap would think that a crook could trade Mexican money for a four-thousand-dollar crate and get away with it. Why they'd get nabbed the first airport they landed at. The ship's got a number, ain't it?"

Well, there was some sense in that, too. I put my shoe on and got it partly laced up and then somebody grabbed me roughly by the coat collar and somebody else yelled in a shrill voice:

"That's him! He said he was the secretary of the treasury."

I looked up and there was the taxi driver I'd left waiting out in front. Then I craned my neck around and found that the fellow who had me by the coat collar was a cop.

"Come with me, Mr. Secretary," he says.

"Is he or ain't he the secretary of the treasury?" the taxi driver asks Pete, who grins darkly and says:

"That's only a part-time job. He's just been commissioned a quartermaster general in Coxey's army."

"Well, come along, general," the cop says. "We got a string of decorations to pin on you. Gangway there!"

Then he shouldered his way through a crowd of air-minded citizens, dragging me after him with the taxi driver stepping on my heels and telling me where I got off.

When they finally unshackled me and let me shamble out of the police station I was four hundred and eighty-nine dollars and forty cents poorer—what with fines and damages to fenders and so on.

On my way back to the air show I dropped in and sent a few inquiring telegrams, because if that movie idol and her idle whim of a husband bawled me out to old man Cooper, I could see where I'd be needing a job of flying.

IT was late in the afternoon when I reappeared in my accustomed place at the Cooper Aircraft dugout, but Pete Salem's a fellow that never forgets other people's errors. He was ready with a line of nasty innuendoes which I didn't bother to dispute, being low in spirits and figuring that Pete and me would soon part company anyway; once old man Cooper got around to it.

However, in the interests of long-suffering American womanhood, I thought it best to tell him that before he did any close-ups with movie queens like Laramie Lou he'd better get a good mechanic to give his face a complete overhaul. I tried to point out that whenever he revved up on his favorite Romeo lines his voice mechanism had a knock in it that no discriminating woman could mistake for heart throbs.

"Oh, I guess I registered with Lou Laramie, all right," he murmurs reminiscently. Then suddenly his voice switched to a growl like a flivver going up Mud Hill in low after a cloudburst. "Crawl under the desk, you boob! She's coming back."

I crawled into the cabin of the Lansing Limousine instead and sat down beside a fat drummer from Terre Haute, Indiana, who was wiggling the joystick happily and unconsciously annoying the kids fighting for standing room on the tail plane.

"Suppose I got money enough to buy a ship like this," says the drummer, "would it take me long to learn to fly it?"

"It might," I answers. "Some people never learn. You see that stout nincompoop talking to the blond dame over by the Aircoupé? He's been calling himself a pilot since 1918 and it's still a lie."

The drummer seemed kind of discouraged.

"Who is he?" he says, looking across to where Pete's dimpling and sniggering at Lou Laramie and her still indignant male whim.

"You've heard tell of war's aftermath?" I says. "Well, he's it. Any time my grandchildren pull that worn-out gag about war being a survival of the fittest, I'm going to silence all arguments by taking down Pete's picture from behind the German helmet on the mantel."

"Well, anyway," says the drummer, reverting to type, "I'll tell the cock-eyed world that blonde is a darb."

"Maybe she was once," I says, "but she outgrew it long before Pershing landed at Bordeaux. The movies ain't what they used to be anyway."

"Get away!" he gasps, letting go the joystick and crawling over my lap. "Is she a movie star?"

He missed the step and fell on his face, but he came up smiling and waddled across to where Laramie Lou's him-whim was handing Pete some notes out of that same morocco case. Apparently the frail had salved over his offended dignity and the sale was going through, which ought to have made me glad seeing that it probably saved me my job with Cooper Aircraft.

Pete put his hat on and flashed me a loud, triumphant look which I ducked and took on the right shoulder. Then the three of them disappeared in the crowd at the main entrance.

In half an hour Pete came back, all aglow like freshly poured pig iron.

"Cash sale, Denny," he chirps. "Signed, sealed and delivered, and the happy couple are off for Hollywood. She promised me an autographed picture of herself to remember her by."

"Which goes to show that Kipling was right about Julia O'Grady and the colonel's lady. They're all dumb under the skin. There's no telling what dames will do."

"Now don't give way to petty jealousy, Denny," he says.

He grabbed a telegraph form and dashed off a message to old man Cooper:

I AM DELIGHTED TO INFORM YOU THAT I SOLD COOPER AIRCOUPE TO LOU LARAMIE SCREEN ACTRESS FOUR THOUSAND CASH FLYAWAY CLEVELAND DESPITE KEEN OPPOSITION STOP I PERSONALLY DELIVERED SHIP TO MISS LARAMIE AND HER HUSBAND STOP I SUGGEST EXCELLENT CHANCE PUBLICITY THIS CONNECTION AND I PERSUADED MISS LARAMIE TO PERMIT USE OF AUTOGRAPHED PHOTOGRAPH THAT SHE IS PRESENTING ME IN TOKEN HER ESTEEM

P. H. SALEM

"Why get so personal with the pronouns?" I asks. "There's five 'I's' and a 'me' in there that don't contribute to anything but the telegraph company's revenue. After all, you're just a broken cog in the Cooper sales organization."

"Who sold this ship?" Pete demanded. "Maybe you'd like me to mention you in that telegram—tell the old man about your part in the transaction."

"Oh, well, if you feel like that about it—enough said," I answered, and he galloped away to file the telegram, returning via the speakie a couple of hours later pretty well needed.

PETE spent the rest of the evening advertising himself and Lou Laramie all around the air show and taking the boys out to the speakie to hoist a few by way of celebration. So I had all the heavy entertaining to do. It was midnight when I got back to the hotel and near noon the following day when I woke up and slunk down to breakfast, feeling lower than a seasick stoker; because Pete had told everybody and his brother about me getting skeptical about the screen queen's money.

I ordered some black coffee and a piece of dry toast just to have something in my stomach before I stepped out to that speakie and took on a load of soul-and-sense-destroyer. Then I opened the morning paper.

If you were in Cleveland that day you got the whole story, just like I did, with your breakfast rolls. It was spread all over the front page and my coffee was stone cold before I got it all read. Then I says:

"Here, fellow, take this away and bring me some oatmeal porridge and a stack of wheats and a double order

of ham and eggs. And have a couple men stand by with refills on the coffee."

"Lou Laramie!" I chuckles happily. "Larruping Lou from Leavenworth! She and her boy friend hit this town and left it flatter'n Coyote Coulee, Kansas, after the last cyclone."

Well, you remember. They simply plastered the business district with thousand-dollar notes and not a blamed one of them was worth a hoot. Mostly, their technique was the same that they pulled on me, with little variations to suit the time and circumstances.

They'd go into a swell jeweler's, say, and the frail'd get all het up over some little ten-thousand-dollar trinket while Arthur explained to the tired help that he was some celebrity visiting the air show. Finally he'd give in with great reluctance and lay ten thousand-dollar bills in front of the salesman's astonished eyes.

Then the staff would go into a huddle and one of them would sneak out to a bank to see if they were genuine, which they always were, whereupon Arthur would get mighty offended and grab his money and stalk out of the place. But the little lady would have her heart so set on that trinket that she'd drag him back and just make him buy it for her. So he would pocket his dignity and lay down ten more bills, phony ones this time. Usually, too, he'd beat them down five hundred dollars or so and take the change in real U. S. currency.

Was it cruel the way they hooked 'em? Huh, boy!

Finally though, somebody got hep to it and phoned the police and the bulls haunted the railroad stations and even the airport thicker'n innocent bystanders at a street fight, so

they couldn't get out of town. They had good descriptions of the pair, too, but, thanks to Pete Salem, they made a clean get-away.

PETE himself drifts into the restaurant presently, looking like a maiden lady's conception of the ravages of strong drink and I welcomed him with considerable warmth.

"Here's old John R. Romeo himself," I says. "The screen idol's idol, soon to be idle in fact as well as in name when Cooper learns the real facts about his big coup in Air-coups."

"What does all that mean in plain language?" he inquires haughtily.

"It means a rude awakening for Salem, the Salesman. It means that the Basin of Minas is a tin cup presented annually to the world's dumbest citizen and that you've been selected from a large field of candidates. The presentation will take place shortly, with appropriate ceremonies, in old man Cooper's private office. Try that with your tomato juice, old chap." And I flops the paper down in front of his face.

Did he holler? Huh, boy!

"Then she wasn't Lou Laramie at all!" he howls.

"Even thus ye scribe hath it."

Suddenly he clutched his breast pocket, sprang from his chair and went galloping out the door without hat or breakfast.

"Something tells me he's looking for a bank," I murmured. "Give me another cup of coffee, George. Glorious day, ain't it."

In no time at all Pete comes limping back with a *non compos mentis* look and four crumpled chromos in his moist fist.

"Something to remember her by," I says sympathetically, indicating the phony notes. "All autographed

and everything. Suggest excellent chance publicity this connection."

That reference to his telegram made him wince heavily. He deserted his breakfast for the second time and staggered out of the restaurant, and I went with him. I'm not a man to rub things in or hit a man when he's down, but on the way to the nearest telegraph office several things occurred to me that I thought it best to tell him for his own good.

Pete flounders into the place and grabs a blank form and writes out a message to old man Cooper with a hand that's shaking like an old-time Jenny in a power dive:

RE AIRCOUPE SALE. OUR SALES FORCE UNFORTUNATE VICTIMS OF SWINDLER POSING AS LOU LARAMIE SCREEN ACTRESS STOP POLICE INVESTIGATING. COOPER AIRCRAFT SALES DEPT.

"Why use the plural of victim?" I breathed harshly in his ear. "And where's all them 'I's' that were paying the telegraph company dividends yesterday?"

"Aw, go soak your head," he groans, and I says:

"Same to you, with porcelain handles on."

Then we repaired in a body to the air show to await unpleasant developments, with me forging ahead and Pete sagging along behind like a 1914 pusher with the fuselage all out of true.

I had just phoned the police and given them the number of the crate and the happy couple's supposed destination, when a messenger boy hands us a billet from old man Cooper. I guess he had got all the particulars from the New York papers, because the only thing he wanted to know was why the blistering blazes somebody hadn't had savvy enough to verify the notes at

a bank, and how soon could our Mr. P. H. Salem report at the New York office.

PETE just broke down and sobbed as though his heart would break. But I said, leave it to me and I'd fix it up for him, because, what I mean, even a boob like him needs a job. So I wired Cooper as follows:

CROOKS FOILED BY OUR MR. DENNISON DYKE BUT UNFORTUNATELY SNEAKED BACK WHILE MR. DENNISON DYKE BUSY DEMONSTRATING LIMOUSINE TO REPRESENTATIVE OF PACIFIC TRANSPORT AND VICTIMIZED SALEM STOP SALEM WILL REPORT NEW YORK OFFICE IMMEDIATELY ON COMPLETION OF A PROMISING DEAL WITH A SOUTH AMERICAN FIRM FOR TEN LIMOUSINES STOP NO CAUSE FOR WORRY RE AIRCOUPE WHICH POLICE WILL RECOVER SHORTLY

COOPER AIRCRAFT
PER DENNISON DYKE

A magnanimous gesture, I thought—that boloney about the South American prospect which would postpone Pete's evil hour until the old man cooled off, but Pete only grumbled that there was a "helluva lotta Dennison Dykes" in the telegram and donned his toga and toddled away to the speakie. He got back in time to witness my signature for two telegrams.

One was from Cooper who wished to remind Mr. Salem re South American prospect that bogus Brazilian milreis would positively not be accepted in payment.

The other telegram was from Montreal, from Hector McTavish. You know Hec. He flies the Montreal mail out of Hadley Field. One cause of the present depression that the investigators missed is the fact that Hec's been withdrawing money from circulation ever since he started

peddling papers around the Teterboro, New Jersey, airport.

Hec keeps a savings account in Montreal and one in New York. When American exchange is at a premium he deposits his pay checks in Montreal. Then, in the fall, when Canadian money goes above par on account of grain shipments, he transfers his account to New York.

His telegram came "collect," and read as follows:

THREE THOUSAND CASH BUYS
BRAND NEW COOPER AIRCOUPE
STOP CUSTOMARY SELLING COM-
MISSION AND BONUS FOR QUICK
SALE.

"Huh!" snorts Pete. "Hec's idea of the customary selling commission is about an eighth of one per cent with cigar coupons for a bonus. Tell him to go fan himself—collect," Pete adds, as I'm reaching for a telegraph blank.

"Dope," I hissed scornfully. "Don't you smell a coupla dead rats?"

He actually sniffed the air.

"I thought it was ether from that needle beer," he says.

"Listen," I says. "Hec McTavish offers a new Aircoupe for three grand. That means he can pick it up for not a cent more than two thousand. Now anybody'd sell a new Aircoupe for half price must want to get rid of it bad. And who's willing to take a loss like that?"

So by easy stages I guided his ponderous brain mechanism until the tumblers clicked and the bolts shot back.

"Lou Laramie!"

"Alias Dannemora Daisy. It can't be anybody else. What more natural destination for her and her indignant buddy than Montreal? They can get a boat from there to Europe and a little loose change from the sale of the Aircoupe would help to defray expenses, especially as the crate

didn't cost them anything in the first place."

"Tell it to the police," snarled Pete, reaching for the phone.

"Tell it to the Horse Guards, you sap," I says, grabbing the receiver and tossing it back on the hook. Then I scribbled off a wire to Hec McTavish:

HOLD EVERYTHING AND MEET
ME ST. HUBERT AIRPORT ON OR
ABOUT SIX PIP EMMA.

DENNY.

"What's the big idea?" Pete sputters. "You better put the cops onto 'em."

"The cops can have them and welcome when I get my equity out of them," I says. "That pair set me back four hundred and eighty-nine bucks. Add to that several little items under the general heading of mental anguish and the whole account totals up to roughly one thousand dollars.

"Let the bulls grab them and where would I get off? Cooper would get his crate back. The merchants would all get back their rocks and fur coats from the pawnshops, and I'd be left flying left wing low in a fog off Staten Island. I wouldn't be doing right by our Mr. Dennison Dyke if I didn't get my hooks into them first."

"How you going to do it?" Pete bleats eagerly. "And speaking of mental anguish, you oughta figure me in for a coupla grand."

"You can't have commutator trouble on a Diesel motor," I reminds him, "nor neither can a brainless moron collect damages for mental anguish. But you come along with me to Montreal and I might be able to use you for a decoy or something."

"My ideas are a little nebulous as yet," I explained in a high voice,

once I'd got a new Aircoupe off the field, set her nose on the southwest bastion of the Montreal *hotel de ville*, and started cutting the corners off Lakes Erie and Ontario. "But believe me, by the time I make one of my celebrated three-point landings at St. Hubert I'll have them all trued up and trammeling pretty."

I DON'T need to tell you that the new Aircoupe is a bonafide maker of aviation history and besides we had a tail wind most of the way. Anyway, we swept into St. Hubert on time and there was Hector McTavish, grinning an anticipatory grin at our evident haste to snap up his bargain in Aircoupes.

"As I live," he says, "Dennison Dyke in person!"

"And Salem the Salesman," I counters. "Don't overlook him—the present holder of the Boob's Basin. But let's postpone the persiflage and congregate around this Aircoupe that's under the hammer for three grand."

"It ain't here," says Hec. "It's back in Newark."

"In Newark!" I yelled.

"Sure. I just bought it before I took off for Montreal. Tell you how come—although I promised not to spill it until they got away. You see, Katie Kissel, the daughter of the chain-store millionaire, eloped last night with her sweetie who was a pilot on Mid-west Airways. They booked passage with me to Montreal and, him being just a poor pilot and in need of money, he offered me his new Aircoupe at a discount for cash providing I'd push it into a hangar and keep it hid for a few days so old man Kissel couldn't trace them. What you gasping about, Denny?"

"Hector," I chokes, "it breaks my heart to have to tell you, but that's the only bum investment you ever

made. If you had squandered tuppence on a morning paper you'd read the sad story yourself. That ship belongs to old man Cooper. Said Katie Kissel having practically stolen it from poor ponderous Peter here, so you're fined two grand for listening to fairy stories. Know where Katie and her boy friend are now?"

"Do I?" he roars louder than the pibroch of Donald Dhu. "They're at a quiet hotel on Bellefleur Street. I took them there myself because the proprietor gives me a little rake-off, see, on any business I send him. They stung me two thousand bucks but, by gosh, I'll take it outa their hides."

"Wait a minute," I says, grabbing him by the coat tail. "Wait a minute and we'll arrange to take it in cash. They owe you two thousand. Add a thousand for me and chip in five hundred for Pete and that makes thirty-five hundred."

"Now, somewhere in a dark corner of one of these hangars there must be a crate that you could arrange to have Pete and me placed in undisturbed possession of for half an hour."

"Sure, but——"

"Then you toddle off to the hostelry and engage Lou of Leavenworth in idle conversation and mention casually that a couple of bogus-bill brokers worked the Cleveland Air Show for a handsome profit and took it on the lam. Then tell them confidentially that the bulls have been tipped off that the swindlers are in Montreal, that they're combing the city and watching all docks, railroad stations, and airports."

"Yeah, and then what?" cried Hec impatiently.

"Then we'll sell 'em an airplane for thirty-five hundred smackers! Once you get 'em all hopped up so

they think they haven't got a loop-hole to crawl out of, see, then you mention that you know of a coupla Canucks that have got a peach of a crate that can be bought for that much cash money account financial difficulties. A crate that for cruising radius would make Lindbergh's new ship look like a Blerio monoplane crossing the Channel in nineteen aught eight.

"They'll snap at it, see, and you bring them around here. But we're wise to their game. Even Puny Pete wouldn't bite twice on the same hunk of boloney. First little Arthur'll give us four grand in bonafide U. S. currency and we'll send Pete out to get it certified. But Pete won't come back to give Arthur the chance to substitute his phony bills. You and I'll stick around long enough to give Pete a start and then we'll melt away into the shadows and join Pete in a merry rendezvous at some convenient groggery. How does that register on your radio-trons?"

"Like a program of organ music," chants Hector McTavish, and Pete bleats his approbation.

"Now you get Pete and me some greasy coveralls and caps for disguises, Hec, and then get going."

HEC plants us in a shadowy corner of a hangar beside a cabin job that would assay about twice the price we were asking for her. Then he disappears.

In about half an hour he returns and sure enough he's got Arthur and the frail with him. What's more, they've got bags and everything, all set to hop off for Mexico City.

"It's a crime to practically give away a ship like this," I mumble in a patois that I hope they'll take for French-Canadian. "But Henri and me need the *argent*, don't we, Henri."

"*Oui, oui*," says Pete, in a hollow voice from under a hat that was much too large for him. "Bloody right. We need money, too."

"*'Argent'* is money, you sap," I hissed at him. "That's French."

But Arthur was tossing the bags into the cabin already. That's how easy it was, like selling the Empire State Building to the champion hog-caller of the Middle West.

"Hurry," says the frail, glancing anxiously at a coupla curious citizens rubbering at us from the hangar door. "We gotta make Toronto to-night."

Arthur pulls out his well-known morocco bill fold and holds out four one-thousand-dollar bills.

"Ooh!" I gasps, shrugging my shoulders excitedly at the sight of them. "Ees thees monee?"

"Sure?" he says, laughing heartily. "Go ask somebody about it if you don't believe me."

"But yes. Henri shall take it to the bank," I says.

"There aren't any banks open at this hour," Arthur says, but Hec pipes up that there's one at Etienne and Cartier Streets that's open evenings.

Pete takes the money with a couple Gallic bows and mumbles, "*Beaucoup! Beaucoup!*"

"Hencoop!" I snarled at him, while Arthur was arguing the point with Hec. "G'wan. Buzz off!"

Pete buzzed through a side door and Arthur was demanding an immediate fill of gas because the money was O. K. and he was in a hurry, and he'd trust Hector to mail the change to him at the Royal York Hotel, Toronto, when up breezes the two curious citizens that had been rubbering from a distance. They throttled down, one on each side of Arthur and one of them slipped bracelets on him while the other ex-

plained in precise English that he could consider himself under arrest if it was all the same to him.

They also invited the lady to accompany them to the wagon which waited without and neither of them batted an eye under the tongue lashing she gave them. Was she hot? Huh, boy!

They let us go after Hec got a fellow from the office to identify him and he explained that Arthur and his frail were just trying to buy a ship off us. You see the police had traced the Aircoupé to Newark and then wired the Montreal cops.

"Couldn't have worked out better," we chuckled as we wended our way to the Windsor Bar. "We just barely got to them in time."

WE waited about an hour and were getting kind of worried about Pete when a bell hop paged me and gave me a message that a cop had brought for me. It was from Pete!

"Come and get me out of stir, you sap!"

We hurried outside, but the cop didn't know what it was all about. However, he led us to a near-by police station and there was Pete with his hat crushed down over his eyes so that he had to tilt his head back to see out. He was cursing vigorously in six languages, including the Scandinavian.

"Calm down now," I says, "and Hec will soon straighten things out. It's all a ghastly mistake."

"You're ghastly right!" he snarls. And was he sore? Huh, boy!

"I went into this bank," he explains after a while, "just to make sure we hadn't slipped up. The teller started spitting French at me as soon as I showed him the notes. I couldn't understand whether he said the money was phony or O. K., and while we were arguing the point a cop comes in. I guess they sent out for him.

"Don't ever argue with a cop, not a Canadian cop. That's why I can't get my hat off. My head's all swollen."

"This is scandalous," I cried indignantly. "Just because you couldn't understand French!"

"French me eyebrow!" he screams at me. "It would have been the same in any language. It was them bills."

"The money!" I gasps. "They thought you stole it!"

A deadly calmness settled upon Pete's despondent figure.

"Is *he* dumb?" he inquired hopelessly of the police sergeant. "You tell him, Clemenceau."

"Don't tell me," I cried harshly, "don't tell me those notes were phony!"

"Clemenceau'll tell you," muttered Pete wearily. "I was pinched for passin' them."

In the next number

BARREL SIZE

By T. T. FLYNN

A pint-sized deputy sheriff shows that when it comes to trapping coyotes what a man lacks in inches he can make up in courage.

FOR LACK OF

It's fine for a puncher to know *how*

CHAPTER I. A PRIZE.

AMONG the many men whose crimes have had queer beginnings, consider Jess Slohm, who became a forger because of a staple and a white-faced heifer.

The branding corral at the Slohm ranch was a bedlam that November morning. In a cold wind, under a leaden sky, four cowboys with their faces and clothes coated with dusty

sweat, worked to rebrand yearlings and heifers before the snow fell. Dust and the smell of burned hair are no easier to swallow because the air is cold. The crash of thrown cattle and their bawling protests sent Drew Milner's collie, outside the corral, into frenzies of running and barking.

Drew Milner, on horseback, roped each animal from a milling reddish-brown herd at the lower end of the corral. Two other men threw the roped beast beside the fire. Jess



A NAIL

By Cole Richards

to write—if he knows *what* to write.

Slohm, with a long piece of iron heated cherry-red, struck a line through his own brand and wrote on Drew Milner's brand, a brand so new that Drew had not yet had a regular iron made. Jess hated to change that brand as much as he would hate to carve his own coffin, but Drew did not know that.

"You're good with that iron pencil," Drew called to Jess above the noise, as the branding was finished on a yearling.

Jess thrust the iron into the fire

to keep Drew from seeing the venom in his glance.

"Yup. We'll be through soon," he answered, choking down his feelings. "Only sixty critters. Can't be many more down there." He put the iron in the pine fire. Jess was awkward, bow-legged, smelling of cattle and chewing tobacco, with his faded jeans thrust into scuffed riding boots. He talked with a straight, ugly mouth that never had known a smile, and he stared at other men with unfeeling eyes.



The yearling, released from the ropes, galloped away, bawling. Jess hoped Drew would get at the work again and get it over and leave the Slohm corral. But Drew had stopped to roll a cigarette. He was friendly sometimes to the point of being obnoxious.

Drew was a straight-shouldered, clean-cut young fellow who had spent five years wandering from Montana to Texas and back to Colorado, never once taking the high road. Drew Milner's eyes were eager and questioning. He was a steady reader. His head was in the stars, but his feet were set on solid earth.

"I'd give you a prize in penmanship for that writing," he said admiringly.

"I've took penmanship prizes in school if you wanta know," Jess flared. "And the copybook line I remember was: 'For lack of a nail a shoe was lost; and for lack of a shoe a hoss was lost; and for lack of a hoss a rider was lost; and for lack of a rider a battle was lost.'"

Drew looked startled at the viciousness of the tone compared to the old familiarity of the words, a familiarity that had almost robbed them of meaning. He seemed inclined to ask whether Jess was trying to warn him of something. He shrugged, blew a cloud of smoke, and was off at a canter, whirling his rope.

JESS jerked the branding iron from the fire. It was sizzling hot. He was sizzling himself. He was hungry, too, and hunger does not add to a man's good humor, especially when he expects to be hungry all winter. Jess Slohm faced a winter of jack rabbits and brown beans. He blamed Drew Milner for his diet.

Drew Milner came to Colorado

with twelve hundred dollars, intending to start ranching if he liked the country. At the end of the year he set as a test of conditions there, he was working for a man named Bartness. Bartness was ordered to a warmer climate. Bartness sold out most of his cattle, leaving three hundred head as the nucleus of a herd in case he came back. He left the ranch in Drew's hands, with the privilege of putting in a few properly branded cattle of his own.

Drew moved into a one-room shanty on the Bartness place, a half mile from Jess Slohm's. This suited Drew because he liked to talk. He invested his twelve hundred dollars, after due deliberation, in sixty head of cattle.

Meantime, Jess Slohm had made two bad mistakes. He raised too many brown beans to the exclusion of other crops on his dry farm, and he bought too many cattle at the top of a falling market. He intended to fatten and sell the cattle. Feed costs money. His expenses went up while the price of beef went down. He stood to lose, even if he took the cattle off grain and put them on grass, for a dry summer had left his grass in poor condition.

The moment he heard Drew Milner had money to invest, he offered part of his ranch. He offered far less than twelve hundred dollars should have bought because Drew was young and a cowhand. Drew refused the offer. Jess was forced to let the bank foreclose on one of his notes. He lost sixty head of cattle. It was this sixty head that Drew Milner bought and which they were now rebranding in the Slohm corral.

"He could as easy have given me that twelve hundred in a partnership, and it would have saved me from bein' sold out, till the market went up again," Jess thought, as he

vented his brand on a heifer and wrote in Drew Milner's. It was a hated business. The smell of branded hide mixed with his hunger and with the jaded foretaste of beans and jack rabbit. It mixed with a growing hatred of Colorado and a feeling that Milner had profited at his expense. "He's cocky now, 'cause he's startin' in the ranch business. But for lack of a nail a battle was lost. It ain't over yet," he told himself.

And then, as a man comes to an abrupt turn on a mountain road, Jess came to a turning point in his life.

Riot broke out in the lower end of the corral where Drew was trying to get a rope on a white-faced heifer with long horns. The rope he thought he had on her went limp and dragged on the ground. The heifer plunged into the milling cattle, forcing a way out with her long horns. It seemed that the cowboy would be lifted, horse and all, on the tossing horns of cattle trying to give the heifer room. Then she broke from the bunch.

Drew was after her at a gallop, unlooping his extra rope from the left side of the saddle. She lunged at the barking collie, with a slash of the horns that would have ripped him from tip to flank if the fence had not stopped her. She made a dive for the men at the fire, and they reached the top corral rail like three bullets shot from an automatic.

With the men whooping, she wheeled from the fire and started to run for the bunch of cattle. At a dead run, she stepped full into the loop Drew threw at her feet. Horse and heifer went over at the tightening of the rope. Drew was on his feet instantly to tie her legs before she could get up. The other three men jumped to the ground and ran to help. With three legs tied, she

regained her footing. The combined weight of four men fought seven hundred pounds of plunging, bellowing beef. The men won when Jess got the last leg in the rope and the heifer fell. They dragged her bodily to the scattered fire.

TWO men could hold her now. Jess kicked the embers together and the wind fanned them into flame. He heated the iron.

"I sure hate to give up this heifer. She was one of the best critters I had," he thought.

Drew Milner was at the other end of the corral, recoiling his ropes and patting his mount to quiet him. The other two cowboys were a good twenty feet away, each with his heels dug in, straining against the ropes.

"A heifer like that is worth takin' a chance for."

Jess Slohm drew the cherry-red branding iron from the fire, vented out his old brand, and wrote in his own brand beneath it. If it were noticed after they left the corral, he could say the old brand had become too blurred to read. There was a stench of burned hair and a bawl of protest from the heifer.

He nodded to the cowboys. They released the ropes. The three men made a run for the fence. But the white-faced heifer was over her mutiny. Kicking off the ropes, she walked sedately down to the herd. Drew yowled at her as he cantered past and whirled his rope tauntingly at her nose.

Ten minutes later one of the cowboys said:

"All done before the storm broke. Looks like it's goin' to be a blizzard."

"This is goin' to be a winter of blizzards," said the other man. "Roads are goin' to be blocked and cattle will freeze."

No one argued with him. Jess kicked out the fire. Drew sat on his horse outside the gate with his collie and a slick-haired mongrel, waiting to count the stock. The two cowboys got in a rusty flivver and clanked away over the rolling plains.

Jess opened the gate wide enough to let a few animals through at a time. He counted at a shout as they passed him. Drew was supposed to check the count.

"One, two, three," Jess shouted. All the cattle tried to get through the gate at once, which suited his purpose. His shout rose above the clash of horns and the grunts and thud of heavy bodies. Dust swirled up with the rising wind. The dogs yelped and ran back and forth in a semicircle, to keep the cattle milling.

"Twenty-seven, twenty-eight," rose Jess's shout loudly. And then the white-faced heifer and two yearlings squeezed themselves through. Jess Slohm's counting slurred and his voice dropped. When his counting shout rose above the noise of the cattle, he had added one number. He saw a frown cross Drew's face, but the young cowhand could not stop the plunging cattle and Jess kept on with his counting as fast as he could shout the numbers.

When sixty animals were out, he shouted: "Sixty-one." He slammed the gate on the empty corral.

"Thanks for the writing," Drew called with a friendly grin. Waving his hand, he rode to head the bunch in the right direction. The herd trotted off and passed through the open gate to the Bartness range. Drew got off and closed the gate, for old man Bartness had been careful about the one fence that surrounded his ranch.

Jess Slohm tightened the belt on his empty stomach. His straight,

ugly mouth widened in a grin. The cattle were scattering over the plain and Drew had not noticed the one carrying Jess Slohm's brand. In a couple of days, the heifer could be herded back without trouble.

Drew Milner dropped several points in Jess's estimation. Drew, for all his learning, was not so smart. He could not even count and he did not check closely what other men did. The Bartness ranch would suffer in the hands of a man like that.

"So you'd give me a prize for penmanship, would you?" Jess mocked. "That heifer's good enough prize for me."

His forging career might have ended there, if it had not been for the ease with which a fence staple can be pulled.

CHAPTER II. THE STORM.

A DRY summer had left Jess without enough grass to feed his remaining cattle all winter. On top of his other losses, he was faced with the expense of buying hay. Bartness had had better luck during the summer, perhaps because he had not plowed up his grass. He had plenty to feed and to rent. Before Bartness left, Jess tried to rent some of it. There always had been bad blood between the two men, for Bartness was a crusty old cattleman who read men's brands and said what he thought. He refused to rent pasture to Slohm.

"Just as glad now I didn't pay good money to rent it," Jess told himself. "It ain't no trouble draggin' a couple of staples out of a barbed wire fence. The cattle'd naturally go through and eat their fill. Yep. The horseshoe nail that lost a battle won't be in it with the fence staple that'll win my battle."

At a point far from the houses, he drew staples from three pine posts and let the barbed wire sag. The cattle, always believing that sweeter grass lies over the fence, pushed against the sagging wire. It slid down the post. They walked over. In due time, they drifted to the better grass.

Fences are inclined to sag and they have to be tightened at intervals. There was nothing in the appearances to show that Jess Slohm had deliberately drawn the staples to let his cattle through. Twice he saw Drew putting in new staples. Jess promptly drew them elsewhere. His cattle fattened on the stolen grass.

Meanwhile, he and Drew Milner became fast friends. The nearest neighbor was ten miles away and Drew was a talkative young man. Jess was not naturally friendly, but if it would help him gain some of Drew's twelve hundred dollars, he was willing to be friendly.

Many a cold night with the wind howling across the plain or the snow deadening all sound, he sat in the one-room shanty with Drew and the two dogs. The house was scattered with Drew's belongings, gathered in five years' wandering. A Navajo blanket, an Apache scalping knife, a hammered copper ash tray, a silver ring and bracelet, and similar articles that could be carried easily in a war bag on his saddle.

The thing that bothered Jess was a heavy iron box, ten inches long and five wide. Ornamental scroll work hid the keyhole. Jess considered that box many a night while Drew talked on, unheard. It stood on a shelf with a clutter of tools and magazines and a holstered pistol. Jess asked about all the rest of the plunder, but the box he never mentioned. He wondered why Drew carried such a heavy thing. With

that thought came the recollection that Drew had paid cash for his sixty head of cattle. The box with the hidden keyhole must contain money.

Drew seemed blissfully unaware of Jess's interest in the box. And he seemed as blissfully ignorant that the Bartness grass was fattening the Slohm cattle. His first remark came suddenly in the midst of his description of an Indian corn dance.

"By the way," he said coolly. "I've chased your cattle off my range a good many times recently. It means my job if Bartness hears they're in here. Yesterday I saw hammer marks on a fence where the staple had been pulled. You haven't got a greaser working for you, have you?"

He knew very well no one was working for Jess. If Jess had had money to pay wages, he would be eating something better than jack rabbits and beans. He took the suggestion, however, as a horse takes corn.

"I had a greaser doin' the fence ridin' for me. Maybe he didn't fix the fence right. Or maybe he tried to tighten the wire and freed a staple. I don't know how they been gettin' through. I've took 'em out of there myself." That was true. He had taken them out once, to make sure the white-faced heifer with the forged brand rejoined his herd.

DREW looked bewildered, as if he had given Jess a friendly chance to tell the truth and could not understand his refusal to take the opportunity. He did not push the argument.

For a week, Jess kept his cattle on his side of the fence. When he judged the cowboy's vigilance would relax, he let them through again. Not all of his herd went through

at any time. Those went who were grazing close to the sagging wire.

On a day of cold wind and a gray sky heavy with storm, thirty of them went over after trampling post and wires down. Jess went about his other business until late afternoon. The lowering sky and a howling wind warned him of a storm that might become a blizzard. He rode out over the plains, gathering as many cattle as possible into the shelter of a valley near the house. Here he could get at them immediately after the storm.

With his head ducked in his mackinaw collar, and the horse's mane flying in the wind, he galloped over the hills and down arroyos, urging cattle ahead of him. Making another round, he saw Drew Milner at the same job. Jess saw that Drew had rounded up his own sixty and most of the Bartness three hundred. Drew had them in a snug valley, but he was still working.

His riding was peculiar. He seemed to be cutting out certain animals. Snowflakes were swirling about him and the ground was rapidly whitening. With the cattle in a safe place, most cowboys would have called it a day. Drew Milner worked at the gallop. The two dogs helped him. They seemed to know which animals he wanted. The cut out bunch amounted to thirty when the cowboy drove them off at a run over the hills, with the dogs running alongside.

"Thirty! The number of my critters that went over the fence today!" Jess exclaimed. "And the dogs knew which ones he wanted. They knew because those are my critters he cut out."

He lowered a fence wire, jumped his horse over and rode at a gallop in Drew's wake. He topped a hill and saw the bunch running in the val-

ley. They went down into a dry wash and did not come up out of it again. The country was cut and criss-crossed with washes and with arroyos that almost became canyons with their high, steep sides. After riding five minutes with no sight of the bunch, he stopped to listen for their sound. The wind was in the wrong direction, blowing toward them.

Jess spurred forward. Snow lay heavy on his shoulders and on the back of the saddle. He could see only about three hundred feet in front of him now. He rode to the arroyo in which he judged they had gone and trotted through it to a spot where the arroyo branched into three. He could not see twenty feet in front of him now. Looking back, he could not see his own tracks.

"Milner!" he shouted. "Oh, Milner!"

The wind caught his words and flung them back into his face. Once he thought he heard a galloping horse. Then he knew it was only the wind striking at his saddle flaps. He thought a dog yelped, but that, too, was wind. And then the wind died under the weight of the snow. The plains, always quiet, are deadly silent under snow.

Jess gave up and turned his horse toward home. He rode at a rapid walk, with his hands tight to his chest and his chin sunk into the mackinaw collar. The horse climbed out of the arroyo to the plain.

Suddenly the white-faced heifer with the forged brand appeared ahead of him. She was standing with her head down, menacing the Milner collie. The snarling dog danced around, trying to head her in some direction that she refused to go. The heifer went for him, with her eyes open and the long horns slashing. Jess expected to see the

dog tossed high. Instead, the collie caught the cow by the nose and hung there. The fight went out of her the way it went out in the corral. She stopped the swinging of her head. When the dog let go her nose, she turned meekly and trotted off.

Jess spurred for the two. They had been almost under his nose and they disappeared completely into the snow. Though he called and listened and searched until he was afraid of going in a circle and getting lost, he found no trace of them. He gave up at last and rode home.

Snow was to play a big part in Jess Slohm's forging career, almost as big a part as that played by the white-faced heifer and the fence staples. The storm kept up until early in the morning. When the snow stopped falling, the thermometer dropped, until at six in the morning it was thirty-two below zero. Jess Slohm was cold in bed. He rose early and started a corncob fire which barely broke the edge of the cold.

"Plenty of cattle will be lost in this storm," he said to himself.

AFTER a breakfast of bread and coffee, he saddled and broke through the drifts the half mile to Milner's shack. The sun was just coming up. A thin smoke line from the chimney rose straight into the cold, clear atmosphere. The dogs were outside. They rushed for Jess, barking. The collie dashed forward in a wild greeting. When he recognized the visitor, he halted and stood watching in suspicion.

With an eye on the dog, Jess knocked at the door.

"Thirty of my cattle are gone," he said when Milner appeared. "The fence is broke again. Did you see 'em?"

A peculiar expression came over Drew Milner's face. It was startled recollection, mixed with apprehension.

"Yes, Slohm, I saw them over here when I was rounding up before the storm. I'll ride out with you. I want a look at my cattle."

The two horsemen rode straight for the arroyo where Jess had lost Drew and the cattle. Sometimes they had to dismount and push through snowdrifts. At other places the ground was swept clean of snow. Making their way cautiously along the arroyo edge, they halted at a spot where they could see across into a wide valley. Drew Milner's cattle had come through the storm in safety. They were sheltered and the morning wind had cleared some of the grass. They were eating.

At the riders' feet, the arroyo cut the wide valley. Without a word, Drew pointed up the arroyo. In a place where it was narrow and high-walled, Jess saw cattle horns sticking out of the snow. About thirty sets of horns showed above the snow. It was the Slohm bunch. Instead of being protected, they had jammed in a small place. Some were trampled. Some were smothered. Some had frozen.

"And hides worth a dollar apiece," said Jess bitterly. "Do you know I paid ten cents a pound for them critters? You cut 'em out of your bunch and put 'em here. Your bunch came through the storm. Mine froze."

Drew Milner sat with his hands on the saddle horn, gazing between his sorrel's ears at the horns in the snow.

"Your cattle had no business in here, Jess," he said quietly. "You had been warned and I believe you cut the fence. Just the same, I'll admit I ran the cattle off. I was going to send them back to you well

starved. I didn't have any idea they'd freeze. Last night was no worse than lots of nights, but they were in too small a place. My fault. I'll make the thirty good to you, Jess."

Jess gasped. Had he heard aright? He looked sharply at the cowboy. The eager, questioning look was gone from Drew's face and in its place was shame. He was actually willing to make good those thirty critters, where many a man would have lied his way out, or stubbornly declared they had no business on the range.

Jess could come to only one conclusion. Drew Milner was a rank coward. The Bartness range and three hundred head of cattle had been left in the hands of a coward. He was dull, too, as his actions testified when he let Jess Slohm get away with the white-faced heifer.

"The big argument," said Jess, "has been that while Bartness would rent other men grass, he wouldn't rent it to me. You let my cattle feed there and we'll call it square on the thirty you killed."

"All right," Drew agreed reluctantly.

Jess grinned. Because of a nail a battle was lost. Because of a pulled staple and trespassing cattle and Drew's hasty action, Jess Slohm had free entry to the grass that Bartness owned.

CHAPTER III. THE RUSTLER.

AT that time, free grass was all Jess Slohm had in mind. While he was skinning the frozen white-faced heifer, the plan came to him, remembering Drew's remark of "I'd give you a penmanship prize." Drew had referred to branding, but Jess had been good in

penmanship at school. And the Bartness cattle were in the hands of a careless coward.

"Dog-gone me!" said Jess as he plied the knife. "I've got a idea and I don't know why it wouldn't work."

A hundred head of cattle at ten cents per pound, represented a loss in the beef market. A hundred head supplemented by three hundred Bartness cattle, would bring the cost down to three cents or less, which gave room for profit.

From that time on, he found it inexpedient to go to town. Drew did his shopping and Jess bought more than he had bought for months. Drew indorsed and cashed checks that Jess gave him. When they were returned to Jess in the course of the bank business, he raised the amount on each one and wrote in the lower left corner of the face, "Payment in full for cattle." On each he gave the number of animals purchased.

He soon had a full complement of Drew Milner's signatures. He got so he could copy them without a flaw. Jess, who had won penmanship prizes in school, spent hours in copying the firm, decisive swing of the signature. After he got it, he made out bills of sale to himself and forged Drew Milner's name. A bill of sale on cattle reads:

"Three roan yearlings, five red heifers," and so on. It is an exactly itemized list of the cattle sold, and it cannot be faked. He had to decide beforehand what kind of animals he would take, although he could not foresee the number of each color or kind.

He filled in all the writing. The numbers could be put in after he got the cattle on the train. Thus he was prepared if he were questioned at the stockyards, to prove by the

bills of sale that he had bought the Bartness cattle from Drew Milner. If they insisted on further proof, he would show the checks, which he had given Drew to cash and which now were made to appear as checks paid for cattle.

"This is too easy. I'm goin' to slip up somewheres," he told himself. Then he remembered that circumstances had a good deal to do with it. Not once in a dozen years would he find a man in Drew Milner's situation.

It was no trouble at all to cut three carloads of the Bartness cattle out of the herd when he wanted to ship them. Thawing snow left a bog from which Drew had to get some yearlings. This occurred on the day that Jess had ordered the box cars at a loading chute siding. It looked almost as if Drew made the excuse to give Jess a chance to take his choice of the cattle. He took it and was making the drive long before noon.

He forced the drive at a small sacrifice of weight. At the loading chute, a couple of cowboys who lived near, came over to help load. One of them squinted a sharp eye at the brand. Jess felt his face change color. He was cold with a strange inner cold that had nothing to do with the winter chill. Here was an obstacle he had not thought of, this cowboy who knew every brand and every cowman in the country; this cowboy who was talkative!

"Bought some Bartness cattle?" the cowboy asked curiously.

"Yup."

"Thought you and him was on the outs a long time."

"We been over it a long time, too."

The cowboy was not suspicious. He was merely looking for a gossip titbit. Long after the train was

moving, Jess was going over the details of his plan. He had bills of sale and checks, and Drew Milner was a dull coward. There was no flaw in the plan.

IN Denver, things were unbelievably easy. Within three hours after they were unloaded in the pens, the last of the cattle were crowded in the alley on the way to the scales. There was a short delay on the first bunch because they did not carry the Slohm brand. He presented the bills of sale.

A clerk questioned them, because Bartness had not signed them. Some one else recalled that Drew Milner was managing the ranch while Bartness was away for the winter. In banter concerning rich cattlemen going South, the affair was passed. The bills of sale were filed. Jess was paid.

"We'll have to notify Bartness that cattle under his brand have been purchased," said the clerk, looking into Jess's eyes. The brand official and commission men did not dream of such a checking up on Slohm's right to sell the cattle. Leave it to an underpaid clerk, thought Jess, to show off his authority. It would be this way all the way along. Little things, not the big ones, would trip him. It was the horseshoe nail that lost the shoe, the horse, the rider, the battle.

"Sure. Write," he said carelessly. "Mail it in care of Milner. He's handlin' everything at the ranch."

He returned to the ranch. He had left home with the cattle one morning and he returned the next afternoon. When Drew Milner asked where he had been, he replied in a surly tone that he had been on a jag in Colorado Springs. Drew apparently believed it, for Jess had been careful to take a drink, not enough

to rob him of sense, but enough to scent his breath. The smell of alcohol was stronger than the smell of cattle and chewing tobacco which always was about him.

He spent the next four days watching the mail. The mail boxes were on a cartwheel at the crossroads. When he looked for his mail, it was easy to watch the Bartness box and extract the letter from Denver.

"If that cowpoke at the loadin' chute don't talk, the thing's a cinch!"

Jess made careful arrangements for the next bunch of cattle. In ordering the box cars, he heard of a loading chute twenty miles the other side of the ranch where the loaders were strangers. They were new in the country and were as yet unacquainted with the different brands.

"Wish I'd known that before. Still," he said to himself, "it's better to use a different chute each time."

On the range the following two weeks, he could not shake off Drew Milner. The cowboy grew into a disconcerting habit of suddenly appearing on hilltops with a pair of field glasses, and a habit of riding from an arroyo when Jess thought he was miles away. Up to the day before the box cars were due at the loading chute, Jess was unable to work with the Bartness cattle. That day, luck entered the battle. Two of Milner's horses cast shoes. While he trucked them in to the smithy, Jess rounded up the stock he wanted and left the bunch two miles from the house.

A FULL moon lit the plains when he rode out that night on a black horse. The wind was right, carrying sound away from the house. He found the cattle feeding quietly. There was little snow. The ground was hard underfoot, giv-

ing good footing and showing no prints. He rode around the bunch, crooning a song to quiet them. When he was ready to start the drive, they moved obediently.

Jess urged them to a slow trot. They ran in front of him in a heavy black current, with horns tossing in the moonlight. He rode to the rhythmic pound of their trotting. He kept a hand on the gun in his mackinaw pocket, although he knew Drew Milner was reading one of his eternal books, with the dogs snoring at his feet.

"Learnin' is a swell thing when you got natural sense to back it up, and nerve to back that up. Drew ain't got either," Slohm snorted.

A hill appeared in front of him. The van of the herd poured up the hill. Moonlight struck their horns at an angle, and they flashed like spears. Suddenly the spears moved up and down and to one side, as though the heads tossed in panic. The cattle snorted and tried to turn back. Jess spurred to the van, with his gun in his hand.

He saw a shadow run in front of the cattle. The shadow became a dog who broke into frantic barking. It was still not too late to turn the leaders and keep them from stampeding. Jess spurred harder. The gun flamed and roared in his hand. He heard the dog yelp in pain. Then out of the milling cattle and tossing horns, came a rider.

"Who's ridin' there? Here, col-lie!" the rider shouted.

Jess recognized Drew Milner. Milner saw Jess in the instant that Jess saw him. Both men, going at the gallop, reined in sharply. Both guns flashed yellow spurts of flame. A bullet buzzed past Jess.

Drew Milner uttered a startled, half articulate cry, like a wounded animal. In his start of pain as the

bullet hit, he plunged in his spurs. The horse lunged forward. Only that kept him from being thrown under the hoofs of the cattle when he fell from the saddle. Jess saw him roll clear of his horse. The cattle thundered up over the hill. Jess rode at their heels.

His first intention was to ride off with them. Then it occurred to him that perhaps Drew had seen his face in the moonlight. The cattle were frightened and hard to handle. It would be better to give up the night's expedition, although it would be expensive because he had ordered the box cars at the siding and the men would be waiting at the chute.

"I don't want to make any mistakes, no matter what it costs in money. I better handle what's just happened before I go on."

He rode toward the house. He could see the line of the roof before he stopped and rode back again. This was to take up sufficient time to back his statement that he heard the noise and rode down from his house.

WHEN he drew rein beside Milner, he saw Drew dragging himself to his feet. Jess dismounted and walked over to him, with his spurs ringing on the frozen ground.

"What was all the excitement, Milner?"

"Rustler," the other said, his voice tight with pain. "Tried to get off with some cattle, and I guess he made it. I shot at him and missed. His bullet only got me through the flesh of my arm and, like a fool, I fell off my horse."

Jess Slohm commented mentally: "Scared to death."

Aloud he said: "I heard the shootin' and the dog barkin' and the cat-

tle runnin'. Heard it clear up to the house. Grabbed my gun and horse and got here quick as I could, but I guess the rustler was gone before even I saddled. How'd you happen to be out here?"

He anxiously awaited the answer and was relieved when Drew said: "I've been milk feeding some calves in the corral. They got out and I was after them."

Jess helped Milner on his horse and got him back to the shanty. The collie followed, dragging himself along on three legs. The dog wanted to be in the house, as was his wont. Jess locked him out in the cold to attend to his wound as best he could.

He helped Milner to his cot, built up the fire and heated water. The bullet had gone straight through, leaving a clean hole. The fall from the horse apparently had not hurt him, because he was limp when he went off. A little fever might follow the shock of the bullet, but at the moment Drew Milner was clear headed. He would remember that Jess came down from his house to help him when the rustler shot him. Jess talked of it to impress it on Drew's mind.

As he bandaged the arm, he said to himself, "Still I wish I didn't have to pay for the cars and loaders that I can't use." The more he thought of it, the more he resented the time loss and the annoyance of explanations and new plans. "Don't know why I can't get there yet. The night's young. If he'd go to sleep, I could leave."

The wounded man was bright-eyed and wide awake under the spur of excitement. Then Jess recalled a period of his own illness after a fall from a horse, when he had been unable to sleep. The doctor had given him veronal tablets. Some of them

were in his medicine cabinet yet, if time had not robbed them of their potency.

"Goin' over and git you some sugar pills," he said to Milner, grinning with his straight mouth that seldom knew a smile.

"Better get me a teething ring, too," Milner suggested. "Imagine me falling off a horse from a clean hit!"

"Bullet shock does funny things. Clean hit sounds little, but wasn't it a horseshoe nail that lost a battle? Things ain't always little just 'cause they sound so."

He returned with the pills and dosed Milner. For a seeming eternity, the young fellow lay there wide-eyed, talking with the clearness of mind that denotes a touch of fever. Then suddenly he was asleep. Jess mounted his horse and started out again. He found the cattle grazing on a hillside. Although they were still nervous, he kept them under control and resumed the drive, two hours after he started it the first time.

CHAPTER IV. A TIGHT SPOT.

MID-MORNING saw them safely in the box cars. When the train halted in the Springs, he got off and sent a messenger boy to a doctor with twenty-five dollars to cover expenses, requesting him to go out to Milner's. He rode to Kansas City with the cattle, disposed of them and rode the rods back, picking up his horse at the loading chute.

His trip home on the rods took longer than ordinary traveling. When he arrived at the mail box, he found the letter to Bartness from the commission men in Kansas City, telling of the sale of stock under his brand, properly covered by bill of

sale. Jess pocketed it. He rode up to the house and met Drew Milner on the way.

"Any mail for me?" asked Drew.

"Not a thing. Say, I done you a dirty trick. I went into the Springs the day after you got hurt to send a doctor out, but I met a friend. I dunno whether I was too drunk to send the doctor or not."

"You sent him and paid him. I owe you twenty-five." He changed the subject abruptly: "You don't look like a drinking man, Jess."

"I like to go on a toot once in a while," Jess said, pretending to take offense.

"Once in a while! This is two in two weeks. Well, it's none of my business. I've lost my gun and I've got to get a new one. What do you carry?"

"Me? A .38 S. & W.," Jess replied truthfully, before he recalled a bullet from his gun had gone through Drew's arm. Feeling a presence at his elbow, he looked around. Nothing was there.

Fear had come to stand beside him.

He was afraid of tripping up on some little action, on a small lie or a small precaution overlooked. For instance, he recalled how his spurs rang on the ground when he went to aid the wounded Milner. If he had actually been riding to investigate shooting, he would hardly have stopped to get his spurs. He would have to avoid such small errors as this hereafter.

"Did you find the rustler's bullet that went through your arm?" he asked.

"All I found was that he got away with ninety head of cattle, all Bartness stuff. That's two thirds that's gone now."

Jess had an inspiration. "Oh," he remarked lightly. "Didn't touch

your stuff, huh?" It was an ugly insinuation.

Drew Milner went white with anger, but he held his tongue. He was a coward right enough, and plenty dumb.

Jess took advantage of the experience. He went over each thing he had done. The only loophole he could find was the talkative cowboy at the first loading chute, to whom Jess had explained that he had fixed up his quarrel with Bartness. No other rancher he met, mentioned his patching the quarrel. Jess hoped the cowboy had forgotten the incident. And yet, if he told that Jess had loaded Bartness cattle, Jess still had those checks he raised after Drew indorsed them to prove he bought the cattle in good faith.

NEVERTHELESS, Jess engaged busily in two enterprises in the next few days. He made out false papers on his car, his land and his cattle, all of which were heavily mortgaged. Armed with these, he hung around Colorado Springs hotels and talked with the winter tourists. It was not hard to find some one interested in buying a ranch. He got three prospects. One prospective buyer, who saw the ranch, waved a check under his nose. Jess felt then that he was in position to meet whatever trouble arose. If things got too hot, he would sell his mortgaged property and leave. If trouble did not come, he had sense enough to sit tight and pretend that all was well.

Jess was not a man to ride a bad horse and hope that the cinch would hold. He was in the habit of testing his saddle. Therefore, as he left the hotel, he faced the mistakes he had made.

"I made a mistake in takin' the first bunch of cattle to a chute where

they knowed me. I made a mistake in puttin' my brand back on that white-faced heifer; she was a critter too easy remembered. She might cause me trouble yet. I made a mistake lettin' my bullets fly around when Drew and the dog found me takin' the cattle. I wonder if I done anything else wrong? It was a horseshoe nail that lost the battle."

He went over every action, every word, but he could think of no other mistakes.

Walking down the street, he was halted by a hand on his shoulder. Jess went cold from his shoulder to his toes, for he recognized the hand of officialdom. He faced the district attorney's investigator, a heavy old man with lazy eyes and sloppy clothes. It was said he could scent guilt, and it was said when he was on a case, he did not stop until the criminal was in prison.

"Come over here, will you, Slohm? Want to talk to you."

Jess went. With one step he wished he had sold the ranch, and had gone. With the next step, he knew he had done the sensible thing in sitting tight. All he had to do now was keep his head, the same as if he rode out a bad horse, or was caught by a mad bull in a corral. Keep his head and be alert, that was all. He knew what mistakes he had made. He could foresee the questions.

The investigator took him to the office of the district attorney. The attorney was there, a thin man who drew pictures on a pad, with a stenographer and an assistant. Drew Milner was there, too, looking sad and ashamed. You would think he was the culprit instead of Jess. Jess's mouth was hard and his hands were steady. He stood quietly in his high-heeled boots until they told him to sit down.

The district attorney opened with all guns at once.

"Slohm, we understand you sold a bunch of Bartness cattle in Denver the other day?"

"Sure," Jess admitted readily. "It was on the fifteenth. I sold three carloads at six. Bought 'em at five, took a gamble and lost. Freight's too high."

"Understand from the bill of sale that Milner sold them to you?"

"Yes."

"You have the canceled checks to prove it?"

"Yes. At home."

THE district attorney was surprised at that. It was an unexpected answer. He went on:

"Why did he sell Bartness cattle to you?" It was a catch question.

Again Fear stood at Jess's elbow. He knew what a bad horse might do, but it takes a keen mind to know what a man is about to do. He had expected these questions and prepared for them, but they were hard to face. The district attorney repeated the question with driving emphasis.

Jess felt sick at the pit of his stomach as he said:

"Milner sold 'em to me cheap because he run off a bunch of my cattle and they froze to death."

The attorney whirled to Milner. "Did that happen?"

"Yes. I ran them off and they froze," Drew replied, with the sweat breaking out on his face, "but I didn't sell him any Bartness cattle. He forged those papers, just as he forged a brand on a white-faced heifer. The other boys remember she was in the corral when you were branding the stuff I bought, Jess. You vented your brand and put it on again."

"Sure I did," Jess replied glibly. "The old brand was blurred, so I run her in with your bunch. When we counted off as they left the corral I counted sixty-one critters. You bought sixty. Do you think I'd be fool enough to try to rustle a heifer as easy remembered as her?" He had been fool enough to do it, but his scornful denial worked.

"You blurred the figures when you counted, I remember," Drew said. Defeat was in his voice.

The investigator suggested: "Ask about the bullet."

"The night some rustlers shot Milner," said the attorney, "his dog was shot. The bullet stayed in the leg. It was a .38 S. & W. While you've been gone from home lately, we picked up some bullets around your place. They were shot from the same gun. You shot the dog the night you stole the cattle. Come clean. Don't lie any more. You can't get away with it. That little bullet is going to trip you, Slohm."

Jess swallowed hard. His pulse was beating in his temples and roaring in his ears. This was a question he had not foreseen and he could not think of a lie. He could not think of anything but the beating in his temples and the roaring in his ears.

And then he looked out the window. Across the street, he saw a cowboy lugging a heavy suitcase. The cowboy clumped rapidly down the street. He was the talkative man who had remarked about the Bartness cattle at the chute. He was the one person Jess had feared, and he was heading for the railroad station with a loaded suitcase.

It was an omen of good. Then Jess recalled the collie snapping at the heifer's nose in the snowstorm. He grew calm again and plunged into the lie with confidence.

"Remember Milner was shot that

night. I heard the excitement and rode down and took him back to the house. The dog followed us. The dog wasn't hurt then. I give Milner some sleepin' tablets cause he was goin' into fever. He wasn't in any condition to know what was goin' on."

"Your bullet was in the dog," the attorney pursued relentlessly.

"Sure it was. I'm tryin' to tell you he wasn't shot that night. I shot him next mornin', when I caught him pullin' down a calf." He saw how that hit them, and went on with renewed confidence: "The day before my cattle was froze I seen him attack that heifer we been talkin' about. I didn't say nothin' to Milner. My cattle have been pulled down before, but it's been a hard winter of deep snow, and I blamed the coyotes. The mornin' after the rustlin', when I was gettin' ready to ride in for the doctor, I seen the col-lie pullin' down the calf and I shot at him. I meant to kill him."

The attorney turned a bewildered look on Milner.

An assistant put in: "Why did you ride to town? Why not phone for a doctor?"

Fear jabbed Slohm in the side. Here was another thing he had overlooked.

"Doctors don't always come so far out on the plains unless they're sure of the money. Milner was sleepin'. I thought best to ride in, pay the doc, and send him out."

It had been a tight spot, but he breathed freely as he saw that he had got through it. The district attorney flapped his open hand on the desk and grunted something that sounded like, "All right." Drew Milner was hunched over, with a pained, shamed look of defeat on him. The investigator opened the door.

CHAPTER V. FLIGHT.

JESS SLOHM walked out, still free. Jess Slohm walked out, a victor over bookish men and lawyers, victor over suspicion and circumstantial evidence. There had been no small thing to trip him, no horseshoe nail to lose him the battle. Jess Slohm walked out with a grin on his face.

The more he thought of the conversation, the less certain he felt. They had asked questions and accepted his explanations. They could have held him for further questioning. And they had let him go!

"Dog-gone, I got by all right. Drew Milner knew those bills of sale were forged, but he didn't have the courage to prove it. And when I said he let the cattle freeze, he wilted. He didn't say his dog wasn't a killer." Drew was dull and a coward. He was a man formed by nature to be fleeced.

Jess went to the ranch. After two days he could not stand it any longer. He decided to go to town and walk the streets in plain view of the district attorney and his men. Then he decided to close the deal on the ranch and leave.

"I ain't bein' smart by stayin'. They're just waitin' for me to do somethin' wrong. They're like wolves, follerin' a steer till he falls down of his own weakness. Well, I won't fall."

He put some clothes in a grip and took them out again. It would be better to leave with only the clothes he wore. Let the new buyer and the bank fight over what was in the house. He pocketed his gun and got the forged papers on ranch and car and cattle. Then he went to the desk drawer for the checks that

would prove Drew had sold him the cattle. He determined to have them if the attorney got him into that office of tortures again.

He reached into the desk drawer. Again Fear stood at his elbow, nudging him. The drawer was empty. The checks were gone.

He went through the entire desk, knowing it was useless. The checks were gone. Drew Milner had taken the checks, so that Jess could not prove Drew had sold him Bartness cattle.

"The dirty, thievin' coward!" Jess muttered to himself.

Never in his life did Jess move as swiftly as he moved that day. He drove over the cattle trails at break-neck speed. Into the hotel he strode, barely able to cover his eagerness. He expected a snag in the person of the man who had intended to buy his ranch.

When the Easterner gave him a check for ranch and car and cattle, after looking over the papers and having them signed before a notary, Jess received the check with icy hands. He shook hands with the new buyer and went for the door at long strides.

Fear jabbed him again. "It was too easy. Maybe this is a bum check. Maybe he was a come-on man for the attorney."

It took all his self-control to keep from running to the bank. He walked rapidly. In the bank he was afraid to present the check. He wanted to run away. A hand touched his arm. Jess thought his knees would not support him.

"Want to cash a check? This way."

It was only the doorman. Jess had to go through with the matter after that. The check was good. He was paid in twenty-dollar bills. No one came near him at the door. Noth-

ing stood between him and escape, but the distance from the bank to the railroad station. The clocks were striking three.

AS he left the bank, he noticed that clouds were gathering in a leaden sky. Another blizzard was coming to block the roads and kill the cattle.

His eyes came down from the sky, and he saw Drew Milner standing by a mail box. He was putting in a letter.

Jess walked over to him, with his hand on the gun in his mackinaw pocket.

"You robbed me of the checks, Milner."

"Yes, I took them. They're in this letter that I'm mailing to the district attorney. I got the bills of sale and sent them and the checks to a handwriting expert. The expert can prove that my indorsement on the checks is different from my signature forged on the bills of sale. He can prove that the bills of sale were made out by the man who made out the checks and later raised them. And he can prove, Jess, what writing was done at any one time."

Jess felt a clap of thunder in his ears. He knew now that Drew Milner was not so dull after all. Drew was still holding the letter, ready to let it slip into the box.

"If you let that letter go," Jess warned, "I'll kill you. I've got a gun on you. You were wrong from the start, for lettin' my cattle feed where Bartness didn't want 'em."

"I paid for that grass out of my wages. Bartness rented it to me. I didn't rent it to you. I gave it to you in return for the frozen cattle. It's O. K. with Bartness, by the way."

"If you mail that letter, I'll kill you. Give it to me."

"Once the letter's in the box, you can't get it out. And killing me won't do you a bit of good. And it won't do you any good to catch that train you're heading for."

Drew let go the envelope. The box clanged shut on it. And then Jess knew that Drew was not only smart but that he had courage.

These things did not matter now. If Drew knew he was going to the train, no doubt the police were there already. Jess had in his pockets more money than he had ever possessed at one time. He wanted to get out of the State as quickly as possible. He did not want to risk taking Drew on a train. He was not so foolish as to commit murder. It would be fatal now to let the man go free. All in all, Milner was a decided handicap just then.

"Where's your car, Milner?"

"At the courthouse."

"Walk," Jess commanded. "If you let out a peep, I'll put a bullet in you. It might not do me any good, but it sure won't do you any good. Come on."

They were not stopped on the way to the courthouse. Drew did not have a chance to signal for help. With Jess's gun in his ribs, he drove south out of Colorado Springs. Jess had intended driving straight on down into New Mexico, and then over the border at El Paso, about a three-day run. The letter Drew mailed, carrying final proof against Jess, would not be delivered until the following morning. He had more than a head start.

SNOW began to fall as they left Colorado Springs. When they arrived at the ranch crossroad, the car was bucking bad snowdrifts. Before they could get to Pueblo, the nearest town on the highway, they probably would be snowed in. If

they went to the ranch, he could get snowshoes and lose himself easier than if he traveled by car. Also he could dispose of Milner more easily. And he could add to the money he had, the contents of Milner's iron box with the hidden keyhole.

He went to the ranch. The roads filled in behind them. They had to leave the car at last and push bodily through the snow to the one-room Milner shanty. By this time, it was pitch dark.

Jess took no chances on being attacked. He made Drew break the drifts ahead of him. In the house, he sat on a chair against the wall while Drew built the fire. The collicie, with his leg in a splint, lay behind the stove, his eyes distrustfully on Jess. Drew put on coffee when the fire crackled. He peeled potatoes and sliced bread and bacon.

Jess sat tilted back in a chair, and watched Drew set the table. He watched so closely he saw the pass of Drew's hand over one coffee cup. Jess's eyes hardened and drew down at the corners, as he remembered that bottle of sleeping tablets. Now he understood why Drew had been so obedient all the way from town. When they ate, Jess drank water.

The shanty had warmed by the time the meal was ready. Jess removed his mackinaw. Drew's back was turned. He did not hear the whispered curse slip from Slohm's lips, nor did he see Jess clutch at his mackinaw pocket. The gun was gone. In floundering through the snowdrifts to the house, the .38 had dropped out. He felt for his money. It was safe. A small billet of wood lay near the stove. Jess got it into the pocket of his sack coat. He could not see Drew's pistol.

They ate. Once Drew got too tight a hold on his knife. Jess half rose, with his hand in his pocket.

"Don't try it, Milner!"

Drew glared like a trapped wolf. His glance went down to the un-tasted coffee in Jess's cup. He relaxed and ate.

When the meal was over, again Jess took no chance.

"Don't move out of that chair, Milner. Put your hands behind it."

Drew complied. Jess tied Drew's hands and feet. While he was doing this, he saw that the pistol Drew said he had lost was in its accustomed place behind the iron box on the shelf. Jess went to get it but changed his mind.

An idea had come to him for cutting off all pursuit. The pistol was part of the plan.

He slept soundly all night. In the morning dark, he lit the lantern hung on a hook out from the wall. Outside, it was dark and cloudy. The snow had stopped and probably would not start again. Jess got breakfast, freeing Drew's hands to let him eat. He gave the collie a piece of bacon that was left. The dog sniffed of the bonds on his master's feet and took up his stand beside him. Jess tied Drew's hands again. He did not notice that the wrists were bent oddly and the fists bulged.

CHAPTER VI.

THE NAIL.

THEN Jess started on the last of his forgeries that had begun with forging the brand on the white-faced heifer. This time he was going to forge a scene to account for his disappearance.

He knew the telephone operator would not answer the telephone until six in the morning. At five minutes past, Jess rang.

"This is Drew Milner," he said. "How are the roads south?"

"Blocked," said a man's voice, "in

every direction, and it looks like more snow. No tellin' when they'll dig us out."

Jess hung up. He set snowshoes outside the door, and made certain they were in perfect condition. He made a pack of coffee, bacon, and bread, with a tin pail and frying pan. His pockets he filled with matches and looked again to be sure he had not lost his money. It was in an inside pocket, but he was taking no chances. He had played too tight a game to make a mistake now.

"I ain't done so bad for a cow-poke," he grinned. "I got to get the money out of the iron box, knock Milner out, tear up the room, phone for help, and go. He'll have plenty of explainin' to do. A little more snow will cover my tracks."

The first step was to get the money. He reached for the box. A nail badly driven in the shelf tore a ragged slash in his wrist. He spun around, cursing, with his hand clutching the wrist between his knees. The nail saved him from being hit in the head with a poker. Drew had got loose and stole up behind him. He struck just as Jess doubled up with pain.

The poker hit his back. Jess forgot his cut wrist. He drove head and shoulders into Drew's middle, knocking his breath out. Instantly the collie attacked, reckless of his broken leg. He was all teeth and fighting fury. He leaped for the throat. Jess's two hands, that had bulldogged steers, met around the furry neck. The dog's red tongue lolled out as he struggled to free himself of the terrible pressure. His claws raked the brown arms and the claws of a hind leg ripped Jess's shirt and undershirt. Then Drew brought the poker down on Jess's arm.

Jess flung the dog into his face.

Both of them came at him. He dodged and leaped behind the stove, snatching a stick of firewood in each hand. As the dog jumped, Jess brought a heavy stick down on his head.

Before he could swing the other stick, Drew was on him. They fought up and down the shanty, with fists and firewood and poker. Blood from the cuts on Jess splattered the room and splattered Drew. The lighted lantern swung on its hook as their fighting shook the small, frame shanty.

Finally Drew hurled Jess into the corner and, running to the wall, got the scalping knife. He now had it and the poker. Jess had a short billet of wood. He dropped it, to tear the Navajo blanket from the wall. The men circled, breathing hard, hair in their eyes, blood splattered. Drew maneuvered to get in the knifework without having the blanket thrown about his head.

He advanced. Jess backed around the room. His foot caught on the overturned coal bucket. He fell heavily. Drew was on him instantly. He let go of the poker to tangle his fingers in Jess's hair. With all the force of his strong arm, he struck with the knife. Jess Slohm's frightened breath whistled as he pushed the wadded blanket into the other's sweating face. The blade disappeared. He knew it was coming down again. He wadded more of the blanket up and pushed it hard against Drew's nose.

The knife flashed in the lantern light with Drew's vain attempts to slash Jess. In his struggles to escape the smothering blanket on his face, Drew threw his body too far back. Jess promptly knocked him off balance, and fell on top without taking the blanket from his face. Drew struck so fast with the knife

that it seemed like a dozen knives, and the corner of blanket Jess used for a shield was ripped to shreds.

THEN Jess got hold of a stick of wood and brought it down on the other's head. Drew was out of the battle. When Jess staggered to his feet, he did not have to wreck the room as he had planned to do. The shanty was a wreck.

While he was still dizzy and out of breath, he remembered to knock the telephone receiver from the hook. At the operator's call, Jess smashed a dish on the stove and shouted:

"Milner's killin' me. Help!"

He cut the cry short, hurled a chair at the window, and slammed the poker down on the table. After that he let a silence fall and then quietly hung up the receiver.

He bandaged his arm and thrust his head out of doors to cool off. He could not afford to get excited now and forget part of his plans, no matter how badly he was beaten up. He put on his mackinaw and cap and set the grub pack by the snowshoes.

"Have to burn those ropes he was tied with, make it seem like he got rid of a body, and get the money from the box. That won't take ten minutes."

While the ropes burned in the stove, he struggled through the deep snow out to the edge of an arroyo behind the house. He staggered and made deep dragging marks to let it appear that a heavy body had been carried out. Snow in the arroyo was deep. He would be well into Mexico before digging police officers discovered no body was in the arroyo.

"All I got to do is get the money," he said on his return to the cabin. And then, "Dog-gone! I almost forgot the main thing that'd prove I was killed."

The thing he had to do was to fire a shot from Drew's pistol into the wall and put the pistol by Drew's hand to further the impression that murder had been done. With his gloves on, he took the pistol from the shelf. At one place on the wall, where Drew had pasted a magazine picture of a pretty girl, the picture had been torn away in the fight. The flapping paper attracted instant attention. It would be the best place to put a bullet hole. Jess aimed and pulled the trigger.

Nothing happened. The pistol was empty.

"Just like him to leave it empty—careless. Always knew he was careless, the way he wasted bullets target shootin'."

He looked into the gun and saw that Drew was not careless, for the gun was oiled and clean. It would not do to put it down that way. The pistol had to be fired at least once to dirty the barrel and give it the smell of powder.

He went to the pantry shelves to look for the box of cartridges. It was not there. He set the chest of drawers up again and looked through each drawer. Not there. He tore a stack of magazines apart, looking for the small box of bullets. Not there. The search became frantic. The firing of the gun was not absolutely necessary to his plan, but it would cinch the evidence he had built up against Drew Milner. He wanted the job done well and it exasperated him not to be able to find bullets in a one-room shanty.

THERE must be bullets. Every man on the plains has bullets. The telephone rang and rang again while he searched the room, looking for a bullet for the pistol. Half an hour passed. The search, coming on top of the battle and the

loss of blood, tired him out. He still had a long snowshoe trip.

"Have to let it go," he said at last. "I can't waste any more time. Somebody might come over from another ranch on snowshoes. I'll take the money out of the box and go. Let 'em think he done it with the poker."

Outside, there came a roaring like a cyclone wind and a thunder as of a herd of cattle stampeding. Jess ran to the door.

An airplane taxied across the snow and came to a stop. A man jumped from the cabin with a shotgun in his hand. Two other men followed him, both armed. They ran for the shanty and pushed past Jess. One was the district attorney's investigator. The other two were deputies.

Snow began to filter down out of the morning sky, the snow that would have covered all Jess Slohm's snowshoe tracks. Jess, stricken dumb, stepped out of the way to let the three men into the shanty. Drew was sitting up now.

"What happened here?" the investigator asked Jess.

All Jess could think of was the horseshoe nail that had lost the shoe, the horse, the rider, the battle. That little, little thing he had been so afraid of, had tripped him, and it had been a bullet. To the question, he answered dully:

"I was lookin' for a nail."

"Nail!"

"I mean bullet," he said miserably, without knowing what he did mean.

"A bullet!" Drew exclaimed as he staggered to his feet. "Here's the bullets."

He opened the iron box on the shelf, the box that had no keyhole. It was filled, in neat and shining brassy rows, with tens and tens of bullets.



RAGGED NERVES

By Charles Wesley Sanders

Mournful Martin proves that all duels are not won
with six-guns.

WORRYING, "Mournful" Martin held, was foolishness. Yet, as he wended his way toward town at sunset, he couldn't keep out of his mind a little nagging suspicion that trouble lay before him. Trouble, he also held, was all right if it was clean-cut, man-to-man trouble. Trouble that spread itself around and couldn't, so to speak, be nailed down was something else.

Mournful was going to town to look up a puncher named Watkins.

Watkins had made the mistake of falling in love with Nina Longley, out at the Three D Ranch. Nina's young affections had been engaged by Harry McLeod, it had been disclosed after Harry had met with an accident. Watkins had borrowed ten dollars from Mournful and had left for town. He had been away now for a week. Mournful knew that either he had won more money gambling or had managed to borrow it.

The sun set. The brief afterglow gave way to twilight. Mournful,

wearing two guns for the special occasion, since he didn't know what serious jam Watkins might have got into, took them out and looked them over. He believed in preparedness. In the mood in which Watkins had been, he might have made enemies of a score of men.

Arriving in town, Mournful rode to the hotel and put his horse in the stable. He noticed a number of horses there, including Watkins's. That was encouraging. Watkins was at least hereabouts. The other horses all wore the same brand—the Bar M. That was the brand of an outfit owned by a man named Thatcher.

Mournful frowned. He would rather have had men from any other outfit in the country here than men from the Thatcher outfit. Thatcher was a young man who had, a few years ago, inherited a good-sized ranch from his father. He had not inherited any of the esteem in which his father had been held. He was known as a bully. He wasn't, Mournful had heard, a cowardly bully. He could and would fight. Drunk, he would pick a quarrel and back words with deeds. He had a considerable reputation as being fast with a gun.

Oh, well, Mournful had more than a considerable reputation himself. A fella could always find some consolation.

Leaving the stable, Mournful went along the side of the hotel till he came to the corner. There he stopped and listened. A number of men, he decided, were in the bar-room, and, judging from the noise they made, they were feeling plenty lively.

Mournful hopped up on the porch which ran along the front of the hotel. As he headed for the bar-room door, a girl came out of a door beyond. This second door led into

the hotel lobby. As Mournful recognized the girl, his face softened. She was Mrs. Doctor Lamar, with whom Mournful had struck up a friendship a little while ago when helping her husband.

Catching sight of Mournful, she hurried up to him. She seemed breathless, and excitement lent added color to her cheeks and added brightness to her eyes.

"Mournful Martin," she reproached him, "it's about time you got here. Your friend Watkins is in a jam. He isn't feeling any too well either. Doctor Lamar has been taking care of him."

"Hurt?" Mournful asked.

"No."

"What disease has he got? Spotted fever?"

"No disease. He's just er-sick."

"I know 'bout that er-sickness," Mournful said. "A man gen'ally gits it from turnin' little glasses from right side up to upside down. Has that puncher got the delirium tremers?"

"Oh, no. He's just wretched."

"Wretches gits that way," declared Mournful.

"This is serious, Mournful," Mrs. Lamar declared. "You'd better go and see Watkins. I just left him. I've been watching for you all day. I saw you ride in."

"I'm complimented far and wide that you knowed me in the dark," Mournful said.

"There's just one of you, Mournful," Mrs. Lamar smiled.

"One more would be one too many. Well, now that we've said how-de-do so graceful, we'll say so long. I'll go up and see Mr. Watkins. What room is he in?"

"Second from the head of the stairs. Mournful, he's in trouble. I can tell by the way he acts. He hasn't spoken to me except to ask

what shape he'll be in at five o'clock to-morrow morning."

"I'll see him, ma'am," Mournful said. "You jest rid your mind of him. Now that I'm here, ever'thing will be straightened out. You oughta know that."

Mrs. Lamar—one of the best-lookin' girls he had ever met, Mournful averred—gave him an affectionate glance.

"Don't let anything happen to yourself, Mournful."

"Me?" Mournful asked. "Nothin' could, ma'am."

"If you want anything, let the doctor and me know."

"Sure. I'll come running. I know where to git my reënforcements."

"I mean it, Mournful. Really!"

"If you have ever said anything or done anything that wasn't real, ma'am, I ain't been present," Mournful said, and his smile ripple went across his lips.

CHEERED by having met the lively lady, he gave her a little nod and went into the lobby. No one was there. Mournful's body was perfectly motionless but wholly at ease as he stood and listened. The sounds of revelry by night came to him with increased clearness here. He could imagine men lined up at the bar, keeping the bartender busy. There was no sound of any one coming toward this room. Walking softly, Mournful gained the stairs and ascended them. He went to the door of the room of which Mrs. Lamar had spoken.

For a moment he listened. It was not eavesdropping. Mournful knew his man. He was aware that Watkins was not idly concerned about the condition he would be in at five o'clock to-morrow morning. He had a date, and it was not a date to hold

a girl's hand and to look into her fond eyes. Even Mrs. Lamar, unused to punchers, had perceived that Watkins had something important on his mind. What was on his mind, Watkins would try to keep there, locked up till five o'clock came. Mournful would have to find out what he could—how he could.

The first sound was a creaking of the bed. Watkins was rolling from side to side. "Tormented some," Mournful concluded. The next sound was of Watkins's voice. He was lamenting to himself. His lamentations had chiefly to do with his putting a curse on his dirty ol' hide. The bed creaked again. Then there was silence.

Mournful opened the door and stepped inside. The room was in darkness save for the faint light which came through one window.

"It's on'y me, Mr. Mournful Martin," Mournful said.

He struck a match and put it to the wick of the lamp on the washstand. Then he turned slowly to Watkins. Watkins had sat up. He glared at Mournful. Mournful, appearing not to notice him, took him all in. He was a sight. His hair was tousled. His eyes were bloodshot and there were dark circles beneath them. His face was haggard. Beside him on a chair was a bottle of dark medicine.

"What're you doin' here?" Watkins demanded. "More people is buttin' in on my business than has any right to do it. I wish ever'body would leave me alone. Somebody called that Doc Lamar las' night an' he has been givin' me medicine from that bottle. I'll take no more of it. Even Mrs. Lamar was in here a while ago. She tried to make me take a spoonful of that stuff. I wouldn't do it. I ain't no baby."

"The few babies I've seen was nice

little things when they had their faces washed," Mournful stated. "Did you use any rough language to Mrs. Lamar?"

"Cer'nly not!"

"Continue to live, then."

Mournful picked up the spoon and the bottle, uncorked it, filled the spoon.

"Open wide," he directed.

"Why, you big——"

"Open wide! Want me to sit on you and drench you with that hull bottleful?"

Watkins "opened wide," took the medicine, lay back on the bed. Mournful read the directions on the bottle—"every two hours"—and put bottle and spoon on the chair. Then he moved to the end of the bed and sat down. Hooking his hands over a knee, he leaned back and regarded the ceiling. Watkins stood that for five minutes.

"What're you doin' in town?" he asked then.

"Lookin' after one big fool."

"Meanin' me?"

"Meanin' you. You're the biggest fool ever I met up with. First, you git yourself all tore up by a girl. Then you come to town to drown your sorrows. You don't best drink. You flood yourself. Then you git into a jam with Thatcher and his outfit, and you won't be in shape at five o'clock to-morrow mornin' to keep up your end."

There, if that wasn't puttin' two and two together to make a han'sum' four, next time Mournful would subtract instead of adding. Yes, he'd multiply, and that, certainly, was harder still.

"Who's been talkin'?" Watkins demanded.

"Thatcher and his hull outfit. They allus talk."

"And you've interfered. You've lined Thatcher up your own self.

Say, you can't butt in on me like this. I c'n take care of myself."

"Sure, you can," Mournful agreed.

SO it was with Thatcher himself that Watkins had his quarrel. That was bad. Watkins was no match for Thatcher. Watkins was not specially fast with a gun. His talent ran more to horses and ropes. At his best the odds would be against him in a fight with Thatcher. And he was far from his best right now, would be far from his best at five o'clock to-morrow morning.

While Mournful reflected, Watkins controlled himself. If he didn't excel with a gun, he had courage. Mournful knew that he would go through with anything he had agreed to go through with.

"What did Thatcher say?" Watkins presently asked.

"Oh, mostly he bragged about what he was gonna do to you when you meet him out on the flat to-morrow mornin'. He didn't go into details. He said you'd insulted him and he'd wipe out the insult."

"Aw, he couldn't wipe the cobwebs out of a corner," Watkins asserted. "Not with a new broom. You go home, Mournful, and leave me alone."

Again Mournful regarded the ceiling. Watkins lay back and closed his lips. His attitude seemed to say that he could keep silence as long as Mournful could. But tortured nerves can't stand much.

"You been a reg'lar preacher, Mournful," Watkins broke out. "You've allus said—or acted it any-how—that a man should fight his own fights. You ain't never had no use for a man that wouldn't take what he had comin' to him. If I insulted Thatcher, I gotta give him satisfaction, ain't I?"

"If he ain't too hard to satisfy."

"If I gotta meet him to-morrow mornin', I gotta meet him to-morrow mornin', ain't I?"

"Sure."

"Well, then, get outa here."

"What I've learnt about this business is kinda sketchy," Mournful said. "I oughta have the details—all of 'em."

"You get no details from me."

"Thataboy," said Mournful, rising. "For the first time in your life you got somep'n in that mind of yours. I don't wonder you wanta keep it there, all by itself. It must give you a lotta comfort. On second thought, mebbe it's what's makin' you sick. Kind of a poison. Well, I'll jest go downstairs and find out from Mr. Thatcher himself the details of what's goin' on."

Watkins slipped to the edge of the bed and then got to his feet. He swayed and then sat down on the bed and buried his face in his hands. The hands shook.

"My gosh," he whispered.

"You better tell me all about it, son," Mournful said. "I expect you're still the fella you've allus been, but your liver ain't nothin' to pin a medal on right now. A bad liver makes a man see crooked."

"I was wild when I got to town," said Watkins, pouring out the words, as if, instead of finding solace in silence, he had been waiting merely for some one to whom to tell his story. "I began to drink. I dunno how many drinks I had. I got awful drunk, Mournful. I hadda be helped up to this room. Wasn't that hell for a growed-up man? I slep' for a coupla hours and then I started in again. That's all I been doin'—drinkin' and sleepin'. I didn't have hardly no food till Doc Lamar brought me some a few hours ago. Mournful, by gosh, I guess I was

pretty near seein' things. I never knowed I was so weak."

"Seems to me you was strong," Mournful observed. "You've stood a lotta punishment."

"Sure! Let me off as easy as you c'n, Mournful. Well, I went down to the bar some time this mornin'. I was shakin'. I had two-three drinks and then Thatcher and his outfit come in. I used to work for Thatcher's father. I quit when the ol' man died. I couldn't stomach young Thatcher. He's one of them fellas that won't stand for nothin'. Course he had me sized up. He knowed he had it on me when it come to draggin' a gun or throwin' a bullet. I was just takin' a drink and my hand shook. Thatcher noticed it. I guess I looked like bad news, anyway."

Watkins stopped, shuddering. He looked at Mournful appealingly.

"Mournful," he said, "get me two-three drinks, will you? I'm shot. This medicine don't do me no good. The doc said it'd take hold after while, but it don't."

"You gotta give it a chance," Mournful said. "It'll help you by and by. You'll prob'ly go to sleep. When a man runs a big bill, he oughta be game to pay a little of it. Besides, why should I do anything fer you? You ain't tellin' me the truth—not the hull truth anyway."

MOURNFUL had often observed that he constantly encountered some incidental dramas when the boards seemed fully occupied by a present drama. He was convinced that there was an incidental drama here. Watkins and Thatcher, he believed, were mixed up in more than a barroom brawl.

"Oh," Watkins confessed, "my trouble with Thatcher was over a girl."

"You was in love once before, then?" Mournful asked. "It was a mended heart that Nina Longley busted."

"Girls gets to me," Watkins said. "Specially little, dark-haired girls. This girl worked in a store at the county seat. On account of her I beat Thatcher up one time. With my fists. He said him and me would come to gun play later on."

"Well, in the barroom Thatcher kep' raggin' me and raggin' me. All in fun, o' course. His punchers joined in. My nerves and my mind wasn't in no shape to stand it. I ordered a drink and filled the glass to the brim. Thatcher was standin' just beyond me. I let him have the drink full in the face and I called him some of the fanciest names you ever heard spoke. I expected Thatcher and his men would beat me up. I didn't care. I was gonna get a little somep'n outa the business."

"But Thatcher didn't make a move. He wiped his face slow and his men stood quiet. I c'n feel the silence yet, Mournful. At last Thatcher turned full around to me and said: 'Would five o'clock to-morrow mornin', straight back on the flat two miles, suit you, Mr. Watkins?' O' course I said it'd suit me. It's gotta suit me, Mournful. What do I care if Thatcher is good with a gun?"

"What you care about now ain't of no importance," Mournful said. "You're too low in your mind. Carin' is a matter of how a man feels. I've seen men care a hull lot fer things that was unwise, unsound, and unreasonable, while they'd pass up many other things that was pure, wise, and holy. Well, I think I'll git myself a little drink."

He started for the door.

"You wait a minute, Mournful Martin," Watkins cried. "You can't fool me. I know what you're gonna

do. Can't I see you got two guns on you? By Judas, you ain't gonna take over my quarrel. I been a fool. To-morrow mornin' at five o'clock I'll be a man."

Mournful went to the old bureau which stood in a corner. He unfastened his gun belt and carefully put the belt, with the two guns in the holsters, on top of the bureau. He turned about to Watkins.

"There," he said, "that shows what my intentions is. Now, I'll make a bargain with you. I'll go down there and enjoy myself fer a while. When your medicine is due, I'll come back and give it to you. On your part you agree not to leave this room. You won't take a gun in your hand."

"How 'bout to-morrow mornin'?"

"I'll do my best to git you in shape to be out on the flat. Thatcher will have somebody with him. His kind don't ride alone. I'll be with you."

"You gimme your word, Mournful?"

"I give you my word."

"Thanks, Mournful. I'll do my best to give an account of myself."

"Sure you will."

Mournful went into the hall, softly closing the door. He was about to start for the stairs when he heard his name called in a low voice. Turning, he saw Mrs. Lamar standing in a doorway down the hall. He went to her.

"What did you find out?" she asked.

"I'm ashamed of you," Mournful said. "You're tryin' to make me tell a lie."

"Meaning you won't tell me the truth?"

"Day by day, ma'am, you git more clever—and prettier. It don't seem possible."

"Mournful, you've taken over Watkins's fight," Mrs. Lamar declared. "You're going downstairs

this minute to meet Watkins's enemies. Why, you're not even wearin' a gun."

"You're gittin' yourself tangled up, ma'am. They's four-five men down there with guns on 'em. Do you think I'm goin' right up against their game?"

"You might!"

"Some day I'll ride over and tell you how foolish it'd be fer me to do that," Mournful said. "Now, you c'n do somep'n fer me. Go and sit with Watkins. Make sure he doesn't leave the room. I give you my word that'll fix ever'thing fine an' dandy."

"From your point of view. Well, all right."

"You and Watkins will be right there when I git back?"

She nodded.

"Could Watkins have that medicine any oftener?"

"He could have it an hour apart for three doses."

"Give him a dose in half an hour," Mournful said. "Jest tell him I said fer him to open wide. So long, ma'am. I'll see you afore the crack o' doom—I mean, the break o' dawn."

They went along to Watkins's door and Mrs. Lamar, a look on her face which said she doubted the wisdom of what she was doing, entered the room. Mournful went down to the lobby. He stood there for a while, listening. From the sounds Mournful judged that joy was still gallopin' wild and free. He crossed the room and entered the barroom. A poker game was going on in the rear and Mournful went slowly down the room, looking neither to right nor left. However, just before he reached the table, he discovered, out of the corner of his eye, that Thatcher was at the side of the room, leaning back comfortably against the wall.

MOURNFUL understood that Thatcher was not drinking. Having picked a deadly fight with a man inferior to him in the use of a gun, he was keeping himself in shape. To-morrow morning he would be perfectly in command of himself while Watkins would be just started on the road to recovery. It was, Mournful felt, a kind of cowardice, though Thatcher was justified in demanding satisfaction from Watkins.

"Say, Martin!"

Thatcher's voice was strident. Mournful raised his head and fixed blank eyes on the man's face as if he had not recognized the voice. The two men stared at each other. There was significance in the fact that Mournful did not greet Thatcher.

Mournful saw that Thatcher resented his being there. Mournful's presence complicated matters for Thatcher. He had expected to have one Three D man to deal with, but now he had two. And the second man was one whose reputation had penetrated to Thatcher's country and beyond. Thatcher knew that he was an inferior to Mournful Martin as Watkins was inferior to himself. Mournful did not know it, but Thatcher, out of vanity, entertained a lively hate for him. Mournful was one man whom Thatcher had never even tried to bully.

"C'mere a minute," Thatcher said.

It was an order. It was an order which Mournful would not have dreamed of obeying in ordinary circumstances. Now, however, he walked directly up to Thatcher and stood within three feet of him.

"Whatcha doin' in town?" Thatcher demanded.

Mournful let an incredulous look dawn in his eyes. That was his only answer.

"You seen Watkins?" Thatcher went on.

"Watkins," Mournful stated, "is a friend o' mine. To-night, and to-morrow mornin' at five o'clock, he's a special friend o' mine."

"You've seen him an' he's whined to you," Thatcher declared. "I knowed he didn't have no nerve."

Mournful said nothing, for he had heard a stir behind him. He did not look around. He was aware that several men were approaching him from behind. The sound continued briefly. Then there was silence. The poker players even lost interest in the game. They sat with their fingers tightened on their cards.

"All your men behind me, Thatcher?" Mournful asked.

"They c'n stand where they please, I reckon."

"Might be! But lissen here, Thatcher, whatever happens atween you and me is gonna be man-to-man stuff. You git me? If you accept any help, you'll have the Three D outfit on your hands. I've had to point out before how Danforth and his men stick together. I don't wanta have to do it no more. Wastin' words peeves me. The Three D men will give your men plenty of what you've allus bragged you was lookin' fer. As fer you and me——"

Mournful shrugged his shoulders. He saw fear dawn in Thatcher's eyes. Then the fear was chased out by hope.

"Look here, Martin," Thatcher said in a low voice. "You say I've bragged. You've bragged some, too. Accordin' to you, you're the best reoper, rider, gunman, and who knows what in the hull country. That right?"

"I ain't never said that," Mournful retorted, "but it's a fact."

"The hell you ain't never said it! You have, and you've said somethin'

more. You've said men should fight their own fights. I've heard you say it right in this room."

"That statement," Mournful said, "is the corner stone of my faith, hope, and charity, and my love o' beans and beef stew, to say nothin' of a slab o' pie and a cup o' coffee."

"Funny as usual, ain't you?"

"Funnier."

"Well, the point is, are you gonna let that skunk fight his own fight?"

"Nope."

"You go back on ever'thing you ever said, then?"

"Nope. I ain't gonna let no skunk fight his own fight. I'm gonna let one of the squarest boys I know fight his own fight. I'm doin' my best to git him on his feet. I got somebody up in his room right now pokin' medicine inta him."

"He'll be out on the flat at five o'clock to-morrow mornin'?"

"He'll be there if I hafta carry him."

"And you'll keep out of it?"

"Way out."

IT all seemed dubious to Thatcher. He was silent for a space while he studied Mournful. Mournful was cool. He regarded Thatcher with half-closed eyes, and once a ripple ran across his lips.

"There's a catch in this some place," Thatcher at length said.

"I can't help that," Mournful declared. "I didn't invent catches."

"You think Watkins is obliged to meet me, don't you?"

"No question about it! Why, if he wasn't out there on the flat to-morrow mornin', the hull Three D outfit would be disgraced."

With that Mournful went over to the poker table. Thatcher followed him. Thatcher seemed not only to want to keep Mournful in sight but to be near him.

A player invited Mournful to sit in. Mournful declined. Another man asked him to have a drink. He declined that, too. He was glad to get the invitations, however. When the wind began to blow ill, men like these sought shelter one way or another. Mournful was satisfied to have these men curry favor with him, for it indicated that they thought he and not Thatcher could temper the wind. Except for Thatcher and his men, he was, so far as he could see, standing ace high.

As he watched, a player with three fours was blown by one with two pairs.

"Never let a man blow you," Mournful told the player, for the benefit of the listening Thatcher. "It's bad fer your morals."

When Thatcher had followed Mournful, Thatcher's men had remained where they were. Now Mournful walked slowly over to the bar. He did not look behind him, but he heard Thatcher, and then Thatcher's men, move to the bar. That was very good. Thatcher was in such a frame of mind that he didn't want to be isolated with Mournful, even in the small space of this room.

Reaching the bar and ignoring the bartender, Mournful turned his back and hooked his arms over the rail. He fixed his eyes on the far wall. He was motionless and seemed to be thinking of nothing. Under his hat brim his eyes were steady and his face placid.

Thatcher and his men lined up, Thatcher stood next to Mournful. Thatcher called for a drink. In addition to his verbal order, he must have signaled the bartender, for Mournful heard a glass spun down the bar to him. Then there were gurgles as Thatcher and his men poured.

That Thatcher was taking a drink pleased Mournful. Thatcher had been abstaining to keep his nerves steady. His encounter with Mournful must have shaken those nerves a little. Thatcher had felt the need of stimulation.

There was a pause without sound of anybody's having gulped a drink.

"There's a glass behind you, Mournful," Thatcher said. "What do you say we have a drink together?"

Thatcher had used Mournful's nickname instead of the more formal "Martin" as he had done at first. Also he wanted publicly to proclaim that there were no hard feelings between them. The act of drinking together would make between them a bond which Mournful could not very well ignore, since both understood the custom of the country.

Mournful failed to take his eyes from the far wall, failed, in fact, to make any movement of any kind except with his lips.

"What do you say we don't have a drink together, Thatcher?" he blandly asked. "Speak quick or I'll beat you to the answer."

"You won't drink with me?"

"Nope."

"You won't drink with my men?"

Mournful turned so that he confronted Thatcher. There was a little blaze in Mournful's eyes now, the beginning of a leaping flame. He had held himself in pretty well.

"Hell, no!" he said. "Your men ain't in this, Thatcher. I tol' you that once before. Your men won't dare to make a move. You know it. I know it. They know it. What's the use draggin' them into somep'n that don't concern them?"

Thatcher did not retort. Mournful went clear around to the bar.

"Gimme a bottle o' sody," he ordered.

The bartender produced the soda and a taller glass. Mournful slowly filled the glass. Thatcher still had in one hand the change he had received from a bill. He rang a coin on the bar.

"On me," he said.

The bartender reached for the coin. Mournful fixed him with an intimidating look. The bartender withdrew his hand without taking up the coin. Mournful tossed another coin to him and he caught it.

Again there was silence while Mournful sipped his drink. Once more, Mournful saw, Thatcher was casting about to clutch at something definite in his mind.

"Martin," Thatcher said at last, "what'd you do if a man threw a drink into your face and called you the lowest names he could lay his tongue to?"

"Throw a bigger drink into his face and try to think of still lower names," Mournful answered.

"Yes, you would! You'd demand from him the satisfaction I'm demandin' from Watkins. The man that can throw a drink into my face and call me names don't live. At least he don't live long."

THIS was the moment up to which Mournful had been working. He took two or three seconds to give himself a figurative pat on the back. By gosh, brains was what counted in this here crazy world. If you used your brains, you could, without force, lead a man to the precise spot to which you wished to lead him.

Mournful had drunk no more than a third of his soda. There was still plenty in the glass for his purpose. While he had accepted praise from himself, he had raised the glass. Turning just slightly, he shot the contents into Thatcher's angry face.

At once he strained his vocabulary to apply to Thatcher every name he could think of. If Thatcher was half the things Mournful called him, he was far down in the human scale.

Thatcher gasped and dropped his head to shake it and to wipe the liquid from his face. None of his men made a move, though they were armed and Mournful was not. Mournful's warning was still with them, and they didn't even hold him up.

Mournful came fully around from the bar, so that he faced Thatcher. At last Thatcher raised his head. His trembling lips formed an accusation, but Mournful knocked the accusation down his throat by delivering a powerful blow on his mouth. Thatcher dropped but bounded up.

Mournful's body was tense. He wanted that one blow to finish his attack on Thatcher. But he would have to throw himself on Thatcher and take Thatcher's gun away if the man went for it. Thatcher's first prompting was to go for the gun. His curled fingers dropped toward it. Mournful uttered no warning. He awaited the event.

With his hand near the gun butt, Thatcher looked at Mournful. Thatcher's eyes were red. A great desire to kill this fellow was in them. But he hesitated and was lost. Desire died out of his eyes. They became bleak.

"You'll pay for this, Martin," he said lamely.

That, Mournful told himself, wasn't perfect. It was perfection itself. A great glow suffused the long man's body.

"Yes, you bet!" he said. "I aim to pay to-morrow mornin'—at three o'clock!"

The overwhelming truth dawned on Thatcher. Mournful had led him on till the game was wholly in,

Mournful's hands. There the bully stood, caught and held in the trap of his boasting. The man, he had said, didn't live who could do what Mournful Martin had done. Thatcher looked helplessly about the room.

Reputation, Mournful reflected, was a great thing. By word and deed, he had built up a reputation. He fully believed in the validity of his deeds, but a great many times his words had been idle. It often amused him to boast, so he boasted. Here words and deeds seemed to go hand in hand, the spurious and the true.

For the men in the room, even the poker players, were moving up to the bar. Those were the actions of men who were convinced that there would be no gun play. They did not fear that Thatcher would call Mournful to account now, backed though Thatcher was by his men. It was, Mournful assured himself, a nice li'l tribute to a brave man.

"You can't do that," Thatcher at length got out.

"Can't do what?"

"Force me to meet you at three o'clock to-morrow mornin'. I meet Watkins at five."

"What would hinder you from meetin' me at three and Watkins at five?" Mournful asked. "You'd have two instead o' one killin' to be glad about. What kinda man are you to refuse a double measure?"

Thatcher had no answer to that. He fumbled about in his mind.

"It won't be hardly light at three o'clock," he said.

"Any daybreak, good or bad, will be as much yours as mine. I don't make the daybreaks. Bein' a workin'man most of the time, I on'y shove out into 'em."

"It's a trap," Thatcher stated.

"Wriggle out of it—if you c'n."

There was appeal in Thatcher's eyes as those eyes traveled again over the faces of the men. He found no support. Even his own men evaded him. Their study of the floor was intent.

"All right," said Thatcher suddenly. "I'll meet you at three o'clock."

"I must git some sleep," Mournful said. "My hand must be steady and sure." He lifted his right hand and looked at it. "And fast," he finished.

Turning his back on Thatcher, he strode to the door and passed through it. To impress Thatcher, he gave the act an energy, a definiteness which he had not displayed before.

HE climbed the stairs and knocked on Watkins's door. Doctor Lamar, a young man, prematurely bald, but with keen eyes, opened the door softly. He came into the hall, closing the door behind him.

"I sent my wife to bed," he said. "Watkins has fallen asleep. He'll get several hours now. When he awakens, give him a double dose of that medicine. How does it happen that you're sober? And what have you been doing to straighten Watkins out in his trouble?"

"If you got anything more to tell me or any more questions to ask, write me, will you, doc?" Mournful queried. "Write me a long letter, a sweet, kind letter."

"Secretive as usual, aren't you?" Lamar asked. "In any other man that'd be a bad sign. Well, good night! I'll see you again some time."

"You and me practices medicine in exactly the same way, doc," Mournful said. "Double doses! So long!"

The doctor went along the hall to

his room. Mournful opened the door and entered. Lamar had put out the light. Mournful advanced to the bed and looked down at Watkins. Watkins was better. His face was peaceful. He was breathing easily. Mournful sat down. He was motionless. At two o'clock Watkins awoke and Mournful gave him the medicine. He was full of questions, but Mournful hushed him. He presently dropped off to sleep again.

Mournful had no watch, but from the window he could tell the time almost exactly. He went downstairs shortly before three o'clock. The barroom was closed. He let himself out the back door. In the stable he found that Thatcher and his men had taken their horses away. Mournful put the gear on his own horse and set off across the flat.

In twilight he rode to the spot which Thatcher had designated. No one was in sight. Mournful built a cigarette. He smoked it, threw away the butt. The twilight yielded to daylight. Mournful could see afar. Still no one was in sight. He smoked another cigarette.

Pink streaks came into the sky. They climbed and spread till the east was lighted. They changed to gold as the sun prepared to rise. Mournful tossed away the second butt. The flat, morning-bathed, was lifeless.

Mournful rode back to the hotel and left his horse in front of it. He climbed to Watkins's room and roused the puncher.

"Time to git started," he said.

Watkins stared at him dazedly. He slid to the edge of the bed and stood up. He was steady enough but he was flooded by dullness. As a fighting man he was, Mournful said, a complete washout.

"I think I need a drink or a cup o' coffee or somep'n," Watkins said

when he was dressed and his gun belt was fastened on.

"You can't have a drink. You can't git a cup o' coffee. You prob'ly need somep'n. I dunno exactly what it is. Mebbe a good lickin' with a lively quirt."

Watkins stood for a moment looking at the floor. Mournful said he took his young courage in his two hands. Knowing himself inadequate to meet a deadly situation, he was still game to meet it.

He jerked his head up.

"Le's get goin'," he said.

When he saw Mournful's horse in front of the hotel, he stopped and gave Mournful a suspicious look.

"Where you been?" he demanded.

"I brought my horse out to have him ready," Mournful answered.

Watkins stepped down and laid a hand on the horse.

"You rode him some," he stated.

"That," said Mournful, "is one of the uses of a horse. Git your own horse and let's start."

IN a few minutes they were riding across the flat. Mournful let Watkins go ahead, so that he could observe that puncher. Watkins's eyes were fixed front. His face was drawn, but no fear was in it. The odds were against him, but he was accepting those odds. Takin' the hull business together, Mournful said, Watkins was gittin' his lesson pretty good. All them sentimental feelin's he had had about Nina Longley was pretty well jarred outa him. He'd be ready, presently, to punch a cow or two.

They reached the point at which Mournful had waited before.

"What time is it?" Watkins asked.

"Few minutes before five."

Watkins took out his gun and examined it. He thrust it back into the holster, squared his shoulders,

and pointed his horse's nose in the direction of the hotel. Five minutes passed. Ten. Fifteen. Then half an hour. Slowly Watkins turned to Mournful.

"You big four-flusher," he asked, "what'd you do?"

"Me? Nothin'. I was out here a while ago to look over the ground and I didn't see hide nor hair of Thatcher and his men. Their horses was gone from the stable more'n two hours ago. You're so dopey you didn't notice they was gone when you got your horse. I got an idea that Thatcher made up his mind it'd be plain murder to meet you. He prob'ly went home. He must have a kind heart."

"You're a liar," Watkins cried. "You been nursin' me, babyin' me, and somehow you've butted in and drove Thatcher off. You thought I wasn't game to meet him, Mournful."

"I didn't think nothin' of the kind," Mournful declared. "Now, you shut your mouth. You ain't boilin' fer a fight. You on'y think you are. Hell, I'm doubtful if you think you are. H'ever, if you try to ride me, you'll have a fight on your hands with the best fightin' man from here to ol' Mexico. How do you like that kinda talk, sonny?"

"You had no right——"

"Right! What has right to do with it? Keep still, Mr. Watkins, and let some of this bright mornin' seep into your system."

Watkins looked over the flat, raised his eyes to the sky.

"I'm goin' home and stay there for a long time," he said at last. "Gosh, this air tastes good, Mournful. Me for air from now on. I'll never take another drink, never gamble, never do nothin' but work. I been——"

"Fer Judas's sake, don't start tellin' me what you been," Mournful interrupted. "Compared to me, you ain't really been nothin'. I been ever'thing. If we start matchin' on what we been, we'll never leave this spot till we're feeble and old and gray, fer, outa ac'shul experience, I c'n match anything you c'n even dream of."

Watkins took several deep breaths of the warming, sweet air. He looked at the risen sun. It was sufficient for Mournful that young Watkins was happy to be alive and that he was being cleansed at the birth of a new day.

"For a fact, Mournful," Watkins said, "this air's like wine."

"Drink hearty!" said Mournful. "It won't cost you a cent. And it'll put red court plasters into your blood. Least, that's what I've heard Mrs. Doc Lamar say."

In the *February 15th Number of*

The Popular Complete Stories

CAGED CARGO

By KENNETH KEITH COLVIN

A dynamic novelette of a convict ship bound for Devil's Island. Mutiny and disaster; with a handful of men to quell the devils of a French penal colony.

YOU CAN KILL

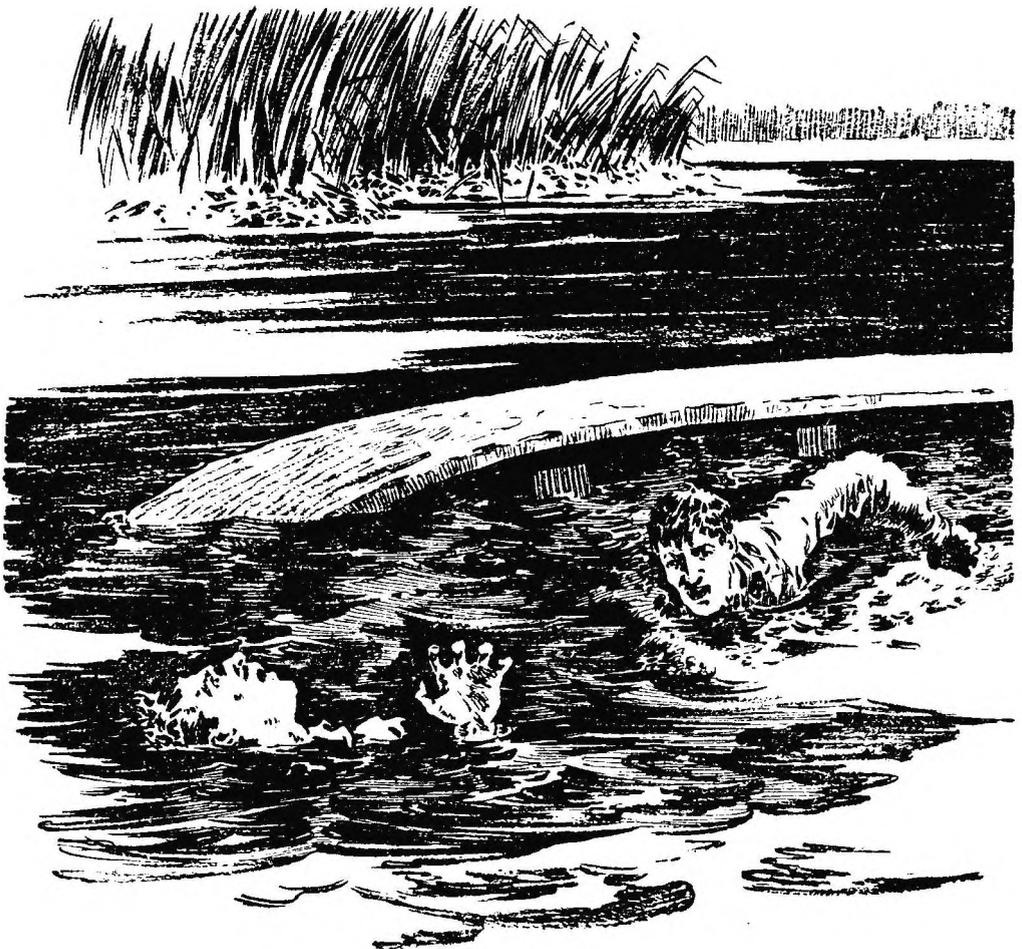
CHAPTER I. THE HOUSE CAN'T WIN.

TWENTY-FIVE years ago yesterday, they had christened him Lewellyn Owens Rice. If you come from the pine country of Georgia, you probably know the family; men dark as their Welsh ancestors from Tirawley; men with very black eyes, thick shoulders, deep chests, legs like tree trunks—and stubborn dispositions. Lew Rice put his hands more firmly on the

counter of the general store and finished telling what he intended to do. "You wouldn't get to first base," said the man behind the counter.

"Why not?" Lew asked him.

"In the first place, you don't know anything about trapping in the swamps. You probably haven't even been in a dugout, let alone paddled one. There's no money in it—with all the big companies holding land and making you pay for trapping leases—even if you could get a license, which the State doesn't issue to nonresidents. And besides, those



A FOOL

By
James Clarke

Cajuns down there wouldn't give you a look in. That's their country, and they don't take kindly to outsiders. You'd run a fifty-fifty chance of getting a bullet through you."

"Hell," said Lew Rice, and walked out of the Bayou Fur Co. office to go and find out about trains leaving for the muskrat marshes of the Mississippi delta. The fact that the railroad ran only two thirds of the way to where he wanted to go made no difference to Lew. He'd find a way to get on down. But the only train went at eight next morning, which

left him with an evening on his hands.

Most men would be pleased to have a free evening in New Orleans. There are things to do and places to go. But Lew Rice was not pleased. He had made up his mind to go and trap muskrats in the delta. Anything that hindered, prevented, or delayed him was not to Lew's mind.

He stood on the sidewalk and looked up and down Decatur Street with dislike enough in his black eyes to hide their pleasantness. His square jaw was thrust out, his thick,



Lew Rice may not have known much about trapping, but when it came to fighting he was as ornery as a mule, and just as tough.

black brows joined together. He would like to smack somebody, just to get it out of his system. Eight people that day had told him he was a fool to think he could trap the delta; that it couldn't be done. If just one more person said something like that—

A piece of gritty dust blew in his eye, and Lew left Decatur Street with his curse on its uncaring cobblestones. He went over to Royal where lights had already begun to glow in the early twilight of fall. It took an oyster cocktail, a crab gumbo, and some concoction of shrimps and other things to put him in a good temper again. No young man with an outdoor appetite and good digestion can resist New Orleans food. Besides, it set him thinking. Down where he was going there was lots of food like this. They got it from there. Also, he would find plenty of ducks to shoot.

HE came out into the street feeling much better. A sign on a bus said: "Jai-Alai." Lew stepped up to one of the men lounging on the corner reading racing forms by the light of the street lamp.

"What's Jai-Alai?"

"Big gambling house outside the city limits," the man said, taking in Lew's wide-open, youthful face. "Stay away from there, son. They'll take your undershirt."

So Lew went to Jai-Alai. He watched them play keno for a while, but it was too tame. Playing with buttons! He passed up blackjack and roulette. But the craps table stopped him.

"Always," somebody had once told him, "bet against the dice."

Lew thought for a while, frowning. Then he began to grin. His hand reached into his pocket for a

five, which he changed to silver. A woman had the dice, and her point was eight. Lew put his money on eight.

That woman took just two passes to roll a seven and lose his money along with the dice. The next man turned up snake-eyes at the first pass. Lew had his money on eleven. He soon changed from silver to bills. Doubling his losses, he dropped a hundred and twelve dollars. Then he started at the bottom again, won a five-dollar bet, and went on losing. That was the way his luck ran; his winnings weren't a drop in the bucket. But he kept right on betting with the dice.

While he was losing his second hundred, Lew noticed a hand beside him. It was stubby and thick and hard from work. It had a stubble of black hair on it and was very brown. Yet for all its appearance of work-worn strength, the hand was very swift, its movements sure and deft.

The thought flashed through Lew's mind that its owner would be a good man. When the house gambler raked in his forty dollars, he turned to look. The man glanced up at the same moment. He had lost also, and grinned, showing that two teeth were gone. His face was round and brown. So were his eyes. Something about the frank, friendliness of his grin told Lew that he was not a city man.

The play went on. Lew changed the next to last of his hundred-dollar bills. Then the last. The man beside him had quit playing, but stood just behind Lew to watch.

"By hell," he said. "You are a man, you! You lose and lose and still you bet that the house don't win. You have nerve to do this."

Lew's jaw was thrust out.

"House can't win all the time. It's

got to turn if I keep on long enough."

The man grinned again.

"If you can keep on—yes. That is all there is to most thing; keep on. I'm all blowed up, me. I make four pass, and *pouf!*"

"Tough," Lew said, and laid his money on the nine.

The dice struck the end board, rolled over and turned up with a five and a four showing. Lew let his money ride while a man with a gold horseshoe on his tie made eight straight passes. Lew dragged down half, won, let his winnings ride.

THE tide had turned. When Lew quit at one o'clock that morning he had three hundred dollars more than he started with, and an acquaintance.

"You're my luck. Stick around, will you?" Lew had said to the man. "You're a Frenchman, aren't you?"

"Sure," the man said to both questions, and stayed to cheer him on.

When they rode back to New Orleans in the bus, Lew introduced himself and asked if the other knew any place where they could get a drink. The Frenchman's name was Augustine leBouf—called "Geese"—and he knew plenty of places to get a drink.

By three o'clock they were friends. Lew was saying:

"Stubborn? Geese, that uncle of mine's a daw-gone mule! I had it all figured out, see? Just how much it would cost to log off that mountain, and how to do it.

"Would he listen to me? Not on your life! Wouldn't even look at the dope I had on it. Told me to get the hell out and start work on forty acres of loblolly not fit for firewood. I told him I wouldn't touch it. He said I could either do what he wanted or get out. So I beat

it. For a long time I'd been figuring on trying my luck at muskrat trapping here in Louisiana. They tell me it's no good, but that don't sound right. Know anything about it?"

LeBouf opened his round eyes very wide and stared at Lew. Then his face became a smile from hair to chin. Even his nose seemed to grin.

"Do I know about muskrat, me? You ask Geese. leBouf if he know muskrat? I have trap those marsh since five year old!"

So they ordered another drink and Geese told Lew all about how he made fifteen hundred dollars in a seventy-five-day season the year before. He also opened his heart and told his troubles. The owner of the land where he had trapped before was a mean, hard man from Chicago. He had raised the price of leases so high that a man couldn't make a thing. Geese could get another lease at a good figure, but this owner wanted half the cash down. He didn't have the cash. That's why Geese had come to New Orleans, to borrow money, which had proved impossible. He didn't see how he could trap this year at all.

Lew very promptly told him how, and five o'clock found them on a freight boat bound down the river. As the faint shape of buildings dissolved into the gloom of early morning, Lew thumbed his nose. He hoped that the eight people who had told him he couldn't trap in the delta would get the message by telepathy.

CHAPTER II.

TWO TO BE WATCHED.

THREE men watched by lantern light while Lew Rice got himself into a dugout. Dawn was half an hour away. Behind them loomed the low roof of a palmetto trapper's shack, the shack where

Lew and Geese had now lived three weeks. A little way down the bayou was the boat in which the other two had come. They were George Jackson, the game warden, and Geese's cousin, Maurice Cherami.

Lew could hear them chuckling and whispering together, as he stowed shotgun and cartridges in the canoe. Their voices rose higher than they realized. There was a bet on.

"Five dollars he dumps over before he gets round the bend."

That was Jackson. For a big man, his voice was too high. His eyes were gray-green and expressionless.

"You better get you gun, Geese. If a duck come and sit on the barrel of his gun he couldn't shoot her."

That was Maurice Cherami, and Geese, who had not answered Jackson's proposal, took him up immediately.

"You want for bet on that? Ten dollar he gets some duck, I bet you."

Lew's jaw was stuck out. He had refused all aid in getting into the dugout. They made him mad, these twelve-foot, hollowed logs, hard to ride as a bicycle on a wire. He was going to paddle one himself or drown trying. But he had not figured on having an audience when he started on his first hunting trip alone.

He drew the pirogue close to the bank and put one foot in it. The gunwale dipped water. How the deuce did anybody ride these things? He removed the foot and drew the boat along to a place where a willow tree grew on a raised bank. Swinging both feet over the edge, he hung onto the tree and lowered himself carefully. The pirogue rocked wildly but did not overturn. Gingerly and awkwardly, running into the banks, zigzagging down the channel, Lew poled himself with a

short bamboo rod. Low laughter from the camp made his neck burn.

Blundering awkwardly through the dark, Lew finally made the turn. Just beyond, the bayou widened and deepened. He laid the pole inboard and took up his paddle, and the going grew easier. Lew had paddled ordinary canoes, and a pirogue wasn't so much different. It was the trick of poling, and you had to pole through shallow water, that he hadn't learned yet; poling and the balance of these cranky logs. How men like Geese and the others could stand up and shove them through a mass of lilies he didn't see.

There were, he decided, a lot of things about the delta he didn't see. Jackson and Cherami for instance. This made the third time they had visited camp without any apparent reason. Also, where were the muskrats? Up to now, they had caught exactly fifteen; not enough to pay for their grub.

PRETTY soon the light came, but there was no colored sunrise this morning. The whole world was gray with mist. As far as Lew could see, the great prairie of sword grass and stunted willows lay bleak and dripping.

He came to a smaller bayou and turned off. There was a pond at the end of this, and he had seen ducks there when making the rounds of their trap line. He would lie up close to the bank and wait till it grew lighter.

But Lew had not figured on the noise he made, paddling the unfamiliar craft. The dugout scraped a log, his paddle splashed, he cursed. Wings drummed the water somewhere beyond the grass and he saw the first duck rise in full flight, speeding away at right angles to his course.

Lew, with an instinctive motion, dropped his paddle and seized his gun. Without preliminary tipping, the pirogue went over.

For one wild moment, Lew was a tangle of arms and legs. Then he landed on his feet in hip-deep water, with the gun held high overhead. Without a pause he brought it to his shoulder and let go both barrels. Feathered shapes stumbled in their flight, beat the air with crippled wings, dropped. Careless of water moccasins, Lew waded after his ducks.

Later, he came back, pulled the craft ashore and emptied it. But he had hunted over an hour by then, scrambling through the sharp-edged grass, floundering through mud and water.

The others came out of the camp and lined the bank to wait for him. Lew, partly because it was now light, and partly because he had grown a little used to the dugout, was able to keep a course that was almost straight, and land without tipping over.

Jackson and Maurice Cherami were grinning. Geese looked troubled and ashamed for his partner.

"You look wet, you," Cherami said, wrinkling up his pointed face. "You are all mud."

"We heard you banging away. But them ducks fly pretty darn fast. I guess you found that out."

Jackson winked as he spoke, and nudged Geese, who looked reproachfully at Lew, as if to say: "What did you want to make a fool of yourself in front of these folks for?"

LEW looked from Jackson to Maurice. His chin jutted out and his eyes were dark with anger. He did not speak, but stooped abruptly to the dugout. From under some grass he drew a

dozen ducks and threw them two at a time up at Geese's feet.

"Here's breakfast," he said, "unless you-all want me to pick 'em and cook 'em, too."

For a moment all three stared with blank and astonished faces. Then Geese chuckled. As Lew went inside for dry clothes he heard him say:

"He gets what he go for, him. You owe me ten dollar, Maurice."

The visitors left immediately after they had eaten. Their motor filled the quiet bayou with echoing noise, and the two partners sat silent till it had died. Lew said:

"They don't like me, Geese. They don't like me a nickel's worth, especially Jackson."

Geese frowned, and stirred uneasily where he sat.

"You are a foreigner," he said. "They don't like for you to come here and trap. Jackson, he has talk pretty big in Bill Snyder's barroom about what he'll do when he get the chance."

"What he's going to do to me? How d'you know, Geese?"

"Bill Snyder told me. Last time I went to town. We better watch that man, us. He is one bad."

"I wish he would start something. I don't like him a bit better than he likes me. Is that why he and Cherami are always hanging around here—trying to start something?"

Geese's face was puckered into puzzled frown lines.

"I don't know, me. I think they come to see what you do and laugh. They are dumb men. They think because a man don't know how to do in the prairie he don't know nothing."

Lew got to his feet and stood with legs braced wide apart, staring across the gray, desolate swamp.

"I hope they get their fill of laugh-

ing now," he said. "Because if they start anything they aren't going to be in any shape to laugh at all. Let's go look at those traps, Geese."

CHAPTER III.

ROBBERY.

LEW was sitting on the deck of Geese's boat thinking about Christmas. At home, now, folks would be still out at the big farm, resting up for New Years. They needed to rest up after one of those Christmas dinners that made your ribs crack. Maybe there would be a coon hunt. Maybe they'd just sit around the fire cracking nuts and drinking some, and his uncle Jake would ask who knew that song about the railroad.

Lew sure was mighty homesick. Geese's boat wasn't much of a boat; just a little old launch swinging there in the current. All around her old Mississippi was flowing down.

The old river was cold, and brown, and muddy. And the air was cold and gray. Those geese flying by knew about that. They flew fast to keep warm. Fishes stayed down below where they belonged. Only the muskrats with warm fur hides moved around. Good muskrat weather, this was; pelts were prime, and for the last couple of weeks they'd been catching plenty. But that didn't make it any less cold and miserable there on the river alone, with Geese gone to town to see if he couldn't find a fur buyer.

Lew pulled the collar of his coat up close to his neck, and saw a boat heading in toward where they lay. She came straight across and then dropped her anchor just astern. Jackson, the game warden, came out on deck. He had his badge pinned on his coat and he looked at Lew real hard. Lew looked back, trying

to find out what was behind those pale-gray eyes.

"Where's Geese?" Jackson asked after a while.

"Down river," Lew said, making up his mind not to tell Jackson any more of their business.

Jackson hooked his thumbs in his belt and looked over Lew some more.

Lew watched him just as close. If this bird was going to start something he wanted to have the jump.

"Got any game aboard?" Jackson said.

"Couple of ducks," Lew told him. "Isn't any law against that, is there?"

"I'm coming aboard," Jackson said. "I think you men are market hunting. You ain't trapping no rats. I aim to find out. I'm going to have a look at your license, too. We don't take no chances with foreigners."

Lew stood up.

"You put one foot on deck and I'll knock you right on off into the river," he said. "You hear me? Stay off this heah boat!"

Jackson flicked his badge with a thumb-nail.

"Listen," he said. "You may be pretty big in Georgia or Tennessee or wherever you come from, but you aren't knee-high around here. You can't talk that way to a U. S. marshal."

"All right," Lew said. "Come on over here and see what happens."

"That's what I'm going to do, mister. And the way you've been talking hasn't done you no good. A man don't get tough unless he's got something to hide."

JACKSON started his engine and moved forward, dragging the anchor, until his bow almost touched the stern of Geese's boat. Lew stood on the small deck, waiting for him with hands loosely

clenched at his sides. If Jackson came, he was going to get a bath in that cold river.

But the warden came with a gun. He drew a revolver as he came on deck, leaped the intervening space, and jabbed the muzzle into Lew's stomach hard enough to hurt.

"I'll teach you to get hard with a U. S. officer. Where's your licenses?"

Lew stood up to him, eye to eye. He said:

"You damn yellow hunk of tripe! Put up that gun and fight, if you're a man."

"Show me them papers or I'll plug you. I'm not going to fool with you poachers from out the State—not at all. Get going, and keep your face shut."

He kept the gun and one eye on Lew while he rummaged through the tin box where they kept their papers. He looked at their hunting and fishing permits, Geese's boat license; then the trapping license in Geese's name, Lew's agreement to work for him, and the contract whereby he was to get back half the profits plus his original investment as wages.

It was air-tight, well within the law, and Lew knew it. But as he watched this man prying officiously into their affairs anger boiled up in him till he was choked with it. He couldn't say a word. Even when Jackson threw the papers back into the box and began searching everything in the place, he could not speak.

Finally the warden found the two ducks of which Lew had told him. His pale eyes turned on Lew.

"I'll take these and hold 'em for evidence. You've been market hunting, you two. I know it. Next time I'll get the goods on you right! Wait and see!"

He kept his gun on Lew until he

was back on his own boat. It was half an hour before Lew grew calm enough to think of the things he might have said to him, but he could think of what he wanted to do right then.

"I'll paste him clear into the middle of next week," he said to Geese that night when he told him about Jackson's visit. "Comin' aboard a man's own boat and holdin' him up with a gun! I won't stand that from anybody."

"He'd rob us," Geese said, and ran off into a string of French that helped to relieve his feelings. "Those ducks, she belong to us. He's a t'ief, him."

But on the way back to camp, he calmed down and was very thoughtful. He asked Lew questions about Jackson's visit, wanting especially to know what he had said and done about their papers.

"This is some scheme, yes," Geese said finally. "He want to find out if we are do something against the law. Then he will take away our rats. I don't like that man, the way he act."

"Let him try something," Lew said. "I'll knock him so bow-legged he won't stand up straight the rest of his life."

Geese's face was very sober when he said, "Be careful how you do with that Jackson. He has shoot a man, him."

CHAPTER IV.

TROUBLE STARTS.

ONE of Lew's hip boots was full of water. All of him was cold, but that one leg, incased with icy wet ached like a tooth. The tall grass clutched at him as he made his way across a bit of high land where the mound of sticks of a muskrat's house showed. The traps were set around it in a

ring, twenty feet away. Lew picked up three rats.

He floundered on, through deep mud that sank under his feet, across a bayou where water came almost to his boot tops, into the tangling, sharp-edged grass again. He did not see the geese and ducks start from his path with a sound like the rise of seaplanes. He did not notice the herons go with slow, long flaps, skimming away toward quieter water, nor the blackbirds fly, chattering protests and showing a flash of red. He was unaware, even, of the thick-bodied, ugly-headed moccasins that swam and wriggled out of his way.

Lew only knew that he was so weary every step was pain. That the muskrats and double-jawed traps on his back seemed to weigh half a ton. That the unfamiliar, treacherous marsh conspired to hold him back. Every day, now, for two months and more, he had made this weary round, covering on foot the same sized territory Geese worked, using a pirogue.

It was beginning to tell on him, this output of strength it took to make up what he lacked in skill by sheer force. When he went to bed at night he fell like a log, dead asleep. When he woke in the morning he did not feel rested. Yet he had kept up with Geese, and was still keeping up. That was all that mattered to Lew. They were getting the rats, and he was keeping up his end.

He plodded on, his jaw thrust forward, shoulders humped under his load, one booted foot following the other with weary, dogged persistence. He came finally to the bayou where he had left his skiff and dumped his burden with a grunt of relief. Sometimes he had not been able to find the skiff and spent hours

wandering the gray trackless prairie until Geese came and found him. The Cajun should be at camp now, already half through his skinning.

But when Lew rounded the bayou bend it was not his partner's voice that greeted him. He looked around at the hail, and saw Maurice Cherami on the bank. His boat was moored a little below the palmetto hut.

Lew frowned as he turned in toward the bank and shipped his oars. He had been too busy, since his row with Jackson, to think much about him. But the vague threat of trouble with the man had remained. And here was Cherami, waiting at their camp. He didn't like it.

WHEN Lew went ashore, the Cajun's face showed an ingratiating smile. He held out his hand as though he were an old friend.

"You do good, yes. Already you are a trapper."

Lew grunted. "Not so you could notice it. It takes me twice as long to do anything as it ought to. Where's Geese?"

Cherami shrugged. "I don't know, me. You should know that."

"He usually gets in ahead of me," Lew said. "Where's your partner?"

"What you mean? I got no partner, no."

"I thought you worked with Jackson."

Cherami shrugged again. "Sometime we go together, but we are not partners, us. I am not such good friend with Jackson to make partners with him."

That was a lie, as Lew knew from what Geese had told him. He nearly said so. But the way Cherami was looking at him made him hold his tongue. Cherami wanted him to think that he and Jackson weren't friends.

While Lew carried his rats up to camp and started skinning, Cherami sat around and talked agreeably about nothing much. He even offered to help, but Lew refused. It was a point of pride with him to do all his share of work himself, and he didn't want Cherami's help anyway. He wanted to find out what he was after.

But though the man talked a lot, he did not come to the point. Under cover of his work, Lew watched him. But there was nothing to be learned from Cherami's face. It was pointed, like the face of a fox. His eyes were twinkling points of light. He talked on easily, completely at home here in the camp as if he had only stopped for a visit.

Lew had begun to worry about his partner when Geese's dugout came round the bend. He was standing up, feet braced in the narrow craft to keep balance, shoving it along with the sure, powerful strokes of a twelve-foot pole.

He did not answer Cherami's greeting, but landed in silence and walked up till they stood face to face.

"What you want here?"

The ingratiating grin did not leave Cherami's face.

"I am come for a little talk, Geese. You are late. I hear you have done good this season. You have got lots of rats here."

"I have a partner that's not afraid for work. We have got plenty rats, prime, too. Most of those skin they are worth a dollar."

"You want to sell those rat?"

Geese stood off and looked at Maurice for a long moment.

"So," he said, "that is why you are come. You want for buy my skin of rat. I have not heard you are hired to buy rat for anybody, Maurice."

LEW, watching close, saw Maurice's eyes flick away, then back again. But his speech was easy, sure.

"These people I work for are up in St. Louis. Mississippi Valley Fur, that's their name. You have heard about that house, Geese."

"They haven't had anybody to buy for them since old Paul Villery died. How is it that they hire you now, Maurice?"

"They need fur, and I know rats, me. You want to sell these, Geese?"

Geese looked from his cousin to the furs drying beside the camp and back again. It looked to Lew as if he were about to close with Maurice.

"I tell you what I do," he said. "I sell you what furs are here and you can take them away in your boat. But you have to pay me cash, yes."

Cherami's grin widened.

"You are make a joke," he said.

"No joke. I sell for cash, or I don't sell, no."

"But this is crazy, *cher*. Look, here is fifty dollar—"

Geese walked away, leaving Cherami standing there with his wallet in his hands.

"I am not so crazy as you think, Maurice. You haven't got cash and you won't get it."

For half an hour Cherami stayed to argue. He walked up and down beside Geese as he carried his rats up to camp. He sat beside him while he ripped open the shining brown skins. Geese did not answer at all. He paid no attention to his cousin. Lew followed his partner's lead.

Gradually the smile left Cherami's face. He began to talk angrily and make excited gestures with his hands. Finally he began to abuse both Geese and Lew. His final words, as he walked to his boat, were:

"You will be sorry you make such

a fool. I would have treat you good because you are my cousin, even though you are partners with a foreigner——” The rest of what he said was drowned by the sound of his engine.

For a while the only sound was the rip of skins as the sharp knives flew. Then Lew said:

“Think he’ll try to make us any trouble?”

Geese laid down his knife and looked for a long moment toward the empty marsh into which Chermi’s boat had disappeared.

“By he’self, he can only talk. He hasn’t got any inside, Maurice. But if he is with that Jackson, then we should look out. This is what I heard from a man I saw up in Red Bay. I talk to this man a long time, that is why I got back late.

“Jackson was not even game warden when he took those duck from my boat. The government had fire him, two-t’ree days before. He is one thief like a man who breaks into your house.”

CHAPTER V.

ATTACK.

THOUGH his head felt something like a free balloon, Lew grinned at Geese at the other end of the dugout, and enjoyed the feel of crisp, gray morning. The whole prairie was alive with birds. The great, silent marsh had a peace and a kind of beauty this morning. It got to a man. And those men on the shrimp boats had been mighty friendly and hospitable.

Geese, knees on the stern thwart, paddled with sure, steady strokes and grinned back at him.

“How you feel?”

“Fine,” Lew said. “I like those fellas, Geese. They look like a bunch

of pirates, but they sure give you a good time. That orange wine beats even corn liquor.”

“That is the way with us down here. We trap and we trawl on the Gulf. That is hard, yes. When the season is over or the wind is blow so a man can’t work, we enjoy ourself to make up. When we have sell all those skin of rat we will give a party for our friends, us.”

“You’re shoutin’ right we will, boy! We’ll give ’em a party they won’t forget. Geese, this is just another season to you, but it’s more than that to this Georgia boy. You know what my uncle said to me when I lit out? He said: ‘Go ahead and starve to death! I’m fed up playin’ nursemaid to a pig-headed fool, and you won’t find anybody else to take the job on. Get out, but don’t you come back here whining. I’m through with you.’

“That’s what he said, and everybody down this way told me I was a blamed fool to try and make money trapping. Maybe I am, but I’m a thousand dollars ahead for three months’ work. Will be when we clean up. When’s that fur buyer coming?”

A slight frown broke the placid good nature of Geese’s face.

“He said he’d come before, yesterday, or the day after that. I don’t know why he don’t show up, me. Those fur, they are worth twelve hundred dollar and should go up to New Orleans. It is bad that our boat don’t run. It has always been a good engine.”

Lew grinned. His partner’s child-like faith in machinery when it ran and helplessness when it didn’t, always amused him.

“What did you do to that timer, Geese? Try to fix it?”

“No.” Geese s’opped paddling to make a gesture of protest.

"Then somebody fixed it," Lew said. "Timers don't generally bust like that all by themselves."

"You think somebody came and break my engine so it don't run? But no, Lew. Nobody would do that thing to Geese leBouf. That engine is old, yes. It has broken itself."

"Maybe so. It is pretty old. If it wasn't for Jackson going to Texas, I'd blame it on him."

"I'm glad that man is gone, me," Geese said, digging his paddle extra hard. "Of him alone, or Maurice alone, I am not afraid. Together, no one can know what they might do. And they do not like us. I am glad he is go."

CAMP came in sight suddenly, as a surprise to Lew, when they came through a fringe of willows along the narrow unfamiliar bayou by which Geese had brought them. He sat up straight, staring, and Geese chuckled.

"You did not know we had come so close," he said. "I can fool you every day for a month in here. I know these bayous, mc."

In a moment they were in the water lane which ran past their front door like a road. Geese's boat day close to the bank, resting with the dead-locking quiet of motor boats which will not run. The camp appeared as they had left it; rough quarters, a bare shelter to keep them from the rain. Yet it had been home to Lew for these two and a half months. They had, indeed, done well here.

He jumped ashore eagerly, looking about like a boy back to school after vacation. A moment later he met Geese by the bayou. His face worked and for a moment he couldn't speak.

"What is happen?" Geese asked,

peering at him. "Have you got sick?"

"Gone," Lew said. "Somebody's been here and swiped every daw-gone hide on the place. They even took that 'gator you shot."

Geese took it very badly. He cursed himself for a fool to go off and leave so much fur unwatched. He ran around the camp like a dog, searching vainly for the furs that were not there. Every little while he would stop to repeat that delta men were honest men, and wonder who could have done this thing to Geese leBouf.

Lew finally caught him by the arms and shook him till his bones rattled.

"Quit it!" he said. "We aren't going to get anywhere acting crazy like this. They can't have been gone very long. The tracks are fresh. Which way would they most likely go?"

Sense came back into Geese's eyes. He turned and scanned the country, seeing landmarks unrecognizable to Lew.

"Bayou St. Clair is the most quick way to the river. Come, we will go in the dugout. Maybe we will find some one who have seen a boat pass."

Lew said: "Wait a minute." He dived into the hut. In a moment he came out carrying his .38 revolver.

"They didn't find this," he said. "I had it hid under the eaves."

As they passed the useless launch, Geese spat toward it as toward a friend who had betrayed him. Then his paddle set up a steady boil of white and the lean dugout swung down the bayou like a water snake in a hurry.

Geese turned into a waterway unfamiliar to Lew, and from that down a straight lane that had been cut by

some one as a short way to his trapping grounds. Lew asked no questions. Geese, now that his first wild anger was over, knew what he was about. And he needed his breath for paddling.

IF Lew had been able to see ahead, things might have gone differently. But the dugout was so small that he rode backward, and so cranky that he could hardly turn without danger of upsetting. His first knowledge that any one else was near came when they shot out from the narrow canal into a wide pond. Geese let out one wild yell.

"They are here! It is Maurice!"

His arms did not leave the driving rhythm of his stroke. Instead of turning in toward the bank where they would have the advantage of cover, Geese kept straight on. In his excitement and anger he did not think of strategy at all.

Turning his head slightly, Lew could see the stern of a launch. They were heading almost straight for it, and now could do nothing but go on. They wouldn't have a chance, but Lew slipped out his gun and cocked it. If he could get in one shot, it wouldn't be so hard to take.

Two sounds came to him, almost together: the first, explosion of an engine starting, and the loud report of a rifle fired over water. Geese lurched sidewise, took one more stroke, then dropped his paddle and clapped both hands to his thigh. As he turned and fired a wild shot, Lew felt ripping pain tear at his ribs.

The impact threw him off balance and the next instant he had to stop breathing or swallow water. Down under the surface the bayou was cold as ice. He threw out his arms to check himself and opened his eyes. It was as dark down there as it was cold. One hand touched the slimy

mud of the bottom. Then he was coming up and his side felt like fire.

A bullet struck close enough to splash him the instant his head broke water. The white launch, her engine running raggedly, had started to move. It came to Lew that the thieves must have stopped here to make repairs. Then he saw Geese a few yards away, fighting gamely, but going down.

Lew got him by the hair, turned on his back, and took a firmer hold with an elbow under Geese's chin. The boat was going out of the pond, down another bayou. Some one had a rifle trained from the cabin window, shooting at them methodically. It seemed to Lew impossible that a direct shot or a ricochet should not get them. Each bullet sounded closer, and more angry when it struck. And the boat went slowly, too slowly. Suddenly he realized that she was going to stop while the marksman finished them. It was all up.

The thought came, but did not linger. He wasn't dead yet, and as long as he was alive he'd be doing something—take a chance.

LEW suddenly threw up one arm and stopped swimming. He sank, pulling Geese struggling after him. He had to fight with all his strength to keep them down. But he did stay, and presently the body in his arm grew limp. Geese had swallowed enough water to make him quiet.

By that time, Lew's own lungs were bursting. But he held out for a quarter minute longer, letting out the last bubble of air. When he rose, he fully expected a bullet to go through his head the moment it showed.

But nothing struck him. He came up, gasping the clear, sweet air and

looked about. The thieves, deceived into thinking him dead, had gone.

It took nearly ten minutes to get Geese back to consciousness. But his life of hard struggle against water and marsh had made him tough. He grinned up at Lew.

"I am a fool, me," he said.

"You're all right," Lew told him. "A little too much guts, but all right."

He cut off Geese's trouser leg and tightened a rag above the wound with a stick for leverage. When the blood stopped flowing he saw a neat, round bullet hole but no splintered bones. He hoped there weren't any under the flesh. Lew knew by the grating pain in his own side that at least one rib was broken. That didn't matter much, now. He had once played half of a football game with a broken rib.

Geese shook himself and sat up.

"You can go back," he said. "Leave me here while you go back and get the skiff at the camp."

Instead of answering, Lew broke off a dead willow branch and waded out toward the overturned dugout which was floating slowly toward shore. He finally brought it in close, only to give it a disgusted shove. There were three bullet holes in the bottom. He went back and sat beside Geese.

"It is best for you to go back," Geese began again. "You are hurt, *cher*. You have a side all over blood."

"Yeah," Lew said absently. "How do you feel, Geese? How strong, I mean."

"I feel pretty good. I can't walk, no. But I am all right to stay here till you get a boat. If you can go with that hurt."

"We aren't going back," Lew told him. "Those birds will get clean away and have the furs sold if we

waste time. I'm going to carry you to the river where we left that trawler's skiff this morning."

"But that is three mile! You can't walk there with me on top and your side all hurt."

"Maybe I can't," Lew said. "But I'm going to. Come on."

Geese took one good look at his partner's jaw and struggled upright, holding to a willow.

"You are one fool," he said, as Lew hoisted him, "but you will do the way you have make your mind."

CHAPTER VI.

NO SHAPE FOR LAUGHTER.

NOON had gone when Lew let his partner slide to the ground for the last time. Geese was perfectly limp, lifeless as a sack of grain. Lew didn't even notice. He dropped him on the short grass and sagged down.

For a while, then, Lew seemed to die, himself. He knew only that a deep pain shot from his side all through him. His heart labored and strained, as a man strains in a stifling heat with a heavy load. For three terrible miles he had carried Geese with that pain burning him. Sometimes it felt as if his ribs would pull apart and fall out. Sometimes they grated together horribly.

The way he had come was trackless. There had been mud which gave and sank under his feet; grass that made a tangled barrier to be pushed through; water where he had to wade, sometimes, to his waist. Part of the way Geese had been clear-headed and able to guide him, pointing out the high spots where the going was best. Other times, when loss of blood took his partner's mind away, Lew had to make it alone.

As his strength came back, Lew

thought of all that and pushed it away as a man throws off the memory of a bad dream. He hadn't quit. Every so often he had set Geese down and collected himself. But he had gone on, and he was going on from here.

Under the steep bank the river ran by. Looking through the screen of willows Lew could see it spreading out like a lake. This was the widest point of the delta, here just above the passes. And this was where they had left the skiff.

Geese stirred and moaned a little. As Lew looked he opened his eyes.

"How do you feel, Geese?"

The brown was all faded from Geese's face. He looked shrunken and small. But he grinned and said: "I feel fine, me."

Lew heaved himself up and went to look for the skiff. It was there, where they had left it, in a small dent in the shore. He went down and baled out six inches of water and climbed back for Geese. They nearly fell twice going down, and Lew's ribs wrenched and grated the way they never had before. He had to sit down on the thwart with his head between his knees and rest before he picked up the oars.

Rowing hurt, too. When he finished a stroke, Lew didn't see how he could take another one. The bank crawled by, slower than a walk. It would take forever to go the twelve miles to town. Even close to the shore where the eddy helped, old man Mississippi was hard to go against.

But after a while Lew steadied to it. He got into a slow, monotonous habit of stroking. He didn't think; just rowed. His side hurt in a dull sort of way with little twinges when the ribs moved suddenly. But he was used to that, too. Banks and trees went by, gray and dull. But

they were going upstream. Geese called out the landmarks when he was watching. Part of the time he kept his eyes closed, only half conscious. The sun tilted slowly down behind them. Two ships passed and made choppy waves that banged them around.

S UDDENLY Geese said: "I hear something." Lew didn't hear anything, but they had talked over the possibility of some trapper's boat or a trawler coming along to give them a tow. After a while the dull throb of a Deisel motor came to Lew. Geese said:

"That's the *Rita*. Swing out. Go to the middle. They'll pick us up."

Lew swung the bow and a moment later the full sweep of the current caught them. He couldn't feel it, exactly. But when he took a stroke the boat hardly moved. All around them the surface was broken by little ripples that changed their pattern all the time. Current made that. Lew stuck his paw a little farther out and put what strength he had left into his stroke.

"Hurry," Geese said. "They are too far yet."

Lew tried, and managed to speed their progress a little. But the squat freight boat passed when they were scarcely a hundred yards from shore. Men on her decks and old man Druscac in the pilot house waved cheerfully in answer to their wild gestures.

The only sign of their disappointment was a silence broken by the squeak of oars against thole pins. Lew had to keep rowing, no matter what happened. He suddenly noticed that his hands ached, and the palms were sore.

Geese said: "We might as well go across, yes. The mail boat comes in close over there."

Finally they reached quieter water on the other side. Lew pushed the boat's nose up on the mud and dropped his head between his knees. He stayed that way until Geese spoke from the stern.

"This is too hard, Lew. You will kill yourself. Wait here till some one come by and——"

"Let 'em get clear on up to New Orleans with those furs! We're going on through!"

Geese called him a fool and let it go at that. Lew backed off the mud and settled down to the steady stroking that had carried them this far. It became plain, after a while, that Geese had misjudged the time. The mail boat did not appear, and they knew she must have passed already. Other boats came, but none close enough to hail, except ocean vessels which had no intention of stopping for a skiff.

The sun made the river rusty and gold for a while, then it was black. Stars blinked in the quiet where Lew was rowing. His oars dipped into the reflections, shattering them. Suddenly he knew that he couldn't row any more after the next stroke. He pulled over to the bank with his last strength and again sank his head in his hands.

There was no comment from Geese, and when Lew turned he saw him as an inert heap on the stern. He crawled back and found Geese dead asleep, completely worn out. Lew let him stay. After a while he pulled himself together, tightened his blistered, aching palms around the oars, and went on.

TIME stopped, now. There was only the slow movement of his body, reaching for a stroke and pulling back, the dull, torturing ache in his side. The words of a song came tunelessly

through his teeth—over and over. He didn't even know he was singing till Geese's voice told him to shut up.

It was a good thing Geese had waked. A light mist obscured everything beyond a hundred yards, and Lew would have run by the town on the opposite shore. He would simply have rowed on till he dropped. But Geese, recognized every indentation and tree, told him to cross. Lew was so dulled, by now, that Geese had to give him directions for keeping the skiff quartering upstream. He didn't even feel the tug of current sweeping down. He just rowed.

But when Geese called, "We are there! I can see lights," Lew turned his head, and the deep well of strength within him flowed again. A string of lights like faint stars bent round a river curve.

Lew did not land at the lower end of town. He brought them in beside the post-office wharf where some trappers' boats were tied, shoving the skiff's nose right up against the levee. Geese's sleep had done him good. With Lew's help, he managed to get up the steep bank on his own legs. Then he sent Lew to look for a coffee can in the engine room of a certain boat tied alongside.

Lew came back and handed him a revolver.

"Take this thing," he said. "I couldn't hit a barn door. Can't even open my hands."

"Mr. Karns has lock the post office," Geese said. "The constable will be in his bed, yes. If we wait, we——"

"To hell with the constable! We didn't come all this way to wait. If they're here, we're going for them right now. Can you walk?"

They looked like a couple of

drunks walking down the levee road. Lew, barely able to put one foot before the other, had his good arm around Geese. They staggered and wobbled from side to side. At every step Lew had to fight his great temptation to sink down beside the road into unconsciousness. He could hear Geese's breath whistling loudly through clenched teeth.

But at last they passed the shuttered lights of Snyder's barroom and came to a house which appeared dark. It was dark, except for a yellow streak beneath the door. And as they lurched down the levee bank, the clink of glass sounded from inside. Some one was in Maurice Cherami's house.

Geese banged on the door. A thick voice shouted: "Come in!"

"Drunk," Lew said. "Too drunk even to lock the door." He swung it wide.

Against one wall of the small room Maurice Cherami sat with a glass in his hand. Opposite, Jackson was pouring himself a drink. Between them, the muskrat hides lay strewn on the floor, a few done up into bales. Geese's alligator skin hung on a nail.

For a long moment none of the four spoke. Jackson and Cherami stared as if ghosts had suddenly walked in. Then the superstitious fear went out of Jackson's eyes. He got to his feet.

"You're tough to kill," he said. "But I'm going to make sure this time." Lew saw that he had a skinning knife in his hand. By the look in Jackson's eyes, he knew that he was drunk enough and desperate enough to do anything. He had no weapon of his own. Now Cherami had come to life and was reaching for a holstered gun on his chair back. Lew reeled a little, and heard Geese curse in French.

He threw himself on Jackson, meeting him halfway. Cold steel ripped through his shirt and along his neck. His right fist came up and struck with a numbing jar. His hands closed round flesh. A gun roared close beside him, and that was all he knew.

LEW opened his eyes to blink at a room full of people. Geese's mother and sister were staring at him. A fat man was reaching into a black bag on the foot of the bed. This man turned and looked at him with twinkling blue eyes.

"How do you feel?" he asked.

Lew became aware that his whole left side was bound so tightly he could scarcely move. That was all right. They fixed you that way when you broke a rib.

"O. K.," he said happily. "Where's Geese?"

"I'm here, me."

Geese lay in a bed next his, grinning all over his round face. Then somebody stepped around from behind and picked up Lew's hand. His uncle's face was all drawn, as if he hadn't slept. His eyes had worried lines around them, but right now he looked glad about something.

"Good gosh, boy!" he said. "I thought you weren't ever going to come out of it."

Lew grinned. "I'm all right," he said. "How about those furs?"

"Sold and shipped north," his uncle said. "And those two crooks are in jail. Geese shot the Frenchman just as he was drawing down on you. They had to pry your hands loose from around Jackson's neck."

Lew sighed and straightened his body under the covers.

"How long do I have to stay here, doc?"

"You can travel in four-five days,

maybe," the doctor told him. "Your uncle can take you back, then."

"What do you mean, 'back'?"

"Son," his uncle said, "I was wrong about that timber. We're a bull-headed family, but I'm willing to admit it, now. You come along back and cut it. I need you, son."

Lew turned to Geese, and Geese nodded, grinning.

"That is all right, Lew," he said. "I have got friends that will finish for us down there. I will send you what you have make this season."

Lew propped himself on an elbow.

"I'm going down there and finish it myself! You get somebody to take your place and we'll go down Saturday. When I get done trapping I'll think about going to Georgia, not any sooner."

The doctor shook his head.

"You can't go back into the prairie," he said. "You ought to be dead now. The thing to do is go home and get plenty of rest till your strength comes back."

"I'll be strong enough Saturday! If I can travel I can work. We've got two weeks trapping before the season ends."

The doctor opened his mouth to protest, but Lew's uncle stopped him.

"Don't argue, doc. I know this boy. We've got a saying back in Georgia that should have been made up for him. We say:

"'You can kill a fool, but a dog-gone mule is a mule until he dies!'

"And that goes for Lew Rice. Ornery as a mule, and just as tough."

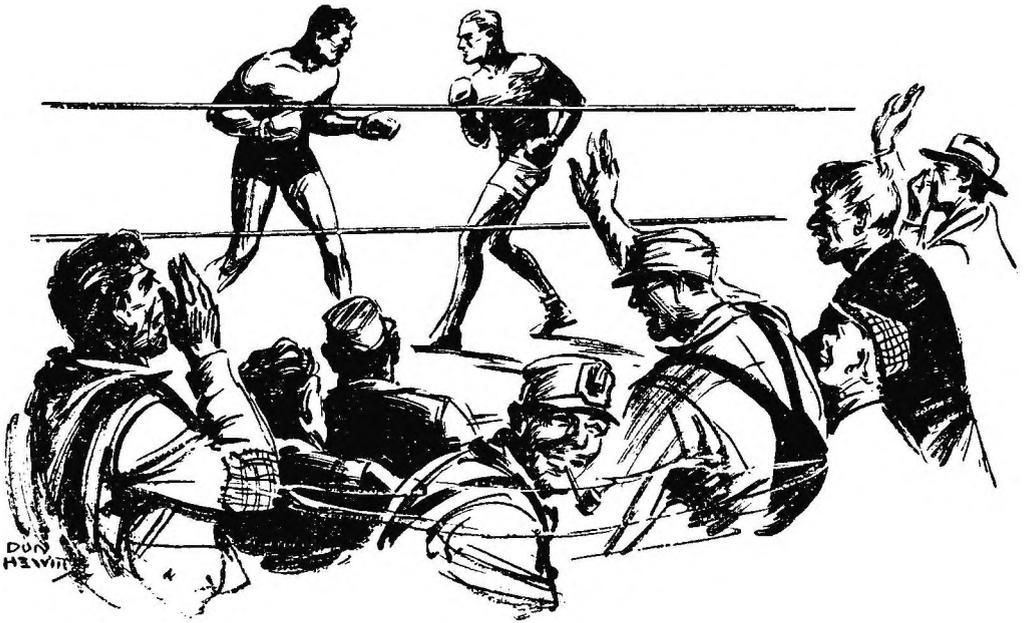
STEFANSSON ON THE ARCTIC

MOST of us have picked up here and there the idea that the arctic region is a frozen waste. The north polar region conjures up a hazy picture of eternal snow and ice, where no man would choose to live and where the Eskimo lives in an igloo and subsists on tallow. Vilhjalmur Stefansson says flatly that the textbooks are responsible for this misconception and that explorers have done little to correct it.

"I have spent ten winters and thirteen summers in the arctic, and before I became acquainted with conditions there I believed that the north pole was the coldest place on earth and that all year round no flowers, trees, or grass grew within the arctic circle. I thought Eskimos lived in igloos and subsisted to a great extent on drinking tallow."

Mr. Stefansson, speaking before a teachers' institute, then went on to say that the temperature rarely goes below fifty degrees below zero near the pole. He points out that as a boy, living in North Dakota, he has seen fifty-five degrees below zero. He then tells of a huge forest which he found in the far northern tip of Canada, one hundred miles beyond the arctic circle. Near Siberia he also came on a forest of full-grown trees. In 1917 he visited what was then known as "the last island on earth," because it was the last land before the solid ice of the polar region. Here he found buttercups, daisies, roses, bees, and butterflies.

As for igloos, he says they were the invention of white explorers. Not one in a hundred Eskimos has ever seen an igloo. He says the Eskimos are a well-educated and well-read race, who know much more about the white man and his life than we do about them.



IRON FISTS

By Art Buckley

Duke Elliot tries a fight outside Cauliflower Alley and knocks a pal out of an enemy.

CLAD in sweater and flannels, "Duke" Elliot, gentleman pug, trotted nimbly over the mountain road. The heat of the sun made his face glisten with the exertion. Beside him puffed Carl Rost, his pudgy manager.

"This vacation is sure going to do you good, Duke," Rost said breathlessly as they pounded along. "How's the arm?"

"Good as new, Carl," the Duke answered. "Never better. It's got the old kick back in it."

"When you get back to New York, you'll be fit enough to lay out the champ in one round!" Rost declared.

A third man was swinging along beside the Duke and Rost. He was Hunter, the Duke's handler.

"You're sure in swell shape, Duke," he panted. "You're in perfect trim. Boy, wait'll you get into the ring with Mike Conlin."

"Conlin's no pushover to anybody," the Duke answered.

"Yeah," Rost agreed, "but wait! You'll paste that mug to the canvas so tight they'll have to steam him off."

They were jogging around a bend in the road, on the return to the town of Carmel. Hearing the sound of a motor car behind them, they shifted toward the edge. The de-

crepit car clattered past them, and a few yards on drew to a stop. Four men dropped out of it quickly, and crossed into the Duke's path.

"Wait a minute!" the foremost called. "You're Elliot, ain't you—the prize fighter?"

The Duke stopped, breathing deeply. Carl Rost drew up alongside. Hunter eyed the quartet suspiciously as he joined them.

"I'm Elliot," the Duke answered.

"Thought so," said the speaker. "My name's McCarthy and this is Chuck Veach. I was thinkin' you and Chuck ought to get together. He's champ of the mines."

The Duke thrust out his hand, taking an appraising look at Veach. The champ of the mines was built like a gorilla—thick-trunked, his head stuck close to his chunky shoulders, long dangling arms.

"Glad to know you," the Duke said. "How long've you been champ of the mines?"

"More'n a year now," Veach answered in a grumbling voice. "Some of the boys've tried to take the title away from me, but all of 'em've ended up knocked cold."

McCarthy spoke up. "Sure. Veach is a sweet hitter. I'm his manager, and we come out here huntin' for you. We thought it would be a good idea to stage a little bout—Elliot and Veach."

Carl Rost laughed. "Sorry, McCarthy. The Duke didn't come here to fight. He's taking a vacation. I'm his manager, and I'm going to see to it that he gets a rest."

McCarthy's lips curled. "You must be afraid to have him fight Veach," he declared sullenly.

Rost snickered again. "There's no reason why I should be afraid of that," he answered. "The Duke's tackled some of the biggest bruisers in the ring, and he's got decisions

over all of 'em. The day's coming when he's going to be champ. He wouldn't have any trouble handling your man—only he didn't come to Carmel to fight."

McCarthy grunted. "Maybe you think Veach is no good because he ain't a professional fighter. Say, he's better right now than half the pugs that're fightin' for money. He's got to be champ of the mines because he packs a punch. He ain't like your New York pugs. He never paid anybody to lay down for him."

Carl Rost's smile faded. "I don't like your tone, McCarthy. You can't insinuate that the Duke is crooked, and get away with it. He's the cleanest scrapper in the ring. He fights fair, but he's not wasting himself on scrubs."

"Scrubs!" McCarthy barked. "Are you calling Veach a scrub? Say, you can't get away with that! If you think Elliot's so good, why're you afraid to match him with Veach? Because you know Veach'll knock him out and spoil his pretty reputation, that's why!"

Rost's face was hard-set now. "You're trying to egg us into a fight, McCarthy, but it won't work. Afraid of Veach! That's a joke! If the Duke ever got into a ring with your man, it would be slaughter. Come on, Duke."

Carl Rost jogged into a trot. As the Duke moved to follow him, Veach's hand shot out and fastened on his arm.

"Wait a minute, Elliot!" he grumbled. "Can't you talk for yourself? I'm askin' you for a fight, and if you're man enough to fight me, you'll give me the chance."

The Duke smiled. "I don't like you, Veach. I wouldn't mind smashing your nose for you, but Carl's my

manager and what he says goes. Sorry."

He disengaged Veach's hand, and began to jog along toward the spot where Rost had stopped. Hunter trotted beside him. They had gone only a few yards when Veach called out:

"You're too yella to fight me! That's what's the matter with you."

The Duke stopped. His hands clenched, and he turned back. Quickly Carl Rost grabbed his arm.

"Hold on, Duke! Let it pass!"

"You heard what he said, Carl!" the Duke answered tersely. "He can't talk to me like that!"

"He's trying to make you mad, that's all!" Rost protested. "He's trying to make you mad enough to fight him! You can't waste yourself scrapping with a punk like him. Come on!"

Rost tugged again at the Duke's arm, pulling him into a run. They trotted on, the three of them. Veach called again, repeating his insult, and the Duke's face paled. Rost kept behind the Duke, prodding him on until they completed rounding the bend.

"Fine guys!" Hunter exclaimed. "That big gorilla is so far out of the Duke's class he makes me laugh!"

The old car had started up again. It came jangling along the road, and slowed when it was alongside the three running men. McCarthy was at the wheel. Leaning over, he shouted:

"If your would-be pug ever gets enough guts into him to fight a real man, let us know. Veach'll flatten him out so quick he'll think it was an earthquake!"

The Duke's face flashed fiery red. Rost elbowed at him, keeping him running. When none of the three answered, the car jangled on, kicking up a cloud of dust that beat into

their faces. They paused and waited for the air to clear, while the flivver rattled out of sight.

"If he talks to me like that again," Duke Elliot said quickly, "I'm going to make him sorry for it."

"You leave that mug alone, Duke!" Rost exclaimed impatiently. "You've got to save yourself for Mike Conlin. You're heading into your biggest scrap, and you can't go wasting your fists on any tough guy that thinks he can lick you. You've got to let Veach alone!"

DUKE ELLIOT was eating dinner in the dining room of the little hotel. Rost and Hunter sat beside him, talking quietly. The vacation season was not yet fully under way, but half the tables in the room were occupied. Several well-dressed women were sending frequent, admiring glances toward the Duke's table, but he was not aware of it.

"Gosh, Duke, you'll be up pretty far when you knock Conlin out!" Hunter declared. "You'll be pretty close to the belt."

"I hope I knock him out," the Duke answered, "but I'm not making any guarantees. He's hard to hit, and still harder to get off his feet."

"You've got to knock him out, Duke!" Rost exclaimed. "If you don't where'll we be? Right back where be started from. It's been a long, hard pull, getting where we are. We're not going to take any setbacks now. You're going to jar Conlin clear through the canvas."

"I'll try my best, Carl," the Duke said.

They finished their desserts, rose, and wandered out to the veranda of the little hotel. The sun was just sinking behind the horizon, and the coolness of night was coming into the air. They sauntered down to

the street and began striding along briskly.

"Funny town," Rost opined. "Half of it is well-to-do people taking the mountain air, and the other half is toughs from the mines who're black as the ace of spades. I guess they come up here after work to see how society looks. I can't blame 'em—after spending all day a mile underground."

They were walking along together. As they paused to look at the posters in front of the town's movie palace, a grumbling voice came from across the street:

"Yeah, that's him—the dude. He calls himself a fighter, but he won't fight. Ain't he pretty?"

The Duke's muscles tightened. Carl Rost's hand shot out restrainingly. Disregarding his manager's caution, the Duke turned, looking across. A pool room was located across the street, and in front of it "Chuck" Veach was standing. Half a score of miners were loitering in front of the building. They were laughing at Veach's thrust at the Duke.

"Never mind that guy, Duke!" Carl Rost warned. "Come on and get away from here!"

Duke Elliot did not move. Veach was speaking again, in a voice loud enough for the whole street to hear:

"Sure, I tried to get him to fight me, but he wouldn't do it! He's afraid of me—that's the reason! He can't buy me off like he's bought off all the other fighters he's ever got into a ring with. I sure would like the chance of plantin' my fist in that baby face of his!"

"Duke!" Carl Rost pleaded.

The Duke tore loose from his manager's hand. He began to cross the street, straight for Veach. Rost jerked ahead wildly, planted himself in the Duke's path, and stopped him.

"Duke, you can't let him egg you on! He's trying to get you to fight, that's all! If you go over there and hit him the whole gang'll jump on you!"

"He's going to take that back!" Duke Elliot declared grimly.

The little manager waved his arms about frantically.

"Listen, Duke! You've got to save yourself for Conlin! I'm managing you, and you've got to do what I say! If you go over there and hit that mug, you'll have to get yourself another manager!"

The Duke looked intently into Rost's eyes.

"Do you mean that, Carl?" he asked coldly.

"Why shouldn't I mean it?" Rost demanded. "I spend all my days and nights training you, getting you into tiptop shape, and you want to get yourself mauled up by a gang of tough miners! I'm trying to make you champ, and you want to throw all your chances away for the sake of something that wise guy said! Go ahead over there and hit him if you want to—get yourself smashed up! But when you hit him I quit being your manager!"

The Duke said tightly: "All right, Carl."

"Maybe you think I'm rotten to say a thing like that," Rost rushed on, "but I'm only thinking of you, Duke! Gosh, you're a great fighter—and what if that gang jumped on you and hurt you so you could never fight again? Think of that!"

"All right, Carl," the Duke said again.

HE stepped aside. Veach was still talking in a loud voice, denouncing Elliot. The crowd around him was laughing sneeringly. The Duke stepped toward the curb, his gaze settled

straight on Veach's face. Just in front of Veach he came to a sudden stop.

"Listen, Veach," he said tightly. "I'm a professional fighter, and you're not. I don't care what you're champion of, you haven't got any real training behind you. Any real boxer could pound you down in a couple of rounds. No professional would ever fight you if he could get out of it. It wouldn't be an even fight."

"That's what you say!" Veach retorted acidly. "You're tryin' to save your pretty face, that's all. You're afraid—yellow—to step into a ring with me!"

"Let me tell you something, Veach," the Duke said levelly. "I just promised my manager not to hit you. I'm going to keep that promise if it's humanly possible. But you can't talk to me like that. If you force me to hit you, I'm going to clean you up so that you'll never be able to fight again."

"Come on and try it, you fancy dude! Come on and try to clean me up!"

The Duke's face was a moist scarlet. He stepped forward sharply, his fists clubbed. The crowd around Veach drew back, and Veach stepped forward, his gorillalike shoulders hunched, ready to meet the Duke's attack. A sharp call came from the center of the street:

"Duke!"

It was Carl Rost's voice. The Duke heard it and paused. His face became even redder as he straightened. Suddenly he turned, and strode away. He passed Carl Rost with his fists still clenched, and started straight back toward the hotel.

Mocking laughter came from the group of husky men in front of the pool room.

ANOTHER day was turning to twilight, and it was almost time for dinner. Duke Elliot was sitting alone in the lobby of the hotel. As the door opened and closed, he glanced up expectantly, looking each time for Carl Rost. Rost did not appear. The Duke was still alone when the clanging of a bell announced the meal.

He rose and went to his place at the corner table. A waitress brought his plate, and he ate slowly. Uncomfortably, he noticed that the men and women at the other tables were glancing at him and laughing among themselves, in a belittling manner. The Duke was puzzling over that when he heard the front door slam, and saw Carl Rost stride over to the stairs without glancing aside.

Duke Elliot waited a moment for Rost to return, but Rost did not come back. Worried, the Duke left the dining room and ran up the steps. Down the corridor he strode, and opened the door of his room. He stopped just inside. Rost was there, gnawing on an unlighted cigar, pulling open bureau drawers and tossing their contents into two suitcases.

"What're you doing, Carl?" the Duke asked in surprise.

"We're getting out of here!" Rost said bitingly. "We can't stay in this place any more!"

"Why not?" the Duke asked. "What's happened?"

Rost growled in his throat, and reached for a folded newspaper he had thrown on the bed. He snatched it up and snapped it flat in front of the Duke's eyes; his stubby forefinger pointed to a boxed item on the front page.

"Read that!" he snarled. "That's why we're getting out of here! Nobody's going to take us for that kind of a ride!"

The newspaper was the local

Carmel *Courier*. The Duke's eyes skimmed swiftly over the prominent item:

ELLIOT, PROFESSIONAL
BOXER, SIDE STEPS A
CHALLENGE FROM LOCAL
CHAMPION OF THE MINES!

Duke Elliot, well known as a professional prize fighter, has not seen fit to accept the challenge of Chuck Veach, Miners' Champion. In spite of Veach's persistent invitations, Elliot will not deign to put on gloves with the local champ. Rumor says that Elliot has sized up Veach correctly, and is wisely determined to keep his face in its present handsome condition. Since Veach is famous for his hard hitting, perhaps Elliot cannot be blamed for that. This is unfortunate for the Carmel fight fans, for otherwise we might have had the satisfaction of seeing a local boy win a knock-out over a "big" New York boxer.

Duke Elliot's jaw clamped shut. He dropped the paper, eyeing Rost grimly. Rost was still throwing clothes into the suitcases. Elliot grasped his arm tightly.

"Put those things back, Carl," he said.

"What do you mean—'put 'em back!' We're not going to stay here! After what they printed in that paper? It's a dirty deal, and we're getting out!"

"We're not getting out," Duke Elliot answered firmly. "We're not going to run away from this. I'm not going to let it pass. This calls for a show-down, and Veach is going to get it!"

"Duke, you can't let yourself be dragged into a fight with that bum! You know you've got to be in tiptop shape to fight Conlin. You can't go into the ring and face Conlin if you're all bashed up! What if Veach broke a rib for you—we'd have to cancel the bout with Conlin because of it! It's not worth the risk!"

"Listen, Carl," the Duke said.

"We can't let anybody make a joke out of us. If we went out of here now, everybody would laugh all the harder. Like as not it would get into the New York papers, and we'd never hear the last of it. You're my manager, Carl, and I do what you say in most cases. But this time I can't let you stop me. I'm going to fight Veach, and I'm going to drop him."

"No, Duke! No!"

THE door of the room opened suddenly. Hunter, the Duke's handler, hurried in noisily, his eyes wide. He had a copy of the Carmel *Courier* in his hands. He tossed it aside as he rapidly spoke:

"Listen—I just saw Mike Conlin on the street!"

"Conlin?" Rost asked quickly. "You couldn't 've seen Conlin!"

"He is here—I just saw him!" Hunter insisted. "He's keeping out of sight. He slipped away as soon as I saw him. There's only one reason why that bird's here—that's because the Duke's here. I'll bet my last dollar that he's behind this thing with Veach!"

Carl Rost's teeth dug deeply into his unlighted cigar. "Conlin! Hunter, you're right. You've doped this thing out right. If Conlin's here, you can bet your last pair of pants that he's behind this. He's the one who's been getting Veach to try to pick a fight with you, Duke!"

"Whether Conlin's behind it or not," the Duke said grimly, "Veach isn't going to get away with it."

"Duke, wait a minute! Can't you see what's been going on? Conlin's been getting Veach to egg you into a fight. Veach is tough. He'll light into you with everything he's got."

"I'll take my chances on getting hurt," the Duke declared.

He turned, jerked open the door,

and strode out, Rost calling after him anxiously. The Duke did not stop; he strode to the stairs and ran down them. As he slammed out the street door, Rost and Hunter came trotting after him breathlessly.

The Duke strode along the sidewalk swiftly. Near the end of the block was a building with a painted sign on its front: *Carmel Courier*. Elliot pushed through the door. The front office was empty, but sounds of activity were coming from the rear. Without stopping, the Duke strode beyond the partition.

The smell of printer's ink was thick in the air. A shirt-sleeved man was picking scrap paper from the floor. He straightened as the Duke strode toward him.

"Where's the editor of this paper?" the Duke demanded.

"I'm Hines. I'm the editor—and everything else."

"You're the man I want to see. I'm Duke Elliot. Don't worry; I'm not here to beat you up for what you printed. I'm here to give you a piece of news. I'm accepting Veach's challenge to a fight, and it will be held anywhere, any time he wants to have it."

Carl Rost and Hunter had come trotting into the room behind the Duke. Elliot silenced them with a gesture when they began to protest. Hines wiped his inky hands on a scrap of paper, wagging his head in dissent to the Duke's statement.

"I wouldn't do that, Mr. Elliot," he said. "I didn't like printing that about you, but I had to do it. The miners are the biggest part of my subscription list, and I've got to please them. If I didn't, they wouldn't buy my paper, and I couldn't run my business. You'd better just forget it, and leave Veach alone."

"You heard me," the Duke said.

"I'm going to fight him when and where he says."

"No, you'd better not," Hines went on. "I think you can lick him, and it would be a big thing for the town if there was a fight, but you've got to realize that it's dangerous. Veach is an idol to the miners. They think he's a wonder. If you managed to knock him out, they wouldn't like it. If you registered a clean knock-out, they'd think there was something crooked behind it—see? The chances are a hundred to one that if you won over Veach, they'd mob you."

"You heard that, Duke!" Carl Rost exclaimed. "You get out of here and leave this thing alone!"

"They'd do it," Hines declared gravely, wagging his head. "They're a tough bunch. They'd mob you in a minute if you knocked out Veach. Once they get started on a rampage, nothing can stop 'em."

Duke Elliot had turned. He was peering through the front window. He strode forward suddenly, and out through the door. With a sigh of relief, Rost followed; but his relief was short-lived. The Duke had seen McCarthy, Veach's manager, across the street. He had McCarthy's arm now, and was leading him back into the newspaper office.

"You want me to fight Veach, and I'm going to do it," the Duke declared. "The sooner you want it, the better. It can all go into the next edition of the paper. Name the place and time right now."

McCarthy's eyes gleamed. "You won't go through with it. You'll back out because you're afraid of him."

"When?" the Duke demanded. "Where?"

McCarthy sneered. "Make it tomorrow night, in the clubrooms. Eight o'clock."

"To-morrow night, eight o'clock," the Duke repeated. "Have your man there, and have him ready to fight."

"How many rounds?" McCarthy asked.

"We'll fight until one of us is knocked out, whether it takes one round or fifty."

"Suits me," McCarthy grinned. "Veach'll take half of the gate."

"He can have the money. All of it," Duke Elliot declared. "All I want is the chance to fight him."

He strode past McCarthy and out the door. Carl Rost and Hunter trotted along after him, scowling, worried.

"It'll ruin us!" Rost groaned. "It'll ruin everything!"

The Duke was smiling. "I feel a lot better already, Carl," he said.

SEVEN THIRTY. The fight between Duke Elliot and Chuck Veach, the miners' champ, was scheduled to begin in half an hour.

The Duke ran down the steps of the hotel with Carl Rost beside him. The main street of Carmel was thronged. Hundreds of miners were crowding into the town from the settlement in the valley below. Some of them were awkwardly arrayed in their best suits; others were still in overalls, blackened by the grime of the shafts. Every eye turned on the Duke as he elbowed his way along the sidewalk.

Abruptly the Duke stopped short. His gaze centered on the face of a man standing near the curb. That man was thickset and heavy-trunked—he had the build of a fighter—and he was grinning slyly.

"Hello, Conlin," the Duke said coldly.

"It ain't hello," Conlin answered sneeringly. "It's good-by. When Veach gets through with you to-night, you're going to be a cripple."

Carl Rost was chewing his cigar savagely as he stared at Conlin. He stepped closer.

"Funny you happen to be in this town right now, Conlin," he asserted. "What're you trying to get away with? Let me tell you, you're getting away with nothing. No matter what Veach does to the Duke to-night, there'll be enough left to lay you out when he gets into the ring with you in New York!"

"Yeah?" Conlin drawled. "It'll be lucky for the Duke if Veach plasters him to-night—'cause then he won't have to take any kayo from me in New York. Maybe that's what he's figuring on."

"Don't make me laugh, Conlin!" Rost snapped. "You're afraid of the Duke. You've been trying every way you know how to get out of fighting him. First you tried to frame him; now you——"

The Duke's hand closed forbiddingly around Rost's arm. "Never mind, Carl. Let him alone. I'll handle Conlin when I get to him."

"Damn right you will!" Rost declared. "You'll knock him clear over the fifty-cent seats! Listen, Conlin! If you try any more of your dirty tricks, I'll——"

"Never mind, Carl!" the Duke urged.

Rost tore himself away. They went striding through the moving crowd, while Mike Conlin sneered after them. Through the rumble of the crowd came catcalls and hoots. The Duke stolidly ignored each gibe. Rost's face, as he hopped along behind Elliot and gnawed savagely on his perfecto, was angrily red. They entered a door which led to the club-rooms on the second floor of the building. They climbed the stairs as rapidly as they could prod their way through the miners huddled outside the entrance.

They stepped into the big room where the fight was to take place. It was bare and square; a ring had been constructed in the center, and hundreds of folding chairs had been placed around it. The Duke and Rost passed toward another door, went down a corridor, and stepped into a small space that was to serve as their dressing room.

A man was already inside it. He was Hines, editor and publisher of the *Courier*. He had been staring out the window at the crowd below; now he greeted the Duke uneasily.

"They're worked up," he said. "I've never seen 'em so worked up. If something happens that they don't like, they're apt to go off like dynamite. Take my word for it—they'll go wild if Veach gets licked."

The Duke was rapidly getting out of his clothes. "I'll take my chances on that," he said.

"Veach'll have every man behind him," Hines declared. "There won't be a voice raised in your favor, Elliot."

The Duke kept peeling off his clothes. Carl Rost paced the little room nervously.

"Where's Hunter?" he growled. "He ought to be here. Where'd he go?" Just then the trainer sidled through the door.

"Where you been?" Rost snapped. "Get to work on the Duke! There isn't much time!"

HUNTER spread towels across a large table, and the Duke stretched himself out on them. While he rubbed and pounded the Duke's muscles, Hunter exclaimed:

"I've been trying to find out about Conlin. He's been staying at the other hotel. I found out he came to town the day after we did. He must've found out where we were,

and followed us. He's as mean as they make 'em, and he came here to make trouble for the Duke."

"Duke, if there ever was a fight I wanted to call off, this is it!" Rost blurted. "Every time I think of what you're heading into I nearly go crazy."

"Take it easy, Carl," the Duke said.

"I saw Conlin downstairs as I was coming up," Hunter broke in as he massaged the Duke's calves. "He'll probably be watching the fight. You can bet he's behind all this! The dirty crook!"

The rumbling of the crowd beat through the partition. Hunter kept working over the Duke's body. Rost marched back and forth, chewing on his cigar. Again and again he glanced at his watch, and saw the minutes flying. A knock sounded on the door, and Rost snatched at the knob.

"Ready?" a voice came through the crack.

"We're coming out!" Rost barked.

The Duke swung off his table, and pulled his scarlet robe around his sleek form. As he moved toward the door, Rost grasped Hunter's arm.

"Hunt, you stick by the time-keeper and see that he doesn't pull anything crooked. I'll stay by the Duke. I'll take care of everything else."

Rost opened the door, and the Duke strode down the corridor. They turned into the big room. It was crowded now; every chair was taken, and men were standing along the walls. A few women were spotted through the crowd—summer visitors, taking it all as a lark. As the Duke found his way down an aisle toward the ring, fresh hoots and howls greeted him. He ducked under the ropes and stood in his corner, ignoring the derision.

"They can't get your goat, Duke!" Carl Rost shouted into his ear. "You can plaster this Veach with a kayo, all right. I wasn't much for this fight, but now you're in it, I want you to slap the big punk down as quick as you can!"

The crowd broke into a thundering cheer. Admiring shouts and deafening handclapping came from every man. Chuck Veach had come into the room. He edged toward the ring, grinning, bowing. He ducked under the ropes and shook hands with himself, turning to all sides. For minutes the ovation lasted, and Veach puffed with confident pride.

A referee had been named. He came through the ropes, carrying two pairs of gloves. Rost darted to him and made a rapid inspection of the pads of leather, while the crowd jeered. He found nothing suspicious about either pair, but he watched sharply while they were laced onto Veach's and the Duke's hands. The fighters returned to their corners, and an announcer stepped into the center of the ring.

"Ladies and gentlemen! To-night we have the biggest fight of the year, between Chuck Veach, miners' champion—"

Deafening, prolonged cheers.

"And Duke Elliot, of New York."

Hoots and birds.

"No limit on the number of rounds!" the announcer screeched. "The fight will continue till either man is knocked out!"

IN a moment the ring was clear. The hubbub quieted. The time-keeper gazed at his watch, one hand on the gong, while Hunter kept close by him. In his corner, Chuck Veach was still grinning. Duke Elliot gazed across the canvas grimly, waiting for the sound of the bell.

"Get him, Duke!" Rost urged. "The sooner the better!"

Veach was a mass of solid, hard muscle—shorter than the Duke, but heavier by ten pounds. The fighters had not bothered to weigh in. The crowd began to hum again, and suddenly—the gong!

Veach sprang to his feet and rushed. He threw his massive body at the Duke with all his terrific strength. The Duke met him in the corner, and the howling of the crowd broke out anew, shaking the very walls. They fell into a session of stiff infighting, and then broke apart. The Duke danced on his toes; Veach stepped after him heavily, head thrust low, eyes half closed, face savage.

Veach rushed again, and they clinched. Parting, Veach began to hit. His arms worked like lightning; his short arms flashed into jabs, feints, and slugs. The Duke was still on his toes, dancing, parrying the blows, feeling Veach out. Veach had no finesse, but he had strength. The blows the Duke parried only served to make him drive in more furiously.

Suddenly the Duke braced him back with a sharp left hook. Veach stabbed at the Duke's face, and they waltzed around the ring, sparring. Suddenly Veach slashed in a stiff jolt to the Duke's midriff, and the Duke bounded back, while the crowd screeched.

Rost was hanging to the ropes at his corner, watching every move, his teeth driven deep into his cigar, and his face glistening with anxious sweat.

Veach and the Duke were sparring in the center of the ring, poking for openings, when the brazen clang of the gong ended the round.

The Duke trotted back to his stool and perched on it, breathing hard.

"Don't fool around with that guy, Duke!" Rost exclaimed. "Don't waste any time over him. Smack him down! You can do it in the next round!"

"That guy's like a brick wall," the Duke said.

The gong again!

Again Veach rushed in. They clashed together in the center of the ring, and bounced apart as the Duke clouted the side of Veach's head. Veach blotted up the power of the blow as though it was nothing. He drove upward with a terrific slash. It slid off the Duke's jaw, and the Duke lurched backward with the tearing force of it. Veach came after the Duke, driving out stiff lefts and rights.

The crowd was yelling like mad.

"Stop him, Duke!" Carl Rost screamed. "Stop that guy!"

The Duke fell into a clinch, hugging Veach. The referee broke them apart, and they danced.

"Knock-out!" came a call out of the bedlam. "Knock him out, Chuck!"

The Duke's arms jerked out short body jabs. He hooked a right to Veach's jaw, which sent Veach tottering on one leg. Veach whirled back, and the Duke took a stiff lacing of gloves across his chest. Veach's heels were planted solidly to the rosined canvas as he struck out. The Duke delivered a stiff clout to Veach's chin, and they fell into another period of stiff infighting, pelting at each other's midriff.

The gong again!

Veach loped back to his corner, still grinning, waving assurance to the men around the ring. Rost rasped at the Duke anxiously:

"You can't let him keep pounding you, Duke! You've got to stop him! Now's the time! Stop him the next round! Lay him flat!"

Clang!

Again Veach rushed out of his corner, but this time the Duke moved as fast. He side-stepped smartly, and exploded a powerful glove against Veach's ear. Veach tottered, but spun back, jabbing rights and lefts in quick succession. The Duke drove into him again, and after a terrific stab, saw a trickle of blood run from a cut opened beneath Veach's right eye. Veach cut loose with a slashing uppercut, but the Duke jerked aside just in time to let it sizzle past his ear. They danced around again, working for an opening.

The crowd bellowed, howled at Veach for a knock-out. Veach's grin was gone now. He was fighting grimly.

The Duke fainted right, and smashed a terrific left to Veach's middle. Veach gasped out with sudden pain, and slugged back. The blows pounded around the Duke's shoulders, but some of the strength was gone from them now. Veach was panting, slugging as hard as he could swing his arms; but the Duke was boxing smoothly.

Suddenly the Duke steamed a blow squarely to the point of Veach's blunt chin. Veach had a jab under way at that instant, but it missed. He stiffened and teetered backward, off balance. The Duke bore in, clouting again and again. Veach began to grope for another clinch, but the Duke side-stepped. His right shot out again and crashed directly to Veach's button.

Veach toppled sideward rigidly and sprawled to the canvas. The rumble of the crowd suddenly ceased. The Duke jumped into a neutral corner as the referee began to count in the ominous silence.

"One—two—three——"

Carl Rost was clinging to the

ropes, watching eagerly, scarcely breathing.

"Six—seven—eight——"

Veach dragged himself up to his knees. He got his feet beneath him, but at once he crumpled down again. The Duke waited, gloves poised.

"Nine—ten—and out!"

Veach jerked himself to his feet again, and this time he stayed on them. He began a rush; but when he saw the referee elevating the Duke's right glove, he stopped short. For a moment he peered dazedly; then he dropped his mitts.

STILL the crowd was silent. The Duke turned and began to return to his corner. Suddenly a ringing shout rose:

"He fouled Veach!"

Like a spark dropped into gunpowder, that call aroused a fury of voices.

"Crooked fight!"

"Foul!"

"Get Elliot!"

"Don't let that guy get away!"

Carl Rost snatched crazily at Elliot. "Get out of here, Duke!" he gasped. "Get out of here quick!"

Another yell: "Don't let him get out of here!"

"Get the dude!"

"He fouled Chuck!"

Men were jumping out of their seats.

They were crowding toward the ropes. Several of them ducked through and came rushing at the Duke threateningly, arms groping. Their faces were hard-set and savage. The Duke whirled to meet them—a flood of power pouring down on one man.

"Get back!" a voice screeched. "Let him alone!"

It was Chuck Veach, yelling. He pushed at the men nearest him, thrusting them aside. A score of

miners were in the ring now, crowding around the Duke. As they struck at him, he jabbed back. But they were coming from all sides. Blows hit the Duke's back—knuckles cracked against his head.

Carl Rost struck out, trying to free the Duke—socked right and left, his cigar still clenched in his teeth. A blow caught him on the jaw, stunned him, and knocked him back. Hunter, at the side of the ring, was struggling to reach the Duke. Two men were grasping his arms, holding him back. The Duke was alone, surrounded by ten men who were slugging at him. Out of the *mêlée* came the screams of women.

"Get away!" Veach screeched again. "Get away from Elliot!"

He literally threw himself against the men around the Duke. His gloves smacked and exploded against their heads. They fell back, throwing up their arms, defending themselves helplessly. Veach delivered a terrific blow toward each face he could see. He rammed himself against the Duke's side and struck out, clearing a space before them.

"Stay back! I'll kill the next mug that hits Elliot!"

Men were glaring, poisoning ready for another rush. Veach was in fighting position, ready to meet them. Blood was still streaming from his eye, and his voice was rasping:

"He didn't foul me! He knocked me out fair and square! You let him alone!"

The crowd was quieted by the surprise of Veach's yell. The roaring of voices grew subdued. Veach kept his position, while the Duke stayed beside him, gloves still up.

"I ain't going to let you mob a guy that's fought a square fight!" Veach

spat. "He won because he's a better fighter. He may be a dude, but he can hit! The next guy that touches him is sure enough going to get a broken jaw!"

There was movement through the crowd. Veach jerked up, staring around.

"Where's Conlin! Show me Conlin!"

A renewed scampering sounded. Near the door was the source of the sound. It ended abruptly, and another voice called:

"Here's Conlin!"

The crowd parted, clearing a view toward the door. Miners were crowded around it. Two of them were holding the arms of a third man, who was struggling to free himself. He was Conlin. His face was lividly pale, and his eyes were glittering with fear.

"I'm going to tell you mugs something!" Veach shouted at them. "Conlin said he'd pay me for fighting Elliot. He said if I got a fight with Elliot, he'd pay me a hundred bucks before I went into the ring. He's a dirty double-crosser. He didn't pay me any money to-night—he welshed on me!"

Conlin writhed in a renewed struggle to break away.

"I came out and fought Elliot anyway!" Veach declared. "Conlin cheated me out of a hundred bucks, but I came just the same. Let me at that guy! I'm going to clean him up!"

Again a shout broke out:

"Get the double-crosser!"

"Tear him up!"

"Sock that guy Conlin!"

Deprived of one victim, the aroused crowd began to close in on another. Conlin uttered a yelp of fear, and tried to break away. He could not. Men began rushing at him, fists raised. In a moment Con-

lin was completely surrounded, and screeching with fear.

Veach grabbed the ropes and pulled himself through them.

"Get away from that guy! He's my meat! I'll 'tend to him! Get away from Conlin!"

Veach threw himself at the crowding miners, striking out with his gloved fists furiously. Carl Rost struggled through the ropes, and grasped the Duke's arm.

"Get out of here, Duke! Hurry up and get out of here!"

"They'll kill Conlin," the Duke said.

"He deserves anything they give him! Duke, come on and get out of here!"

"He hasn't got a chance," the Duke said. "He can't fight 'em all. They'll kill him!"

"Duke!"

Elliot broke away from Rost's grasp. He thrust through the ropes, and hurled himself against the men mobbing around Conlin. He slugged right and left with his gloves, opening the way. The men fell back before his terrific clouts. As he forced his way on, he saw Veach standing beside Conlin now, striking out madly. He groped his way to Veach's side, and they faced the scuffling crowd together.

THEIR gloved fists lashed out. Conlin was fighting now furiously. The three of them were backed toward the wall. The space in front of them grew larger, as men drew back from the terrifically punching gloves. The Duke looked around quickly, and began to sidle along the wall.

"Get through that door, Conlin! Head for that door!"

Conlin heard, and moved. As he stepped toward the entrance to the corridor, in the corner, the Duke and

Veach followed him. The miners were still milling about, and a few of them were lashing out unthinkingly. Veach flayed them with leather; the Duke bore off any wild attackers. In a moment they were within reach of the door.

"Get through!" the Duke gasped.

Conlin broke away, and dashed into the corridor. The Duke held his ground, forcing Veach back. Suddenly he retreated, grasped the door, and slammed it shut. He shot the bolt into its socket as best he could with his gloved hand, and turned, panting.

Conlin trotted along the corridor, and into the Duke's dressing room. Elliot, Veach, and Rost followed him quickly. Inside, Conlin sank exhaustedly into a chair. His clothes were torn to ribbons; his face was gashed, and his nose was bleeding. One of his eyes was swelling and closing. He gasped for air, peering up at Veach entreatingly.

"Lucky for you you're in that shape!" Veach declared. "I'd lay you out right now if you could fight!"

Conlin could only gulp. The Duke looked around quickly. Hines, the newspaperman, was in the dressing room with them. His hat was battered, and he was wagging his head woefully.

"Is there any way of getting Conlin out of here so the men won't see him?" the Duke asked Hines.

"There's a back way. We'd better get him out before they think of it."

"Get him into a car and drive him out of town. Take him to any railroad station near here and buy him a ticket for New York. I'll pay you for it later. Get him out of here or they'll kill him!"

Hines grasped Conlin's arm, and Conlin responded unprotestingly. They hurried into the corridor. A

door slammed beyond, and they were gone. Veach sank into the chair, breathing hard, and the Duke perched on the table, grinning.

Carl Rost was feeling the Duke all over, frowning worriedly.

"Gosh, Duke, look at you! Look at you! All battered up! And you came here for a vacation!"

The Duke did not hear. He was looking at Veach speculatively.

"You can fight, Veach," he said. "You can hit. You oughtn't to be wasting your time working in a mine. You ought to get into the real game."

Veach uttered a breathless laugh. "I didn't think you'd be so good. I can't fight, compared with you."

"Training'll make a lot of difference in you," the Duke said. "Listen, you'd better make a try at it. You can get somewhere. We're going back to New York in a few days. You'd better come with us."

"I can't do that," Veach answered. "I haven't got any money. I'd sure like to, but I've got to stick here."

"I'll get you to New York. I'll lend you the money you need. You're going to be a real fighter some day," the Duke told him. "I'd like to see you get a start. You come with us, Veach. I'll see that you get some matches. I'd be glad to do it."

Veach laughed again, brokenly. "Say—you're sure white to say that, after all I said about you. You're a swell guy to do that. You're the best guy I ever knew!"

"That's all right," the Duke said. "Then it's all settled. You're coming with us."

"Great grief!" Rost exclaimed. "Duke, you're the damnedest guy I ever knew! First thing you'll be founding a benevolent home for pugs knocked off the map by Duke Elliot!"

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, in care of The 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.

G. F., New Jersey: I find that many people are under the impression that I get a clew from the text of a letter and answer accordingly, instead of getting my information from the handwriting itself. I assure you that I study the formation, pressure, size, et cetera, of the handwriting, and am not influenced by the text. However, when one is asking a specific question, such as you are asking, I naturally can answer more completely if I know the circumstances or conditions with which the writer is faced.

You say you intend to change

your position, but don't believe in telling what you have been doing. In that case I can't tell you whether or not you are wise in changing your position, as there is nothing in handwriting that gives any details of the writer's past, present, or future. You might have been doing work that was absolutely contrary to your talents. I can only give you the general characteristics and let you decide for yourself whether or not they point to success in your plans.

You write a backhand, which means a self-centered person and

one who is reserved. In combination with this you use a heavy pressure and a cramped hand, indicating secretiveness.

*intend to change my
I would like to have
need, I don't believe in
what I have been doing
like to hear just what
ten and ability of my hands*

The thickened terminal strokes show stubbornness. I am taking into consideration that your script is foreign; that doesn't make any difference in this instance.

The very long lower loops show an interest in physical activity and suggest that you would find active work more congenial than a mental occupation. You are very thrifty, practical, and interested in making money, so would turn naturally to business; but not to selling, because of your temperament. You have mechanical ability and a mature mind for a young person. You are persistent and thorough, ambitious and proud.

R. W. S., Pennsylvania: When a person doesn't like any of the usual occupations, he should seek to combine the things he does like to do into a paying job. It takes a little ingenuity and enterprise, but it has been done over and over again. The trouble is that most people don't seem to have the imagination to think of any type of occupation beyond those already established. There are five hundred and seventy known occupations. That ought to be enough from which to choose, but it is possible to add to that number with an original one.

In your case I don't think it would be difficult to figure one out to fit your temperament and ability. You like physical activity—those long lower loops show that—and you say you are young, fond of novelty and change, like a country environment, dislike towns, like to travel, and enjoy hunting and driving a car.

*decent, am single, still
my parents on the farm
at home, farming doesn't
agree with me. I am a
sort of restless and day
of distant places. west.
have traveled some. part*

This is quite in keeping with your handwriting, because it shows that you haven't any special talent, are lazy when it comes to real hard work or mental application; but have vitality and like outdoor life. This is shown in the sprawling script, procrastinating t-bars, and heavy pressure.

If your parents have a farm and you don't care for farming, how about establishing a game preserve right there on the farm? You act as guide to the men who come to hunt, and manage the parties. Build one log cabin at first, out in the woods; start with some good game, and improve from year to year. Use your car to bring your parties of hunters to your place or to take them other places where there is game. You'll get the excitement and change of scenery and the country life together with the fun of hunting, all combined in a paying job. The Federal board at Washington will furnish you with information and suggestions.

B. C., Florida: I hope I won't hit so hard that it will be necessary to "take it on the chin"! I'm sure you will be a good sport about making criticism. When one understands that it is done for one's own good, it becomes impersonal. My idea is to help those who want to help themselves, and not to flatter and compliment those who already think pretty well of themselves. That would be a waste of time. I am here to advise those, like yourself, who are sincerely seeking to know themselves better.

*I am at the present very
dissatisfied with my present job.
high school only this present
as yet unalterable just*

You didn't tell me what your present job is and why you are dissatisfied with it. And your handwriting is one of those that does not show any special talent or ability. It reveals average ability, but not any special training. In such a case one ought to seek out a trade that seems congenial, and through application become skilled in that particular line.

As you say you have just quit high school, I presume you to be young and still in the stages of growing up. Your writing shifts from one angle to another, and the

letter formations are not well formed and change considerably. This all indicates an uncertain mind and lack of maturity and fixity of purpose.

Why not get right down to some hard thinking? Take yourself in hand and put that fighting spirit, which is shown in those combative downward-slanting t-bars, to work for you. You need a goal ahead to work for, so that you can forget the immediate present and the dissatisfaction with your lot, in the hope of making a brighter future. You are the type that could accomplish a lot if you once got your mind made up to it.

Readers: Write with black ink when possible, so I can use some of your samples in the magazine. Colored inks do not reproduce well. Be sure to send a stamped, self-addressed envelope with your request for an analysis, as well as the coupon below. Canadians please send coin to cover postage. Readers from other foreign countries need not send stamps, as they are not redeemable here.

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In the next number of The Popular Complete Stories



GET TOGETHER!

ADVENTURE is as old as the world. When Adam first stood near the tree of good and evil in the middle of the garden of Paradise, Adam was already headed for the open road to adventure. Just as every man who has ever panned dirt or dug in any of the Western hills will tell you that gold is where you find it, so, also, excitement and adventure are where you find them. A superstitious person has only to be told that the house that he is living in is still haunted by the ghost of the man who was murdered there, and he need go no farther than the attic-stairway door to hear the call of fearful but exciting adventure. If

you have eyes to see it, adventure lurks behind every hedge and tree in your back yard.

Dull and listless people who have little or no imagination would not know adventure if they came face to face with it, even on a South Sea beach or in an African jungle. Naturally, far-off, unknown places appeal more vividly than the well-trodden path between one's front door and the village post office.

RECENTLY there came into this office a young man under twenty, who had walked or hitch-hiked over every province of Canada, and had seen the whole of California, and most of the Western

States. He told us that he had never been arrested in his life, though he had frequently taken a bed at a town or city jail for the night, and he had never stolen a penny's worth of food or tobacco.

ONE cannot but admire the daring and hardihood of this young adventurer who is a stranger to fear and acquainted with every hardship. Most of us are strangers to hardship in strenuous forms of wind and weather and hunger and the lack of shelter. Most of us would be utterly daunted and almost totally unable to care for ourselves if we were suddenly wrecked on a desert island or lost in a dense forest. Firsthand acquaintance with nature and the soil are prime factors in giving a man a real sense of security, and these are the factors most essential for an adventurer.

People who live only in cities and seldom leave them believe that "wine, women, and song" are the things most necessary for getting the best out of life. These people who take their cue from Broadway or some popular crooner over the radio are strangers to the high lights which only a man acquainted with danger and hardship can appreciate. On the other hand, there are certain timid and conventional souls who suppose that adventurers are not much better than tramps and that they skim pretty close to the border line of petty crime in all its ramifications. This is a decidedly mistaken notion, and the man who has learned how to take care of himself under alien skies, and to protect himself from scoundrels and schemers, is very often a very high-class man indeed. The circum-

stances of his life, the diversity of his temporary employments, and the skill he has acquired in using his strength to protect himself, make him an all-around "good guy."

SUCH a "good guy" is the hero of Cole Richard's novel, "The Mule Runners." This is not the usual Western story of sheriffs and bad men and guns, but an exceedingly realistic story of what may happen to a man in the West of to-day. In the same number there is a fine novelette by Kenneth Keith Colvin which takes place on a convict ship from France bound for Devil's Island. Here is another kind of adventure—most unusual adventure if you like, and probably adventure of the most perilous kind—a handful of officers on board a ship which is a floating jail of desperate men. In this number, too, you will find another story about a very regular Western cowpuncher, *Mournful Martin*. Surely *Martin* does shoot off his mouth a lot; but *Martin*, unlike most men who boast too much, has a quick trigger finger and a good head.

These are the high spots in the next number of *The Popular Complete*, and the short stories are all up to standard. But we still want to hear from you about this number or any other number, and we are ready to turn over this department to any man who has a proposition to make that concerns the magazine. We think this is the best all-around book of adventure on the news stands. Are we just kidding ourselves along, or do you also think as we do? In any case, it will be a pleasure, as well as a profit, to hear from you.



The Outlawed Guns of the White Wolf



never nestled long in his holsters. And when "Jim-twin" Allen, as special deputy, lines 'em up on the side of law and order, they blaze overtime in Hidden Valley County.

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until James Allen put the gunmen in the running with his own deadly guns.

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The Wolf Deputy

By HAL DUNNING

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