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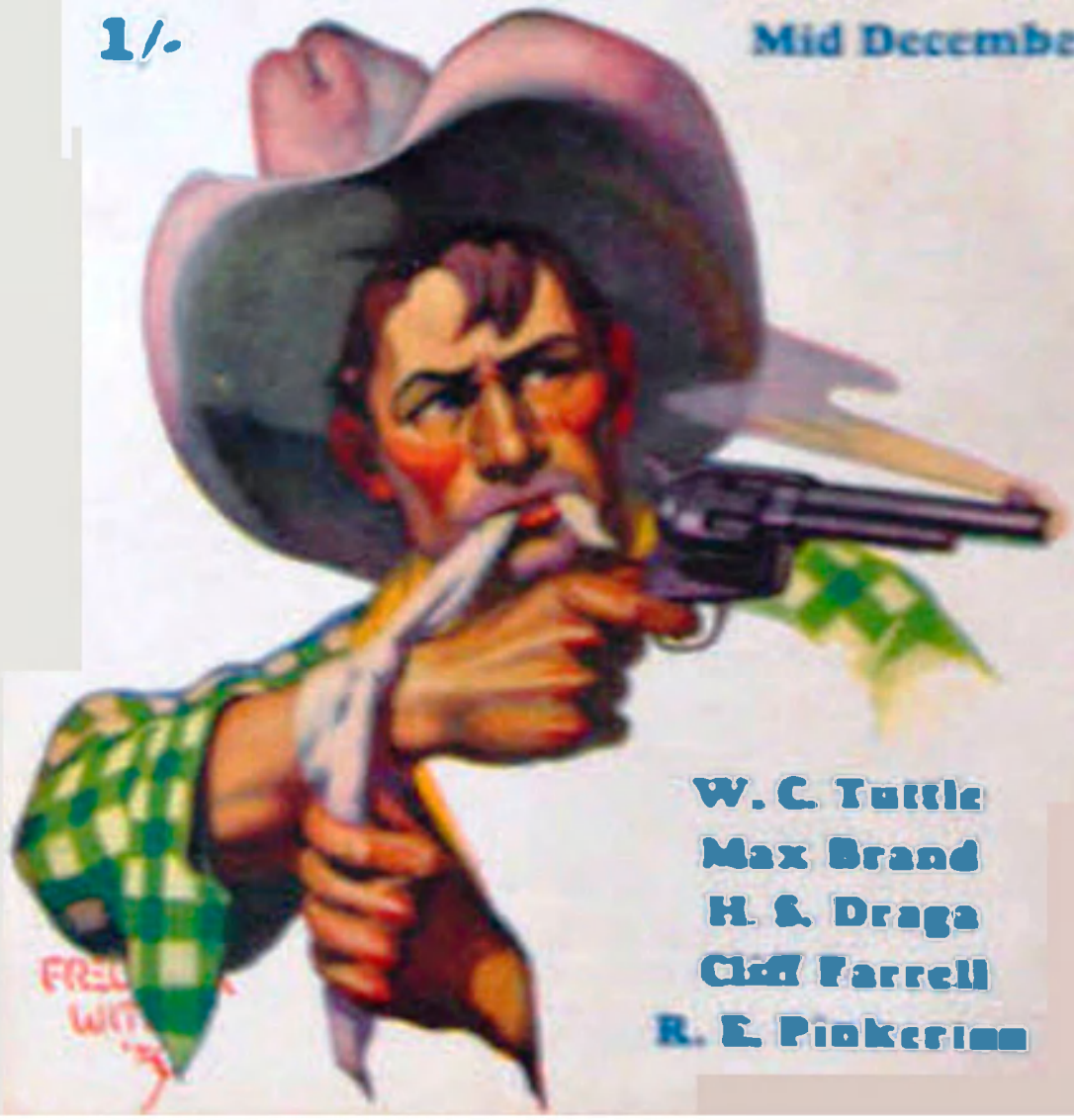

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MID DECEMBER, 1934 EVERY OTHER THURSDAY

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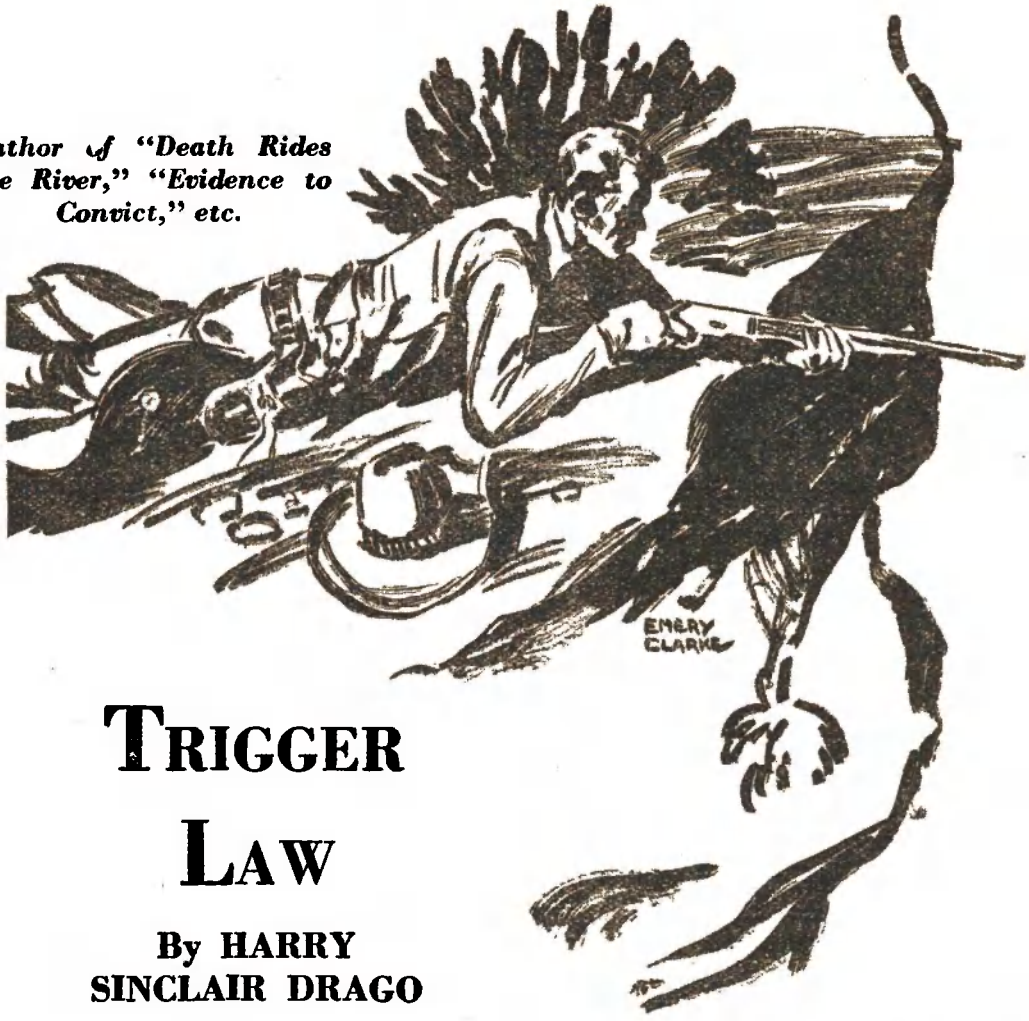

TRIGGER LAW

By HARRY SINCLAIR DRAGO

I

SCREENED by the tumble-down house on the deserted Lazy A ranch, two miles south of Laguna, six men waited this morning. There was a tense, strained look about them that deepened as the minutes fled.

With one exception, they were a hard-bitten crew, with a price on their heads dead or alive, for they were none other than Little Bill Santry and his long riders. Against the youngest, Paint Johnson, the law as yet had no grudge.

Repeatedly their attention strayed to the road.

"Damn near the time Crescent got here," said one. It was Link Garrett, veteran of a score of daring bank robberies and train hold-ups. Even in that company of case-hardened souls his word commanded respect. He had been riding with Little Bill for two years. "I don't pretend to know what's keepin' him, but if he don't show in a few minutes, I'm thinkin' we'd better pull out, Bill."

"He'll be along," said Little Bill, a grizzled five-footer with the small hands and feet of a woman. His faded blue eyes narrowed to a piercing squint as he flashed another glance at the road. He was not young any more. "These things always work out, Link, just like anythin' else. No reason to think anythin' has gone wrong because he's a few minutes late."

"Mebbe so you're right," Link grumbled. "I'd like it better if he was here. You never sent him in ahead of us to size things up before. You've always done it yourself."

"Go Straight, Kid," Was Little Bill's Advice, and Paint Johnson Had to Ride Through Hell to Do It

"Well, Bill was in Laguna yesterday," Flash Chaney exclaimed impatiently. He had a reputation for being ice in a pinch. "He says we're all set, don't he?"

"Then why send Crescent in this mornin'?" Link demanded sullenly.

"I'll tell you why," Little Bill answered. "I'm playin' this one as safe as I know how, Link. We're pretty far north for us. When we ride out of Laguna we'll have close on to a hundred miles ahead of us before we can get across the Cimarron bottoms, and we can't figger we're in the clear a foot this side of the river.

WE BEEN all over that," Link reminded him. "I ain't got no kick about what's ahead of us. I'm just sayin' that as long as you thought somebody ought to go in this mornin' for a last look

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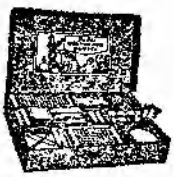

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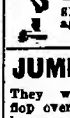

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around, you should have gone yourself."

"The only reason I didn't was because I thought Chilton might begin to ask himself questions if he saw me hangin' around again."

"Yeh?" Link's tone was skeptical. "Was that your idea or Crescent's?"

"He might have mentioned it," Little Bill admitted. "But it was right in line with what I was thinkin'. A marshal who can make his brag stick for two years that a bank can't be hoisted in his town ain't no fool. I don't figger anythin's happened over night to change our stand at all; but it was worth sendin' a man in to find out. Crescent's a stranger in Laguna——"

"So he says." There was an insinuation in Link's tone that brought all of them up sharply.

"Do you know different?" the Yuma Kid demanded, clipping the words off hostilely. He was a tall, rangy man who had lived the greater part of his life outside the law.

"I know he was damn anxious to go into town," Link shot back at him, "and he never was before! I wasn't the only one that noticed it. Jack got it."

"Is that right, Cactus?" Little Bill asked.

"Oh, I may have said somethin'," Cactus Jack muttered deprecatingly. "It want nothin' personal. Crescent is all right, I guess. He wouldn't dare to be any other way with us. I reckon this will be him now."

"It's him, all right," Little Bill announced a second later.

"Yeh, and he's sure takin' his time," Link growled. "He's half-an-hour late."

"Better lay off him when he gets in," Bill advised. "We'll just take it easy. I don't want to walk into that bank before nine-thirty. They'll have the safe open by then and the money kinda spread out." He turned to Paint. "You better get the team hitched now," he advised. "We'll be movin' out of here directly."

PAINT nodded and said nothing as he started for the hitch-rack where the team stood, idly switching flies. His face was stained with excitement, his lips bloodless. He was about to take a step that would place him among wanted men, and it was that, and not the dangerous touch-and-go with death of the next hour, that weighed so heavily on him.

Little Bill watched him for a minute and then walked over to him.

"Paint, your nerves are beginnin' to snarl," he said. "If you've changed your mind about anythin' and don't want to go through with this, just say so. It will be all right; I can get along without you."

"Huh, you don't think I'd back out now, do you? I'll be all right as soon as we get movin'." Paint managed a smile that showed his even white teeth, but his level gray eyes did not lose their troubled look.

Little Bill continued to regard him with keen scrutiny as Paint hitched the team to the wagon. "You know I didn't want you in this at all," he said, and some of the grimness was gone from his face. "You don't owe me nothin', Paint. Anythin' I did for you was done because I like you. You don't have to let that get in your way."

"I don't know whether it's gettin' in my way or not," Paint murmured soberly, "but I ain't forgettin' that when I was laid up flat on my back with a broken leg and not a cent to my name, you came through for me. That Box U outfit I was workin' for wouldn't even get me a doctor."

"Now see here," Little Bill scolded. "you don't have to throw it up to me again about my doin' somethin' for you. I've told you before it wasn't nothin' at all. I get my money pretty easy."

"Yeh, I know how easy you get it," Paint remarked with bitter irony.

"Well, I won't argue with you," Little Bill snapped fiercely. "Your leg's all right again. The thing for you to do is to drift down into Texas or some new country and get yourself a job—and save your money this time."

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PAINT pretended to laugh. "After all that moralizing it's about time to pass the collection box, ain't it?"

"Funny, eh?" Little Bill rasped. "Well, you can't laugh yourself out of it with me. If we have any luck today I'm goin' to give you a stake and chase you out of this country. If I ever catch you back in Oklahoma again I'll rawhide the life out of you. You can drive the team over in back of the kitchen now."

Crescent was riding into the yard. Little Bill turned away to meet him. Paint called him back.

"Bill, you ain't tryin' to get rid of me because you're afraid I'll crack and spoil your play—are you?"

"No, I wasn't thinkin' of that; you'll be cool enough. I was just lookin' ahead a little. It's an awful good thing to do now and then." Without another word he turned on his heels and hurried across the yard as Crescent Campeau slid out of his saddle.

There was more than a dash of Cherokee blood in Crescent, and it was reflected in his high cheekbones and cruel mouth. He was a vain, swaggering individual. For years he had been running wild between Fort Smith and Santa Fe, robbing and plundering with one gang or another.

"Well, you're back," Little Bill exclaimed. "What made you so late? Anythin' wrong?"

"Not a thing, Bill." Crescent rolled a cigarette with a flourish. "I went in to have a look, and I had a good one." Link's open hostility and Cactus Jack's vague distrust had not escaped him. An insolent smile curled his lips as he glanced at them. "You hombres seem to be takin' it pretty hard," he jeered. "I suppose you were worried about me——"

"And I'm goin' to keep right on worryin' about you," Link promised him. There was a challenge in his tone that Crescent refused to take up.

"Come on," Little Bill rasped as they glared at each other. "I'm waitin' to hear what you found out, Crescent."

CAMPEAU welcomed the interruption. "Why, I found things just as you said I would," he declared.

"No strangers in town?"

"No——"

"None of that feelin' in the air that they're waitin' for somethin' to happen?"

"Why no! All I could see was just a cow town gettin' ready for another long hot day."

Little Bill had a score of questions to ask. They concerned Luke Chilton, the town marshal, and such apparently irrelevant things as whether or not the morning train west was marked up on time.

"She was on time leavin' Pawnee," Crescent informed him.

"Then she'll be on time gettin' into Laguna. That train's goin' to play an awful important part in our lives this mornin'." Little Bill rubbed his chin thoughtfully for a moment. "I guess that covers it," he said. He glanced at each of them in turn for some sign of confirmation. "Anybody got anythin' to say?"

"We're waitin' on you, Bill," Yuma answered.

Little Bill's eyes were fixed on Link.

"All right," the big fellow agreed grudgingly. "I guess it's okay."

The others nodded their assent. Flash glanced at his watch. It was just nine o'clock.

"We can put our rifles in the wagon," said Bill. The box was filled with wild hay; about the quantity a rancher would take into town to feed his team. "Just be sure you know where they are," he warned. "We may have to go for 'em in a hurry."

THE guns were quickly concealed.

"Now," Little Bill announced. "I'll give you our play. Crescent will drive the team in. He'll pull out of here first and we'll time ourselves to pass him just about as he drives across the tracks into town. He'll draw up in front of the bank, hitch the team and go into that little eatin' place next the bank." He turned to Crescent. "You'll be watchin' through the windows. If nothin' goes wrong, you stay inside until we come out. If we stub our toe, you come out with your six-guns smokin'. Paint will be holdin' the horses around to the side of the bank. Your pony will be there. You got all that?"

"Sure——"

"All right! Cactus and Flash will cover the bank door. Yuma, you'll be at the corner of the bank. When we come out, throw yourself into the ditch and cover us until we get into our saddles. Is that plain?"

"Yeh——"

"You boys want to keep your eyes peeled," Little Bill ran on. "Link and me will go in. We won't be long, but if ever'thing is workin' out our way, we'll time it so we won't step out until that west bound train is pullin' out. Folks won't be thinkin' of the bank just then. We may be able to reach our horses without firin' a shot."

"Say, has it occurred to you that the train may stop so it'll block the road and bottle us up?" Link replied.

"It might," Little Bill agreed, "but it ain't in the habit of doin' that. If that happens we'll go out of town on the road beside the bank and cut across the tracks as soon as we can. I'm hopin' we won't have to do that. I figger we can cross the tracks right at the depot and as the train pulls out, keep it between us and the gents who'll be tryin' to cut us down. Now there's just one thing more; the ordinary run of folks don't get very excited about seein' somebody else's bank robbed. Shootin' down innocent citizens is somethin' else again. Just remember that. When we pull away from the bank our guns will be a poppin'. But that'll be just a little argument against followin' us."

"That's if ever'thin' goes right," Link jerked out. "Otherwise——"

"You'll shoot to kill—every time!" Little Bill turned to Crescent. "You can pull out now. Just jog the team along and don't worry about us; we'll be right behind you."

CAMPEAU picked up the reins and drove out. Little Bill let him have a start of half a mile before he gave the order to mount. Presently they were riding away. Grim-faced, a tremendous preoccupation on them, they found nothing to say to one another. Paint rode in the rear. Bill dropped back beside him as they reached the Mexican shacks at the edge of town.

"You all right?" Paint's face was chalky under its tan.

"Yeh," he nodded, his throat tight. He could see the bank, just beyond the railroad tracks. Around the depot there were signs of activity already. "The train can't be due yet——"

" 'Bout twelve minutes. I can see a little smoke over there to the east."

Twelve minutes. Win or lose, they would know the answer in a hurry.

"You're drawin' it awful fine, ain't you?" Paint got out tonelessly.

"That's the way I want to draw it," Little Bill answered. His grizzled, weather-beaten face was suddenly a stony mask. "Robbin' a bank is just the same as anythin' else; either you do or you don't. Keep your head now for a few minutes, and remember no matter what happens your place is with the horses. We'll be countin' on you to have 'em ready."

II

THE train was whistling for Laguna as they walked their horses across the tracks. Crescent was just ahead of them. They passed him a moment later without any sign of recognition.

The crowd gathered on the station platform evinced no interest in them, apparently believing them to be just cowboys riding in from some distant ranch. It was an encouraging sign.

"All right so far," Little Bill volunteered.

"Yeh, but take a look at that street," Link muttered apprehensively. "Ought to be more people in sight for this time of the day."

Bill looked and saw that the main street of Laguna was almost deserted. His jaws clicked together sharply.

"What do you make of it?" Link demanded fiercely. The others were instantly on edge.

"I don't know," Bill answered, glancing up one side of the street and down the other. "Don't lose your heads now; it may not mean a thing."

"You know what it usually means," Link droned.

"That we're expected?"

"Yeh! You don't see anybody hanging around the bank where they might stop a little lead."

"Aw pull yourself together," Yuma blazed. "Nothin' has been right with you all mornin'. Now you're ready to believe there's been a tip-off just because you don't see a flock of people standin' around. We're here and we're goin' through with our stand."

"Ain't no question about that," Little Bill informed them. "If this is a jackpot, we're walkin' into it with our eyes wide open. If things get tough we'll get tough with 'em."

They turned into the little-used road that paralleled the side of the bank building. Twenty-five feet from the corner they slid out of their saddles. Paint gathered up the bridle reins.

Little Bill flicked a glance at him. "Plenty iron there," he told himself, with a sudden rush of pride. He sensed something fine in him too, other than courage, and conscience stabbed him. "For his sake, if for no other reason, I hope we make it," he muttered as he fell into step with Link. Cactus Jack and Flash were a step behind them. Yuma brought up the rear.

EVEN as Paint held his breath they reached the corner of the bank. Yuma pulled up; the others passed from sight. Each second had suddenly become hours long. Unconsciously he wet his lips with his tongue. There was an old feed barn and unused blacksmith shop down the street. A dilapidated board fence connected them. He had no way of telling whether unseen foes lurged there, holding him covered with high-powered rifles.

In back of him, across an open space, was the depot. He could be picked off easily enough from there. But no one seemed interested in him. With steam pipes hissing and brake irons grinding, the westbound was rattling into Laguna. He didn't know it, but the train carried an extra coach this morning; the division superintendent's car.

The train moved slower and slower as the engineer put on the air. Paint's blood ran cold as he watched the rear car edge up to the street. It was barely moving now, and it still blocked the way!

"We'll never make it," he groaned.

THERE was a dumb appeal in his eyes as he glanced at the engineer. Three or four feet might make all the difference in the world to them. He held his breath. He couldn't be sure the train had not already come to a stop. But it hadn't; inch by inch it crawled on until he could see one of the shacks beyond the track.

"We can squeeze through!" he sighed as he drew a deep breath into his bursting lungs.

Yuma stood with his back to the bank building. His attention was riveted on the

hotel across the corner and the hardware store next it. Suddenly Paint saw his hands flash to his guns. He didn't draw, but he stood at rigid attention, every inch of him alert.

Across the street, Paint noticed that the door of the hotel stood open. It had not been open a moment ago. He knew Yuma's attention was fixed on it. From that doorway the bank entrance could be raked with fire.

Wtih his pulse pounding madly, Paint's imagination pictured graphically what was taking place; the wagon standing so innocently in front of the bank; Cactus and Flash backed up against the entrance; Yuma at the corner, telegraphing them a warning; Crescent watching from the little restaurant; Little Bill and Link marching up to the cashier's cage.

ALTHOUGH he saw it so clearly in his mind, he had one detail wrong. Crescent was in the restaurant, but his attention was centered on the back door rather than on what was taking place in front of the bank.

"Bill and Link certainly must be makin' their play by now," he assured himself. "The train will be pullin' out in a minute or two——"

His surmise was correct; Little Bill and Link had continued past the bank as far as the Bud saloon. They had turned back then, their eyes everywhere. They were stepping inside now.

Bill was first in. Link was only a few feet behind him. When he reached the counter used by the bank's customers for making out checks and deposits, he stopped. Aside from the two men in the cage, they appeared to have the bank to themselves.

Suddenly Little Bill's guns seemed to leap into his hands. Link was only a split second behind him.

"Come on, open up!' Little Bill commanded as he covered the two men. Their teeth were chattering. "Take it easy and you won't get——" The words died in his throat. Crouched on the floor behind the counter were five armed men. One of them was Luke Chilton, the town marshal.

Bill's eyes bulged incredulously even after the truth crashed thorugh his brain.

"Stick up your hands!" Chilton cried. "You're dead men if you move."

LITTLE BILL had not waited. His guns spat viciously as he leaped back. Crouching low, he reached Link's side. No orders were necessary. A rifle barrel appeared above the counter. With no better target to aim at, they began to fan their guns.

There was a moment's lull, and then hell seemed to break loose. Chilton had leaped to the corner of the cage, pumping a .30—.30 as fast as he could work the bolt. His deputies threw caution away, and standing up, began to fire.

Across the street, a man ran to the hotel door and threw a rifle to his shoulder. Yuma dropped him before he could pull the trigger. The next moment, however, another man appeared, and throwing himself flat on the porch, began to pour a withering fire into the bank entrance.

Flash went down, rolled around and finally lay still. Cactus reached into the wagon for their rifles. He fumbled around with his hand and could not find them.

Yuma was stretched out in the ditch, firing at the hotel. "Fetched him that time!" he yelled as the man on the porch dropped his gun.

Crescent had not appeared. Crouching down beside the wagon, Cactus Jack looked for him and saw him running out the back door of the restaurant. "The dirty rat!" he groaned. It was only a chance, but he fired through the window at him. The slug spun Crescent around, evidently getting him in the shoulder. But he got through the door and was gone.

Inside the bank, Little Bill had upset the counter. He and Link were crouched down behind it. The room was filled with gunsmoke and the acrid fumes of burnt powder. Chunks of plaster fell every time

a slug ploughed into the walls or pinged off the iron door of the vault.

TWO of Chilton's men were out of the fight. The cashier and his assistant had taken no part in it. Of the others, not one had escaped unscathed. Blood trickled down into Little Bill's eyes from a ragged gash across his head. His clothes had been almost shot off him, but he had somehow miraculously escaped serious injury. Link had not fared so well. A soft-nosed .45 had torn a great hole through his left lung. His left arm was shattered too, but he had managed to prop his six-guns up against the counter and continue to blaze away.

"Link—I'm goin' to drag this counter toward the door," Bill whipped out. "Do you think you can back up a little? I'll get you out of here in a minute or two."

"You won't get me anywhere," Link muttered. "Give me your guns; I can't reload any more. I'll keep 'em busy until you make the door——" He began to cough again as the blood choked him.

Little Bill glared at him ferociously. "We're goin' out of here together. You get that straight!"

"No we ain't, Bill," Link gasped. "I ain't goin' nowhere. This is keno for me——"

Little Bill knew it was the truth, but he made no move to go. His guns spurted flame again. He heard the engine whistle and knew the train was moving out of Laguna.

Link heard it too. He slumped over against Bill's leg. "Bill—get goin'," he whispered. "Just look into this for me if you make it——"

"Link——"

There wasn't any answer. Outside he could hear Yuma and Cactus Jack's guns barking. Flash Chaney's lifeless body lay huddled on the sidewalk. Of Crescent he could see nothing. But he understood why. "Believe me I'll look into this if we make it!" he promised.

He leaped through the door and reached Cactus.

"Where's the rifles?" he demanded.

"They ain't in the wagon!" Cactus exclaimed. "Crescent——"

"Yeh, come on! Run for it!"

PAINT saw them coming. He was hugging the side of the building with the horses. He pulled them down as Little Bill and Cactus ran up. Cactus had hard work getting his leg up. Blood was oozing out of his boot.

Yuma came then. He sailed through the air into his saddle. Bent low, they headed for the depot. The train was moving out. The snipers who were firing from the roof of the hardware store had to hold their fire for fear of hitting the crowd on the platform.

"Give 'em the spurs," Little Bill cried as they circled around the rear end of the moving train. "We got to ride now!"

The passengers and crew were leaning out of the windows watching them. Just outside of town the tracks curved sharply to the south. The train began to gather speed. In a few minutes it left them behind. But they were a mile from town now.

They knew a posse would be after them presently. The telegraph would flash a warning ahead of them. In less than hour, sheriffs and peace officers all the way to the Oklahoma line would be riding on their trail. It left them a fighting chance, and they had to be satisfied with it.

Little Bill forced his horse up beside Paint. "You all right?" he asked.

"Yeh—not a scratch!" His voice sounded hollow and tired. "Link and Flash—they got 'em, eh?"

Bill nodded. "Crescent—Link was right about that skunk! Sold us out."

"I'll square that some day if nobody else does," Cactus muttered grimly.

"It'll be attended to," Little Bill assured him. "You think you can make it with that leg? We can't stop."

"I'll make it, all right."

They left the railroad in the course of two miles and began to head west. In that direction they could escape the telegraph.

HOURS later they pulled up at a little creek and wasted precious minutes bandaging their wounds.

"If we can give 'em the slip until night falls, we'll make it," Bill told them. "We'll help ourselves to fresh horses, first chance we get."

Luck was with them. Twice they avoided ambushes by less than a mile. By midnight, dog weary, they circled around the last Kansas town and headed for the line. Daybreak found them back in the wild, lawless Cherokee Strip where only the hardiest of U. S. marshals dared to venture.

III

SAFELY back in their old hide-out in the Strip, they could take stock of themselves. Save for Paint, all needed attention. Little Bill turned surgeon and soon had his men and himself patched up.

"In a week or ten days we'll be as good as ever," he laughed. It was just a gesture. The others nodded and said nothing; they had too much on their minds to desire conversation. Later, rested and fed, they became more communicative.

"Mighty lucky for us you didn't say nothin' about the train until just before we rode into town," said Yuma. He was filing still another credit in his gun. "If Crescent had known about that in time to have tipped the marshal off we would have been mowed down right there."

Little Bill cursed the traitor. "I should have listened to Link. Funny how he knew——"

"It was just a hunch he had," Cactus brooded. "I had it too, but I didn't pay any attention to it. How do you suppose he got rid of the rifles, Bill?"

"He must have tossed them out just before he turned off the ranch road. It was the only place he was out of our sight for a minute." His wrath began to run away with him and he got to his feet and paced furiously back and forth the length of the sod shanty. "The dirty, low-down snake!" he raged. "You hear me, boys, I'll fetch him for this if it's the last thing I do on earth! He perhaps got a nice piece of money for this. It'll take him out of the country; but he'll be back as soon as he's broke. I'll be waitin' for him."

"So will the rest of us," Yuma promised.

That evening Little Bill and Paint sat outside the shanty, a smudge going to keep the gnats away. The others had turned in, but the two of them continued to stare into the fire with a moody, preoccupied air.

"Paint—you know what I've got on my mind," Little Bill murmured at last.

"I reckon I do," Paint admitted soberly.

"It ain't easy to say, but I got to do it: you've got to go, Paint. You know now what happens to outlaws—Link and Flash gone; the rest of us shot up; and not a cent to show for it. I hope the lesson won't be wasted on you."

"I'll never forget what happened yesterday," Paint answered without looking up. "A lot of things ran through my head as I waited for you to come out."

"Yeh? For instance?"

"That crack you made about how easy you got your money. You're just an old liar, Bill."

"You're right. There ain't no such thing as easy money when you've got to put a six-gun in your fist to get it." He gave Paint a searching glance. "If you had things like that runnin' through your head this fracas wasn't all for nothin' at that

Mebbe you're beginnin' to agree with me that you ought to be movin' along."

PAINT did not answer at once. "Bill—why can't the two of us be movin' along?" he queried at last.

"What? With all the grudges the law has got ag'in me?" Little Bill shook his head solemnly. "It's too late, Paint—too late. Don't think even you won't have trouble makin' it. A hundred people saw you yesterday; the law will be waitin' to trip you. You'll have to get this thing out of your mind and tell yourself it never happened. I don't care how straight you go, if folks ever get wind that you took part in an attempted bank robbery they won't overlook it. They'll make an outlaw out of you; and I know you ain't one—I'd hoped to be able to give you a little stake; but I've got only a few dollars in my belt. You're welcome to that."

"I don't want it, Bill. When I pull out of here I'm goin' on my own. Sooner or later I'll catch on somewhere. I'll ride the grub-line until I do. And I ain't driftin' down into the Panhandle. I'll be smarter than that. I'll——"

"Wait a minute," Little Bill interrupted. "I don't want you to tell where you're goin'. I'd like to kinda know where you are, but it'll be better if I don't. You just put a lot of distance between yourself and this country."

There was little that remained to be said. Both realized this was good-bye. The moment had an emotional drag for both that surprised them. And yet there was nothing in Little Bill's flinty eyes or Paint's wooden stare to say that it meant anything at all.

They did not speak for minutes.

"I see you brought your little dun in this evenin'," Bill got out at last, his eyes fixed on the grazing pony.

"Yeh, she's fat and sassy. Ought to take me a long ways——"

"You ain't goin' tonight?" It was only Bill's way of saying he knew it to be the case.

"Yeh—I just been waitin' for the moon to show. Reckon I can throw my saddle on now."

LITTLE BILL bent down and knocked the ashes out of his pipe. He made it an important operation this evening. "Be a nice night," he muttered without looking up. "You'll be able to move right along when you get out of this turkey brush."

Eyes veiled, he watched Paint saddle up beyond the fire.

"Wish I was goin' with him," he mused. "Funny, after all these years, me hankerin' for a new country. Shucks, I'm just an old fool. I hope he don't ask me to shake hands."

The identical thought was troubling Paint. To escape from it, he vaulted into his saddle. The little dun reared. It was very opportune.

"So long, Bill!" he called, his voice sticking in his throat.

"So long!" Little Bill answered. "Luck to you."

He got to his feet and stared after him. Paint did not look back. Ten hours or more to the west was the New Mexico line. That was his objective for the present. Later, by skirting the Raton Range, he meant to move north into Colorado.

HE RODE in the open when he could, and not only because the going was easier. The Strip was not a country to be traveled by night with impunity unless one gave warning of his coming.

Several times he knew horsemen watched him from a distance. A few minutes after midnight he heard a pony nicker in a clump of tall brush off to his right. A moment later he was ordered to pull

up. Four men appeared out of the black shadows of a patch of scrub oak.

They were all armed and evidently outlaws. He had never seen them before.

"Where you headin' for, stranger?" one asked.

"West," Paint answered.

"From the east and goin' west, eh?" The man laughed unpleasantly. "You ain't very talky, are you?"

A man on horseback rode up. He looked Paint over. "He's all right," he announced. "I've seen him with Little Bill."

"All right, keep a goin'," the other grumbled.

Paint went on. The rest of the night passed uneventfully. Breakfast time came, but without any sign of breakfast. In fact noon passed and evening was well on the way before he caught sight of a shanty.

As he rode up, a man came to the door and eyed him suspiciously. Paint felt his sharp scrutiny. "No need to ask," he told himself. "I'm still in the Strip."

There was something familiar about the man, and when Paint saw the light yellow wagon under the lean-to that had been built onto the shanty, he knew the man in the doorway was Windy Ben. Ben was really a fence for the roving outlaw bands who had their headquarters in the strip, but he pretended to be just a poor peddler of such odds and ends as men living in the open need from time to time.

"Well, Ben," Paint called out, "any chance of puttin' my feet under your table?"

The old man's hawk-like face remained as bleak as ever. "Vell, young fellah, you got my name, all right; but I don't know you."

"No, but you know some friends of mine," Paint remarked pointedly. "You sold this check shirt and neckerchief I'm wearin' to a certain party about ten days back, didn't you?"

IT WAS identification enough. Old Ben knew immediately that Little Bill was the friend to whom Paint referred. Very little went on in the Strip that did not reach his ears promply. In fact, he liked to pretend that he had secret sources of information.

"Vell," he said, "come in. A meal you're always velcome to."

The shanty was clean. The old man had evidently been preparing his own supper. As he busied himself at the stove he kept up a running fire of conversation. Most of his talk was veiled, but Paint understood him perfectly and replied in kind.

"Vell, draw up a chair and eat," Ben invited finally.

The food was good and Paint did justice to it.

"I see you're headin' vest," the old man volunteered as Paint prepared to leave. "The La Junta Trail is being watched—both vays. Deputy U. S. marshals— looking for outlaws. If anybody vanted to give 'em the slip he could follow the first creek into the hills and come out beyond Raton Peak."

"Yeh, I reckon he could at that," Paint nodded. "If he wanted to——"

"Sure! Just follow the north fork and stay on the ridge." He stepped out with Paint. "You ever know a fellah by the name of Crescent Campeau?" The question came without warning. Paint did not answer until he was in the saddle.

"Seems I heard of him," he said without apparent interest.

"I could tell some friends of yours vere to look for him."

Their eyes met and held for a moment.

"I reckon they might be interested," Paint murmured tonelessly.

Long after he had left the shanty behind, he continued to ask himself if old Ben really knew anything about Crescent. "Reckon not," he decided. "Crescent is a lone wolf from now on, and that kind is mighty hard to find."

THE country began to change beyond the Peak. Before the week was out, Paint found himself jiggling broncs for a small outfit, well into Colorado. He had

no intention of remaining there. With a few dollars in his pocket, he headed north. Ten days from the time he had waved farewell to Little Bill, he stood looking down on the country spread out to the east of the Big Horns in Wyoming. It was a cowman's paradise.

"This will just about be it for me," he told himself.

A thin line of willows told him where to look for water. It was Crazy Woman Creek. He followed it through the hills. Cattle grazed on the green flats. He did not have to see the white-faced bulls running with them to know they were graded stock. Experience had taught him that a cowman who took pride in his cattle was usually a good boss.

"Well, Quita," he said to the little dun, "maybe we'll catch on with this outfit. We're sure goin' to speak to the old man."

He had not gone more than half a mile before he saw a rider ford the creek below him. To his surprise the stranger raised a hand in a friendly hail. He pulled the dun into a lope and quickly jogged up to where the other waited.

Paint's eyebrows arched into startled question marks as he saw that it was a girl who confronted him. She seemed equally surprised.

"I'm sorry," she said, "I thought you were one of the men." There was something in the deep timbre of her voice that thrilled him. Her blue eyes were frank and smiling. Paint whipped off his Stetson and fiddled with it nervously.

"I reckon you're speakin' of the Forty Bar, Ma'am," he ventured.

"You *are* a stranger in these parts," she countered, with a little laugh. "We're the only outfit on Crazy Woman, this side of Buffalo Crossing. The brand on your pony is a strange one to me. Where are you from, cowboy?"

THE question brought Paint out of an absorbed contemplation of the golden glints the sun was striking in her hair. "Arizona," he answered. He had long since decided that should be his story.

"As far as that, eh?" He was filled with a pleasant confusion as her eyes met his.

"Yeh," he nodded, anxious to turn the subject into safer channels. "Been some time since I spread my loop; but I hope to catch on somewheres in this Big Horn country. I don't suppose you'd know whether the Forty Bar was takin' on anybody or not?"

In prospect, the job of riding for that as yet unknown outfit had become utterly desirable to Paint.

"I suppose I would," the girl answered, eyes twinkling. She was well aware of his confusion. Something about Paint burned into her too; but being twenty and thoroughly capable of taking care of herself, she was in no danger of permitting him to suspect it. "The Forty Bar hasn't taken anyone on in months." She saw Paint's face fall. "But don't let that stop you from asking," she continued. "The Fall work is just a few weeks away. You'll see the house if you just keep to the creek."

She picked up her reins and prepared to ride away.

"Might I trouble you to tell me the foreman's name?" Paint asked.

"Father is his own foreman. Corson is the name—Thad Corson," she called back.

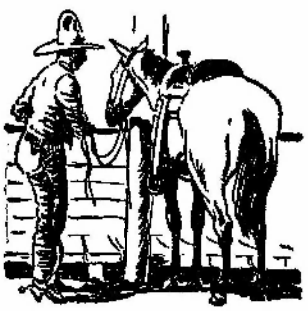
Paint watched her until a bend in the creek hid her from view and then headed down the stream. His mood had changed in the last few minutes. He found himself whistling merrily as he came in sight of the Forty Bar house.

Half a dozen men were gathered about a pole corral beyond the house. As he rode up he quickly decided that the tall man, with the flowing white mustache, standing on the corral gate and watching with absorbed interest the performance going on in the corral, was Thad Corson. The surmise was correct.

THE owner of the Forty Bar and his men turned their heads momentarily to give him a perfunctory nod of welcome. It was only a stolen glance, for inside the corral a man was attempting to ride a big black stallion, and having a very difficult time of it.

Paint drew up across the corral from them and was immediately as interested as they. The big black was covered with foam, and squealing and snorting with rage. It would crow hop across the corral, spin on its hind legs and come back, head down, and bucking and twisting from its nose to the tip of its tail.

"This old boy is in earnest," Paint said to himself. "I don't know who this hombre is who's tryin' to fan him, but he's got a lot to learn about fightin' broncs. You can't get anywhere by clubbin' 'em when they get that way."



Every few seconds the black would try to brush its rider off against the corral. Failing in that, it would charge at the opposite side, come down stiff-legged and trembling in a dizzy stop.

"Look out for him, Stony!" some one cried. "He'll get you at that!"

Stony doubled his fist and hit the black a resounding crack on the side of the head. He was a three-quarters Piegan Indian, and as enraged now as the horse he was trying to ride, for he had been thrown twice already, and he had some reputation around Buffalo Crossing as a bronc fighter.

"He better call it a day," Paint thought as the stallion backed off for another rush at the fence. "That black will pile up so sudden one of these times that he'll get rid of everythin' that ain't nailed down on him. If he ever gets that breed in the dust he'll sure stamp the life out of him."

IT HAPPENED sooner than Paint figured. The powerful stallion stopped as short as though he had pulled up at the end of a trace chain. Stony Pierce went sailing through air to bring up with a dull thud against the corral posts.

He lay still. There was no way of telling whether he was badly hurt or not. It had happened so quickly that, across the corral, Corson and his men sat helpless as the black reared to come down stiff-legged on his late tormentor.

Paint saw what was about to happen. His lips pursed and a shrill, quavering whistle, with a weird plant at the end of it, pierced the air. The big black's ears went up and its nostrils quivered nervously. Paint repeated the call. To the amazement of the men who had started to climb the gate, the stallion backed away.

"Keep your men back!" Paint called out.

The black had its eyes on him now. He began to talk to it; a curious chant. It held the animal spellbound as Paint vaulted over the corral fence. With marked deliberation he walked up to the horse.

The stallion was trembling and snorting excitedly. Paint's lips pursed again, but the shrillness had gone from his cry. It was soft, pleading now. The black did not rear as he put out a hand and ran it over its muzzle. Unhurried, he reached for the dangling reins and led the animal across the corral.

"Get that man out of here now," he said without raising his voice. As two of the Forty Bar men carried Stony out of the corral, Paint pulled the saddle from the black. The bridle followed next. It was little short of necromancy. He backed away then and made for the gate. The stallion stood watching him as though he had put a spell on it.

MAN, I don't know how you did it," Corson exclaimed weakly as Paint climbed down from the gate. "I heard the Navajos have a trick like that; but I never believed it."

"Seein' is believin' some times," Paint grinned. "I didn't learn that cry from a Navvy, but it's their horse cry. That man get hurt?"

"No, just knocked out. That black has banged us all up. I had Stony come out to see what he could do with him. Plain to me the only thing to do is to shoot the critter.

"That horse can be ridden," Paint declared. It was not said boastfully.

"Well, he's yours if you can ride him."

"I don't know as I want him," Paint answered with a laugh. "I would like to have a job though."

"So that's the trick of it, eh?" Corson grinned. "Kind of a case of handin' out a free sample of your goods before you try to make the sale." He looked Paint over with fresh interest. "How did you happen to come here?"

"Saw your stuff in the hills," Paint answered. " 'Good stock, a good boss' is the rule in my country—and I never saw better-lookin' cattle."

"There ain't no better," Thad declared proudly. "What's your name?"

"Paint Johnson——"

"Paint Johnson, eh?" He turned to one of his men. "Trace, you show this boy where to put his roll; he's ridin' for us."

IV

THE Forty Bar wagon was moving toward home. Seven men were with it. Paint was one of them. For three weeks they had been working the bad lands to the east, branding calves and putting their stuff back on its own range.

Nine months had passed since Paint had come to the Big Horn country. Jogging toward home this morning, the air pleasantly warm and the blue skies cloudless and sparkling, he found it hard to believe.

"Don't seem as though time could have passed that quick," he mused. "It seems it was just the other day I said good-bye to Little Bill."

He had done well for himself with the Forty Bar. He had proven his worth on innumerable occasions. That Spring he had been made straw boss, with a foreman's wages. And he had saved his money; something he had never done before coming to Wyoming.

It was indicative of the change in him; a change so great that it was reflected in his face. His mouth had lost its reckless set. The restless look had left his eyes. And it was not due solely to his work. There was always Julia Corson, proud, beautiful and unattainable—or so he often told himself. There had been times when, on her account, he had almost convinced himself that he should be moving along. The resolve had always come to nothing. Invisible chains, that she could have shattered with a word, held him there as securely as though the links had been forged of steel.

He had heard nothing of or from Little Bill. The unhappy affair at Laguna had almost passed from his mind. Matt Williamson, the sheriff of Johnson County, was not an infrequent visitor at the ranch. At first, Paint had been filled with apprehension at his coming. But they had become good friends, and the old score the law had against him no longer worried Paint.

It was soon before they came in sight of the house. Paint went on ahead. As he rode into the yard he noticed a strange horse standing at the hitch-rack outside the room Thad used as an office.

"Company," he said to himself, looking about for a glimpse of Julia. She was not to be seen, but as he got down from his saddle, Corson and his visitor stepped out. The stranger's face was turned away, but Paint's mouth went hard. He did not have to see the man's face to know he was Crescent Campeau.

IT WAS Crescent, sure enough. He turned the next instant and found Paint's eyes boring into his. He pulled down the corners of his mouth in his sur-

prise, but not an eyelid fluttered in his bronze mask.

Corson greeted Paint and then turned to Crescent. "This is Paint Johnson, my straw boss," he explained. Then to Paint, "Poe, here, has just bought the old Lazy K place over on Pole Creek. Goin' to be neighboors of ours."

"Yeh?" Paint queried, his eyes cold. "I'm certainly glad to know you, Mr. Poe."

"You can forget the mister," Crescent answered with a show of good will. "Drop in sometime; I'd like to have a talk with you."

"I'll do that—sometime," Paint answered.

Crescent mounted with a flourish and rode away.

"I feel sorry for him," Thad declared. "He hasn't any water to speak of on that place and precious little good range. How he hopes to take a livin' off it is beyond me."

"Maybe he's got some original ideas on how to squeeze out a profit," Paint answered.

"He'll need 'em," said Corson. "I predict he won't be with us long."

"He may not at that," Paint murmured cryptically.

For twenty-four hours he plagued himself with the dire possibilities Crescent's presence held for him. In a twinkling the nine months that had intervened since he had seen him last seemed to have been swept away.

"The sooner this thing gets to a showdown the better it'll be," he decided at last. "This country ain't big enough for both of us."

The afternoon was well along when he rode up to the tumble-down Lazy K house. Two men were building a corral. One of them was Stony Pierce. The other was a Mexican, and a stranger to him.

"You workin' for this outfit?" he asked Stony.

"Yeh. If you looking for the boss you find him in the kitchen."

Paint went on. "Stony and that Mex makes it three of a kind," he thought. "All nice boys."

He found Crescent waiting for him.

"I thought you'd be over," Crescent grinned. "Take a chair. We ought to have a lot to say to each other."

"I can say it standin' up," Paint informed him. "What's your game, Crescent?"

CRESCENT pretended to be amused by his directness. "You want to get this over in a hurry, eh? Well, I can understand that." The amusement died out of his eyes, leaving them cold and menacing. "If you're smart, you'll get that chip off your shoulder. I ain't goin' to turn you up or run you off this country unless you make me."

Paint understood him perfectly.

"So that's the club you're goin' to use," he whipped out. "Once a rat, always a rat, eh? Well, you get this, Crescent—you're not goin' to run anybody out of this country."

"No?" Crescent rolled a cigarette deftly. "Maybe you're mistaken. I been askin' some questions since I met you yesterday. You ain't done bad for yourself at all up here; straw boss for a good outfit and all lined up to wed the old man's daughter."

Paint stiffened to spring at him. Crescent waved him back.

"All right, I won't bring the lady into the conversation again," Campeau sneered. "I was only goin' to say that you don't want certain people around here to know that you used to run with outlaws. I reckon you'll go a long way to keep them from knowin'. You might even consider pullin' out."

"Not a chance!" Paint ground out fiercely. "I ain't runnin'. You might have me sent back to Kansas—but I don't think

you will. You're a tinhorn, Crescent. I always figured you was, long before I knew it for a fact. You're livin' up to it right now. You can crack your whip, but don't fool yourself that you can stampede me. I know how to slow you up. I've got some friends who are powerful anxious to meet up with you—some of your old acquaintances, Mr. Poe."

Crescent jeered, but it seemed forced.

"That would do you a lot of good, wouldn't it?" he demanded. "Before they ever got me I'd fix things up pretty for you. I might even fix it up for them—and you could all go back together. But why talk of a pay-off? I told you there won't be any trouble unless you ask for it."

Paint's lips curled with fresh contempt. "Your tone seems to have changed in the last few seconds," he jerked out. "You know there ain't room enough here for the two of us."

"Why not? It's a big country. When I found you was here I figured you'd listen to reason. You've got everythin' at stake. Some people think a lot of you around here. You're doin' well too. And it ought to get better.. You ain't goin' to toss that all away, are yuh? Why, folks that love you now would hate you if they ever—"

HIS voice trailed off to silence. There was something in the ice-cold depths of Paint's eyes that told him he had gone far enough.

"Crescent—this is the second time I've asked you. What's your game?"

"Game? Humph! What makes you so sure I've got a game?"

"Because you never made an honest dollar in your life."

"Maybe I've turned over a new leaf. Who knows?" Crescent laughed at his own sorry jest. "I bought this outfit cheap enough. I'm goin' to build it up."

He was lying, and Paint knew it.

"No, that would never appeal to you," he said. "You know you can never take a livin' off it."

"Don't fool yourself," Crescent scoffed. "I may take a mighty good livin' off this ranch."

"With that pair outside to help you, eh?" Paint queried sarcastically. "Listen, what you've got on your mind is no mystery to me, Crescent. I don't know that pock-marked greaser, but Stony Pierce is no stranger. If what folks are sayin' is true, he's workin' for the right outfit now."

"What do you mean by that?" Crescent shot back. "What are they sayin'?"

"That he runs an iron on other people's stock."

"Is that so?" Campeau gasped in mock surprise. "I'll sure have to speak to him." He laughed brazenly.

"And that'll be *your* game," Paint said bluntly.

"Yeh?" Crescent snarled venomously. "I'd think it over once or twice before I repeated that remark if I was you. Just remember it will take a lot of provin'."

"Not much. If we begin to lose stuff, I'll know who's doin' the rustlin'."

"Will you?" Crescent's eyes were murderous. "And what will you do about it?"

They glared at each other with deadly intentness for seconds before Paint answered.

"I'll stop you cold—no matter what it costs me."

"Yeh?" Campeau queried with an oily smirk. That's what you think now. You may change your mind when you've had time to cool off. One of us is bluffin', Paint—and it ain't me!"

V

THE Spring work went on. By the first of the following week the Forty Bar had its beef ready for the long drive to the railroad. Paint was to have charge of the trail herd and the shipping, with Corson arriving in time to see the stuff go aboard the cars.

It was a prospect Paint did not relish now, for it meant he must be away from

the ranch for at least ten days. But there was nothing he could say.

He came out of Thad's office in the late afternoon to find Julia perched on the porch railing. There was always a fresh, crisp look about her that wind and weather seemed not to affect at all. He would have gone on if he could, pretending not to have seen her. He had been avoiding her studiously for days.

Julia's mouth tensed as she sensed his intention. "Paint——" she called. He turned to face her with evident embarrassment. She made him sit down beside her, after having retreated to the far end of the porch.

"Nice and cool here, ain't it?" he said awkwardly. She continued to gaze at him and made no attempt to answer.

"Paint Johnson—what's come over you?" she demanded earnestly. "I've never seen such a change in a man. I don't mean your staying away from me. There's a haggard, worried look about you that wasn't there when you came back from the Badlands."

"The work, I guess," Paint murmured. "We've really been short-handed——"

"No, it's not the work," Julia insisted. "Work agrees with you, Paint. You've got something on your mind. Have you had words with father?"

"Shucks, no!" Paint replied miserably. "He couldn't treat me better if I was his own son."

"Then what is it?"

"I tell you it ain't nothin' ma'am." And then in a desperate attempt to turn the conversation. "I see you're goin' for a ride. I wish I could be goin' along." He felt safe enough in expressing the desire, since he obviously had so much to do before evening that he could not be spared for thirty minutes. "Where you aimin' to go?"

"I thought I'd cross over to Pole Creek and come back by way of the North Fork."

Paint's eyes clouded. "I don't think you ought to be goin' that far alone."

"And why not?" Julia demanded with mild surprise. "I've always gone where I wanted—"

"I know. But the country's fillin' up with strangers—"

"Oh, so that's it!" she exclaimed triumphantly. "We seem to be getting somewhere now. The only lately-arrived stranger I know of on Pole Creek is the new owner of the Lazy K. The two or three times he has been here, trying to buy breeders or to transact business of some sort, I've caught you glaring at him, Paint. You don't like him at all—do you?"

"I'll say I don't," Paint answered, and his tone was sharper than he had intended.

"He's kind of a show-off," she ran on, "but rather interesting I think." Thus did she take revenge for Paint's studied aloofness of the past few days. "Do you know anything against him?"

"I know I don't like him," Paint got out guardedly. "There's half-a-dozen ways you can ride without goin' over there."

"Now you're not being fair," Julia teased. "Just because you've taken a dislike to the man isn't any reason why I should stay away from Pole Creek. Did you know there was a dance at the schoolhouse tonight. It's the last dance this Spring."

PAINT felt he knew where their conversation was headed now. For three days he had tortured himself with the thought that he must not ask her to go to the dance, nor do anything but try to efface himself in her mind until the issue between Crescent and himself was decided one way or another.

"I heard about it," he said; "but we're pullin' out before daylight for the railroad."

"Yes, that's right; you will be busy," Julia said lightly. "You wouldn't be back

here before midnight. I thought of that when Mr. Poe invited me—"

The blood drained away from Paint's face. For a moment he couldn't trust himself to speak. "Ma'am, are you goin' to the dance with that man?"

"Well, May Ennis and Bud are driving in. I thought we might ride in with them."

Paint threw discretion to the winds. "I—I figured you'd be goin' with me," he exclaimed.

"But you didn't mention anything about it. You're busy—you just finished saying so."

"I am—but I'll arrange things."

It was exactly what Julia wished. Eminently successful, she mounted her pony and rode away. With murder in his heart, Paint hurried back to the corrals.

CRESCENT was already present when they arrived at the school-house. It amazed Paint to see how easily the man had established himself on a friendly footing with the community in the short time he had been there. Crescent swaggered up to him at the first opportunity and asked for a dance with Julia.

They were alone for the moment, near the door.

"You skunk, I didn't think you'd have nerve enough to crowd me like that," Paint ground out furiously. "We can have a showdown right here tonight. You're armed and so am I. If I see you so much as tryin' to speak to her you want to fill your hand in a hurry, 'cause I'm comin' after you, and I'll come a smokin'. And you can talk and be damned to you!"

The livid scar on Crescent's cheek that had won him his sobriquet flamed redly. Paint was watching his hand rather than his face. He saw Campeau's knuckles whiten and then slowly relax.

"All right," Crescent muttered viciously, "I'll let you get away with this. But I'll remember it, Paint."

"That's what I want you to do—remember it!"

Crescent kept his distance for the rest of the evening and Paint pretended a gaiety he was far from feeling. As he expected, it was long after midnight when Bud Ennis deposited them at Forty Bar house. Even so, Julia refused to let him go at once.

HERETOFORE, he had been to some pains to manage a minute alone with her. Tonight it filled him with fear. She had never seemed so desirable. The impulse to take her in his arms and crush her to him was almost irresistible. He was leaving in an hour or two to be gone for days. Evidently she was thinking of that too. Her lips were tremulous in the moonlight; her eyes warm with a strange light.

Paint had but to gaze at her to realize what he stood to lose. For a moment he was tempted to play Crescent's game, to do whatever he asked of him, that he might not lose her. A word from him tonight and she was his. He knew it—as little as he knew about women. And yet, he found courage to steel himself and turn away.

"I see Bozie is wranglin' the horses already," he said, his throat tight. "Light in the cookhouse, too. Reckon we'll be movin' pretty soon——"

He waited for Julia to speak, but she had nothing to say.

"I'd like to fetch you somethin' from town—if there's anythin' you'd like——"

"No, never mind," she murmured, holding her voice steady with an effort. She opened the door. "Just have a—good trip, Paint."

He stood there alone for a moment and then shuffled off across the yard, his face grim and stony.

By the time he had folded away his finery and buckled on his chaps the bunkhouse was awake. A few minutes later the cook rang the bell for breakfast. Paint singled out Reb Powner.

"Reb, I don't want to borrow trouble for you, but you're goin' to be in charge after the old man leaves day after tomor-

row, and you're mighty apt to have a good-sized dish of it put in your way."

Reb cocked his head and glanced at him sharply. He was an old-timer and had been drawing wages from the Forty Bar for many years. "What do you mean by that, Paint?"

"Well, just keep your eye on our stuff and let things take care of themselves here at home."

"There ain't no misunderstandin' that," Reb declared thoughtfully. "I reckon there's a certain outfit that'll bear watchin' at that."

"That's what I want you to do," Paint ordered. "You strap your guns on when you go out, and you have young Bozie ride with you."

BREAKFAST was dispatched hurriedly. In the ghostly half-light just before dawn the corrals were emptied and the beef herd put in motion. Corson came out to see them on their way.

"First time since I started the brand that I haven't led the drive myself," he told Paint. "I sorta feel like a duck out of water this mornin'. You better ride along before I have a pony saddled and take after you."

Paint glanced at Julia's window as he rode past the house. There was no sign of her. Just before he forded the creek he looked back again. It was almost the exact spot from which he had first seen the Forty Bar.

"If I was a man I'd let that be my last look at the ranch," he brooded bitterly. "It would keep me out of jail and keep her from ever knowin' what an ornery coyote I am—lettin' her care for me with what I had hanging over my head."

The thought stayed with him all morning. Riding in the dust, moody and uncommunicative, he could think of nothing else.

"But how could I do it?" he asked himself repeatedly. "Everythin' in the world that means anythin' to me is there—I've got to come back."

VI

FOR a week Reb and Bozie roamed the hills without finding anything to justify Paint's warning. Several times they watched the Lazy K from the high bluffs above Pole Creek without seeing anything to arouse suspicion.

They were there again today. Just before noon they saw Crescent and his two men ride away. They waited an hour and then came down and had a good look at the cattle penned up in the corrals and grazing along the creek. Every cow and steer wore a vented brand.

"But that's as it should be," Reb had to admit. "They bought everythin' they've got. There's one of the breeders they got from us." He pointed to a two-year-old that bore a vented Forty Bar and a freshly-burned Lazy K brand.

"It looks honest," young Bozie agreed, "but you tell me how you're agoin' to know if them steers was bought or rustled. You couldn't tell unless you checked up every head of stock they got."

"Don't be so hasty," Reb scowled at him reprovingly. "Who said anythin' about rustlin'? We're just curious, that's all!"

On Sunday morning, Crescent came to the Forty Bar. He asked for Corson. Julia talked to him.

"Father isn't back yet," she said. Despite her telling Paint that she found Crescent interesting, something about the man aroused her distrust.

"Well, no harm done," he answered. "I'll come back tomorrow."

"But I hardly think he'll be here before Tuesday. Better wait until then."

That was the information Campeau wanted.

"Gettin' things fixed up over my way," he volunteered, giving her an appraising glance. "Before long we'll have a house-warmin' and an old-fashioned barbecue. You can consider this an invitation, Miss Corson. I sure want you to come. Just feel at liberty to drop in any time you're

goin' by. I'm always glad to see my neighbors."

Julia thanked him and he rode away.

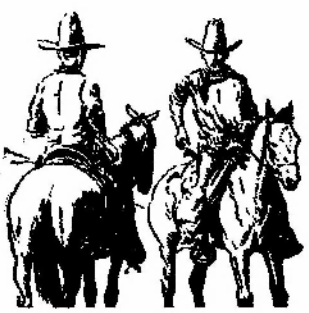
ON TUESDAY, she was preparing to ride into Buffalo Crossing for the mail when young Bozie dashed across the yard. He had been east of the creek for a few miles.

"They're comin', Miss Corson," he exclaimed. "They're well this side of the Powder. They ought to be in in less than an hour.

Julia returned to the house to wait for them. Half an hour later she caught the sharp tattoo of hoofs and came to the door, thinking it was her father or Paint. She was surprised to see that it was Sam Ennis, Bud's father, and Steve Taylor from the North Fork. Both owned big outfits.

They had nothing to say, other than that they'd wait for her father to arrive; but Julia sensed an air of tremendous excitement about them.

Thad was surprised to find the two men waiting for him. He greeted Julia fondly and then led Sam and Steve into his office.



Paint did not come up to the house. From across the yard he had caught a glimpse of the two men. Instantly he surmised what brought them there. He knew Steve Taylor was not in the habit of riding thirty miles just to pass the time of day. He called Reb aside and plied him with questions.

"Then you really didn't see anythin' that looked queer?"

"Not a thing, Paint! They got about three hundred head of stock over there; but that ain't no more than they should have, accordin' to reports of what they been buyin'."

"That's a fact," Paint had to admit. "I don't suppose you got out into the Badlands very far."

"No, I didn't. Some of our stuff may have drifted back that-a-way, but not much. The water-holes are beginnin' to dry up. That country is just plain desert after the first of June.

THEY were still talking when Paint was summoned to the office.

Ennis and Taylor nodded a greeting.

"Paint, we appear to have got back none too soon," Thad announced gravely.

"Yeh? What seems to be the trouble?"

"I'll tell you, and in one word," Taylor exclaimed. "Rustlers! They got into my stuff sometime yesterday and cut out not less than fifty head!"

"And I got about the same dose," Ennis informed him. "Be mighty strange if they missed you folks."

Paint's mouth hardened. They were only confirming what he had feared, and he could not even pretend to be surprised. Crescent was hurling his defy in his teeth as he had promised.

"You take this pretty calm," Thad rebuked him sharply. "It'll be serious enough if we find they been in among our stuff."

"Reckon I appreciate all that," Paint assured him. "If I don't seem surprised, maybe it's because I've been all set for this for days."

Corson brought his chair down on all fours with a bang. Taylor and Ennis were no less startled.

"If you know somethin', I'd like to hear it," Thad exclaimed, measuring Paint with his eyes. "Or was it just a hunch?"

"It could be a hunch or just common sense—dependin' on how you look at it. When you call a man a rustler you've got to have the facts or be ready to take the consequences. I'm willin' to take that chance," Paint drove on, realizing he was pulling the props out from under his feet.

"When a man buys a worthless ranch, without good grass or water, and then pretends to stock it with a handful of stuff picked up here and there from every outfit in forty miles of himself, so that he's got the greatest assortment of vented brands runnin' loose on one range that a body ever saw—what are you goin' to call it if you suspect he's got a trick up his sleeve?"

"I'd call it damn good sense!" Thad whipped out. He hit his desk a resounding blow with his fist. "It's as plain as the nose on your face! Why didn't you say somethin' about this, Paint?"

"Well, there ain't no such thing as rustlin' until stock begins to disappear. I had Reb out ridin' the hills while we were away. Our stuff seems to be all right."

"Wait 'till you start lookin' for it out in the Badlands," Ennis muttered gloomily. "You won't find it!"

"Well, if that's the case, I'll know where to look for the gent that took 'em." Thad thundered.

"I don't know that you will," Taylor said. "I had that idea too. About this fellow Poe, I mean. Some of my boys laid out in the Badlands last night at Crow Butte. They jumped three men just after daylight. Tough lookin' hombres. They chased 'em for an hour before they lost 'em. They were all strangers. Poe wasn't one of them, nor was Stony Pierce."

THAD didn't know what to say. Paint was equally dumbfounded. He wondered if Crescent had a gang behind him of whom he knew nothing.

"You're sure your boys didn't make a mistake?" Thad asked.

"Positively no!" Taylor answered. "I'm convinced Poe hasn't anythin' to do with this. These rustlers are movin' in on us from across the Badlands. That's the way they'll run the stuff out too. In that broken country they can hide out mighty easy."

"What I'd like to know is what we propose doin' about it," Ennis spoke up. Taylor answered him.

"The thing to do is say nothin' and start out to comb that country. We won't bring the law into this. We'll round up these gents and string 'em up. That's the only way to stamp out rustlin'."

They were in accord on that. They discussed their plans for an hour. Paint had little to say. He could not reconcile himself to the fact that Crescent was not the rustler.

"As far as I'm concerned it doesn't matter now whether I'm right or wrong," he told himself. "He'll be sure to hear that I came out against him, and he'll be after me—unless he figures he's doin' so well he can afford to wait."

With rustlers to worry about he had a valid excuse for seeing little or nothing of Julia. Heavily armed, Corson, Reb and he combed the Badlands, checking their stuff. On the second day Paint found the ashes of a fire. They were cold, but they were not old.

"Somebody heated an iron here," he declared. "Too small for a campfire."

IT WAS on range that the Forty Bar claimed.

"I moved quite a little bunch of stuff out of here last month. You can see that some of 'em came back."

"Not a critter in sight today," Reb pointed out.

"No, they raided us," Corson ground out. "Can't be any doubt of it."

They went as far as the Powder without catching sight of a soul. On the way back they headed northwest, so as to come out beyond Pole Creek. They were well out of the Badlands when they saw two riders waiting for them. It proved to be Sam Ennis and Bud. They had been out for two days without seeing anything of the rustlers.

"Ran into Taylor and his men yesterday," Sam told them. "They had an Injun tracker with 'em. He picked up the trail of those three hombres, but it led him into the lava beds, and that was that."

They rode on together for a few miles.

"By the way, Paint," Sam remarked, "that certain party that you thought might be the man we're lookin' for was seen in Buffalo Crossin' about two hours after Taylor's boys jumped those fellows out here. He couldn't have made it in that time."

"Reckon not," Paint agreed.

THEY left Ennis and his son and turned up Pole Creek. It was a steady climb. Paint pulled up his pony when Corson would have turned off for the Forty Bar.

"I'm goin' to go up the creek a ways," he said.

"You can if you want to," Thad agreed, "but I think the sooner you forget that idea the quicker we'll get somewhere."

"Well, it won't take me out of my way much," Paint answered philosophically.

He found no one at the Lazy K house. A glance inside revealed nothing of interest. In the corral there was not over half-a-dozen steers. The new brands were healed. That was true of the stuff he saw along the creek.

"I'd have to give him a clean bill of health on what I see here," he confessed. "Course there's nothin' to keep him from havin' a hidden corral in the Badlands."

He began to climb the bluffs presently. He had just reached the top when Crescent rode out of a little stand of aspens. Campeau carried a rifle across his saddle bow.

They rode up to each other, eyes wary.

"Been payin' me a visit, eh?" Crescent laughed. "I hope you had a good look. Nothin' down there I'm afraid to have anybody see."

"Then you've heard the news."

"Yeh, I get around a little. I also heard that you suspected me."

"I did, and I still do," Paint assured him. It seemed to amuse rather than infuriate Crescent.

"It turned out to be quite a favor to me," he taunted, "Judgin' by what Steve Taylor and a few others are sayin'."

"You'll trip up yet, Crescent—"

"It won't be your fault if I do," Campeau shot back, his jaws clicking together. "You were damn careful about what you said. You didn't tell anybody we were old friends—"

"I'm ready to tell 'em!" Paint blazed.

They fenced with their eyes for a moment.

"That's a bluff—and I'll call it right now," said Crescent. "You'd like to get rid of me, but you ain't throwin' away what you got at stake. I been takin' a lot from you. Now I'm tellin' you where to head in. Don't start movin' all your stuff back into the hills. If Corson suggests it, you talk him out of it!"

Paint could only stare at him aghast for a moment.

"On the level, Crescent, do you think you can pull that on me? Why don't you stick one of your crooked irons in my hand and ask me to ride with you?"

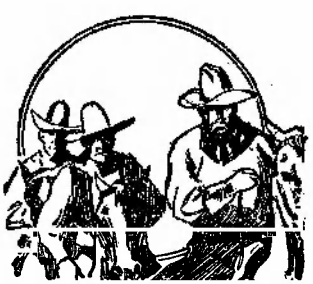
"Think it over," Crescent commanded. "It won't seem so funny——"

"Not for a second!" Paint rasped. "I'll see you in hell first, Campeau."

VII

THE Forty Bar was in the saddle eighteen to twenty hours a day now. But the rustling continued. Neither eight men nor eighty could have properly defended Corson's unfenced line.

Reb rode with Paint. Several times they stumbled on the fresh tracks of three shod horses.



"They may be holed up around here," Paint said to Reb, "but I doubt it." They were dry-camped in the Badlands.

"I'm beginnin' to agree with you," Reb answered. They could hide out here, but so can a man crawl under a bed. But

that's the first place a person looks. I'm thinkin' we'll find 'em east of the Powder."

"Too far, Reb. They have to hold the stuff somewhere until the overbranding heals before they dare to send it along."

"Well, where do you figger they are?"

"Maybe among the buttes to the south."

Reb shook his head. "No water there, and they can't get along without it."

"I wonder about there bein' no water there. What was that tale you told me once about Ghost Springs? Were you just gassin'?"

"No, sir!" Reb exclaimed with a positive shaking of his head. "I never seen it, but I know men who have. Just a big hole dug out of the plateau. You can't see a tree or a rimrock until you're right on it."

"Do you know how to get there?"

Red scratched his head as he reflected. "No, I can't say I do," he declared thoughtfully. "I know it ain't far east of the sand hills."

"Well, it ain't much to go on," Paint mused, "but I reckon I can find it if it's there."

"You mean you're goin' alone?"

"Yeh. You lay out around here until tomorrow this time, Reb. If I don't show up by then, you go on in to the ranch."

Hours passed before Paint saw the bald, treeless buttes looming up on the horizon. He was riding the little dun. She was sure-footed, but the broken lava made the going slow.

"Looks like you'll have sage-brush for supper, and not much of that, Quita."

EVEN in among the buttes the ground was flinty. A regiment of cavalry could have ridden over it without leaving sign of its passing. That was also true after he reached the sand hills. The white diamond sand was so dry and free-running that it filled Quita's tracks as soon as the mare stepped out of them.

"East of the sand hills," Paint murmured, recalling Reb's directions. "That might be most anywhere now. This sand has drifted up into hills as far as you can see."

He got through them and continued on east for two miles. Turning then, he headed southward, paralleling the hills. He had to trust to luck now.

Ghost Springs proved to be as ephemeral as its name. By evening he had traced a pattern miles long, back and forth across that desolate land, without finding the slightest sign of a spring.

He picketed the dun.

"I can't give you a drink, old-timer," he murmured, pouring water from his canteen into his hat, "but I'll let you wet your mouth. If we don't find what we're lookin' for an hour or so after the sun comes up we'll pull out of here."

He spread his blanket and pulled off his boots. Night came on but he did not risk a fire. The sombreness of the barren wasteland touched him, and he found it hard to escape his thoughts. But he was weary. By the time the moon came up, he was asleep.

He was astir at dawn. In all the vast sweep of country about him nothing moved.

"Guess we had this hotel to ourselves last night, Quita," he said to the dun. "We'll saddle up now and be movin'."

HE HAD covered several miles and had about given up hope when he was pulled up short by a fissure in the earth that yawned almost at his feet. It was only a crack in the earth's surface where he stood, but off to his right it began to widen until it formed a box canyon half a mile wide. How far east it extended he could not tell.

"Must be water down there," he concluded, "judging by the willows."

He was looking down on the tops of them. "If ever there was a hideout made to order this is it."

From the rimrocks he reconnoitered the canyon for the better part of an hour before he tried to find a way into it. When at last he discovered a narrow defile that

led down to the springs he moved cautiously, the willows affording perfect cover for a lurking foe.

His fears proved groundless. The springs were flowing, and he and the dun drank their fill. Fresh tracks of horses and cattle in the soft ground told their own story. Just above the springs he found a cleverly concealed brush corral. There was sign enough there to convince him it had been used within two or three days. In a clump of buck brush he found a gunny sack that contained a cooking outfit.

"Sure means they're comin' back," he thought. "Be mighty strange if they haven't cached their irons here somewhere."

He walked around the corral fence, poking under the brush with his foot. His boot touched something that gave out a metallic ring. It was a pair of Lazy K branding irons.

"Ghost Springs," he mused thoughtfully, "won't be hard to find when this business is over."

He replaced the irons and erased all signs of his having been there. He was anxious to get away. Leaving the springs, he went on to the east, intent on learning if the hidden canyon had more than one entrance. He found that it had; the walls pinching together in the course of a mile so that he could reach out and touch them with his hands. As they closed in, fallen rock and earth choked the crevasse and formed a trail that led up to the level of the plateau. He could see it had been used.

"Reckon this is the way they come and go," he decided. "Crescent undoubtedly stumbled on this place just as I did—maybe long before he showed up in Buffalo Crossing."

He took his bearings and rode away. He had hours in which to determine exactly what he wanted to do before reaching the ranch. His course was plain enough.

"I told Crescent I'd stop him, and there ain't no goin' back on that," he told himself. "We'll have our little showdown at Ghost Springs. Ridin' into Laguna to stick up a bank wasn't the only mistake I made. I figured I could rub out the outlaw brand on me by playin' square and makin' folks respect me. It doesn't work out that way." He recalled what Little Bill had said. "He was right; if the law has a grudge against you, and folks find it out, they won't overlook it. Maybe you can't blame 'em."

HE FOUND Corson and the men moving the Forty Bar cattle out of the Badlands. He called Thad aside and told him what he had discovered.

"You better leave this stuff here for a bait," he suggested. "Make it easy for 'em to rustle it. I'll get some grub and go back to Ghost Springs. You can get word to Taylor and Ennis and whoever you like. For the present, I'd be mighty careful not to let the boys know anythin' about this."

"Why, you don't think I'm lettin' you go back there alone, do you?" Thad asked. "You wait for us; we'll go to Ghost Springs together."

"That would be a mistake," Paint argued. "I've got my play pretty well figured out. One man can get in there and hide out without makin' them suspicious. Half a dozen of us would tip our play off. We want 'em red-handed."

"I don't want you to take no unnecessary chances, Paint. Just what do you propose doin'?"

"Why, I aim to be back there before midnight. I'll get into the canyon and hide out near the springs. It'll be just a case of waitin' then until they show up. You and the others can lay out in the sand hills. When I want you I'll send you a smoke signal."

Corson shook his head. "How do you know you can get the drop on them? Three to one ain't no fair odds. They'll be armed, and they'll shoot to kill. The skunks will have everythin' to win and nothin' to lose." He paused and fumbled for words. "I've never said nothin', but

you've come to be like one of the family to Julia and me. If anythin' went wrong I never could face her."

Paint swallowed hard. So much was destined to go wrong that he could only close his mind to it and go on now.

"Don't worry about me," he muttered. "I'll make it, all right."

VIII

FROM where he lay concealed Paint could command a view up and down the canyon. He had left his pony in the hills and trudged into Ghost Springs on foot.

"If they're comin' this mornin', they'll show up soon after dawn," he said to himself as he saw the stars begin to pale.

He nodded off once, only to jerk awake, thinking he heard them coming. Off to his right a piece of brush snapped. He listened intently and heard the sound again once or twice. But minutes passed and he heard nothing more.

"Must have been a coyote comin' in for water," he decided, nerves taut. "Scented me and changed his mind."

Dawn marched up out of the east. A purple mist hung over the canyon. It faded to saffron as the sun touched it and then was gone. A magpie settled itself on a dead willow and cawed a raucous welcome to the new day. The gaudy scavenger finally fluttered down to the spring and stilled its cry.

Paint was aware of a strange beating in his ears. It became sharper. Suddenly he realized it was the thudding of hoofs. A moment or two, and he heard cattle bawling. Their querulous bellowing told him they were being hazed along at top speed.

"Mighty anxious to get out of sight with 'em," Paint thought. "They'll be in here in five minutes."

He heard the madly-driven steers pour down the defile to the east. They raised a din that echoed against the canyon walls. Above it he heard the shrill cries of men. Suddenly a horseman flashed into view. It was Stony Pierce, riding ahead to turn the cattle into the corral.

There were at least forty yearlings in the bunch. Paint saw they were all Forty Bar stock. He found some grim satisfaction in that. "Crescent evidently figures I did just what he told me to," he thought.

Campeau and Tampico, the Mexican, appeared through dust, fanning the last of the stragglers ahead of them. In a few minutes they had the bunch corralled.

"Well," Crescent sighed with the satisfaction of seeing a job well done, "there they are. Reckon we can thank Paint Johnson for that bunch."

THE smirk on his face, his insufferable insolence, whipped Paint's fury into a searing flame. The three men were not over eighteen feet away. All were easy targets. His fingers tensed with the temptation to cut down on them and close their mouths forever. For excuse, he would only have to say they had jumped him. Thad and the others would only thank him for it.

The impulse passed however. Without his knowing it, Paint subscribed to a code —often as foolish as it was magnanimous —that a man could not be shot down without giving him a warning.

"We better rustle up a little grub now," Crescent said. He turned so that he faced Paint and took a step toward him, all unsuspecting of what the next moment was to bring.

"Stick 'em up! I'll bust the first man that moves."

Crescent's right foot was lifted. He brought it down as though he suddenly found himself standing on eggs. Stony and the Mexican froze in their tracks.

"Come on, up with 'em!" Paint commanded.

Crescent could not locate him, but he recognized the voice. He flicked a glance right and left, looking for a way out. Tampico and Stony had their hands in the air. Slowly Campeau raised his arms.

"All right," Paint rasped. "Now turn around!" He crawled out of the willows and disarmed them. The three of you line up," he ordered. "If you've got any idea you're goin' places you better get it out of your heads. It'll be just like stringin' fish if I have to open up on you."

Crescent had found his tongue. "You damn fool!" he cried. "What is this four-flush anyhow?"

"I don't want any chatter from you," Paint droned. "Just button your lip, Crescent!"

"You'll hear it whether you want to or not," Campeau raged. "You can't wash me up that easy. You can turn us over to the sheriff, if that's your idea, but I'll take you out of the arms of that Corson kid. She'll have to get her lovin' somewhere else——"

It was more than Paint could stand. His left flashed out with every ounce of strength he had behind it. It caught Crescent flush on the mouth. The big fellow's head went back as though a mule had kicked him. Down he went then, blood trickling from his lips, to stretch his length on the ground.

He lay there for a moment without moving. Paint touched him with his boot.

"Get up!" he ground out. "You ain't hurt."

CRESCENT had fallen beside his horse. He clutched the pony's fore leg as he started to drag himself to his feet. His hand settled on his saddle horn then, and he slowly straightened up. He had a six-gun in his saddle-bag. Apparently groping blindly, his fingers stole to it.

Tampico and Stony knew the gun was there. Their bodies tensed as they waited.

Crescent shook his head, as if to clear it, and leaned against his saddle. As though on springs, he whirled then, gun in hand, and fired without taking aim. The bullet burned a red trail across Paint's cheek. With the shot, Tampico and Stony leaped at him.

Paint flung himself backward. As he did, three rifles spurted flame in the willows. Tampico was dead before he hit the ground. Stony rolled over and lay still. Crescent flung a leg up to get into his saddle. He got no further. In mid-air something hit him and twisted him around. A scream died in his throat. All the stiffness seemed to go out of his body. Another slug slapped into him, and still another. Eyes glazing, he slipped over the hindquarters of his horse to fall lifeless to the ground.

Blood was streaming from Paint's cheek. Unconscious of it, he started at Crescent and the other two, his breath coming in gasps. It had happened so suddenly he could think only that Corson and the others had not waited in the sand hills as they had agreed.

THREE men stepped out of the brush. Still dazed, Paint turned to face them. For a moment he was helpless in his surprise. He blinked his eyes incredulously, thinking he must be dreaming.

"Bill," he got out huskily, "is that you?"

"Yeh, it's me Paint—and Yuma here and Cactus." Little Bill turned Crescent over with his foot. "Took us a long time to catch up with this coyote but we fetched him. If I'd only blazed away a second sooner he wouldn't have marked you, Paint."

Light was beginning to break on Paint. "Bill, you and the boys have been in this country for days, haven't you?"

"We sure have. Old Windy Bill gave us a tip that brought us up here. We've been chased for rustlers three or four times. This is the second time we've been into these springs. Came in again this mornin', just before daylight, when we

knew Crescent was headed this-a-way. Never dreamed you was here until you stepped out."

"But you knew I was in this country, didn't you?"

"Yeh, I knew that. I wanted to talk to you but I didn't figger it was safe. You've come a long ways since you quit us. I wouldn't do anythin' to get you into trouble on our account. What sort of a showdown was Crescent forcin' on you?"

Paint told him briefly. Yuma and Cactus had gone down the canyon.

"Just what I figgered," Little Bill muttered. "You see, Paint, he was a rat, and he couldn't believe that a man could be foolish once and still be a man. But you don't have to worry about that now. You vented your outlaw brand when you pulled away from us, and you've blotted it out completely by what you've done since then."

"I don't know, Bill," Paint muttered glumly.

"Well, I know! The only man who might have testified against you is dead. You're in the clear now." He broke off to examine Paint's wound. "You ought to do somethin' about that cheek," he declared gravely.

"I'll take care of it after you pull out," Paint told him.

Little Bill glanced at him sharply. "Ain't no hurry about that——"

"Yes, there is, Bill. Here comes the boys now; I reckon they'll bear me out."

"Looks like a posse over there to the west," Yuma stated. "They came out of the hills—must be a dozen of 'em—and they're sure streakin' it for here."

PAINT told them who the men were. "Well, we will have to be movin'," Bill admitted. "They'll come into the west and we'll go out the other way as they come down off the plateau." He communed with himself a moment and then handed his rifle to Paint. "You better take this gun, Paint. You've saved these men the trouble of stringin' up these gents, but that may not stop 'em from askin' questions, even though it's a shut and closed case of shootin' rustlers in self-defense. You might also kinda take the rifle as a little present from me. You won't find any notches on it, Paint."

Paint took the gun. "I'll take good care of it, Bill."

Little Bill got on his horse. This was a last parting, but as on that evening in the Strip, they did not shake hands.

"So long, Paint," he murmured.

"So long, Bill." Paint raised a hand to Yuma and Cactus.

CORSON and the others were not long in arriving. They had heard the shooting and did not know what it portended. Paint turned a blood-smeared face to them as they rode up. To his surprise, he saw that Matt Williamson, the sheriff, was with them.

"What was all that shootin'?" Matt asked. "Sounded as though——"

"Look, Matt, he got the whole three of 'em!" Corson cried.

"Well, so he did!" the sheriff exclaimed as he stared wide-eyed at the bodies on the ground. "They couldn't be any deader if you'd strung 'em up." He turned to Paint and pushed out his hand. "I congratulate you, Paint. I got wind of this party and came a packin', figurin' I had a lynchin' on my hands. But you've made lynchin' absolutely unnecessary. Reckon you were in a pretty tough spot."

"Yeh, I sure was," Paint agreed thoughtfully.

JUST TALK

By
ROBERT E. PINKERTON
Author of "Red Wolves," "The Spider," etc.

Fists Count, Too, but Here Was a Man Who Could Talk a Peavey into Dancing a Jig

BLACK RIVER BEN examined a wound in Flambeau Smith's head.

"It ain't decent," he said. "I can watch you think. If this don't heal up, how can you ever talk to women again?"

"I don't expect to see any women again," Flambeau retorted. "Nor grub either."

"Three days!" Ben scoffed. "Men have fasted forty."

"No lumberjack ever did. I'm for leavin' this place."

"With two hundred waitin' to jump us?"

"Falk and his crew won't bother if we say we've had enough," Flambeau insisted. "All they're tryin' to do is chase us off the river. And what if we do stick it out? We've got no peaveys or pick poles, no grub or tents or wanigan. We can't drive the logs even if we do hang onto the dam. Jack Reed should 'a' come himself when he starts loggin' a new country, and he should 'a' brought a crew."

"If Webster was livin' he wouldn't have to write a dictionary," Black River Ben commented. "He'd just run you through a printing press and make a book twice as big as what he did by himself. Now, if you'd only say something when you talk."

Flambeau Smith lifted himself with much effort and glared at Ben.

"Talk!" he repeated in his shrill voice. "It's all you've done for three days. You've talked us into stickin' and gettin' our heads busted and starvin' to death. But you ain't fooled me any, especially about Barry Page. You ain't even sure he started for help, and you know Jack Reed is drivin' Kettle River and can't come if Barry does get to him."

Ben again peered at the cut in Flambeau's head.

"Now how did I ever come to think they was brains?" he demanded in astonishment. "Must be because the last thing I

saw butchered was a calf. Figure this out for yourself, Flambeau. Jack Reed's never had a drive hung yet for any reason. Last fall he sends us over here to start loggin' his new holdings and take the drive down. How was he to know Austin Falk is the sort that thinks he owns a river and might get nasty about it? Jack's depending on Barry Page and us."

"You don't have to tell me that!" Flambeau yelped. "And I won't stand for your damned preachin'. But you've lied to us. You never saw Barry watchin' from the brush that first mornin'. I tell you, Falk's men got Barry and there's no help coming."

A CHORUS of yells stopped Black River Ben's answer. He went to a window in the log cook camp and looked out.

"Falk and his gang are going to try that once too often," he said. "Our lads can't stand four to one forever. And the skunks are using rocks. One just laid Pete Martel out cold."

Ben spoke dispassionately, but his eyes were troubled as he watched the scene before him. A hundred men had charged out of the woods on the west side and were attacking a handful of defenders behind a barricade of logs on the dam. But the dam was narrow and only a few could approach at once.

Yells sounded on the opposite side of the low log building and Ben crossed to the other window to behold a similar scene near the east end of the dam, beyond the sluiceway.

"You lay still!" he barked when he saw Flambeau getting up. "It's the same old thing. Ten times they've tried it now, but we're still here."

Ben darted through the door. Flambeau Smith staggered to a window and saw him cross the timbers over the sluiceway.

The dam was a bit wider there and more attackers could come up together. Others remained behind and laid down a barrage of stones. One struck Ben in the chest as he ran forward. He dropped to his knees, remained there a moment, got up and ran on.

"I seen the skunk that done that," Flambeau muttered, and he tottered toward the door.

Battle raged fiercely now at each end of the dam. No more than forty-five defenders, all that were still able to fight, crouched behind the barricades, and nearly two hundred men attacked them. Clubs and stones were used as weapons. Oaths and shouts were heard.

But none of those sounds came from Reed men. They fought in grim silence, without excitement, without undue expenditure of effort.

Something magnificent characterized the actions of that handful of lumberjacks. Like seasoned regulars, they fought a rabble. A certain dignity was evident even in the movements of their bodies. Unhurried and unruffled, they beat back the onrushing horde when the attack began, and they were still unruffled when sheer numbers forced them from the left end of the barricade.

BLACK RIVER BEN arrived then. The breath had been knocked out of him by the blow on the chest but he hurled himself into the hole. He swung a heavy club and stopped the wave that surged over the logs.

"If you'd come sooner you wouldn't 'a' had to come at all," Marty McGuire commented. "Was you takin' a snooze?"

At that moment the right wing of the defense gave way. The left side could not spare aid. Desperately, with sudden ferocity, the right wing attempted to hurl the invaders back, and failed.

"Out o' my way and let someone fight as can!" a shrill voice sounded behind them.

Flambeau Smith, his face deathly white beneath a streak of dried blood, came charging in. At best, he was a grotesque figure, tall, thin and apparently most awkward. A small head topped a long, scrawny neck, up and down which a huge

Adam's apple chased itself. His face was without a chin, the top of his head without hair, his voice without a bass note. But how the man could fight!

His long, ungainly arms were of whalebone, and not nearly so thin as they seemed. Now they lifted high a long piece of dry driftwood, hurled it over the heads of his mates into the faces of their foes. Instantly he charged after it.

The driftwood did little damage, but it checked the attackers. The Reed men took quick advantage. They swept forward all along the line, drove the foe outside the barricade and then into quick retreat before a fusillade of the same rocks that had been thrown at the fortress.

In the sudden hush the defenders glanced back to see that their companions had been victorious at the east end of the dam. Then they looked down to find Flambeau Smith lying at their feet.

"I told him to lay still," Black River Ben said. "He'll be steppin' on his own brains if he's not careful."

They carried Flambeau to the cook camp, bare and empty, and laid him on some straw in a corner. They could do nothing more. They did not have a cotton rag to bandage his head, nothing in which to warm water, no blanket to spread over him.

FOR three days they had had nothing, ever since their retreat up river before the overwhelming forces of the Falk crew. Black River Ben had herded them to the dam and rushed the construction of barricades to protect it, and the little band had remained there, without food, without aid for their injured, now without hope.

"That was the next to the last time they'll have to try it," Marty McGuire said.

"Around dark," agreed Sandy McLean, a burly Miramichi whose nose was crushed and whose scalp was torn. "But I've saved me up a good fight for the last one."

Black River Ben squatted beside Flambeau and apparently was not listening. Yet he was alert for the first sign of weakening. His job had been difficult. The crew was without a foreman, and each of the fifty had immediately constituted himself his own boss. Able and resourceful, rampant individualists all, they bowed to no man who had not demonstrated his right to leadership.

Yet Ben's adroit mind had welded them into a cohesive group. He understood them better than they understood themselves, and skillfully and patiently he had planted thoughts, had guided even their emotions, without arousing suspicion that they were being led.

The physical part of defending the dam offered his least difficulty. The rivermen were alert and competent and had long worked and fought together. No leadership was required there. After each attack they repaired and strengthened the barricades, gathered missiles and weapons and discussed new methods of defense.

But their situation was becoming increasingly hopeless. Lack of food, little rest and increasing injuries were cutting down their strength. In the first two days they had fought joyously and with confidence, exulting in their triumphs against such odds. The third day they were grim and determined. Now, the morning of the fourth, doubt was increasing its grip.

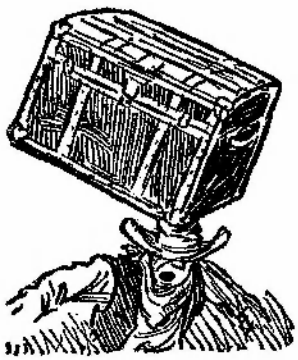
THEY were in a strange land, seventy-five miles from the railroad. Help would be a long time in coming, and its arrival depended wholly upon one man, Barry Page, their foreman. Barry, taking the cut-off trail across the big bend, had escaped Austin Falk's dawn attack on the Reed crew down river and the subsequent retreat upstream to the dam.

"They got Barry, all right," a riverman growled. "All they need to do is starve us out."

"But I tell you I saw him watching from the brush the first time they rushed us," Black River Ben said sharply. "He'd see the jam we was in and know all he could do was to get out for help."

Ben almost never used that tone and Flambeau Smith opened one eye and stared up at his friend's drawn face.

"Yeah," the riverman retorted, "and may be you only thought you saw him."



Flambeau jerked to a sitting position.

"Call me a liar, too, will you?" he demanded in his shrill voice. "I saw Barry the same time Ben did. And more'n that, I saw him signal to hold on before he snuck away."

That silenced the score of men in the cook camp. Black River Ben gently pushed Flambeau back onto the straw.

"Easy, lad," Ben said. "Don't strain yourself like that," and he winked.

But despondency would not down. The beleaguered crew knew how close had been the decision in the last battle.

"What if Barry did get out?" one demanded. "First he's got to shack it seventy-five miles to Whitewater and catch a train to Kettle Falls. The drive's up river and he'd have to hunt it. And then come all the way back."

Black River Ben was instantly alert.

"Barry Page never yet fell down on anything he started out to do," Ben said harshly. "Paul Bunyan's a dead water man alongside Barry."

Again he had checked them. Barry had been Jack Reed's walking boss for years and had won their complete allegiance by whipping every man in the crew who sought a test.

But a little later Ben's strongest support gave way.

"Ten times is enough," Marty McGuire growled as he rubbed a bruised shoulder. "We can get out of this now, and we'd better while we've got a chance."

"Sure!" someone agreed quickly. "We're licked, only we don't know it."

THE idea gathered momentum like water drawn into a sluiceway.

"Falk's men don't like this fightin' anyhow," Marty McGuire continued. "They'll be glad to call it off. And all Falk wants is his river to himself."

"May be he'll stake us to a couple o' meals before we hit for Whitewater," someone said hopefully.

Black River Ben, still kneeling beside Flambeau Smith, looked down to find a mocking, challenging expression in the injured man's eyes. Of all the crew, Flambeau alone understood how Ben's keen mind was able to control even the thoughts of his companions, and how Ben himself delighted in his power.

"Bet you a month's pay," Ben whispered in quick answer to Flambeau's look, and he arose and strolled toward the group at the other end of the cook camp.

"What gets me is how Falk keeps his men at it," he remarked casually. "Falk's huskier'n most, but he ain't come within ten rods of us yet."

They understood what he meant. A woods foreman must always lead to hold the allegiance of his crew. Not one of Jack Reed's men would take an order from Jack or Barry Page were he not sure in his heart that Jack or Barry could whip him in a fair fight.

"May be he pays 'em double time," Marty suggested. "Long as we stick to this dam, Falk can't drive a log."

"Barry told me last winter that Falk wants to drive all the logs on this river and got contracts from everyone except us," Ben offered. "That's why he's buckin' us. And he has to pay a forfeit if the drive don't go through on time."

"Which is what I'm getting at," Marty said. "If we're costing Falk so much money, he'll be glad to get rid of us any way he can."

"I suppose he would," Ben agreed hesi-

tantly. "It's what—supposin' I go have a talk with him."

The silence of amazement greeted this. But the men were hungry and weary and battered. Marty quickly recovered.

"The clear rig!" he exclaimed. "You can talk a peavey into dancin' a jig, Ben."

"If he'll come out and listen," Ben said dubiously. "He'll be leary of a trick. And I am, too. I want a good crew behind me."

TEN men were left at the cook camp to guard the east barricade and thirty-five accompanied Ben to the west end of the dam. They remained at the log fort and Ben went on.

"I've got to string him along a bit," Ben explained. "Work him around to givin' us some grub."

"We know you, Black River," a lumberjack chuckled. "We've seen you work before."

Ben walked to the end of the dam and called to the silent forest beyond.

"Oh, Falk! Come out and let's have a little talk."

A second call brought a riverman into the open.

"Falk's down at camp."

"Then send for him," Ben said harshly.

He found a seat on a log about twenty yards from the barricade and began to whittle a stick. A half hour passed, forty minutes, and Ben did not look up. Then Falk appeared.

"That makes his camp a mile down river," Ben said in a low voice to the men behind him. "Not far to go for your grub."

"Work him for three good meals," a riverman chuckled.

Ben continued to whittle as Falk walked out onto the dam. Falk was a big man, less than six feet but weighing well over two hundred, barrel bodied and with short, thick arms and legs. He stopped once, studied the men perched on the barricade, then walked closer to Ben.

"Well, boys, you've had enough, eh?" he exclaimed exultantly. "I'll guarantee you won't be bothered if you leave right away."

"We figured we was just gettin' nicely started," Black River Ben drawled without glancing up from his whittling.

"Huh!" Falk snorted. "Four to one, and I've got more men coming."

His face was heavily bearded but the sneer showed through the whiskers.

BEN looked at him, and then back at his own men, who leaned eagerly against the barricade. Falk was remaining far enough away so that every word of the conference carried.

"It's been proved more'n once that a Jack Reed man is worth five of any other kind," Ben observed.

"Reed men! Never heard of 'em."

"That's strange," and Ben glanced up in surprise. "From Kettle River, you know."

"Now that you speak of it, I've heard talk of a Jack Reed from Kettle River," Falk sneered. "Thinks he's a little king in that logged off country. But you're in a different part of the state, boys. We're real loggers here and not afraid of this Reed or any of his jackpine eating gang. I'm giving you a last chance. How about it?"

Black River Ben did not speak but bent over his whittling to hide the exultant gleam in his eyes. For he knew his work here was done.

"I'll tell you how about it!" Marty McGuire roared. "No dog ever yet nipped the seat of a Reed man's pants and lived to brag about it. A Reed jack is worth five ordinary men and ten like you and your yelpin' brush wolves. If you'll stand still for thirty seconds I'll prove it to you."

Marty was over the barricade and the others were following. Black River Ben jumped up in alarm. Falk recognized dynamite when the fuse sputtered. He retreated, and instantly one hundred men leaped out of the forest to protect him.

Ben waved his comrades back and no attack ensued.

The defenders returned to the cook camp, which stood near the sluiceway in a wide, flat space that had once been an island and now formed the center of the dam. They crowded inside, growling and muttering, but in a new tone. The Jack Reed spirit possessed them. They were aroused, a cohesive, fighting Reed machine with no thought of ultimate defeat.

FLAMBEAU SMITH, lying on his mat of straw, listened in amazement, but Black River Ben did not come near him for some time. At last, when the guards had been posted and the rest of the men were sleeping in the warm sunshine outside, Ben brought a hatful of water for Flambeau to drink.

"You sure are wasted in a loggin' camp," the injured man said. "Did you feed this crew concentrated essense o' bulldog or refined extract of wildcat?"

Ben's ready grin did not respond.

"They'll hit us again tonight sure," he said. "And I've been doin' some figurin'. On Barry. I can't see how he can get here with more men before daylight."

"You still so sure he got away, Ben?"

"I'm dead sure now since seein' Falk. He's dirty and he's mean. Think he wouldn't 'a' used Barry to get us out of here if he had him?"

For the first time, Flambeau displayed frank admiration.

"If I had a hat I'd take it off to you, feller," he said. "Then what you afraid of?"

"Daylight's the *first* time we can expect Barry. And Falk is going to keep pounding at us now."

"Shucks!" Flambeau snorted. "You don't know Barry as well as I do, or Jack Reed either. Another month's pay they'll be here before midnight."

"You ain't figured it as close as I have, Flambeau."

"Hours and miles ain't the way to figure Barry and Jack. Call it a bet?"

"Which will make two months you owe me," Black River Ben agreed, and he went outside to get some sleep in the warm noonday sunshine. He believed he would need it.

FALK'S attack came unexpectedly in the late dusk instead of after complete darkness. He had a second surprise in that, for the first time, only one barricade, the west, was besieged. In the dim light it was impossible to determine whether the entire Falk crew had been concentrated there. The Reed rivermen at the east end of the dam dared not leave, even though no foe appeared before them.

The defenders fought with a savagery they had not previously displayed and they held the west barricade against the succeeding waves of lumberjacks that swept up.

Darkness came as the battle raged. Falk men retreated, and it seemed that new ones immediately took their place. The Reed crew was tiring. Ben decided to get help from the east end, but he ran the length of the dam only to find his comrades there in desperate conflict.

The end had come. Black River Ben knew it. Falk had told the truth when he said he was bringing fresh troops to the battle. The defenders were worn out and now outnumbered more greatly than before. The Falk lumberjacks rolled over the log wall and swept their opponents back.

The first day of the siege Jack Reed's men had planned their course in case a barricade was carried. A signal was to warn those at the other end of the dam and all were to retreat to the log cook camp.

Now, when "Dam's blown out!" echoed in the night, swift flight caught the Falk crew napping. Within sixty seconds every Reed man still on his feet was in the camp. Soon a jeering, exultant mob had gathered outside.

"It's just a matter of how long it'll take 'em to get the bright idea o' tearing off the roof," Marty McGuire said.

"They don't even have to do that," Sandy McLean growled. "Not a drop o' water in this shack. They've only got to wait."

AS BLACK RIVER BEN feared, Austin Falk had no intention of delaying matters. He sent half his men in a swift charge upon the door. But repulsing them was comparatively easy. Only two could squeeze through at once, and they were outlined against the sky, while the defenders remained invisible in the black interior. Clubs and fists darted out of the darkness, the door was choked with fallen besiegers, and the attack quickly ceased.

"They won't ask for much of that," a Reed man laughed.

But he laughed alone. They knew they had reached the end. Knocking down a few men at the door would not ease their plight. Falk's two hundred and fifty could tear the lop camp apart.

A wild clamor sounded outside, shouts of victory and suggestions for attack. Black River Ben stood in the door and watched the crowd milling about.

"A lot you've got to yell about," Ben called. "Six to one, and you haven't finished the job yet."

"We will!" Falk men shouted.

"How?" Ben taunted. "What with? You ain't got the brains of a fool hen or as much guts as a butchered hog. The only mistake we made was not fightin' you in shifts. Half of us could 'a' kept you off while the other half slept."

Black River Ben walked out until he was half way to his encircling foes.

"I don't mind spotting you a bit of advice," he told them confidentially. "A couple o' sticks o' dynamite tossed into the door would do the job neat and proper. No danger to you at all. Or you might use shotguns and buckshot. Little chance of your getting hurt with them. You could dig a hole in the dam and let the water wash us out. If you wait long enough, may be lightning will strike us. Or why don't you go see the feller that aims the shootin' stars? One right down in the middle of the camp now, and your troubles are over."

"Wait until we get hold of you!" a voice came from the rear of the crowd.

TO THE amazement of the Reed men in the log camp, Black River Ben did not retort to that, and they had never known him to fail in having several nice ones ready for any situation. Then he surprised them even more by asking, "How many men you got?"

"Hundred and fifty," came the same voice.

"I thought it was more like two-fifty tonight," Ben said. "And we've got only forty-three left. You must feel quite proud o' that. Your bellies full o' grub, too, while we was starvin'. And usin' clubs and rocks, which no decent river pig ever thought o' doing before. Why don't you make another try for us?"

"Wait fifteen minutes and we will."

Falk walked out in front of his men.

"We'll wait no fifteen minutes!" he bellowed. "But I'll give you another chance if you take it quick."

Some of the men behind Ben stepped through the door.

"See what he'll offer," they whispered.

Ben waved them back. "Falk," he said, "listen to what I think of you."

Black River Ben was himself again. A certain exultation throbbed in his voice as he exhausted his imagination in describing Falk. He employed every curse ever heard on a log drive or in a logging town saloon. He even invented new ones, and he dressed all in such fresh garb he brought snickers from his foes.

"You damned fool!" Marty McGuire growled. "Falk will tear us to bits now."

Falk was raging. He came closer, shaking his fists and calling up his men. Suddenly the whole group charged.

They were beaten back at the door.

"Falk side-stepped and let the others get it," Ben said disgustedly when the attackers had retreated.

"So that's why you stirred him up!" Marty exclaimed. "Might 'a' known you had some scheme up your sleeve."

"Sure!" a riverman agreed. "That gang would quit if we could get hold of Falk."

"I'll get hold of him!" Ben announced exuberantly. "Fifteen minutes and I'll have my fingers in his whiskers."

"A month's wages you don't!" Flambeau Smith called from the rear of the cook camp.

"I don't bet on sure things," Ben chuckled. "Didn't you hear me talkin' to Barry. Barry Page himself! Walkin' around the outside of that gang answering me. They thought he was just one of their new ones. He's got a hundred and fifty men. The whole Kettle River crew! And Jack Reed will be with them. Boys, oh, boys! Fifteen minutes, Barry said."

"Ben's been hit on the head," Marty scoffed.

"We got to give Barry and Jack time," Ben rushed on. "Got to keep Falk busy. The crew's coming up the tote road and Barry's gone for 'em. One of you think of something for a change."

"Falk's done that," a riverman called from the door. "Now how'd he ever get that bright idea?"

EXPLANATION was unnecessary. Red lights glowed at both windows. Thumps sounded on the board and tar paper roof as blazing chunks of pitch pine were thrown. Smoke curled in under the eaves. Black River Ben ran to the door.

"Give us one chance!" he called. "Throw your clubs away and we'll come out and take it."

"You'll come out anyhow," a Falk man jeered.

Ben pleaded and argued, appealed to their sense of fair play. They scoffed at first, and then a few sided with him. Shouts of "Fists it is!" were followed by an increasing noise of splashing in the lake. The roof was burning brightly now and Ben could see Falk men throwing clubs and rocks into the water.

"You ain't got long to wait!" he yelled. "It's getting hot in here."

But Ben was looking beyond them, looking for Jack Reed and his men, awaiting some signal. All day he had been playing for hours. Now he played for seconds.

"I knew you were sports if Falk would let you be," he called. "Give us a two to one chance."

"What you mean?" someone asked in a puzzled voice.

"Split your crew. Count off a hundred and we'll tackle 'em. And when we've licked 'em we'll take on the rest."

Men were coughing behind him in the thickening smoke.

"We can't stick it any longer," Marty McGuire said. "You lied about Barry. We'll go take it."

The Reed rivermen were marshaled in a double line, waiting to charge out the door. Two had been told off to help the injured from the burning camp. But still Black River Ben could not see any sign of the rescuers.

"Come and get it, you scum!" Falk jeered.

BLACK RIVER BEN, outside the door, escaped the smoke. The choking men inside took affairs into their own hands. They came out, two abreast, spread into a column of fours, and charged swiftly upon the thick mass of Falk lumberjacks.

They gasped for breath in the fresh air, and they had no faith in Black River Ben's assertion that help was at hand. But they did have a plan. If they could fight their

way through to the sluiceway, which was crossed by only three heavy stringers, they could hold off an army.

The solid column hit Falk's crew like an ax biting into a white pine. It drove almost to the other side, slowed, stopped. The press was too great for effective fighting. Even though the Reed men now had clubs against fists alone, two hundred and fifty well fed lumberjacks crowded in on the band of forty-three starved and battered but still gallant defenders of the dam.

The dry old cook camp was burning fiercely now and a red glare lighted the battle. The Reed men were in a compact group which they endeavored to spread into a circle, and could not.

"Anyhow, they'll never forget us," Marty McGuire grunted.

"I've got my six!" Ben yelled as he tapped a Falk man on the head. "Now I'll get half a dozen for Flambeau."

"Six apiece is all we need!" Sandy McLean roared.

It was useless. Reed men began to fall. Sheer weight was too much for them. Their group became more compact, and thereby less effective. Suddenly the group itself, their only hope, was shattered by a terrific rush of Falk men from one side.

But those Falk men had not charged. They had been driven, driven by a grim, relentless band of heavy fisted rivermen who shouted as they came.

"Kettle River! Kettle River!"

It long had been the battle cry of Jack Reed's crew, and Jack's own bellow sounded above the rest.

"If Black River didn't tell the truth!" Marty McGuire roared his astonishment

SWIFTLY the conflict spread out. Falk men could not comprehend. Forty lumberjacks had suddenly become two hundred demons maddened by the details of the siege Black River Ben had given to Barry Page over his foes' heads.

In a miraculously short time the battle ground was cleared of all who could run. Ben and Marty held the badly mauled Falk between them and hurled him to the ground before the burning cook camp.

"Watch him," Ben said. "I've got a lot to do."

He found Barry Page and the two quickly assembled a band of one hundred, which swept down the river trail and captured Falk's camp, with its food, tents and blankets. They had little opposition. The Falk crew had scattered. Many were already on their way out to Whitewater.

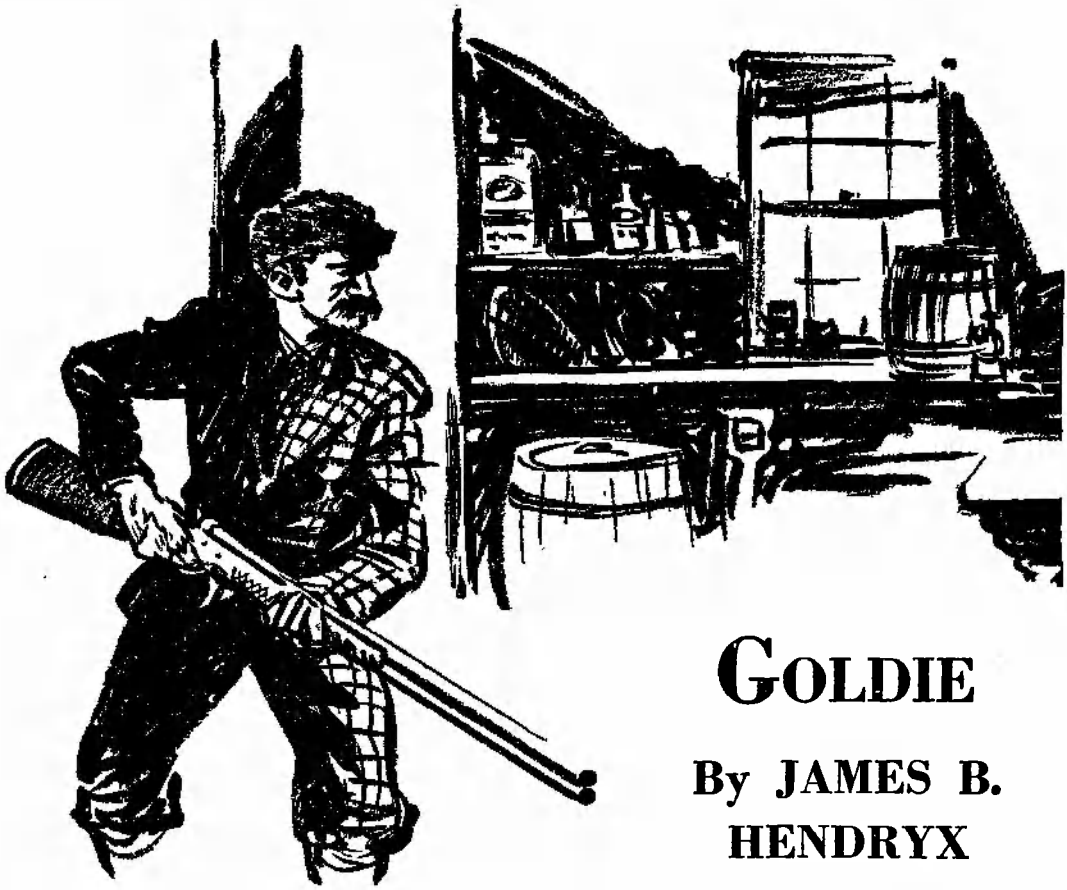
At dawn all Jack Reed's men were in the Falk camp. Jack now knew all the details of the siege. His broad face was stretched in a broader grin, and his bellowing laugh echoed through the forest.

"When it comes to fighting, nothing can lick the Kettle River outfit," he chuckled.

"Fighting!" Flambeau Smith scoffed in his high treble. "It wasn't fighting that held the dam."

"What would you call it?" Barry Page grinned.

"Talk did it," Flambeau answered, and he glanced across the fire to where Black River Ben had fallen asleep with a cup of tea in a big paw. "Just talk."



GOLDIE

By JAMES B. HENDRYX

Author of "Trial and Error," "Corporal Downey Invades Halfaday," and Many Stories of the Outlaws of Halfaday Creek

HE WAS an innocuous little man with soft brown eyes, mild and confiding as a setter dog's, yet with a haunting, hurt look in them that spoke of confidence betrayed. He stood blinking just within the doorway after leaning his paddle against the wall, depositing his pack upon the floor, and carefully closing the door behind him. In a mildly apologetic voice he addressed the two men who stood at the bar:

"Is this Cushing's Fort, on Halfaday?"

"The same," answered the solemn faced man with the drooping yellow mustache, who presided behind the bar, as he shoved aside the leather dice box, and elevated his steel rimmed spectacles from nose to forehead. "Step up, stranger, an' have one on the house. It's quite usual hereabouts."

The man advanced to the bar, and lined up beside the only other occupant of the room, a huge black bearded man, who stood with one foot resting on the battered brass rail and regarded him with interest.

"Snowin' eh? She's comin' early this year. It looks like, pardner, you got here on the last water."

The newcomer removed his cap upon which snowflakes were melting into tiny drops of water, and beat it against his knee.

"Yeah, but it don't amount to nothin'.

It started about an hour ago. I be'n breakin' ice in the still places the last three mornin's. Water don't leave no trail."

"That's what they say," agreed the big man, shoving the bottle toward the other. "Fill up."

Grasping the bottle eagerly, the man filled his glass and, with a furtive glance toward the door, he raised it. "Here's how," he said, and the three downed their liquor. "Fill 'em up agin," he ordered, tossing a well filled gold sack onto the bar. "Which my name's Smith—John Smith——"

"Not," interrupted the black whiskered man, "on Halfaday, it ain't."

"Wha—what?" stammered the little man, his eyes on the speaker's face.

WHITE teeth flashed in a smile behind the black beard as the big man explained. "Meanin' that sixteen, seventeen other folks arrived at that same solution—me included—before you come. Of course, we ain't none of us got no patent on the alias, but further indulgence in it would lead to monotony an' confusion—at least, ontil some of the present incum-

The First Female Woman Turns Up on Halfaday—and Naturally Trouble Also Turns Up

bents is thinned out. In the meantime, the name-can there beside you will furnish a name that will answer the purpose jest as well as John Smith, er the one you was born with."

"But—this name-can?" queried the man, with a glance toward the tin molasses can that stood at the end of the bar. "How do you work it?"

"It ain't complex. In fact, when me an' Cush devised it, we geared it to fit mentalities that couldn't think back no further than John Smith fer an alias. You simply stick yer hand in the can an' draw out a name which then becomes yourn ontil circumstances removes you from our midst, as a newspaper would say."

With a grin of understanding the man drew a slip of paper from the can and held it to the light.

"George Cornwallis," he read aloud.

"Yeah," observed the black bearded man, "me an' Cush copied them names out of a hist'ry book. We mixed up the front an' hind ones, so if any of the real parties would show up on Halfaday they couldn't make no trouble. But at that, I s'pose most of 'em's dead. This here Cornwallis, I rec'lect, was a general that made a famous retreat."

"Him an' I, both," said the newcomer. "Let's licker."

The bottle was passed, and glasses were filled.

"Here's mud in yer eye, George," toasted the black bearded one, "An' by way of introduction, I might add that the party behind the bar there is Lyme Cushing, an' I'm Black John Smith—to all intents an' purposes."

"Glad to know you," said the newcomer, and as he drank, Black John noted that again he shot a furtive glance over his shoulder toward the door.

"Two drinks calls fer a third," he said, refilling his own glass and shoving the bottle along. "An' not to git personal, I might inquire if you was expectin' some one? It's fer yer own good," he hastened to add. "Bein' located only a little ways from the Alasky line, we're in shape to do a stranger a good turn, now an' then."

"My Gosh!" exclaimed the man nervously. "I hope not! No—I ain't hardly expectin' no one—way up here. It ain't like White Horse, er Forty Mile, er Circle, er Eagle, er Fort Yukon, er Dawson, er Mayo——"

"Cripes sakes!" exclaimed Black John, in undisguised admiration. "An' they mentioned this here other Cornwallis's retreat in hist'ry! Where, if one might ask, was the origional sin, if any committed?"

"In New Bedford, Massachusetts," replied the man lugubriously. "I figgered I could lose myself in the gold rush. But up to now I ain't had no luck."

"The offense must have be'n one of importance," observed Black John.

"An' that ain't the half of it."

"Alasky's American territory," reminded Old Cush. "It would be best to stay on this side."

"Boundary lines don't mean nothin'," replied the man sadly. "It would be the same in Timbuktu, er Chiny."

"Gawd," breathed Black John, in an awed tone. "I robbed an army an' retreated less than five hundred miles, an' feel reasonably safe! Keep yer sin to yerself, fella. We'd never be able to hold it!"

"You, ner no one else," sighed the man, raising his glass. "Here's lookin' at you."

THEY drank, and once again the two noted the stranger's furtive backward glance.

"A man can't walk on three legs," observed Old Cush, giving the bottle a push. "Have another on the house."

"Is the hull crick staked?" inquired Cornwallis. "Er could a man locate him a claim?"

"Plenty of room up the crick from here," answered Black John. "She's mostly staked, below. She's spotted, but a man kin most always take out better'n wages."

"Wages would suit me—if I was left alone to enjoy 'em. I heard, down on the

river, that Halfaday is a good place to—er—er——"

"It is," interrupted Black John, "provided a man keeps in mind a few simple rules. Not favorin' the police nosin' around up here, we aim to keep the crick moral. Murder, claim-jumpin', larceny in any form, an' skullduggery is punished by hangin', after conviction by miners' meetin'. Other offences is winked at."

"What's skullduggery?"

"Skullduggery," explained Black John, "is any hangable offence that ain't included under murder, claim-jumpin', an' larceny. We ain't got no hard an' fast definition of the term, as a perfesser would say. We leave it to the jury, which it consists of such citizens of the crick as kin be rounded up—except the defendant who, outside of tryin' to lie out of the charges, ain't got no voice in the proceedin's. The way we look at it—a man had either ort to git hung; er he orten't. If he ort; we 'tend to the matter. If he didn't murder no one, er jump no claim, er steal nothin', then we hang him fer a skulldog.

"What a man done before he come to Halfaday, no matter how magnanimous, ain't none of our business. But what he does after he gits here is vicy vercy."

"I think I'm goin' to like it here," opined the man, as the three swallowed their liquor. "I'll go on up the crick a piece, an' when I stake me a likely claim, I'll be back fer supplies."

"You better cut you some logs, an' when you come down, a bunch of us'll go on back with you an' help you roll up a cabin. Winter'll be onto us d'rectly. An' logs has got canvas beat all to hell."

After the man had retrieved his pack and his paddle, and closed the door behind him, Old Cush mopped perfunctorily at the bar with a rag. "Cornwallis is a quiet appearin' man," he observed, "an' he's got kind lookin' eyes."

"His looks," opined Black John, "ondoubtless belies him. They wouldn't have run him out of New Bedford fer havin' kind eyes—ner yet, neither, fer quietness."

"What's New Bedford—a town?"

"Yeah. Back in Massachusetts. It's where they make shoes—er stockin's—er mebbe it's collars."

"He might of robbed a fact'ry," hazarded Cush.

Black John shook his head. "Nope. A man couldn't hardly steal enough shoes, er stockin's, er collars to git chased clean acrost the States, an' all over the Yukon, an' half of Alasky fer. An' besides—what in hell would he do with 'em? No sir—it ain't nothin' less important than murder—an' a damn good one, at that. It jest goes to show that you can't never tell by the size of a frog, how far a stone kin roll. You better jest slip word to the boys that it might be best not to rile him."

II

FOUR days later Cornwallis reappeared.

"I've staked me a claim," he announced, "on a bend, about four miles up the crick. There ain't be'n no one inquirin' fer me?

"Nary soul," reassured Black John. "Halfaday's hard to git to, with the freeze-up comin' ahead of the snow, like it done this year. You've prob'ly throw'd off pursuit—anyways till the snow comes."

"It's a comfortin' thought," said the man. "I'm buyin' a drink."

When the glasses were filled, he laid a slip of paper on the bar. "Here's the list of what I'm needin'. The crick's froze above the rapids, so as long as there ain't enough snow fer sleddin', I'll have to backpack the stuff. It'll take three er four trips."

"Did you git out them logs?" asked Black John.

"Yeah, I got a few cut. I only want a little cabin. It's easier het."

"Don't bother about extry trips fer them supplies. Me an' some of the boys'll be up in the mornin' to help you with the cabin. We'll fetch 'em."

"Drink up, an' have one on the house," invited Old Cush.

They drank, and once again, the two noted the furtive back glance.

"It shore is white of you boys to help out with the shack," said the man, as they refilled the glasses.

"Oh, we're like that on Halfaday," replied Black John. "We all hang together —er stick together, I should say. That word hang has got a kind of a forebodin' sound, somehow. You see, most of us is outlawed fer one thing an' another, an' we've got to kind of co-operate, as the fella says. That's one reason why we've got to keep Halfaday so damn moral—so the police won't come buttin' in on us. When one shows up on the crick, we sort of pass the word along, so them that don't want to meet up with him kin lay low, er cross over into Alasky, as his judgment dictates."

"It's a good system," agreed Cornwallis. "An' anytime I kin be of use to you, jest let me know. Every man's got to make a last stand, sometime. An' I ain't afraid of no police that ever walked. I'll be goin' now. See you tomorrow. An' I'm shore obliged."

"Yer welcome," answered Black John. "An' by the way—a man can't walk on two legs when one of his feet's on the brass rail. I'm buyin' a drink."

WHEN the man had taken his departure, Old Cush glanced at Black John. "He looks over his shoulder a hell of a lot fer a man that don't fear no police," he opined.

"It might be caution, rather than fear," replied Black John. "He don't look like a man that would brag."

"He don't go heeled," grunted Cush.

"Huh! Jest because he don't go 'round strapped to a couple of six-guns ain't no sign he ain't heeled! I seen a fella onct, which he didn't look no more warlike than a fishin' worm. But one time in a card game, he got riled—an' that afternoon we buried the hombre that dealt off'n the bottom—an' his pardner, too."

"He claimed every man had to make a last stand," said Cush. "An' if he's as bad as you think, I don't want him makin' no last stands in this saloon. S'pose he was to knock off some policeman—Corporal Downey, fer instance. What a hell of a fix we'd be in!"

"Downey wouldn't be huntin' him, chances is—the way the chechakos is pourin' in on 'em down on the river. The Mounted ain't got no time to be doin' chores fer the police of New Bedford, Massachusetts. An' besides—jest because a man makes a last stand ain't no sign there's goin' to be killin'."

"Huh! I seen a chromeo, one time, of Custer's last stand—an', believe me, there was plenty of killin'! I ain't favored the idee of last stands, ever sence."

"Time'll tell," observed Black John sagely. "Of course, we don't want no police knocked off on Halfaday—not even American ones. If any shows up, we'll slip Cornwallis the word, so he kin lay low till they go back where they come from. An' meanwhile, some of us'll go up tomorrow an' help him with his shack."

III

CUSHING'S FORT, the log trading post that catered to the needs and the wants of the little community of outlawed men that had sprung up on Halfaday Creek, close against the Alaska-Yukon boundary, was situated on a high bluff at a sharp bend of the creek. The front door opened directly into the spacious bar room, and together with several windows, commanded an unobstructed view of several miles of the creek bottom, which anyone approaching from the Yukon River country must traverse to reach the fort. An

old fashioned brass telescope, kept just inside the door in summer, and just outside in winter, to prevent the lenses from frosting, was at all times available for the minute scrutiny of any approaching traveler.

Thus it was that one morning, two weeks after the men had returned from rolling up Cornwallis's cabin, Black John Smith paused before the bar-room door and fixed his gaze upon some tiny black specks that showed against the white floor of the valley. Deliberately, he reached into the section of hollow log that was the receptacle for the telescope, and withdrawing the instrument, rested it against a corner of the building, and focused it upon the moving black specks. For several minutes he continued the scrutiny, then, returning the telescope to its place, opened the door, and approached the bar where Old Cush had already set out a bottle and two glasses.

"Someone," he announced, after clearing his throat and returning the empty glass to the bar, "is coming."

"Who?" asked Cush, as he wiped at a few drops of spilled liquor with his rag.

"Police," replied Black John, pouring himself another drink. "Two of 'em, an' a guide. They must have be'n waitin' fer this first snow."

"A guide!" exclaimed Cush. "What in hell would the police want of a guide? They all know where Halfaday's at."

"American police don't."

"What would American police be doin' on Halfaday?"

Black John grinned. "I'll never know, except by hearsay. They might be lookin' into the matter of an army pay-roll."

"How clost be they? An' how do you know they're police? They wearin' uniforms?"

"Clost enough fer comfort—an' gittin' closter. They'll be here in half an hour—an' I won't. They ain't wearin' no uniforms. I'm basin' my assumption, as a lawyer would say, on the theory that anyone comin' in here fer personal reasons wouldn't need no guide. I didn't; nor neither did the rest of the boys."

"Yer assumptions is kind of far fetched, it seems like to me. You'll feel kind of foolish if it turns out to be a huntin' outfit, er some such."

"Mebbe," admitted Black John. "But I'd a damn sight ruther feel a little foolish whilst remainin' at large; than to feel sorry under restraint. I'll git over it quicker. I'm goin' down to Red John's shack an' hole up. I'll start a couple of the boys out to warn the American wanteds."

THREE-QUARTERS of an hour later, two men entered the room, and stamping the snow from their feet, approached the bar.

"Are you Mr. Cushing?" asked the larger of the two, as the other eyed the bottles on the back bar.

Old Cush nodded somberly. "If you want to put it that way."

"I'll buy a drink," said the man who had eyed the bottles. "Will you join us?"

"Shore," answered Cush, setting out bottle and glasses.

"Where's the guide?" asked the larger man. "He'd prob-ly like one, too. Here he comes. He's be'n looking after the dogs."

"Siwashes ain't served," announced Old Cush, with a glance toward the guide.

The man objected. "He's only half Indian. He told us that his father was a white man."

"His father could git a drink, then," replied Old Cush.

"But it's pretty cold, an' he's come a long way."

"So's the dogs."

"You can't call a half-breed an Indian," insisted the man. "He's half white."

"Separate him, an' I'll serve the white half," advised Cush. "We're law abidin' on Halfaday."

The two exchanged glances, and as they filled their glasses, the smaller man's eyes roved the bar as though searching for something. "Haven't you got some water?" he asked.

"Water?"

"Yes. Water—for a chaser."

"A which?"

"A chaser. A wash. Something to follow the whiskey down."

"We gen'ally foller it with another whiskey," said Cush. "But if you want water you kin have it. Wait till I find a bucket, an' I'll fetch some from the crick. The only water I've got here is to rinse glasses in."

"Oh, never mind. I guess we can stand it, if you can. Quite a place you've got here."

"Yeah."

"Do you have much trade?"

"Some."

"Nice crick—Halfaday," opined the other, when they had swallowed their liquor.

"In what way?" asked the somber-eyed Cush, as he shoved the bottle toward them. "Have one on the house."

"Why—er—nice wide valley—and—well, it looks like a good place to find gold."

"Prospectors?"

"No," answered the larger man. "The fact is, Mr. Cushing, we're policemen — detectives."

"Business good?" asked Cush.

The man smiled. "Well, not particularly. We're on the trail of a man that pulled a big bank job in Massachusetts. Are there any newcomers on the crick?"

"I couldn't say."

"Well, if one showed up, you'd know it, wouldn't you?"

"I might. An' then agin, I mightn't," replied the noncommittal Cush. He was hoping that Black John hadn't neglected to send the warning up and down the creek. These were evidently the men Cornwallis expected to be on his trail. He had mentioned fleeing from Massachusetts. Old Cush rather liked the little man with the kindly eyes.

"Oh, come, now," persisted the detective. "You know that if anyone——"

THE door opened, interrupting the sentence, and a man stepped into the room. He was a small man, with mild brown eyes. A rifle barrel snuggled in the crook of his left elbow, and as he advanced toward the bar, he shook the mitten from his right hand, and allowed his thumb to gently caress the hammer of the gun.

Behind the bar, Old Cush's muscles tensed as he noted that the two policemen were eyeing the intruder narrowly. As Cornwallis took a position near the end of the bar, facing the two, the proprietor greeted him with a furtive wink. He wondered whether he was about to witness that last stand Cornwallis had mentioned. At least, he could warn him.

"Cornwallis," he said, "the house is settin' 'em up. I want you should meet these two gents from the States. They claim they're detectives, an' they're huntin' someone fer robbin' a bank back in Massachusetts." He turned to the others, without pausing. "Gents, this here is George Cornwallis. He's be'n a residenter of Halfaday fer quite a long time." And with a stifled sigh of relief, he noted that no hint of recognition showed in the faces of the officers, as they acknowledged the introduction with nods.

The larger of the two spoke. "You haven't either of you run across a man by the name of O'Dowd, have you? Of course, he's probably——"

"O'Dowd," interrupted Old Cush, as a slight scraping sound drew his glance toward the log wall over the back bar, where the muzzle of a rifle was swiftly disappearing from view just beneath a shelf that held a stuffed white owl. "Would you be meanin' Ezra O'Dowd?"

The effect of the name was electrical.

The two sleuths faced him with eager eyes.

"Sure!"

"Yes—that's him!"

"Where is he?"

A man stepped through the doorway leading into the store room, and Black John Smith joined the group at the bar. "Did I hear," he asked, "the name of Ezry O'Dowd?"

"Yes. Do you know where he is?"

"I shore do."

"We're United States officers, and we want him for murder and bank robbery in Boston."

"Yer welcome to him. But I'd like to explain that we ain't to blame fer the shape he's in."

"What do you mean?"

"Meanin' that he's bunged up considerable. His fingers an' thumbs is off. But they're all there. He's got 'em in his shirt pocket—the one on the right."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Why, Ezry O'Dowd's fingers. He got murdered, an' Corporal Downey, he wanted to take his prints, to make sure it was Ezry. He was froze, so we took him apart to make it handier to git the prints."

"Who in thunder is Corporal Downey?"

"What! Ain't you be'n to Dawson?"

"No. We were headed for Dawson, but at White Horse we got a tip that our man was up here—his accomplice, too."

"Yeah," answered Black John. "They was. Ezry's here yet—in body; but not in sperit. His pardner, which we know'd him as Ulysses S. Lee, is down in the Dawson jail, along with the bird that murdered Ezry. So's about forty-nine thousan', out of the fifty thousan' dollars they lifted off'n that Boston bank. You was askin' about Corporal Downey. Well, he's the young fella that slipped up here an' done you fellas' chore fer you. The Mounted's like that. We work hand in glove with 'em, up here on Halfaday."

AFTER the officers had departed, Old Cush turned to Black John. "What in hell was you doin' in the store room with a rifle bar'l shoved through the peek slot? I thought you went over to Red John's. An' I thought you was goin' to send the warnin' up an' down the crick! I damn near throw'd a fit when Cornwallis, here, walked right in on them two, jest after they'd got through tellin' me they was police from Massachusetts."

Black John grinned, and eyed Cornwallis, who still stood fingering his rifle. "I got some askin' to do, too. How about it, George? Didn't no one warn you that American police had showed up on the crick?"

"Why, sure! A fella come hurryin' up an' slipped me the word, an' I grabbed my gun an' come down here as fast as I could leg it. I thought you was needin' help, bein' as you'd spoke about that army job."

"Cripes sake!" cried Black John. "The warnin' was so's you could hide!"

"I won't hide from no police," said Cornwallis. "I ain't afraid of 'em."

Old Cush set out bottle and glasses. "This un's on the house," he said. "But I don't know, yet, why you was in the store room, John?"

"Why—I slipped over to Red John's an' sent him an' One Armed John out to warn the boys. Bye-'n'-bye I peeks out the winder an' seen George, here, slippin' into the saloon with his rifle. I figured that somehow the boys had missed warnin' him. So I snuck over an' come in the back way, an' shoved my rifle through the peek hole. You all know I don't favor no violence on Halfaday—but us outlawed men has got to stick together."

IV

THE long winter passed. The sun appeared in short, but ever lengthening arcs, above the valley rim, and the snow softened at midday.

"Where," asked Black John, as he stepped one morning into Cushing's bar room, "is the book?"

"There's two," replied Cush, setting out

bottle and glasses, "The Bible, an' the singin' one. My wife was religious."

"Wimmin's liable to be," commented Black John. "Them an' preachers. But I mean the hist'ry book which Short John left behind when we hung him, that time. It's regardin' the name-can. There's one showed up on Halfaday!"

"One what?" inquired Cush, wrinkling his forehead into furrows.

"One woman, of course! We was jest talkin' about 'em, wasn't we?"

"A woman!"

"Yeah, a woman—of all the damn things to be showin' up! An' bein' such, there ain't no provision in the name-can to pervide her with an alias, in case she couldn't think of none, off hand. Anyways, she won't be claimin' her name is John Smith, like everyone else does!"

"Mebbe, bein' a woman that-a-way she wouldn't need no alias," ventured Cush.

"What the hell would she be doin' on Halfaday, then?" demanded Black John.

"I couldn't say."

"We was gittin' along fine till this had to happen to us," bewailed Black John, pouring another drink.

"Mebbe she won't stay," hazarded Old Cush, hopefully, refilling his own glass, and entering two drinks against Black John's account in the well thumbed book. "It might be she's what you might say, a transient."

"Transient—hell! She's moved into Olson's old cabin down the crick. It's a jinx cabin, anyhow. Out of the five that's lived in it sence Olson built it, two was shot, an' the Derelic' got married, and two was hung. But you can't hang a woman!"

"Not as such," agreed Cush, "onless there was aggravatin' circumstances. I wonder why in hell she come to Halfaday?"

"Why does anyone come?" grinned Black John. "But at that, I'd ruther it had be'n most anything but a woman! They shore raise hell wherever they're at!"

"They're sharper than a serpent's tooth, an' they stingeth like a adder, the Good Book says. I read out of it now an' then when I git the bar chores done. There's some good sayin's in parts of it."

"I wouldn't wonder," admitted Black John, "but we couldn't use them Bible names fer the name-can. They didn't have no hind names—er is it the front ones that's lackin'? It don't make no difference—we couldn't none of us say most of 'em, if we got 'em wrote down. At that, I don't rec'lect no wimmin's name in the hist'ry book, outside of Marthy Washington, an' Betsy Ross, an' Molly Stark."

"There was Barber Frisky," suggested Cush. "She's in the hist'ry, somewheres. I rec'lect hearin' a piece spoke about her an' Stonewall Jackson."

"Barber Frisky!" exclaimed Black John. "He would be a man. There ain't no wimmin barbers."

"The hell an' there ain't!" cried Old Cush. "One shaved me, onct. In Chicago it was, an' she talked me into gittin' a shampoo, an' a massage, an' hair dye, an' tonic, till it cost me better'n four dollars, an' I come out of there smellin' like a drug store had tipped over an' spilt all the bottles."

"Even if we could find the book," said Black John, "how are we goin' to work it? If we mix up them three, four wimmin's names an' put 'em in there, how do we know she'd git one of 'em? Chances is, she'd draw out a man's name; an' the next man that come along would git a woman's."

"The only way I see," said Old Cush sagely, "is to have a separate can fer the men an' wimmin'. That would save trouble, all around."

"Percautions agin trouble is futile, if there's a woman mixed up in it," replied Black John forebodingly. "We better jest let things ride, an' hope fer the bad luck to fall on other shoulders than ourn."

"There must of be'n wimmin' in yer past, John," hazarded Cush.

"Plenty. Any one of which, if she'd

show up, could start in an' raise partic'lar, hand-painted hell! How about you?"

Old Cush shook his head. "Nope. Too fer back to bother about. My conscience is clear, er at most only slightly befogged. Who told you about this here woman?"

"One Armed John. He seen her from acrost the crick."

"Seems like One Armed John is the first one to find out about whatever happens along the crick."

"He gits around more. Bein' crippled like he is, he can't do no good minin', so he hunts most of the time, an' sells the meat to the boys."

"What fer lookin' was she?"

"One Armed didn't know. He didn't stop to look her over good. As soon as determined her sect, he come bustin' hell-bent up the crick to tell me."

"Of course," speculated Old Cush, "if she's good lookin', an' would mind her own business, things might go along all right."

"Good lookin' ones never does," growled Black John. "An' the better lookin' they are, the more hell they kin raise with a crick."

THE door opened, and Cornwallis crossed to the bar.

"What ails you two?" he grinned. "You look as solemn as a couple of buzzards. There ain't nothin' should ort to make a man feel glum on a fine bright day like this."

In silence, Old Cush set out another glass and shoved the bottle toward the smiling man. "Bad luck has hit Halfaday," he said.

"What d'you mean—bad luck?" asked Cornwallis, raising the glass to his lips.

"The worst that could be," replied Black John. "A woman has showed up on the crick."

Cornwallis choked suddenly. Liquor spilled into his beard, and slopped from his glass to run down his wrist and disappear beneath his sleeve.

"A woman!" he gasped, coughing the burning liquid from his throat. "What kind of a woman?"

Both Old Cush and Black John stared in astonishment as the little man, with trembling fingers, refilled his glass, and downed its contents at a gulp. "Where's she at?" he continued, question after question hurling itself from between his lips. "What does she look like? Is she big; er little? Light; er dark? What's her name?"

"Hold on!" cried Black John, checking the torrent of queries. "We don't know nothin' except what One Armed John seen in one look, from acrost the crick. She's got pants an' a parka, an' she was throwin' her stuff into Olson's old cabin, about six miles down."

"It's her! It's her!" moaned Cornwallis, reaching again for the bottle. "I've got a premonition! I might of know'd my luck was runnin' too good."

"It's who?" persisted Black John. "What the hell are you talkin' about?"

"It's—it's—Goldie! My wife! She's ketched up with me, at last."

Black John heaved a sigh of vast relief. "Is that all!" he cried. "Well, that's fine! Narrowin' the trouble down to one man, that-a-way, shore dispels the gloom."

"It shore does," seconded Old Cush. "Here, Cornwallis—have another one on the house!"

"What d'you mean—dispels the gloom?" faltered Cornwallis. "By God, if you fellas was married to her, it wouldn't dispel no gloom to have her show up on a crick! She's run me clean acrost the States, an' all over the Yukon, an' half of Alasky—an' now she's ketched up with me!"

BLACK JOHN grinned broadly. "Cheer up, George," he encouraged. "Nothin' should ort to make a man feel

glum on a fine bright day like this! So it's a woman yer on the run from? Do you mean to say that you ain't in no trouble with no police?"

"Hell—no! I wisht to God I was! I'd ruther have forty police chasin' me, than her!"

"Have one on me," invited Black John. "You've shore took a load off'n my mind. When me an' Cush heard about this here woman showin' up on the crick, we foreseen plenty of trouble ahead fer all of us —with the boys up an' down the crick plottin' an' counter-plottin' agin one another, till a man couldn't trust no one. They might even begin tippin' one another off to the police—an' hell would have be'n to pay, all around. Fill up, Cush! An' we'll drink one to Cornwallis. He's the savior of Halfaday! Like the boy that stuck his thumb in the dike, an' saved Switzerland from the big washout. It's a case of hist-ry repeatin' itself!"

"Yeah," murmured Cornwallis disconsolately, "but does hist'ry tell what become of the boy?"

"Damn if I remember," said Black John. "An' this long after, it don't make no difference. The main thing is, Switzerland still sticks up there, high an' dry."

"It was Holland," corrected Old Cush loftily. "An' it was the boy's finger—not his thumb. William Tell saved Switzerland."

"It's immaterial," said Black John. "The p'int is that our woes has rolled off'n our shoulders onto Cornwallis, an' that's a grand thing. It localizes the menace, you might say. Narrows it down to where it kin be met. An' it's our dooty to meet it, Cush. One good turn deserves another, as the sayin' goes, an' I hereby pledge the combined an' total resources of the whole damn crick in George's behalf."

The little man shook his head. "It won't do no good," he said dolefully. "You don't know Goldie. She's shore got a will of her own."

"Where there's a will, there's a way to bust it," comforted Black John. "S'pose you go ahead an' tell us about this here Goldie, an' then we'll figger on a way to out-guess her."

"Well—it's like this. Fer years I prospected in the Birch Crick, an' Forty Mile country, an' about three years ago, the flapjacks got me. I got to ailin' in my stummick, an' I went down to Seattle to git doctored up. In the hotel a fella give me a paper which he'd got through with. 'Hearts Beats,' the name of it was, an' it was printed fer to bring lonesome folks together, which their intentions was honorable. You could write in an' they'd send you the name of a woman which she was huntin' around fer a man to marry, er vicy vercy. An' if you got married, you give 'em a fee. Well, I was kind of lonesome down there amongst all them strangers, so I wrote in, an' they sent me Goldie's name, an' we got to writin' back an' forth, an' she sent me a picture. So I went an' got one took, an' sent it to her. She wrote me how she was the widder of a sea captain which he was dead, an' she'd bought a hotel in New Bedford, Massachusetts, an' was makin' big money off'n sailormen. An' I told her how I was a gold miner up around Forty Mile.

"Well, the long an' short of it was, I went East an' seen how the hotel was a good property, an' full-up with boarders most every day. An' I figgered how a man might do a damn sight worst than marry in on it. Of course, the widder, she didn't come quite up to specifications as to looks, the photographt she'd sent me havin' be'n took a long while back——an' was of someone else to boot. But I was tired of livin' in the bush, an' sloshin' around in wet gravel all summer, an' freezin' to death all winter, so I was willin' to give her considerable rope in the matter of looks. 'Specially with her so nice an' friendly as she was—givin' me the best room in the hotel free, an' what not.

"It looked to me like the job of settin' back an' runnin' the hotel, an' takin' half the profits, had minin' beat all to hell—so I suggests that we git hitched. Well, she

was smart, er she thought she was, an' she wanted to know all about my mines, up north. I had a lot of papers, like a fella will—claim grants, an' transfers, an' water-rights, an' so on, an' I showed 'em to her. They wasn't worth a damn; the propositions havin' be'n abandoned. But they looked important.

"So, she suggests that, as a matter of mutual love an' affection between us, she'd deed me a half interest in the hotel, an' I'd deed her a half interest in them claims an' water-rights.

"It was a go with me. I was right there on the ground, where I could see the hotel, an' that it was a goin' proposition. An' I figgered that as long as I could keep her out of the Yukon, she'd never know about them claims.

" 'It's a trade,' I says.

" 'Call me Goldie,' she says.

"So, we went to a lawyer an' had the papers draw'd up, an' then we got hitched."

THE little man paused and poured himself another drink. "That same day," he continued, "I got moved out of that good room down to her room in the back of the house, an' it didn't take me no time to find out I hadn't married no desk job, runnin' the hotel. I wasn't even the bartender. I was chore boy, janitor, bell hop, porter, dishwater, an' potato peeler, an' I didn't even rate eatin' in the dinin' room. I got what I could snatch out of the kitchen.

"The hotel done a good business, bein' mostly filled up with sailormen, an' I didn't kick none—figgerin' that, what with the bar, an' all, we was makin' good money, an' at the end of the month my share would amount to quite a roll. Goldie done a cash business, an' she banked it in her sock.

"She was capable, all right——big, an' yaller haired, an' raw boned, an' she bossed them sailormen an' stevedores around like they was afraid of her. They was, too. I'd hear 'em talkin', now an' then, in the bar, when they didn't know I was around. She was the widder of a sea captain, all right—a big Dane that traded along the Labrador coast, an' acrost into Greenland, an' she sailed with him. But he was four, five husban's back, there bein' some intervenin' ones that she hadn't told me about. They was all men of property, too—accordin' to the whisperin's. An' they all died under such circumstances that made them sailormen an' stevedores to kind of wink, an' wag their heads, an' to kind of slant me glances that seemed like they was sort of waitin' fer somethin' to happen.

"The hair along the back of my head would git to pricklin' when I'd think about it, but I figgered on keepin' my eyes open, an' hangin' on till I seen what the job was payin'.

"Well, the first of the month come, an' passed, an' Goldie never cut me in on no money, nor neither mentioned any. So one night, after we'd went to bed, I asks her about my half."

" 'Your half? Your half of what?'

" 'Why, of the money,' I says. 'Of the profits of the hotel.'

"She laughed out loud there in the dark, an' believe me, it wasn't no silver tinkle. An' then she cut loose a string of cussin', which if she learnt it off'n her first husband, he could not of be'n nothin' less important than a pirate. 'Listen, darlin',' she says—speakin' the word darlin' like you'd tell it to a dog that had raided the grub cache. 'Git this,' she says. 'There ain't no profits! An' what's more, you got to dig up fifty-five thousan' dollars by the tenth of the month, in hard cash, er gold. The mortgage on this dump comes due then—that's forty thousan', an' there's fifteen thousan' back taxes.'

" 'That's all right, sweetheart,' I says. 'Jest as quick as the bank opens in the

mornin', I'll 'tend to it.' Figgerin', you see, that with fifty-five thousan' in sight in the mornin', she wouldn't do nothin' drastic that night—like if I riled her. I couldn't help but think of that gang of dead husban's as applied to my own case.

"Well, bankin' time come at last, an' after I'd finished up with the dishes, an' mopped up the office, I put on my good clothes an' went up town. I went to the court house an' verified her statement about the mortgage an' the back taxes—they was there, all right, to an extent where her equity in that hotel was a damn sight more of a liability than an asset.

"I had a thousan' dollar bill that I'd slipped in under the insole of my shoe fer emergencies, an' deemin' this to be one, I slipped it out, in an alley, an' sneaked to the deppo, an' ketched me a train fer Boston. That same evenin', I was on another train fer Seattle. An' the day after I got there, I ketched a boat fer Skagway, an' come on inside."

Once again, the man paused, filled his glass, and gulped his liquor.

"If you think that's the end of the story, it's 'cause you don't know Goldie. That's better'n two years ago, an' she's be'n on my trail ever sence. You see, before she got here she thought them claim papers an' water rights covered goin' propositions, an' she figgered on gittin' in on 'em. Chances is, she knows better now. It wouldn't take a woman like Goldie long to find out—but instead of quittin', she kep' a-comin'. Somehow, I've always be'n lucky enough to hear about her, an' git a-goin' before she ketched up to me. The way it looks, it's me personal she's after now—an' she's had time enough to git good an' damn mad. I keep thinkin', somehow, about that row of dead husban's. I thought I was safe, up here on Halfaday. I shore thought I'd throw'd her off, at last. But—it ain't no use. I'll have to move on."

AS THE man turned disconsolately from the bar, Black John laid a detaining hand on his shoulder.

"Hold on," he reminded. "Wasn't it you that spoke of makin' a last stand on Halfaday?"

"Yeah—but that was before Goldie got so clost."

"Lesten—there ain't nothin' beyond Halfaday but mountains an' such. You couldn't git nowheres without dogs. You'd git bushed."

"It would be a pleasant death, at that. Wait till you see Goldie."

"Look at here, Cornwallis—git holt of yerself! An' let this be a lesson to you not to have nothin' to do with wimmin. If they can't gyp you one way; they will another. Her hornswogglin' you into marryin' her constitutes a swindle, *per se,* an' as such would be hangable on Halfaday under the skullduggery provision. But the act wasn't perpetrated on Halfaday, so we'll have to think of some other way out. You done me a good turn, that time you come down here when you thought the American police was closin' in on me—an' now I'm goin' to square the book. Go back to yer cabin an' lay low till you hear from me. Leave me an' Cush handle Goldie."

A gleam of hope flashed in the mild brown eyes, as the little man glanced from one to the other. The gleam faded, and he shook his head sadly.

"I can't do it, boys. You've be'n kind to me. Yer friends of mine. It's askin' too much. Nope—I'll be on my way. So long."

As he turned once again toward the door, Black John reached out, grasped him by the arm, and spun him around in his tracks.

"Listen, you!" he said gruffly. "Go to yer cabin, an' stay there! Like you said—we're friends of yourn. An' there ain't man, beast, god, devil, nor woman that me an' Cush can't stop in their tracks! Things has got dull on Halfaday. This here eppysode will be a diversion, as the fella says, to break the monotony."

"Yer welcome to yer diversion," said Cornwallis dryly. "You've had fair warnin'. I'll do like you say. But believe me,

I'll have a stampedin' pack handy, an' keep one eye on the back-trail."

The man crossed the room and opened the door. The next moment it slammed violently shut, and he whirled, white faced, toward the two at the bar.

"The back door!" he cried. "Where's the back door? Quick! There's someone on the crick, right there at the foot of the bank—an' it's her!"

"Did she see you?" asked Black John.

"Hell—no! I seen her first! She'll be in here in a minute! What'll I do?"

"Slip into the store room," advised Black John. "Never mind the back door—you couldn't find the tunnel, nohow. Jest slip along that wall behind the bar till you come to the peek slot, which is clost up under the owl shelft, yonder. Then you kin peek through an' see if it's really her."

V

HARDLY had the terrified man faded from the room than two dull thuds sounded from the direction of the door.

"Knockin' the snow off'n her snowshoes" said Black John. "Git that third glass off'n the bar! She'll be in here d'rectly."

Scarcely were the words out of his mouth than the door was flung violently open, and a tall, parka-clad figure entered and strode toward the bar. Below the parka skirt showed caribou breeches and mukluks.

"My Gosh!" cried Black John in well-feigned surprise, as the figure threw back the hood to disclose an untidy mop of yellow hair. "It's a lady!"

A pair of pale green eyes regarded him with a fish-like stare, and wide, thin lips twisted into a sneer.

"Smart as hell, ain't you? How'd you guess it?"

Behind the bar Old Cush shifted uneasily. "I'm buyin' a drink, mam," he said. "Have one on the house."

"Make mine rum," ordered the woman, "an' see that it's pipin' hot!"

Old Cush ran a finger beneath the collar band of his flannel shirt, as though the garment had suddenly become uncomfortable.

"I ain't got no rum," he apologized, "but if you ain't in no hurry, I kin b'ile you up a mess of whiskey."

"Git at it then," snapped the woman, "an' in the meanwhile I'll take one neat."

Filling her glass, she tossed off the raw liquor, rasped the dregs from her throat, and spat viciously in the direction of Black John's mukluks.

Old Cush disappeared through the door leading to his living quarters, to return a moment later with a tin pan, into which he slopped a liberal portion of whiskey, and carried it to the stove.

The woman turned to Black John. "This is Cushing's Fort, on Halfaday Crick, ain't it?"

"Yes, mom. This is the place."

"Are you Cushing?"

"No, mom. That's him. My name's Smith."

The woman eyed Old Cush, who had resumed his place behind the bar. "Huh," she snorted. "I thought he was the bartender. So yer name's Smith, eh? An' I s'pose everyone else's name up here is Smith, too, ain't it?"

"No mom. There's a scatterin' of others."

"They say yer a hard outfit up here—outlaws, an' all that line of bull. But you don't look hard to me! I came up here to find my man; an' I'll find him, too—outlaws, er no outlaws!"

"Yes, mom. I wouldn't wonder an' you did. Who is the party? An' what was you wantin' of him? Mebbe we could be of help to you. We always like to accommodate a lady, on Halfaday."

"Never you mind what I want of him! I'll 'tend to that part! He's my husband, an' his name's Hubert Morningstar. D'you know where he's at?"

"No, mom. We ain't saw Hubert. Howcome he got mislaid?"

"Don't lie to me! I'm goin' to look over

every damn man on this crick, if it takes a year! It won't do him no good to try to hide out in the brush. He might's well step out an' face the music first as last—er else keep right on a-goin'. I've run him out of fifty camps already—the dirty bum! An' I'll run him out of fifty more if I have to. But I'll git him!"

"Yes, mom. You must want him bad."

"I'll say I do! He's a dirty, low-down, ornery swindler—that's what he is! An' a deceiver an' deserter of women, to boot!"

"Well, well!" sympathized Black John. "Such acts is reprehensible, to say the least. If you could give us a few facts in the case, mebbe we could help you. Hubert might of slipped in on us under an alias. We've got an inklin' that a few others has. What did Hubert look like? An' when was he s'posed to have come amongst us?"

"This winter—er maybe late in the fall. He's a little shrimp, with a smooth tongue in his head."

"Tongues is hard to identify."

"He's got sort of mild, soft eyes—like a sheep's. But he's a dirty, schemin' loafer—fer all his eyes!"

"Sort of a sheep in skunk's clothin', as the Good Book says, eh?"

"He's a no 'count, lousy, parachute-goin' around marryin' women, an' livin' off'n 'em!"

"Yer case seems like a sad one," observed Black John. "How come you married him, in the first place?"

THE woman turned on Old Cush, who had been a silent listener. "Where's that hot whiskey?" she demanded. "You'd stand there like a spare anchor an' let it all b'ile away while a body froze to death waitin' fer it! Shake a leg, an' fetch it over here. What kind of a way do you call that to run a saloon? What you need around here is a good capable woman to look after things! Are you married?"

"No, mam. That is—yes, I was," stammered Cush, and seizing the bar rag, he hastened to the stove, retrieved the pan, and carrying it to the bar, filled the woman's empty glass.

"Fill 'em all up," she ordered. "A shot of good hot grog under yer belt'll do you both good. If it was good old New England rum instead of this damn rot-gut, it would be better. But there ain't no rum in this whole God-forsaken country!"

"If it's jest the same to you, mom," said Black John, "we'll take ourn cold—out of the bottle. We ain't use' to drinkin' b'ilt whiskey—nor yet to pourin' it out of a pan."

"Suit yerselves. It'll leave all the more fer me."

She downed the hot whiskey, and as Old Cush refilled her glass, her eyes roved about the room. "Does this place pay?" she asked abruptly, focusing her fishy gaze upon him.

Black John caught the look of sudden terror that flashed into Old Cush's eyes, as he stammered a reply. "No—no—mam! It don't pay! Ain't never paid! Ain't long, now, till I'll have to close down."

The heavy black beard concealed a certain twitching at the corners of Black John's lips, as he interrupted. "You see, mom," he explained gravely, "Cush has got so many minin' interests to look after that pays real important money, that he ain't got time to give proper attention to the post here. I've often told him that if he could git holt of some woman that onderstood the saloon an' hotel business, this place would be a gold mine of itself. Of

course, Cush, he don't run no hotel, now—but there's some rooms upstairs that could be fixed up, an' it wouldn't cost much to put on an addition. A good hotel on Halfaday ort to pay big money—providin' Cush could find the right woman to marry.

"But we're kind of driftin' away from our subject, as a preacher would say. You was about to tell us how come you married this here Hubert."

THE whiskey was taking effect, and the woman drew a red bandana from the hip pocket of her caribou hide trousers, and dabbed at her eyes. Behind the bar, Old Cush's eyes shot daggers at Black John.

"Like you said," sniffled the woman, "my case is a sad one, an' should be a warnin' to pore, trustin' women not to marry up with slick tongued strangers. I was happy till he come along with his lies about his gold mines, up north. I was jest a pore little New England girl, tryin' to git along—an' an orphant, to boot. I was runnin' a quiet little boardin' house down by the sea, in a quaint old New England town. Like I said, I was happy an' contented, an' peaceful, with my cats, an' my books, an' lookin' after the comfort of my boarders. I was makin' a modest livin', but I'd had to give a big mortgage on the place when I bought it. An' what with the interest, an' taxes, an' all, debts was pilin' up on me. It was then I got acquainted with Hubert. I give him the best room in the house, free—'cause I loved him. It was a case of love at first sight, I guess—like the books tell about. An' he told me about his mines, an' showed me a whole thick packet of deeds, an' water-right papers that he carried around with him. An' so, when he asked me to marry him, I give in, hopin' that maybe I could take life a little easier. We deeded one another a half interest in what each one had; he transferrin' over to me half his mines an' water-rights—an' me deedin' him a half-interest in my little boardin' house.

"Only one month went by till I found out, all to a sudden, that it wasn't me he wanted at all—it was money! Yes sir—jest nothin' but money! It nearly broke my pore heart when one night—right out of a clear sky, you might say—he up an' demanded his share of the boardin' house profits. Well, I hid my grief as best I could—like a woman will—an' I explained to him how there wasn't no profits outside of our bare living, which I had gladly shared with him. An' then I tells him about the mortgage, an' the taxes, an' asks him fer a few dollars to make the payments, an' keep the roof over our heads."

The woman paused, swallowed a hot whiskey, dabbed at her eyes with the red bandana, and proceeded in a voice trembling with emotion. "Yes, sir, jest a few pitiful dollars out of all them gold mines that I had a half interest in, to keep the roof over our heads. An' what do you think he done?"

"Why—shelled out the money, of course," bellowed Black John, heartily. "Jest like any right thinkin' man would do fer his wife! Wouldn't they, Cush?"

Old Cush made a choking sound in his throat, and the woman continued. "That's what you'd think he'd do. But he didn't! Not him! He lied to me—that's what he done! Yes, sir—layin' right there beside me in bed, he lied! He says, 'All right, sweetheart,' he says, 'jest as soon as the bank opens in the mornin', I'll git the money.'"

THE woman paused, refilled her empty glass, and gulped down the luke warm whiskey. When she proceeded, her voice broke, blubberingly. "He dressed up next mornin' an' went out, tellin' me he was goin' to the bank—an'—an'—that's the last I ever seen of him!"

She broke off to sob loudly into her bandana, her shoulders heaving so that the mop of yellow hair flopped up and down on her back-thrown parka hood. "Yes, sir, he run out on me—jest like that! He done me dirt! Kin you beat it? Kin you even tie it? I'm askin' you?"

"Our hearts bleeds fer you, mom," comforted Black John. "An' you say you ain't never ketched up with him?"

"No. I figgered he'd come back up north, where his mines was, so when they sold the roof over my head, an' kicked me out alone in the world, I took what few dollars I'd managed to save out of the wreck of my happiness, an' took out after my husband. I was goin' to forgive him, an' live happy with him up here in the mines. I had the half of them papers he'd turned over to me, an' I hit fer Forty Mile. When I got there I found out he'd lit out jest ahead of me! An' I found out somethin' else, too!" she cried, her green eyes suddenly taking on a murderous gleam, as her voice rising to a scream of fury, as the fist that held the crumpled bandana banged on the bar. "I found out that not a damn one of them claim papers an' water-rights is worth the powder to blow 'em to hell! That dirty, lousy, low-down, good fer nothin' swindler had not only deserted me, right in the middle of, what you might say, our honeymoon—but he'd gypped me, to boot! But he won't git away with it! I'll foller him to his dyin' day! To his dyin' day, do you hear —an' that will be the first day I ketch up to him!" Her voice broke in a screaming falsetto. She fumbled in a pocket, and slammed a photograph down onto the bar. "There's the dirty little swindlin' deceiver of women! An' don't stand there an' try to tell me he ain't showed up on Halfaday! I know different!"

Black John picked up the photograph and studied it. Finally he shook his head. "It don't favor no one I kin think of," he said. "But a man might change. This one's shaved. Here on Halfaday, we mostly run to beards—except Cush, here, which he favors a mustache. But there ain't no one huntin' him—not even no woman."

As the woman focused her gaze on Old Cush, the angry gleam faded from her eyes. "You look like a nice man," she said. "A man that would treat a lady right, onct you'd married her. I know all about the hotel business, an' about runnin' a saloon, too. I had a nice quiet little bar in my boardin' house. I ain't the one to hold a grudge again all men; jest because one of 'em done me dirt. Between the two of us, we could make this dump pay."

"What—what d'you mean—between the two of us?" gasped Old Cush, in sudden panic, his somber eyes widening, as he mopped furiously at the bar with his rag.

"Why—if we was to git married—you an' me, we could——"

"Shore, Cush," urged Black John, grinning broadly. "That's an idee! Here's, what you might say, opportunity knockin' right at yer door! Why—you an' Goldie, here——"

The woman whirled on him like a flash. "How'd you know my name? You've be'n talkin' to Hubert! He's be'n tellin' you lies! He——"

SENSING his blunder, Black John regained his poise, and held up a silencing hand. "Hold on, mom. You got me wrong. I ain't talked to no Hubert. Nor, neither, I ain't seen none. It's yer hair, mom—shinin' out like a big lump of pure gold. Why, mom—a lady with such a perfusion of beautiful yaller curls like you've got, a man couldn't call her nothin' else but Goldie! I hope you won't take no offence, mom. I shore didn't mean none."

After a searching scrutiny into Black John's guileless blue eyes, the woman's gaze dropped, and she simpered tipsily: "That's all right. I thought, first, you might of be'n talkin' to him. You see—Goldie—that's what they call me back home. My dear old dad, he named me that in the first place. His little Goldie, he use' to call me—an' the name stuck."

"It couldn't help but stick," said Black John. "It fits you like a glove. Don't it, Cush? You know, you always claimed you favored yaller hair."

"Oh—do you?" cried the woman, reaching for the hand that wielded the bar

rag, just as Cush jerked it away. "Everything's all set then. We'll git married, an' make this old dump pay!"

"Shore," echoed Black John. "It ort to pay big."

"You shet up, an' keep out of this!" cried Cush, and turned to the woman. "An' what do you mean—git married? Yer married a'ready!"

"Never mind, Cushie, dear," murmured the woman, leaning over the bar and regarding Old Cush with a loose-lipped leer. "When I ketch up with Hubert, there won't nothin' stand in our way. It looks like fate."

"I'll say it does!" cried Cush, as Black John roared aloud to drown the sound of a hurried movement from beyond the partition, in the direction of the peek hole.

"Cushie, dear!" roared the big man, in a paroxysm of mirth, "Don't git excited, Cushie, dear! Keep yer shirt on!"

"Git to hell out of here——the two of you!" yelled Cush. "I'm closin' up. I got to go shoot me a moose!"

"An' I'm goin' back down the crick, an' start huntin' fer Hubert," said the woman. "But, first, I want twenty pounds of salt pork, an' five pounds of sugar, an' a pound of tea."

Crowding the supplies into her pack sack, the woman shouldered it and departed, pausing in the doorway to wave a mittened hand at Cush. "Take care of yerself," she called. "I'll be seein' you! An' when I git my job done, if you still insist on it, we'll git married."

When the door had closed behind her, Black John reached for the bottle, and poured himself a liberal drink. "This un's on the house, Cushie, dear," he grinned.

"You go to hell!" cried Old Cush. "You've got me in a nice jam now—what with eggin' her on, like you done! You'd ort to be shot! My God—what a woman! Cornwallis didn't tell us the half of it!"

"Haw, haw, haw," roared Black John. "'Cushie, dear!' You'd ort to have seen yer face, when she pulled that one! I wouldn't have missed it fer nothin'."

"You've got a hell of an idee of a joke," growled Cush. "But it ain't no joke fer me—nor Cornwallis, neither. A woman like that's as dangerous as a cocked gun! What the hell are we goin' to do about it?"

"Speakin' of cocked guns," cut in Black John, "gives me an idee. I've got a hunch we kin pull off another drayma——"

"Not by a damn sight!" cried Cush. "No more draymas! Not with me in it! One's enough! You damn near scairt me to death the last time!"

"Shut up, an' hand me that rifle—the old 45-90 there in the corner. That's it. So long. I'll be seein' you later."

"But—Cripes, John—you—you hadn't ort to shoot her! We'll figger a way out, somehow."

Rifle in hand, Black John paused in the doorway. "It's all right, Cush. I got you into it—an' I'll git you out. What's one woman, more er less, between friends? I'll be back in a little while. It won't take long."

A FEW minutes after the man had gone, a timid head thrust into the room through the store room doorway. "P-s-s-s-t! Cush!" sounded a sibilant whisper. "Has she gone?"

"Yeah—she's gone, all right," answered Cush. "Come on up, Cornwallis, an' have one on the house. You shore raised hell when you tolled a woman like that onto Halfaday! I'd ruther it had be'n the police!"

"You an' me—both," agreed the little man. "I didn't think she could foller me. I thought I was shet of her, at last."

"Well—you ain't," said Cush somberly. "An' now that damn Black John has gone an' got me mixed up in it, too. His idees of humor is shore warped."

"Yeah, I heard him when I was lookin' through the peek slot. I stayed there till the time she says how when she'd ketched up with me, there wouldn't be no more reason why she couldn't marry you. Then I got to hell out of there an' crawled in under that pile of moose hides. How'd

I know she mightn't take a notion to come in there?"

Both started at the sound of a shot that roared loudly up from a short distance down the valley.

"What's that?" asked Cornwallis, starting nervously.

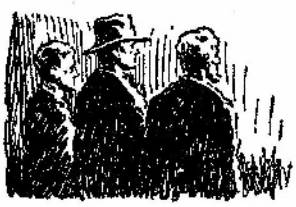
"That," answered Old Cush, solemnly, "would be Black John. He's fixin' to stage him a drayma."

"A drayma! What kind of a drayma?"

"I couldn't say," answered Cush. "It sounds like it might be a tragedy. But at that—John hadn't ort to of shot a woman."

"Shot her!" cried Cornwallis. "Good God, Cush! You don't mean he's shot Goldie?"

"I couldn't say. Black John would go a long ways fer a friend. It would save you an' me a hell of a lot of trouble if he had. Anyhow, what John done; he's done. Stick around a bit. He'll be back, d'rectly."



A few minutes later, the door opened, and Black John stepped into the room, crossed to the bar, and handed Cush the rifle.

"Put it back where you got it," he ordered tersely, and assumed his usual position before the bar. Then his eyes fell upon Cornwallis. "Git back in the store room!" he cried. "She'll be back here in a minute—madder'n hell! An' if I was you, I wouldn't want she should find me!"

"You—you didn't shoot her then?"

"Hell—no! Of course, I didn't shoot her! But, I shore shot hell out of her salt pork. I'm settin' the stage fer a drayma."

VII

TRUE to Black John's prediction, the door burst violently open a few minutes later, and the woman catapulted into the room, her pale green eyes a-glitter.

"Back agin, mom?" greeted Black John placidly. "Me an' Cush was jest speakin' of you, an' the raw deal you'd got from yer man. We was jest about to take a drink. Won't you jine us?"

"I've be'n shot at!" screamed the woman. "Down the crick—it was! Not a quarter of a mile from here!"

"Shot at!" cried Black John, his eyes widening in well-feigned surprise. "Was you hit?"

"No—but it was a damn clost call! The bullet hit my pack an' knocked me clean off my feet! I thought I was killed. It's a wonder you didn't hear the shot. It roared like a cannon."

"You was closter'n what we was, mom," reminded Black John. "What with the door shut, an' all. But at that, it seems to me I did hear somethin' that sounded like a shot. I didn't pay no heed to it, though—what with the boys huntin' moose, up an' down the crick. Hold still, mom, an' we'll take a look at yer pack." As he spoke, he lifted the pack sack from the woman's shoulders and, setting it upon the bar, proceeded to examine it minutely. "Yes, mom," he announced, peering into it. "It missed yer tea, an' yer sugar, an' went right plumb through the middle of yer salt pork. But there ain't no harm done—barrin' a couple of small holes in the sack."

"No harm done! An' if that bullet had gone a foot further ahead, I'd be layin' dead out there on the snow."

"Yeah," admitted Black John. "The case calls fer an investigation. We aim to keep Halfaday moral. Think what it would have meant to us if some son of a gun had murdered you right in cold blood, as you might say. Like as not the police would have come in, an' it would have be'n a nuisance, all around."

"Meant to you!" cried the woman angrily. "What the hell do you suppose I care what it would have meant to you? Look what it would have meant to me!"

"Yeah," agreed Black John. "There's

that angle, too. S'pose you jest stay here a while an' keep Cush company, an' I'll slip down an' investigate the shootin'. Whoever fired that shot must have left his tracks in the snow. You say it was about a quarter of a mile down the crick? An' which side of the crick did the shot come from?"

"Yes, about a quarter of a mile. I had jest rounded that big bend where the crick swings in clost to the woods, an' whoever fired the shot, laid fer me in the timber on the right hand side, goin' down."

"Good," approved Black John. "I'll slip down there an' find out what come off. Like I said, whoever done it must have left tracks—an' I know every snowshoe track on the crick. Jest rest easy, lady, an' leave it to me. I'll git to the bottom of this myst'ry—don't you worry. We don't stand fer no crime on Halfaday. An' bushwhackin' is one of the lowest forms of skullduggery. You an' Cush kin kind of lay yer plans fer the future, whilst I slip around through the brush an' find out who done the shootin'."

Grinning broadly as he caught the murderous glare in the somber eyes of Old Cush, Black John disappeared, to return a half-hour later, a look of extreme gravity upon his face.

"Well," demanded the woman, who had seated herself at a card table, while Old Cush stood behind the bar in grim and stony silence, "what did you find out?"

"Plenty," answered Black John, leaning an elbow upon the bar and striking an attitude. "I gathered enough evidence to hang the skulldug higher than Gilroy's kite."

"You mean, you know who done it? Who shot at me?"

"Not only that, mom—but I know why he done it."

"Who was it?"

"Before I go ahead I'd like to ask you if you know anything about rifles—the kinds, an' calibers?"

"No. I've got a rifle—bought it when I come into the country 'cause they told me I'd need it to git meat with. But I never seen anything to shoot, an' probably couldn't hit it if I did. I buy my meat."

"I'll explain then," said Black John, producing an empty brass shell from his pocket. "Here's the shell that the bullet was fired from that went through your pack. It laid there in the snow, right where the damn cuss throw'd it out of his gun."

"What good is the shell? What I want is the man that fired it!"

"I'm comin' to that," replied Black John. "Now this here is a 45-90 shell—an' there's only one 45-90 on the crick." He paused, suppressing a grin at the swift glance of apprehension that Old Cush flashed toward the rifle in the corner behind the bar. "Yes, mom," he continued, "an' what's more, this rifle belongs to the very man whose snowshoe tracks was there in the snow, right where he stood when he fired the shot!"

THE tense silence that followed the announcement was broken by the woman. "An', you know who it is?"

"I shore do. He lives on up the crick a few miles, an' that's right where his tracks headed fer. When his shot knocked you down, he ondoubtless thought he'd finished you, so he throw'd out the empty shell, an' lit out fer his shack."

"But—why would he want to kill me?"

"The motive's plain to anyone that savvies such things. This here party's a—a philanthropist, which that's the scientifical name fer a woman hater. He's often told me how he hates women, an' how it's always a chore fer him to refrain from killin' one, on sight. It's quite a bad habit, as a general rule—but it didn't bother none on Halfaday, on account of there not bein' no wimmin to kill. Of course, when you showed up it was different, an' I s'pose he jest natchelly yielded to his desire—him havin' lived under, what you might say, a repression fer so long."

"Why—the damn lunatic!" cried the woman. "What's his name?"

"His name," announced Black John, as

both Old Cush and the woman waited in breathless silence, "is George Cornwallis."

"What's that noise?" asked the woman, glancing toward the peek slot.

"Rats," answered Black John. "There's a lot of 'em in the store room."

"But what'll I do? He'll probably shoot at me again!"

"No, mom. He won't. You jest go on back to yer cabin, an' rest easy. He thinks he got you, an' he's gone on up the crick. Tomorrow mornin' we'll go up an' fetch him down here, an' at three o'clock in the afternoon, we'll call a miners' meetin', an' try him, an' hang him to that there rafter right over where yer settin'. Yer cordially invited to attend the same, besides bein' needed as a material witness in the case."

"But," queried the woman, "how you goin' to hang him. when he didn't kill no one?"

"Bushwhackin'," explained Black John, "is skullduggery, *per se,* an' as such, is hangable on Halfaday, whether the *quid pro nunc* was accomplished or not. You'd better git goin', now, mom, er you won't make yer cabin before dark. Remember, three o'clock sharp, tomorrow afternoon."

A few moments after the door had closed behind her, a white-faced, trembling form appeared in the store room doorway. "What—what in hell are you framin' me fer? Good God, man—hang me tomorrow afternoon!"

Black John grinned broadly. "Come on up, George, an' have a drink. Like I told you—I'm settin' the stage fer a drayma. An' I've got you cast fer one of the leadin' parts."

"Yeah—it sounded like it."

"Shore," agreed Old Cush. "John claims it's quite an honor to have a leadin' part. I had it, onct. An' believe me—there wasn't a dull moment in the hull show!"

Cornwallis filled the glass Old Cush set before him, and turned his mild brown eyes accusingly upon Black John. "Why did you tell her where my shack is? There ain't nothin' left fer me now—but to move on."

"Move on—hell!" exclaimed Black John. "If you'd pull out on us now, you'd sp'ile the whole show! You've got to stick around!"

"Yeah—stick around an' git hung—like you told Goldie!"

"I'm comin' to that," replied Black John.

"*You're* comin' to it! What do you think about me?"

"That's so," seconded Cush, gnawing at his plug of tobacco. "An' me, too! I'm warnin' you, John—I won't have nothin' to do with yer damn drayma! I won't take even a *little* part!"

"Listen!" exclaimed Black John disgustedly. "You fellas holdin' back like that is liable to ruin the drayma—after I've went to work an' got it all thought out! It's like this—George here he's the villain of the piece. Goldie's the heroyne. An' Cush is the hero—which the heroyne flees to the arms of, after the villain gits hung."

"Not by a damn sight!" cried Old Cush. "If that damn huzzy flees at me, I'll knock her cold with a bung starter!"

"An' I ain't goin' to git hung, neither!" vociferated Cornwallis.

"Hell—it ain't nothin' but a fake hangin'! We'll pass the rope around yer chest, under yer shoulders, an' run it out under yer coat collar. We'll pass another loop of rope around yer neck, so it will look like a *bony fido* hangin', an' run the other rope through it. But yer weight's supposed to be on the chest rope."

"Yeah—but at that, it's liable to choke like hell, pullin' again' that neck loop," objected Cornwallis.

"Well, if you was to git a little black in the face it would look more like a real hangin'. Anyhow, you don't need to worry. You'll be onconscious."

"Unconscious!"

"Shore—so you'll look damn good an' dead, hangin' there, when Goldie comes in. I've got it all doped out—timin' an' everything, jest like clock works. I told Goldie

to be here by three. She'll prob'ly make it by two-thirty, so's not to miss nothin'. We'll set the clock, an' all our watches, an hour ahead, an' then we'll rig up like I said, an' you'll be layin' there on the floor, under the rafter, ready fer the boys to haul you up when the lookout reports that Goldie's gittin' clost. When she comes in, we'll tell her she's late. an' prove it by the clock an' our watches. She'll recognize you, hangin' there, as her long lost Hubert, an' she'll realize that at last her quest is ended, as a poet would say."

"Yeah," grunted Old Cush, "an' I s'pose that's my cue—I'm the new quest!"

"But," persisted Cornwallis, "you claimed I'd be unconscious! How you goin' to work that?"

"It's easy," replied Black John. "In the safe, yonder, reposes a little bottle of knock-out drops. Me an' Cush has 'em in case we've got to knock out someone's achin' tooth, er like when someone gits too obstreperous fer the good of the crick. We jest slip a few drops in his licker, an' he wakes up sober an' peaceable. You'll simply go to sleep, painless an' peaceful—an' when you wake up yer troubles will all be over, as a preacher would say."

"Yeah—I've heard 'em say it—at funerals," interjected Cush. "But how about me? As I see the plot, my troubles begins where his'n leaves off!"

"That's it!" cried Black John enthusiastically. "Now yer enterin' into the sperit of the thing! When she sees how she's lost Hubert here—she turns to you fer solace, as a book would say."

"Yeah——an' she'll git a bung starter! I tell you, you kin leave me out of it! I won't have no truck with that turrible woman! An' how do you figger this drayma's comin' out? As fer as we've got Cornwallis is hung, an' I'm gittin' fleed at by that damn woman. An' I don't mind tellin' you, that would be a hell of a place to quit."

"Like this," explained Black John. "George, here, by the simple little ruse of gittin' hung, is shet of Goldie fer ever. His troubles is over—we could even cut him down an' bury him, jest to make the play good—in case Goldie persisted in stickin' around."

"That's all right, as fer as Cornwallis's troubles goes," admitted Cush. "But how about mine—in case she sticks around?"

"I ain't figgered that fer ahead yet, Cush—an' we don't have to. 'On with the show,' is my motto—an' let the chips fall where they may. It'll work out all right—take it from me. Things always do. It's a cinch she can't marry you. It ain't legal. It's bigotry—because George, here, he won't really be dead, if nothin' goes wrong. We kin keep him fer an ace in the hole—an' if worse comes to worst, we kin spring him on her."

"Like hell you will!" cried Cornwallis. "If I git hung; I stay hung—as fer as she's concerned!"

"Well, there's that angle, too," admitted Black John. "I'll tell you what we might do—an' by Cripes that's an idee! We could go ahead with the weddin'——"

"Not by——"

"Hold on! Hold on, Cush! Wait till I finish! We could go on with the weddin', an' when it was over, we'd have a clear case of bigotry on her, an' could hang her fer skullduggery. She'd ort to be hung, all right—but I wouldn't favor hangin' a lady with nothin' on her."

"It wouldn't look right, at that," agreed Cush dryly. "But we could hold no weddin'. There ain't no preacher."

"That's an angle. But we might git around it. My pa was one. An' I use' to pump the organ in church. I might marry you. I'll take a chanct."

"Yeah—but I won't!" cried Cush. "S'pose it should turn out to be legal, somehow, an' then the jury would turn Goldie loose instead of hangin' her. Where in hell would I be at, then?"

"Oh, all right! All right!" exclaimed Black John impatiently. "But fer Cripes sakes, quit yer objectin', an' let's all pull together on this! We'll go ahead an' hang George, an' then you jest reach right out

an' take the bull by the horns, an' put it acrost to her, emphatic an' final—that you won't marry her under no circumstances whatever. Then there won't be nothin' else she kin do, but turn around an' go back where she come from."

"That would be fine—if it works," opined Cornwallis, a ray of hope for a moment dispelling the doubt in his mild eyes.

"Yeah," agreed Cush sourly, "if it works. But I take notice that John ain't got his own self down fer none of the leadin' parts."

"Hell's bells!" cried Black John. "Someone's got to manage it! An' that reminds me—I'll slip out an' notify some of the boys to be shore an' stop in tonight. We got to practice that hangin' act. I wouldn't like fer nothin' to go wrong."

"You an' me—both," breathed Cornwallis, with fervor.

"Don't you worry," reassured Black John. "This here's a simple scene, an' the boys had ort to git it perfect in one rehearsal. All we need to practice is the hangin'. I'll guarantee the knockout drops'll work. I'm goin' now. I'll be seein' you tonight. An' fer Cripes sakes, buck up, an' enter into the sperit of this here drayma! You'd ort to have some consideration fer a fella that's doin' all he kin think of to do fer you."

VIII

AT APPROXIMATELY two o'clock the following afternoon, the lookout opened the door of Cushing's saloon and called to the dozen or more men that lined the bar.

"Someone's comin' up the crick. It's three er four mile down, yet. But it looks like a man."

Striding to the door, Black John took the telescope from the man's hand, and trained it upon the moving object that showed far down the creek.

"It's her!" he announced, handing back the instrument. "She looks like a man, an' talks like one—but no man as ornery as what she is would of be'n let live to git that old. All set, now, boys! We want this here to come off without no hitch. You all know yer parts. There ain't no hurry. She won't git here fer pretty near an hour. Red John'll keep us posted. An' when she gits right to the bottom of the bank, we'll haul George up, an' make the rope fast. Hang him high, boys. Pull him clean up out of her reach. You can't never tell what a woman will do. She might start in workin' on him with a knife. Er she might start blubberin', an' makin' over him, like she hadn't never loved no one but him in her life."

"We can't haul him high enough so she couldn't reach him with a knife," opined a man, eyeing the rafter.

"She couldn't only reach his legs," retorted Black John. "She couldn't cut him fatal. Anyhow, if she draws a knife, one of you boys grab her arm." His eyes strayed from the rafter to Cornwallis, who stood dejectedly with one foot on the brass rail. A coil of rope lay beside him on the bar. One end of this rope, after passing through a loop of rope about the man's neck, disappeared beneath the collar of his heavy coat. "What's the handkercheef doin' in under that loop?" demanded Black John. "Who in hell ever heard of hangin' a man with a handkerchief under the loop?"

"The rope scratches me," complained Cornwallis. "I shore wisht this was over with."

"It won't be long now," reassured Black John. "Hell—you ain't got no kick comin'! You'll be onconscious in jest a few minutes. The brunt of this here falls on us."

"Better git out them knockout drops, Cush!"

Old Cush stepped to the safe, and handed Black John a small vial. "Better not give 'em to him, yet," he cautioned. "He might come out of it too quick. If he'd start to wigglin' around up there when he was s'posed to be dead, it would look like hell."

"That's right," admitted Black John, removing the cork and sniffing at the contents of the vial. "Say, Cush— how much is a dose. I fergit."

Old Cush tugged thoughtfully at his long yellow mustache. "It ain't the same every time. Five, six drops in a glass of licker most gen'ally works. But I rec'lect that when we punched out that tooth fer that big Siwash, that time, we give him double."

"Did it kill him? I disremember that case."

"No, as I rec'lect it, he come to—in time."

"I guess we better slip George twelve, fifteen drops, to make shore."

Cush frowned. "It would be too bad if it killed him. He ain't as big as that Siwash."

"A white man kin stand more'n a Siwash, any day in the week. It ain't apt to kill him. We'll take a chanct on about fifteen drops to make shore he'll stay quiet. Like you say, if he'd start kickin', an' spinnin' around on that rope, an' makin' sounds, whilst Goldie was in here, it would make us look kind of foolish."

"Yeah," cut in Cornwallis, "but how about me? S'pose that dose is too big?"

"You wouldn't never know it," soothed Black John. "Hell—it would be our mistake, not yourn! Quit kickin'! What do you want to do—s'pile the show, at the last minute?"

The door opened, and Red John thrust his head into the room. "You got about fifteen minutes more," he announced. "She's comin' fast."

"All right!" answered Black John. "Come on in, jest before she starts climbin' the bank, an' give us a hand on the rope!" He turned upon the others who waited expectantly. "Set the clock an hour ahead, Cush! An' the rest of you change yer watches! Here, George, throw this into you—an' good-bye! We'll be seein' you—if things goes right!

"Here, you fellas—throw the rope over that rafter! An' you George—you git over in under it. You'll be passin' along in a minute er too, an' it'll save draggin' you!"

"Someone jerk that handkerchief out from in under that loop, an' ease him down onto the floor—his knees is beginnin' to sag!"

"Here comes Red John! All set—George is plumb out! Heave away! Up high with him! Whoa! Ease off a hair! You'd drug him tight agin the rafter! We don't want to pull his head off! Make him fast now, an' line up to the bar an' be kind of lookin' sad at the corpse—like men that had done their dooty!"

The men assumed their places at the bar, with faces dolefully upturned toward the form that dangled at the end of the rope.

"Looks nat'ral," approved One Armed John. "Like a man after he's quit kickin'."

"Yeah," agreed another, in a loud whisper, "but he'd ort to be a leetle blacker in the face."

"She won't know the difference," whispered another. "Most wimmin' ain't never took in a hangin'."

"Shut up!" rasped Black John in an undertone. Even as he spoke the door was thrown open, and the woman stood blinking in the doorway. Her green eyes, sweeping the room, came to rest on the limp figure that depended from the rafter.

"Come in, mom," invited Black John, in a funereal voice. "It's too bad yer late, but——"

"Late!" interrupted the woman, drawing a thick silver watch from her pocket. "You said three o'clock, an' it's only a quarter to three, now!"

"A quarter to four, mom," corrected Black John, pointing gravely to the clock on the wall.

"That damn clock's wrong! This watch belonged to my fourth husband, an' it don't lose a minute a year! You kin see fer yerself—it's jest thirteen minutes to three!" Advancing, she thrust the watch under the big man's nose.

"That's right mom," he agreed, "accordin' to your time." Consulting his own

watch, he showed her its face, and called for corroberation.

Other watches appeared, each of which checked with the clock.

WITH a growl of rage, the woman hurled her big silver watch against the log wall. "Carry a watch five year, an' the first time you depend on it, it goes back on you!" she cried "Well—it won't do it agin!"

"That's right, mom," agreed Black John. "It's too bad you missed the trial. It didn't take long. An' there wasn't nothin' spectacular. George hung easy, an' everything come off nice as you please. The evidence was so plain agin him that we convicted him without needin' your testimony. Justice has be'n done. There he hangs—George Cornwallis, the man which bushwhacked you on the crick!"

The green eyes turned upward, and the next moment they widened until they seemed to protrude from their sockets.

"Cornwallis!" she screamed, in a voice shrill and vibrant with fury. "Cornwallis—my foot! That's Hubert! Hubert Morningstar! My husband! So, it was him that shot at me—the dirty, low-lived lyin', thievin', murderin' son of a sea cook! He tried to murder me, an' I hope I'll see him in hell!"

"You ondoubtless will, mom—if he goes there," replied Black John. "The house is now buyin' a drink, as is customary after a successful hangin'. We'd be pleased to have you j'ine us."

Instead of complying, the woman made for the open end of the bar.

"Don't you set out that bottle!" she commanded, fixing her green eyes on the astounded proprietor. "From now on, things'll be run different around this dump! If these lazy loafers wants a drink, they kin pay fer it!"

"What d'you mean?" gasped Cush, as the woman started behind the bar.

For answer, she whirled and pointed to the form that dangled limply from the end of the rope. "That's what I mean! There's nothin' in the way of our gittin' married, now! An' believe me, we'll start in to make this joint pay!"

The whiskey bottle dropped from Old Cush's hand and crashed to the floor as he reached swiftly beneath the bar. The next moment, the woman recoiled from the muzzle of a .45 revolver.

"You git to hell out of here!" cried Cush, his pale blue eyes flashing. "Git out that door as quick as fate'll let you! An' begin pickin' 'em up, an' layin' 'em down fast, an' wide apart, till you git clean down to the Yukon! I won't miss, like that other damn fool did! I know the police'll come in an' hang me fer it—but you won't know nothin' about it! Git now—before I pull this trigger! My finger's a-twitchin', already!"

Wide-eyed, the woman retreated, step by step, before the deadly menace of the glittering eyes beyond the gun muzzle. In the doorway she paused, and her voice rose in a scream of baffled rage.

"I'll go!" she screeched. "I'll go hell-bent down to Dawson an' send the police up here! They'll hang the hull kit an' kaboodle of you fer murderin' my man! He was a good man, too! The best, an' the kindest husband a woman ever had! An' you murdered him in cold blood! You murdered him fer nothin'! I'll swear no one ever took a shot at me—down the crick nor nowhere's else! Laugh that one off—you damn hyenas!"

When the door slammed behind her, Black John turned to the bar with a grin. "Set out the bottle, Cushie dear, an' we'll all have a drink. I told you everything would come out all right—if you left it to me. Drink up, boys—an' then we'll let George down an' fetch him to—if we kin. He'll be wantin' one, too. An' besides, we'll need him to swear he ain't dead—in case Corporal Downey comes along."

"Yeah," grunted Old Cush, as he returned the six-gun to its place beneath the bar, "an' as fer as I'm concerned, we kin git along without no more draymas!"

THE FLOOD

By

MAX BRAND

Carney Had an Hysterical Impulse to Laugh. Here He Was Lying in His Own Bunk, with His Murderer Prone on the Opposite Side of the Room.

CHAPTER I

THE hole was seven feet across and thirty feet deep; a lot of those feet were through hardpan, and at the bottom was the black of bedrock. The sheriff considered the excavation for a time with the eye of one who knows pick and shovel work. He glanced, afterwards, at the hoist that had been rigged, and at the huge heaps of soil that had been brought to the surface.

"You made a regular mine of it, Joe," said Sheriff Lew Carrol.

"Water would be worth more than gold to me," answered Joe Carney. "It would be worth more than heaven, to those."

He waved towards the cattle. Some of them, weakened by the long thirst, were lying down. Others stood swaying with weakness; but there were still a number that ranged up and down the powerful barbed-wire fence which herded them away from the full troughs of water on the farther side.

The face of the water in those brimming troughs flashed like diamonds. Even now one of the Miller steers was lifting a dripping muzzle to take breath before drinking again. Others, which had come from distant grazing lands, lay about with swollen sides, resting before they heaved themselves to their feet and trekked back to the grasslands. Their rounded barrels contrasted with the starved sides and the humped backs of the famine stricken cows on the other side of the fence—Joe Carney's side.

The eye of the sheriff ranged on up the sandy valley. He pointed to the rocky bottom of the draw.

"You get plenty of water down there, sometimes," he suggested.

"I've seen the draw running full as late as May," answered Joe Carney. "It's only every four or five years that we run into a long drought like this, and no water comes down from the mountains."

"There's plenty up there," sighed the sheriff, waving towards the peaks of the Gallop Mountains in the northwest. The summits were holding out long flags of mist towards the north; or else they were shrouded low by the rainclouds.

told how carefully Joe Carney had worked in times of plenty to prepare for the times of need.

"You been out here for ten years?" he asked.

"Yes. Since I was eighteen."

"Plenty of rain up there," agreed Joe Carney. His lean young face twisted; a pang of desire narrowed his eyes. "But they'd die before I got them up there to the creeks. They're dying now. That one, down there—you see? And there—and there—dead! You see that nearest one—that black-and-white Holstein? I fought all through two months to keep that steer alive after it was born. I might have spared the trouble. It's dead enough now!"

"You better get the hides off the dead ones, hadn't you?" asked the sheriff in a gentle voice.

"No use in that," answered Carney. He stood up. He was not more than average height and labor had thumbed every ounce of extra flesh from his frame. "They'll all be dead and done for before long. Then —I'll make a new start—somewhere."

The sheriff glanced towards the small shack, towards the long sheds behind it, towards the huge stacks of hay which

"Why did you ever pick out this sort of a life?"

"Because I like the land," said Joe Carney. "I was raised up liking it, and I'll die liking it. I'd rather dry up here in the big droughts than get fat in anyman's green acres in another part of the world."

"Yeah, and it's a funny thing," commented the sheriff. "You'd think that we like old dry bones better than meat, the way we act!" He sighed, in pity of himself and Joe Carney. Then he added: "Have all those cows of yours got to die?"

"They've all got to die," said Joe Carney, gravely.

"Where in the world would a gent find a fellow as mean as Tony Miller!" exclaimed the sheriff. "He's got all the water in the world, and he won't let you have none!"

"Where'd a man find a law so damn' stupid that it wouldn't *make* fellows like Tony Miller open up?" countered Joe Carney.

"What you ever do to start him hating you like this?" asked the sheriff.

"I'll tell you what I did," answered Carney, with reminiscent eyes. "I was running cows all by myself and had the whole valley to do as I pleased with it. And along came Tony Miller, on the loose. He was broke, and I took him in. He was damn' skinny, too, and I fed him fat. When he left, he said he'd never forget me and my valley; and he didn't. He knew that I'd only been able to take up part of the land; so he came back with a herd of cattle of his own and squatted on the rest of the valley. When I went over and asked him what the hell, he told me to move over —I had more room than I needed. And there he sat and grinned at me; him and his guns! He's squatted on the land clean up through the ravines where the water leaks out of a few springs all the year round, and he pipes that water down here for his cows."

"It's a mean story," said the sheriff. "Mighty mean! Him and his guns—he's pretty good with guns, ain't he?"

"I've thrown up pebbles the size of this," said Carney, picking up a stone half the size of a man's thumb, "and he's knocked them into dust right in the middle of the air."

"Yeah, and that's pretty good work," agreed the sheriff. "But—Carney—what are you going to do? Cut his wire and let your cows get to the water?"

"He'll come gunning for me, if I do that. And you'd be out arresting me, anyway."

"I might come—and maybe I couldn't find you," said the sheriff. "Why didn't you start your cows marching when the drought began, anyway?"

"There wasn't any need. I helped him build those troughs, and my cows got all they wanted. But I was away a couple of days in the hills, and when I came back, I found that he'd strung the wire fences—and my cattle were out of luck."

"I tried to reason with him," said the sheriff. "There's no law for this sort of a thing, but I tried to reason with him, and it wasn't any good."

Carney leaped sudden to his feet. A calf had begun to bawl loudly, pitifully, a great, flat, stupid cry. Sweat poured out on the face of Carney as he listened.

"You know what it is?" he asked.

"It's murder," said the sheriff.

"Ay, and it's murder," agreed Joe Carney. "If I had the nerve of a man, I'd take my gun and go over there and get him."

"It's a thing I wouldn't know about," answered the sheriff. "But maybe that would be self defense. It would be cow-defence, anyway."

HE MANAGED a dismal laugh at his own remark. Then he stood up and went to his mustang.

"Listen, Joe," he said. "There's something more than you told me. There's some reason why he hates you so bad."

"I never met him outside of this valley," replied Carney. "How could there be anything else?"

The sheriff mounted.

"I came over here hoping to do my best," said he. "There wasn't any best to do. I'm gonna go back to town. Maybe when this yarn is heard there'll be a gang of fellows come out here and either tear down that barbed wire fence, or else they'll be lynching your old friend, over there."

"That's the only hope I have, eh?" asked Carney.

"It's the only one I see," answered the sheriff. "I've gotta go, now. It's pretty close to evening, and there's a long ways to town. So long, Joe. I'm mighty sorry."

To this, Carney made no answer, for he was listening to the pitiful bawling of the calf again.

When that ended, he looked around with surprise to find that the sheriff had disappeared.

So he sat down again and peered into the well which he had sunk in the hope of reaching water. He had found bed-

rock, instead. When fortune turned its back on a man, that was the sort of treatment one had to expect.

If he dived down into that pool of shadow, he would crack his skull on the rock beneath; that would be all the burying he would need.

He glanced across the draw, his eyes invincibly drawn, and across a distant hillock he saw a horseman silhouetted, looking as big as the mustang he rode. That was Tony Miller on his paint horse. Tony had gone out to enjoy the desolation which he was causing. Now he was turning homewards, content.

The sun burned hot until the last few moments of the day. When it was red in the west the heat diminished. The ground still radiated warmth. And as the darkness grew, Carney looked away towards Mount Gallop and saw thin veins of lightning flash, very dimly, through the rain clouds that shrouded the range.

Up there it was cold. The rain came down in slanting lines. Everywhere was the uproar of booming water in the ravines.

HE WENT into his shack. The day's heat was still thick in it. His face became moist at once.

He lighted a lantern. It showed him his bunk, with the tumbled blankets on it. He saw the flimsy stove, the home-made table, the bucket, the old clothes pegged up on the wall, the set of traps that hung from a rafter, the brush-broom, the compacted earth floor; and he saw also the long gleam of a rifle barrel in a corner of the room.

It was not cold that made him shudder. He turned his back quickly, and stared out his doorway. He could see no stars. It was not dust that obscured them, but the bawling of the thirsty cattle. They would bellow all night. Before morning, his brains would be addled.

He thought of making a pack and leaving the place. That thought was still working in his mind when he turned from the door, but all that he could see was the long, gleaming barrel of the rifle. And it was freshly loaded, he knew.

He picked it up.

Across his mind flooded a host of broken recollections. Headlines in newspapers, whispers among people, the shaking of heads.

How could men come to murder?

How could they be mad enough to put the welfare of their souls in jeopardy? And also, there was the danger of the law which would surely follow.

But he found himself walking, with an even step, through the starlight towards the shack of Tony Miller.

CHAPTER II

MILLER'S place stood back behind a pair of hills and with the wind standing in the south, the noise of the bawling of the cattle hardly reached his shack, except as a tremor to be felt in the air. At a distance, before the house, Joe Carney stood for a long time. He could see the lamplight shining like a confined star inside the open doorway. He could see Tony Miller at work in front of his stove, cooking supper.

No doubt that Tony would have an excellent appetite for his meal!

Well, murder was this sort of a thing. You did it as securely as possible. You sighted, and fired, and death struck the victim before the sense of it had entered his wits.

Considered in that way, it seemed hardly a crime. We all have to die, and he could promise Tony Miller that there would be no lingering. His aim was certain enough, if he could use a bit of time in steadying the gun. At target practice he was as good as anyone. But when guns are used in battles between men, there is no chance for steady aiming. There is a whirling and a leaping, a confusion of bodies, and

guns spitting fire and lead. In that wild hurly burly, Tony Miller more than once had proved himself a master.

But Carney did not raise the butt of his rifle to his shoulder. Instead, he walked up the slope and stood at the open doorway.

"Hello, Tony," he said.

Tony Miller turned with a gasp of dread. He was a dark man. He was big, and he was perfectly made with heavy shoulders and narrow hips. He had the weight where it counts and where it helps the hands.

"Hey—hello!" said Tony. "Carney?"

"I've come to kill you, Tony," said Carney.

"My God, don't shoot!" cried Miller.

He threw his hands above his head and leaped back, crashing his shoulders against the wall. He was no longer beautiful to see. Fear turned him olive gray and stretched out his mouth with invisible fingers, pulling.

"I didn't say murder," answered Carney. And he came closer into the light, crossing the threshold.

Miller recovered from his spasm of dread with a groan. He still had to lean against the wall for a moment, passing a hand repeatedly across his face, which seemed numb and bloodless.

Carney put down his rifle and leaned it against the wall. He took off his cartridge belt with the holstered Colt attached, and he hung it on a peg.

"I wanted to talk to you a bit, first," said Carney. "After that, we'll have it out."

Mutely, Miller had observed these acts which claimed and accepted hospitality. The danger was gone. The great breath which he drew proved how completely he felt himself free from peril.

"I thought for a minute——" he said.

"You thought that you were going to get it, eh?" asked Carney. "How did that feel?"

"It's not the first time that I've been up against it," said Miller, scornfully.

"It's the first time that you ever stuck up your hands and yelled for help, isn't it?" asked Carney.

Miller, for a moment, regarded him darkly, steadily.

"You came out for a killing," he said, "and I guess there'll be a dead man before morning. But it's not likely to be me!"

"No," agreed Carney, instantly. "It's not likely to be you. I'm apt to be elected."

"Then what in hell's the matter with you?" demanded Miller. "You can't stand up to me with guns. You can't stand up to me with empty hands. You ain't got the size for that. So what's the matter with you? Why'd you come over here at all?"

"I've got to die sometime," said Carney. He looked earnestly at the big, rounded throat of Miller. On either side the huge arteries kept a tremor of life just under the surface of the flesh. That was where a beast would strike, with its fangs. "I've got to die sometime," he repeated, "and there's no better way for me than trying to kill you, Miller."

"What's up?" asked Tony Miller, scowling, peering through the scowl at the other. "You talk like you were drunk—or doped —or something like that!"

"I'm not drunk, and I'm not doped. I want to talk to you a minute before we fight."

"Talk away," said Tony Miller.

"It wasn't accident, the way it seemed, when you first came into this here valley?"

"Wasn't it?" answered Miller.

"No. You were looking for me, right then."

"Well, what of it?"

"I'm asking you, Tony. Weren't you looking for me, then?"

"Well then, damn you, I found you all right, didn't I?"

"Yes. You found me all right. Why were you hunting for me?"

"Because I wanted to do you in."

"Why did you have a grudge against me? I'd never seen you."

"Your old man saw mine, though."

"My father? What's he got to do with it?"

"He owned the rope that hanged my father."

"How was that?"

"A double-crossing lot of crooked cowpunchers—they accused my father of stealing a horse. It ain't a new story."

"And my father had the rope?"

"Yes. And he put the noose around my old man's neck."

"When was this?"

"Twenty years back."

"Then how do you come to know about it?"

"I made one of that posse talk before ——"

"Before you croaked him, Tony?"

"I made him talk," said Tony, and his face became brilliant with a gleam of satisfaction. "He told me the whole yarn. And how the posse found out, afterwards, that my old man hadn't stolen the horse at all. It just happened to be a ringer for a yellow-headed roan that a rancher owned. And they thought my old man had blotted the real brand. That's how they came to hang him."

I SEE," agreed Carney. "So you wanted to fix it up against me, eh?"

"My father was rubbed out," argued Miller, sternly. "That left me to shift for myself as soon as I was big enough to work. I've had my hell. Now I'm going to pay some of it back."

"I pay for my father, eh?" asked Carney.

"You do!"

"That's all right," agreed Carney. "I'm just glad to know what was in the back of your head. Because I knew that nobody human could turn himself into a skunk the way you have unless you had a reason."

"You've got my reason. Now what do you think of it?"

"I thought that I'd sit down and swallow it," said Carney. "But I've been listening to the cows bellowing all day long. That's what made me come over here."

"All right," said Miller. "I hoped that you'd come. I didn't think that you'd be cur enough to sit down and take it even this long. There's plenty of light in here and there's plenty of room, I guess. Where do you want to stand?"

Carney stood up and rubbed a hand over his thigh. In the flat of his palm appeared a big-bladed knife.

"Don't move for a gun or I'll stick this into you," he told Miller.

Tony Miller's hand had already flashed to his own holstered revolver on the wall. But he did not grip the butt of it. The hand remained suspended in the air while thought trailed a quick darkness across his eyes.

"Murder with a rifle ain't good enough for you?" he asked. "A knife's better?"

"I'm not going to murder you," answered Carney. "This'll be a fair fight. I'd do it with my bare hands, but you're bigger than I am. Thirty pounds bigger, and that's too much. I'd try a revolver, but I'm no good with a gun, and you know it. That's why you've felt so safe and easy over here, all the time."

"What the hell is in your head?" demanded Miller.

His hand moved slowly away from the gun. But desperation was still in his face. He knew that he could not draw and fire as quickly as the knife of Carney could move.

"A fair fight is what I'm thinking about," answered Carney. "You'll still have the advantage of reach—but we'll have this out with knives, Tony. That's the thing that you didn't think about, eh?"

FOR a strange green was mixing into the color of Miller's face. He ran the red tip of his tongue across his lips. Then he was able to speak.

"Knives?" he said huskily. "D'you think I'm a dirty greaser, always heeled with a knife? I don't know anything about knife-work."

"Neither do I. I make an even start with you, old son. I've never used a knife in my life, except to carve a steak or take off a hide."

He jerked a thumb towards the hanging belt of the other.

"There's a good big hunting knife there," suggested Carney. "Haul it out—and we'll start the party."

Miller reached a vague hand towards the belt. The gesture was not completed.

"K n i v e s——" he said. "Knives—hell—they're not the things for white men to fight with!"

"No—there's other ways," agreed Carney. "Building barbed wire fences to shut out cattle from water—squatting like a damn hound on the water rights—those are ways of fighting, too. But I like knives better."

"You been down in Mexico—you've learned knife-work down there!" declared Miller.

"I tell you I didn't. But what if I did? Why don't you take your chance? You've spent a couple of hours a day all your life practicing with guns, but you never were ashamed to fight with ordinary gents like me who shot at meat, not at men. Why do you set up a yowl, now?"

"I won't do it," breathed Tony Miller. "I'll be damned if I'll do it!"

"Then I'll ram this knife into your throat—or the soft of your belly," said Carney. "They can hang me for it afterwards, but you've smashed my life, anyway. You've ruined me, and I'll send you to hell before me."

"Wait a minute," gasped Tony Miller. "I've gotta think. I need to think a minute——"

Chapter III

IT IS the unknown that we fear.

Tony Miller, brave enough and big enough, looked at the bright flash of the knife and at the deadly sheen of the point. And his heart shook in him. He knew nothing of knives except that the least cut across the skin could be terribly painful.

What, then, would be the agony caused by a deep gouge, and the twisting of the blade as it was torn back through the flesh? The wide sweep of a knife might rip the face of a man to pieces. Even if it were not fatal, a man could be carved into a horrible mask. He had seen such scar-faces in his life!

And though his enemy assured him that he was ignorant of knife-play, why was it that Joe Carney stood so steadfast, with grim and almost eager eyes, waiting for the knife battle to begin?

There was a trick somewhere behind all of this. It was time for him to be cautious.

And then, out of the distance, he heard the soft beating of hoofs—not the swing of a riderless horse but a steady cadence coming straight towards the house.

Tony Miller groaned out, in the immensity of his relief, "If you make a move with that knife, it's murder—and there's a witness coming now!"

Joe Carney heard in turn—and his face blackened. Still he seemed to hesitate for a moment.

When would there be another chance like this for even battle between them?

"It's not morning yet," he said. "Before morning, you and I are going to have it out, Miller. I'll tell you another thing—there's something yellow in you. There's something so damned yellow that I'll take my chance with you, after this, with guns—with my bare hands—with anything. I'm going to have the killing of you. I've had the taste of it already!"

The hoofbeats were just in front of the shack, pulling up, when Carney stepped back and slipped the knife away, out of view. Then a girl's voice called cheerfully: "Hello, inside!"

Carney stepped through the doorway into the open. He saw the girl swinging down to the ground. She pulled off her riding glove as she turned to him.

"I'm Laura Dilney," she said. "Can I pick up a meal at this place?"

"I'm Joe Carney," he answered. "You certainly can eat across the draw, at my place."

"Thanks, Joe," said the girl.

"You can hang up your hat right here," remarked big Tony Miller, stepping across the threshold into the night. "I'm Tony Miller. This is my joint, what there is of it. Step inside. Joe, take her horse down to the shed and throw a feed of barley into it."

That was like Tony Miller—edging the other fellow out gracefully and all in the name of perfect hospitality.

JOE CARNEY, taking the reins of the horse, looked back and saw the girl against the lamplight that streamed through the doorway. She was a brown beauty, full of blue eyes and smiling.

Well, if she had come five minutes later, she would have found two men in a tangled, bloodstained, writhing heap, like a pair of wildcats closed in the death-grapple. Or she would have found one man lying twisted, face-down, dead; and the victor standing above him with blood still dripping down from the point of a knife.

Even supposing that victor had been he —well, it was better this way.

He unlashed the roll and the pack behind the saddle and brought them into the shack. He laid them across a three-legged stool.

"Hold on," said the girl. "I won't be staying all night! There—there aren't any——"

"A lady, a gentleman, and a chaperon. That's all right, isn't it?" asked Tony Miller, laughing.

And suddenly she was laughing back at Tony.

"There's a shed where I'd rather sleep, anyway," said Miller.

"Anyway, there's eating to think of now," said Laura Dilney, and she advanced towards the stove with the air of one ready to take charge of that department of the housekeeping.

Joe Carney went out and took the horse down towards the shed, slowly. A thought walked with him, and a vision of a girl who was all blue eyes and smiling.

The mustang was not really hot, so he gave the horse a good drink at the trough and put it up in the shed with a feed of barley and a mangerful of hay.

After that, he stepped back under the stars and watched them for a moment. There was a tremor in the air that seemed like sound issuing from the twinkling of the stars; he recognized the sound. The cattle were over there, beyond the hills, still swarming up and down the barbed-wire fences.

HE STRODE over the two hills and down to the fences. They gleamed as though set with eyes, the wire was so burnished and new. The wire clippers that was always with him came into his hand. Opposite him, packed close along the fence, he could see the heads of his cattle, he could see the gleam of the bright horn-tips. Hoofs clicked as the impatient cows swung from side to side, changing their footing. And there was the roar of bellowing that seemed oddly muffled, now that it was so close at hand.

The hard-drawn wire parted with a light clanging sound as the wire pinchers bit through the soft metal. He opened a gap, the wires springing back into tight furls.

Through that gap the cattle moved in a rush—a slow wave that quickened as it ran.

He went on and opened another gap and another, and another. The whole fence hung in tatters. And through it his cattle were pouring, stumbling here and there over obstacles on the ground. He knew what those obstacles were.

He could hear them drinking. He could hear the long sucking, soughing noises as they buried their heads in the water of the troughs. The troughs were long, but there was not nearly enough room for all the famished.

The rearward rows tried to climb over the backs of the foremost. A huge steer literally lifted a calf right across the troughs and onto the other side.

Below the troughs, some of the maddened cattle were eating the sopping mud

of the overflow. The bellowing grew louder and louder, as though hope had poured strength into those voices.

Perched on a fence post, he watched the wriggling, twisting, heaving backs of his steers. The foreranks, drenched, glutted, were shoveled to the side, now, and the rearward host began to get its chance.

And it seemed to him that his soul was drinking with all those dumb brutes. That he was still thirsty with them—that he was tasting life with them.

On the morrow—well, on the morrow either he or big Tony Miller would be dead—and what difference did a little infringement of the law make in the meantime?

So he breathed the dust, and laughed it out of his lungs again. And he laughed a little, now and then, of a full heart of happiness.

It seemed to Joe Carney that he had always been wrong, before, feeling that life must be summed up only at the end. Instead, the truth appeared to be that each moment has its peculiar value. He was living an endless joy in an hour. It did not matter that in the morning he would have to face an almost certain destruction at the hands of Tony Miller.

For when he had said that he was ready to face the big man with guns—with bare hands, even—he had spoken in folly. In a time of cooler thinking, he could remember the small stones smashed to dust by the unerring bullets of Tony. However, all of that would lie in the limitless distance of the next morning; while he had for himself the deep domain of this present.

AT LAST he left the fence post and found his way around the edge of the herd. Many of the surfeited cows were lying down, their heads stretched out along the ground. Others swayed like overloaded wagons on a rutty road. And he laughed with content as he strode away over the hills towards the house of Tony Miller.

It would be as well for Tony to understand, now, what had happened.

Or was it the picture of the girl that drew him back? He knew when he again stood on the threshold of Tony's shack and looked at the dark, handsome face of Miller as the rancher sat opposite the girl, smiling at her, chatting freely and easily.

He, Joe Carney, had never been very easy with women. He had never been easy with anyone or anything.

In the meantime, what had Tony been telling the girl about him? Something unpleasant, of course. He knew that as he entered the shack again and she looked suddenly up at him with an unsmiling face. Cold, stern disdain made her more beautiful, in a way, than she had been before. But it was a sort of beauty that he did not wish to see again.

However, she rose at once from her place.

"Here's your plate," she said, pointing out the laid place. And she went over to the stove and picked up the stew-pot to serve him.

"Thanks," said Carney, "but I ate while I was away. I just had a snack."

"You went clear back across the hills, eh?" asked big Tony Miller, jerking up his head.

"I went clear back," agreed Carney.

"See anything in the night?" demanded Miller.

"I saw some lightning away off over the Gallop Range," answered Carney.

"It's been dark in that corner of the sky for weeks," commented the girl.

"Anything else worth looking at?" asked Miller, snapping out the words.

"Nothing much. Just some thirsty cows I found," said Carney. "There was no other quick way to get 'em through a fence to the water, so I cut the wires."

"You—cut the wires?" repeated Miller heavily.

"Easier for me to splice those wires again

in the morning than for me to listen to the bellowing of those cows," said Carney.

He stared at Miller, and Tony Miller stared back, his upper lip stiffening, a curse coming into his eyes.

CHAPTER IV

THE girl had gone back to her place at the table. She had a cup of strong, dark coffee and Carney noticed the brown of her hand against the cup. The fingernails were pink and polished and showed care. All of her showed care, now that he looked at her again. She had taken off her wide-brimmed hat, and her hair flowed in a smooth, close pattern about her head. And she simply had a clean look. There was no other word for it. She looked open-pored from a recent scrubbing.

She was good to look at. The light glinted in her hair, her eyes, her smile, and there was the pink shimmer of the fingernails, also. It was strange that he should waste his time looking at non-essentials, but these really were not non-essentials. A lucky man would be able to sit all day long and examine this girl with his eyes. Whatever she did possessed a peculiar charm. The movements of her wrist and hand were fascinating. It was a good, strong, round little wrist. The hand was strong, too. It could do a mighty lot of serious work, a hand like that.

Joe Carney began to smile. The girl did not like that smile because it said to her: "Little girl! Little girl! Little girl!" and she had stopped being a little girl four years ago. She was nineteen, in fact, at this moment.

"You let the cattle through to the water," said Tony Miller, when he was capable of speech, "and you think that you'll splice the wires tomorrow, do you?"

The girl looked up, sharply, anxiously. For when men are about to fight, their voices slide up key and become querulous. The voice of big Tony Miller had altered in this way and a girl with three huge, strong brothers, was sure to know a lot about men and their ways. That was why she watched Tony like a hawk. Carney noticed her glance.

"Don't worry about him," said Carney. "He has to talk that way and he has to look that way. It doesn't mean much. It kills cows now and then—that's all."

He was amazed to find himself talking like this, frankly, openly, but with a hidden sting, also.

Tony Miller forced a laugh. The force was more apparent than the laugh. And the girl tried to smile, but her smile remained anxiously watchful.

"Tony's a great joker," said Carney, "but the trouble is that people have to know him before they understand the jokes. He's been sitting here telling you some funny stories about me, for instance.

"Oh, were you listening?" asked the girl, staring.

THE blood seemed to curdle in the face of Tony Miller, leaving it patched with purple and with gray.

"I didn't have to listen," answered Carney. "I know old Tony's ways."

"But I thought——" began the girl.

And she looked curiously across at Tony Miller as though to say that she found this a very odd situation.

What would Miller do, thus put on his mark? Well, he simply laughed again as well as he could, which was not well at all.

"This fellow Carney, I told you there was nobody just like him," said Tony Miller.

"Yes—you said that," murmured the girl.

She looked more and more distressed and confused. And by this Carney could guess at the enormity of the lies which Miller had been telling about him.

She said, "You know, it's about time for me to start along, again."

"Where are you going?" asked Miller.

"Over to Chinese Gulch. I'll help you do up the dishes, and then I'll go along ——"

"You can't ride on to Chinese Gulch,"

said Tony Miller. "It's thirty miles."

"My horse is a good, strong worker," she said. "And I like to ride at night."

She pushed back her chair.

"Wait a minute," said Carney. "You're afraid that you've run into a pair of fellows who are a little too queer to suit you. Isn't that it?"

She shook her head.

"Oh, no," she said, "certainly not. Only —I'd better be starting."

She rose, and started to pick up dishes.

"Please sit down again," said Tony Miller. "Just because Carney had to come back and——"

His voice trailed off before he stated what Carney had come back and done.

"It's this way," said Carney. "We're getting a lot of good out of seeing you. Will you let me explain why?"

"Yes," she answered, doubtfully.

SHE kept looking from one of them to the other. Tony Miller kept his eyes mostly on the floor, only glancing now and then towards Carney with a murderous yearning.

"Did you ever have to eat meat without salt?" asked Carney.

"Yes," she said.

"It's pretty flat, isn't it?"

"Yes," she agreed.

"Living out like this, away from other folks, that's like eating meat without salt. Having a chance to look at you does us a lot of good. Why not be a good fellow and stay on here, tonight? You'll have the shack to yourself. And that'll give us a chance to see you start in the morning, all rosy and fresh."

He amazed himself with the words he was speaking. He had never talked to a girl like this, before. Usually, he was tongue-tied, but the knowledge that life would probably end for him the next day gave him more courage than whiskey would have done.

And there was the girl, laughing! And there was Tony Miller glowering at him—no doubt because Tony wished that *he* had thought up that speech.

There is power in women, decided Carney. The mere presence of this girl was tying the strong hands of big Tony Miller and making him try to be polite to a man he wanted to kill—a man he would try to kill the next day.

"Well there's a lot of nonsense in all that," said the girl, still laughing.

"No, there's no nonsense. It's the truth," said Carney. "Don't you know it's the truth?"

He leaned forward a little, smiling at her. Her laughter began to die away, but her eyes were very kind as they dwelt on him.

"It's the truth," said Carney. "We've never seen anything so pretty and so clean-looking."

"Stop him, Tony," protested the girl, very cheerfully.

"Yeah, I'd like to," said Tony, too seriously.

"Do you mind it?" asked Joe Carney.

"I love it, of course," she answered. "But I've had enough of it, now."

"All right," said Carney. "I'll quit then, but tell us about yourself."

"Glad to," said Laura Dilney. "I'm twenty—almost. I live back there in Crooked Creek, or almost in it. My father has a ranch there. And I'm going across country to visit a girl who went to school with me."

She stopped.

"Go on," said Carney.

She laughed again. She had a nice laugh that threw her head back and made her eyes shine down over her rosy cheeks.

"Well," she said, "I'll go on. In addition to all those things, I have three brothers, a grandfather, two uncles; and then there are a lot of female relations, too, but I don't suppose they count. My hobbies are dancing, fishing, riding, talking, swimming, climbing, gardening, reading, and writing letters to my friends."

"Go on," said Carney, and he laughed with her.

She was talking only to him. Big, hand-

some Tony Miller was excluded, thrust deep into the background.

"I'm five feet five inches tall," said she, "and I weigh a hundred and seventeen pounds. I've got oversize feet and a good disposition—after breakfast. Now—have I told you enough?"

"No," said Carney. "That's just a beginning."

"Suppose you take your turn and tell me about yourself?" she suggested.

"I would," said Carney, "but men are not worth talking about. There isn't anything to them. They don't amount to anything. They don't have any ideas that are worth a rap. They never do anything that's worth while. If the president of the United States came into this place and wanted to talk about himself, I'd shut him up. I'd say: 'Wait a minute. Quit it. Don't you see who's here?' "

HE JOINED her in laughter again. He felt a bubbling happiness and he knew that some of it was coming out of his eyes.

"Besides," he said, "men don't know how to talk. I don't, anyway. All I have a talent for is listening."

"You?" cried the girl. "You? You? I've never laughed so much—I've never met such a chatter box."

"That's just your first impression," Carney told her. "But you start in and talk, and I'll show you the best listener you ever talked to. Go ahead—I'm all set and ready. I'll tell you when I'm tired of listening."

He rested his elbow on the table, fell into an attitude of profound attention, and sat there, close to her, studying her face.

"If you can't make me talk, you can make me laugh," said the girl, in the midst of pealing merriment. "Are you—are you always like this? Tell me about him, Tony; is he always like this?"

Tony Miller stood up, so that the greatness of his size might appear.

"Yeah," said Tony Miller, "he rattles along a lot—he's all right, though. Nobody minds old Joe Carney."

He got out a laugh of his own that sounded like grinding metal.

"Look at Tony now, will you?" suggested Joe Carney. He made his voice pretentiously low. "He's wonderful, isn't he, when he stands up? I mean—did you ever see such a pair of shoulders in your life?"

"Tony *is* wonderful," said the girl, chuckling.

"Oh, but you don't know," Carney assured her, in a very loud and penetrating whisper. "I never saw anything as handsome as Tony is. Did you? They used his face, once, for a soap ad. They paid him a box of soap—a whole box of soap for his face, was what they paid him. But Tony wasn't spoiled by it. A little thing like soap doesn't mean anything to Tony. He's used to being admired. All the girls in town go crazy when Tony comes in, but he doesn't mind. He laughs at 'em and leaves 'em. Good old Tony! There's a man for you."

He looked up and shook his head in wonder and pretended admiration. Tony Miller's face was as black as night.

He said, "Ah, to hell with you!" and strode out into the darkness.

The girl looked after him with all the laughter gone out of her face, at once; but still the tears of pleasure were brightly clotted on her lashes.

"You shouldn't do it, Joe," she warned him. "Tony's not a fellow to treat the way you do."

"What way do I treat him?" asked Carney. "I just point him out to you. That's self sacrificing, on my part. I give him the right of way. After you look once at a beautiful big fellow like Tony, how could you ever even let me listen to you, the way I've been doing? You wouldn't want me

around to spoil the view. You wouldn't ——"

"Hush," said the girl. "Stop! You must stop! If he hears me laugh again, he'll think that we're both laughing at him behind his back."

She stood up. "Go away, Joe," she said. "I'm going to turn in. But I've loved this."

She held out her hand to him. He took it carefully.

"That's a fine hand," said he. "That's the best hand I ever saw."

"Is it? What's good about it?" asked the girl.

"I don't know," said Carney. "It's just a big, strong, fine hand. It's the sort of a hand I'd like to have, when I grow up."

And they laughed together, heartily.

"Goodnight," said he.

"Goodnight," said the girl. "I'll be laughing in my sleep. How nice you are, Joe—what a tremendous lot I like you."

"Wait a minute," said Carney. "That suggests something to me. I could tell you——"

He stopped. Suddenly grown serious, they stared at each other for a moment, deeply, steadily.

"Well—goodnight," said Joe Carney.

"Goodnight," whispered the girl.

Chapter V

WHEN Carney turned away from the cabin, he had expected to meet big Tony Miller—but at a little distance. Instead, he encountered the great shadowy form before he had taken three steps from the door. Had he been listening?

"Why not go over to my place?" asked Carney.

"Yeah, why not?" said Miller.

They walked along, side by side, silently, until they had crossed the first hill and were descending into the dark of the narrow little valley between it and the next swale.

"You cut the fence up, did you?" asked Miller.

"Yeah. I cut the fence up."

"That's kind of interesting," observed Miller.

"Yeah. I thought that you'd like to know," said Carney. "It's a funny thing, Tony. There I was, sitting over there and watching my cows die. Five or six of them turned up their heels, and I didn't pay any attention to what I could do. Somehow, I just thought that you'd be angry, if I cut the fence."

"Oh, you thought that I'd be angry, did you?"

"I did. Queer, isn't it? I must have been in a funny state of mind to think that a big-hearted guy like Tony Miller would care if I cut down his fence and let my cattle drink his water."

"Yeah," snarled Miller, "you must of been in a funny state of mind all right."

"So I just cut up the wire. Cut it all to hell. And did the cows lap up that water? They sure did, brother. They didn't think that they were really drinking until they got their front feet into the troughs."

"It would of done me good to see that," said Miller.

"I'll bet it would," answered Carney.

"Just by the way—how long were you spying and listening outside my house while I was talking to that girl?"

"I didn't spy, Tony. But I just knew that you'd be talking about me while I was away. I could tell it in your eye. You've got a really speaking eye, Tony. What dirty cracks did you make about me?"

"I told her enough to sober her up before the morning."

"Nice girl," said Carney.

"She's all right. Kind of skinny," observed Miller.

"That's a funny thing," said Carney. "You didn't see her at all. She was slender, all right, but round. You didn't do any talking, so I thought you must be using your eyes, but I was wrong. You didn't see her at all."

"Didn't I?" sneered Miller. "You've got all the eyes, I guess?"

"I use what I've got; it isn't much. I just do the best I can," said Carney. "For me, I never saw such a lovely face."

"Lovely? Oh, sort of pretty, in a cheap way," commented Miller.

There was the most deadly danger locked up in this man; but Carney continued to play with fire and found the play exhilirating.

"That was because she didn't shine at you," suggested Carney. "But when she started laughing at me, it was better than a swing in the air, it was better than a roller-coaster doing the swoops."

"You're young," said Miller. "You'll get sense, one day."

"I'd rather have Laura than sense," answered Carney. "What about you?"

A HAND of iron gripped the shoulder of Carney.

"Listen!" said Miller. "You tried to make a fool of me, in there—in my own house. About the girl—what do I give a damn about her for? I don't give a damn. She's nothing. She's only a cheap little tomboy. Full of wind and cackle, that's all. But you and I are going to have this out when the daylight comes. I'm going to do it with my hands—in the daylight—where I can see your face! Understand? And then I'll go back and have breakfast with the girl and tell her that you preferred riding range to seeing her off. You hear me? And afterwards, I'll ride in and report to the sheriff how you started cutting my fence, and how I warned you, and how I had to fight you off—and just killed you—by accident—defending my life and my property."

He laughed, and there was plenty of reality in that laughter, now. There was plenty of devil in it, also.

And Carney, with the bubbles of happiness completely gone out of him, understood how perfectly the thing would work. The sheriff had seen him desperate, grimly down-hearted. The sheriff himself would be the first witness to agree to the probability of the story told by Tony Miller. Men would despise Miller for being a water-hog. But he cared little for public opinion Money and the fat of the land—that was what he would live on the rest of his days.

"Don't spoil the evening," said Carney, rallying himself by force. "I've had a good time with the girl. I don't want to think, now, about what I'm going to do to you in the morning. But I'll tell you later what's wrong with you."

"You'll tell me later, will you?" grated Miller.

"Yeah. I'll tell you later on."

They reached the shack. Miller pointed towards the vaguely looming heaps of earth about the mouth of Carney's dry well.

"That'll do fine—for a grave," said Miller.

They went into the shack. Never since he had first gripped the shoulder of Carney had Miller relaxed his hold, as though he feared that Carney would try to escape from him and bolt away.

Carney said, "Aren't you playing five kinds of a fool with yourself, Tony? Look at it this way. I'd rather see that girl again in the morning than have the biggest ranch in the West, all stocked with the finest cattle that money could buy. I'm not going to run out on you."

The hand of Miller relaxed its hold.

"Damned if I don't believe you," he said. "I'll just fasten the door to hold you in."

And he drew the door shut behind them.

MILLER took the bunk nearest the door. Joe Carney slept on the farther side of the room.

As he lay there, thoughts went slowly through his mind, and strange and horrible speculations.

He might rise in the night and take a weapon and steal over to the bunk of Miller. He might strike, in the dimness of the dark, and try to end the life of the big fellow.

But he could not do that. He knew it. Miller knew it. The strange scruple of honor would prevent him from trying to kill in the dark.

But Miller himself?

Well, one great truth had come from the lips of the big man. He would want daylight in order to see what his hands accomplished.

Then there came to Carney an hysterical impulse to laugh. He was lying in his own house, in his own bunk, with his murderer prone on the opposite side of the room. And the thing was a folly beyond conception. Something could be done. Something had to be done. But what?

And while the blankness of that question stared into his mind, he was suddenly asleep.

WHEN he wakened, there was still a thick darkness through the room but someone was stirring about in the place. Something was moving outside of it, also, making soft, distant, conversational noises, or murmurs which seemed to have the body of words though they could not be translated into speaking sense.

That was not all. There was an odd, faintly pungent scent in the air, an odor which he had smelled a thousand times before but which he could not name for the moment. Presently his wits would clear and he would know what the thing was.

That which moved in the darkness within the shack turned into the voice of big Tony Miller, cursing deeply, quietly. Then a match scratched and the lantern was lighted. As the chimney was pressed down into place again, the metal guides screeching with rust, a faint light flickered, steadied, and then showed to Carney, as he raised himself on one elbow, the mighty form of Miller with a shadow cast from him engulfing half the room, and across the floor, running slowly, black as ink to the first glance, poured a thin stream of what seemed to be water.

Bewilderment maddened the brain of Carney. He sat up.

"Tony, what's happened? What the devil can that be?"

Miller, without a word, leaned and dipped his finger into the fluid that seeped beneath the door.

"Water," he growled. "Water. I'm gone crazy—and—it's water!"

He flung the front door open. His shout rang thundering inside the room and floated thin and small, far away.

"It's a flood! Carney—for God's sake—there's nothing but water all over the world!"

Carney sprang to his feet. Through the door he saw a glistening sheet and in it were small, bright eyes. Those were the faces of the stars and water, in fact, sheeted over the entire valley!

Chapter VI

CARNEY got to the door where Miller had slumped to the side, weak, staring, helpless.

Now that the door was open, the night was not so silent. Beside the intimate little seeping, sucking sounds as the dry sands drank up the water, there was a distant roaring which came out of the west where the waters, of course, were raging through the upper ravines before they spread out into the sudden calm and quiet of the wider valley.

Towards Mount Gallop the continual tremor of lightning showed the rain clouds there vastly enlarged, like distorted black flowers blooming in the midnight sky. No one needed to squint their eyes in order to make out the flashing of the lightning, now. Sometimes deep-throated murmurs also flowed in from the north west and were, no doubt, the immense shouting of the thunder. It was not strange that there was a flood. Those days of raining had not been entirely on the farther side of that water divide, after all. There had

been plenty of it on the southern slopes, as well, and now the ravines and the woodland creeks of the mountains were gorged with accumulated masses of water which had broken through old dams and obstructions and swelled and gathered head and then come roaring away towards freedom and the sea.

It seemed a miracle that this thing should have happened, but suddenly he remembered that he had seen shallow markings and stains on the rocks even at the tops of the hills between his house and that of Miller. The breath left the body of Carney. Had those been water marks, the signs of an old flood exactly like this one? There was no record of such a thing in the mouths of men. But what did people know? Their knowledge went back over a single stride of fifty years, and that was all.

The cattle?

He could hear them lowing, in the distance.

It was childish, it was insanely impossible that they had been dying of thirst the night before and that he had risked his life in order to cut the fences of Tony Miller. Here there was enough water to supply all the throats in the world, human and animal. And it flooded along with a deep and quiet murmur and with a meaning, surely. What the meaning was staggered the mind of Carney. He wanted to expand his soul and grasp at a new language which had no syllables, only might, weight, movement like that of this water towards the sea.

Here, close at hand, where the water was only crawling, he could see the stars reflected. But yonder went a more rapid current in which various indistinguishable objects were floating. That was the stream which moved in the center of the valley, over the bottom of the rocky draw.

What would the valley be like when the flood withdrew? He could think of it as a black, dripping throat, senselessly gaping wide. There would be great drifts of black mud from the upper mountains valley overlaying the sands with fertility. There would be places where all the soil was gouged away and the rocks lay bare.

How had the thing come in such immensity, and yet so softly, so gradually rising that he had been able to sleep until this moment?

Miller came first out of the trance of wonder.

"My house!" he shouted. "The guns—the furniture—the hundred sacks of grain in the shed—the saddles—and the money—oh my God!"

He leaped out from the door and sank almost to his knees in water and in slush.

He clambered back, his face distorted. His shadow, thrown by the lantern light, wavered vague and far across the sheen of the water. And rising, terror and grief had distorted the handsome face of Tony Miller until he looked like an ape.

"Try the back—we can get through the window, there——"

He rushed to the window, but outside the lantern light made a path across a level surface of water that stretched as far as they could see towards the hills. It might be a coating only inches deep, but there would be whole feet of thick mud beneath the water. No man could make easy progress through that mud, and in a few steps he might sink into a quicksands and drown.

Already the water was deepening on the floor. Carney stepped into a chair and sat on the top rung of it. He made a cigarette and lighted it, blowing the smoke towards the ceiling.

"You crazy damn fool," shouted Tony Miller, "don't you see that it's the wind-up and the finish? Don't you see that we're done for? My shack—it's on lower ground than this, and it's closer to the draw."

It was true, for as the draw wound in a leisurely loop around the two hills and came at last to the house of Tony Miller, the edge of the bank lay not more than fifty feet away from the shack. Water high enough to flood the floor of Carney's house would already have lifted the shack of Miller from its foundations or else have collapsed it like a house of cards.

"You don't understand, you fool!" shouted Tony Miller. "The whole place is gone, by this time. It's gutted. It's swept away. And the money—oh God!—why did I ever come to this hell-hole? Why did I ever waste my time? Why didn't I put a bullet through your damned brain and watch you drop? That would have been enough! And then to ride on!"

"No use in murdering me," said Carney. "Not then. The law would have found you and strung you up."

"D'you hear me? There's eight thousand dollars gone to hell with my house!"

"How do you come to have eight thousand dollars buried in your house?" asked Carney, curiously.

For his own part, there was only a single thing that worried him—the fate of the girl.

But he kept saying that she was calm, she was keen witted, she was strong—for a girl—and she would not lose her head. There was always something to do, and she would save herself.

"No matter how I came to have it—it's mine," said Tony Miller—"it *was* mine—and it's gone—eight—thousand—dollars—gone! Because the devil sent a woman out of the night and tempted me away from my place."

"She'll find the money for you and save it, most likely!"

"Bah!" groaned big Tony Miller. "It's under the floor—nailed down under the floor in a tin box, so that it can't be got at by rats. Eight thousand dollars! Eight thousand dollars!"

He beat his head with both fists.

"Curse her!" said Tony Miller. "Oh, I hope her soul rots in hellfire! It's because of her. That's why I wasn't there to save the stuff. I wish to God that I'd never laid eyes on a woman in my life!"

CARNEY watched him gravely.

"Have you talked yourself out about her?" he said. "Then let's leave that subject. Because, Tony, if you put your dirty mouth on her name again, I'll stick you with this knife—like a pig!"

"Ha!" cried Miller. "You're out of your head about her and——"

Carney pulled the knife and laid it flat on his knee. Miller gaped.

"You mean it!" he stammered.

"Ay, I mean it," said Carney. "She's gone. I've been trying to think otherwise. But I'm a fool. She's gone—and I'm gone—and so are you."

"I'm not," shouted Miller. "I'm going to get out of this in spite of hell and——"

"Look!" said Carney.

He pointed, and out beyond the door they saw a moving object—a small chicken coop, painted white.

There was no house within five miles—but it had come down the river.

"The Winsteads—they're done for," said Miller, heavily.

He began to stride back and forth, splashing his feet through the ankle deep water, looking about him with a crazy eye. Now and then he struck both hands quickly against his face. He was pale; he was stone-gray.

They could hear the current, now, and over its gradual murmurings a roar came at them from the distance.

"Is that a wind rising?" asked Miller, stopping as though shot. "That's all we need—a wind—to make things hell——"

"It's a wave of water coming—it's a higher level of water, that's all," said Carney.

He dropped his cigarette into the water. It hissed, and spat upwards a last jet of smoke and steam.

Then he heard the shouting of Miller at the door, where he was leaning out to watch.

"It's true—it's coming like a breaker at sea. It's going to smash hell out of everything. Carney—Joe—what are we going to do?"

"Wait and see," said Carney.

He made another cigarette, not out of bravado, but because he wanted the smoke badly.

He looked across the room towards the

row of shelves which he had nailed near his stove. Half of a bacon was there. He could see the glistening white of the fat. It seemed a pity that that bacon had to go to waste——

But down there at the house of Tony Miller, what was happening to the girl? What had she done?

He made a gesture with one hand as though to beat the smoke away from his face. In reality, it was to banish the image of the face of Laura Dilney. But there was no good trying to do that. He had one strange regret—that he had not seen her in the honest strength of sunshine. How she would shine in that. Her hair would burn like a flame. It would throw a light into his mind——

THE approaching roar of the wave ran nearer. Tony Miller, with a yell, ran to Carney and shrank behind him.

"Stop it, Joe—do something—tell me what to do! Don't you care?" cried Miller. "Are you going to give up and go down ——"

A mighty blow struck the house. A dozen of the flimsy boards on the western side were smashed in at once, and the water arched into the interior in shining masses. As it struck, it cast up a spray that fell coldly on the face and the hands of Carney.

Through the door heaped waters rushed into the little house. They poured across the floor. They swept around the chair on which Carney was sitting and left his feet awash.

Onwards in a wave rushed that first mass and struck the table, and overturned it, and hit the shelves in the corner and washed them loose with a feeble jingling and clattering of falling pans and crockery.

Chapter VII

THE lantern went with the fall of the table. The darkness that poured through the cabin multiplied the danger suddenly. Blind helplessness stifled Carney. It was like being buried alive. But the screaming of Miller put a devil in the dark.

"What'll we do? Carney! What'll we do?"

"Get to the roof!" shouted back Carney, and began to wade for the door.

The whirling currents grappled like fingerless hands at his legs, trying to upset him; but he got to the door and Miller wedged through beside him. The big man had the agility of a wildcat now that there was goal given him to strive for. Catlike he went up the side of the house, with Carney laboring beneath him. It was not very difficult climbing because there were many cracks and flaws in the wall that gave hand and footholds. They reached the rooftree and spraddled it.

It had always seemed to Carney a good, roomy shack; now, with the immensity of the flood about it, it looked smaller than the back of a horse.

A staggering horse. A welter of choppy water surrounded the place. There was a crunching and swaying of the supports. Then the whole dim landscape of stars and distant hills began to turn.

"We're afloat!" yelled Tony Miller. "Your rotten shack is falling to pieces."

IN FACT the house settled and kept on settling beneath them, turning on the sweep of the water. The flood seemed to be rising to swallow them, but that was because the shack was falling to pieces. Now the force of the current began to whirl the little cabin more quickly. Lower joists still protruding sometimes snagged in the mud and made the structure buck like a horse in the water; but the house of Carney had turned into a sort of crazy boat which was journeying with the stream.

"If you'd built the damned thing like a white man should of, with a tight floor and all, it would ride like a ship!" shouted Miller.

"There's no use in yelling," answered Carney. "I can hear you, well enough."

The uproar that had been deafening for a few moments inside the breaking house had now given place to a wide quiet. Even the roar of water in the upper ravines was no longer a vibration travelling through the ground; it was a voice that was soaked up and quickly blotted away in the immensity of the night.

The wreck of the house stopped whirling, it straightened out and at the same time half the roof was ripped away, turning into a mass of little floating fragments. What remained was like a badly constructed raft. The two men gripped the thicker edge of it, which contained the roof beam; the rest of their raft slanted off into the water.

They were soaked to the skin, of course, and the flood had brought down with it some of the cold of the upper mountains. It seemed that this sweep of water was not very far distant in time or in miles from the melting of original snows. The fear of cold joined the fear of the flood.

"Where are we drifting? Which way?" asked Miller.

"We're pulling down towards the central current," answered Carney. "You can hear it, over there. You can see the jump of the water, too. We'll be in that, before long, and then God pity us!"

"Why didn't you build a house, while you were about it?" shouted Miller. "You built a nigger's shack—you built it like the poor white trash that you are! Wait a minute—Carney, you don't think that we're going to be pulled down into the center, there?"

"We sure are," said Carney.

"But then we'll be gone!"

"No, we'll still have one chance."

"Out of what?"

"Out of a hundred."

A WILD, groaning cry burst from the throat of Tony Miller.

"I can't die. I'm too young to die!"

"Choke yourself—shut up and be damned, will you? Stop this whining," commanded Carney.

"Joe, we're gunna die together," pleaded Miller. "We oughtto be kind to one another."

"I can't stand your yelling, Tony. We're going to take it on the chin, I suppose. But let's take it, then! Why howl all the time?"

"You don't know what's behind me," said Tony Miller. "What have *you* done? Nothing! Nothing in your whole damn life! Dying ain't a thing to a fellow like you. It's no more than falling asleep."

A slight shudder that did not come from the cold ran through Carney. He could see, in the far east, a blackening of the mountains, and he knew what that meant. The dawn was commencing. The day would open its eye wide enough to see the two of them die.

"What's the matter with you, Tony?" he asked. "What have *you* done?"

"You know. You've guessed the whole thing," said Miller. "How would I come by eight thousand berries in my shack? How would I all at once come on enough money to pick up a herd of steers? You must of wondered about that!"

"I wondered, all right. I thought some relation might have died and left you something."

Miller began to groan.

"We'll be dead before the morning!" he said.

"I suppose so," said Carney.

"Carney, tell me something. You're a serious kind of a fellow. I never heard you talk gay and easy—except to that girl. Tell me what you think—what happens to people after they've died?"

"Whatever they're afraid of—that's what happens to them, I guess," answered Carney.

"What do you mean by that?"

"You know what I mean. What people

believe in—that's what really exists for them."

"How can that be?"

"I don't know. It's what I feel."

"Carney—telling a thing and being sorry about it—that ought to count for a man."

"Maybe. Yes, I suppose so."

SOMETHING dark and long and sleek went by them through the water. A sudden whirl of the pooling waters leaped the thing clear—a stripped tree trunk that lurched into view and went down again. There was enough weight in it to have smashed their flimsy raft to bits. And Miller groaned.

"I'm not a yellow hound," he said, "but I've got to talk! We're going to pass out, the pair of us."

"Ay, we're a pair of goners."

"Carney, all I aimed at was cracking the old peter in that bank."

"What bank?"

"Over there in Pearson Corners."

"You mean where the old man was killed?"

"Listen to me, Joe. I was in there to get something. It was something that was coming to me. I mean, if my old man had lived, he would have made money. He would have given me a decent start in life. You know that?"

"I suppose so."

"Well, they wiped him out. They hanged him. And that means that the world owed me something—so I went to take it. How wrong can you call that?"

"That's fighting according to your own rules, and to hell with the rules of the regular game. You can't live that way, Tony."

"I know it—maybe. I'm telling you, though. I got into the bank easy. I thought I'd have to blow the damn thing, but I didn't have to. A can-opener was all that I had to use. It opened like a tin can. It was a cinch. I got the safe wide and I went through it. There wasn't as much as I thought. There wasn't hardly twenty thousand in cash in that safe. There were some legal looking folded papers. If I'd had the sense to take those, I would have had a hundred thousand more. But I didn't have the sense. I read that in the papers, afterwards. And then, when I was cleaning up and getting ready to leave—the old man came into the bank."

HE MADE a pause. A side eddy cast a rippling wave over the raft and froze Carney and Miller with the chill of the water.

"Go on," urged Carney. "Get it off your chest."

"I lay low," said Miller. "I thought that the old fool would go into his office and stay there. Then I could slip away. But he came straight back, as though I were calling to him. It was the damnedest thing! He came straight back to me, and there was no place left for me to hide. He switched on the lights. The shine of them murdered me, pretty near. Then I saw that there was only one way out. I got hold of the bar and waited, and when he turned the corner, I let him have it. Right across the eyes, because I didn't want him to see me. I slugged him across the eyes and he fell. It wasn't such a hell of a wallop that I hit him."

"He died, though," commented Carney.

"Listen to me—it was his head hitting the floor that done for him. His head hit the floor a regular whack. Like clapped hands. You couldn't call that my fault, could you? He fell and fractured his skull. That was what killed him. Listen, Carney. Suppose a boxer whangs the other fellow and the man drops and hits his head on the edge of the mat and fractures his skull—they don't hang the boxer that does that. It's just bad luck."

"The boxer isn't waiting behind a corner ready to sock his man with an iron bar," said Carney, "and that's why they don't hang him."

"You think so? Don't you see anything on my side?"

"I'm no judge," answered Carney. "I wouldn't judge you, Tony. Maybe there's something in what you say."

"There's got to be. I didn't feel like no dirty murderer. You know, Joe. I didn't plan it all out. I wasn't cold-blooded, or anything. I just hit him—sort of in self defense."

Carney said nothing. He was seeing the picture of the crime. He could imagine himself desperate enough to commit robbery, but not brute enough to smash the old man across the face.

"He was seventy something, wasn't he?" asked Carney.

"Yeah, somewhere around there," answered Miller, with an accent of relief. "He didn't have far to go, anyway. It didn't make much difference to him, after he'd lived his life. You could see that. And I feel a lot better now that I've talked the thing out. I can die easier, now. Only —I wish to God it were something besides drowning!"

Chapter VIII

THE currents were pulling the flimsy raft steadily towards that curve which ran west and then south of the two hills, towards the place where the shack of big Tony Miller had stood. Carney, breaking off a couple of long boards, tried to guide the clumsy craft somewhat by paddling, but he was not successful. It was far too wide, unproportioned, and keelless to be handled by the efforts of one or two men in such currents as those which controlled it now.

Tony Miller, when he saw what was happening, joined his companion and paddled with such might that the board finally snapped half its length in his hands.

"It's no good," he said. "We can't handle her! Look out! What's there?"

The thing behind them loomed quite suddenly. It was not, in fact, directly behind them, but just a trifle to the right it was carried along with overtaking speed by the strength of the central current. They could make out, now, that it was a great wreckage, jumbled together, and a triangular silhouette that projected with the rest looked like the forehead of a house.

"Make for it!" cried Miller, picking up the broken half of his board. "Work like hell—that's a regular ship for us!"

Carney, on his knees, was already paddling, and the unwieldy bulk of their raft they drove inch by inch towards the sweeping mass that came down the stream, holding out its fifty arms as though in a mute appeal for help.

There was a gradually growing light of the dawn, now, that made the stars dim, and by this light Carney scanned the wreckage until he was sure of its origin. This had once been a portion of a big house; the projecting arms were so many huddled beams.

"Look, Joe!" yelled Miller. "There's people on it!"

Something had in fact moved along the top of the wreckage. They were a good bit closer, by this time, as they struggled at the improvised paddles and as the central current bore its prize up abreast with them; and now Joe Carney was able to make out the form of a huge cat that had paced the ridge of the confusion and crouched again. The glint of the big round eyes was like the glowing of phosphorous.

It was not alone. A horned head crowded close to the monster, and now Carney made out surely a big bearded goat which literally touched shoulders with the meat-eater! In that strange companionship they faced the end of their world together.

But now, struggling hard, it became apparent that the two men could not manage to work their raft out to reaching distance of the wreckage. It was chance that showed Carney, as he sat at the forward end of their craft, a long line cutting the water, and his grasp was instantly on the end of a dragging lariat. His yell brought Miller to him.

With one hand they clung to their raft; with the other they pulled on the line and rapidly drew near to the great bulk ahead of them. One more draw on the rope

might have given Carney a hand-hold on the rearmost projecting timber when the rope loosed from its grip on the wreckage and let them jerk helplessly back.

When they sat up again, the huge bulk was already a considerable distance ahead of them.

The mountain lion and the goat were saved from an addition to their crew; Carney saw the clear silhouette of the pair drawing away through the dusty light; and in his ear came the loud lament of big Tony Miller.

"We're done for!" he shouted. "It's the last chance, Joe!"

"Ay, it's the last chance," said Joe Carney.

HE STARED around him, trying to make out the features of this familiar part of the world, but it was impossible to recognize anything. The lower hills were swamped; the higher hills were transformed by the immersion of their lower slopes. Yet he had a feeling that they were nearing the site of the shack of Miller.

"Can you remember, Tony?" he asked. "Wasn't your place about in here?"

"Further ahead," said Miller. "Damn the place, anyway. If I'd been there, I might have done something. If I'd had my own tools and things around me—I would of done something to make a real boat—but your flimsy bit of nothing——"

He checked himself with a shout. The big mass of wreckage ahead of them, caught in a great whirl of the currents, was suddenly revolving, and now it split apart and dissolved before their eyes like sand in water.

They heard one frightful, screeching howl; then the hulk to which they would have trusted themselves was completely gone. A yeasty frothing of the water showed where it had been swimming, and a few small bits of flotsam.

"There's one turn of luck for us, Tony," said Carney. "We'd be with that cat, now, if we'd climbed into that hulk of stuff. And here we are a rope to the good—and still breathing."

It was hard to be cheerful for their raft, taking in a continual increase of weight through the water that soaked into the dry wood, was now only an inch or two above the surface at its highest part. And the rest of it sloped off deeply into the stream.

"Ay, we're breathing," said Miller. "But when we hit that same whirl—then what, Joe?"

"Hold hard and wait!" urged Carney.

He looked back at the big, crouched silhouette of Miller. He had every reason to hate the man; he had every reason, recently, to despise him also; and yet an odd warmth that was like an affection worked through his blood when he saw Tony. He could not resist reaching a hand back and slapping the shoulder of Miller.

"We're going to fetch through it, maybe," he said. "One chance in ten, anyway!"

"We can tie ourselves on with that rope," declared Miller. "Give it to me."

"And then when the raft goes to pieces, the pieces pull us down. Is that what you want?" asked Carney.

"Look out!" yelled Miller. "Here it goes!"

AT THE same time Carney felt a quick tug at the raft, spinning it suddenly to the side, and they were swept instantly into the wide arms of the whirlpool that had dissolved the house-wreck. The speed of the motion buried them to their shoulders in the water for a moment, but by degrees they rose again to the surface. Again and again the currents wrenched violently at the raft but it was an object too small, it appeared, for the water to get with a

proper breaking grip. Where the wreckage of the house had broken up at the first touch, the little raft went safely through and, swinging out from the force of the whirl, slipped away into smoother and shallower water at the edge of the flood.

Tony Miller was still repeating, in the full frenzy of his fear, the prayer which he had mumbled during the crisis.

"Gimme another chance. God, gimme another chance!"

They were well off into the quieter currents before he stopped his chant. It was in fact big Tony Miller who called out: "Look ahead, partner! D'you see what I see? A scarecrow hanging at the top of a pole! Well, I'll be damned! What is it, Carney?"

The light was increasing, but it was still thick and dull, and when Carney looked it seemed to him that he did in fact see a scarecrow at the top of a pole; he had to stare closely to make sure that it was the weight of a human body suspended in a sling from the top of a post just above the water. Then understanding came over him:

"It's the site of your place, Tony!" he called. And that's the girl—she's lashed herself to the last standing joist of your house."

"It can't be the place—and no girl would have the brains to do a thing like that," protested Tony Miller.

"It's got to be true," answered Carney. "Help me in towards her, Tony. Row like the devil with that board of yours!"

His own clumsy paddle was already struggling against the weight of the water.

"Hold up!" argued Miller. "You've got sense enough to know that we can't do that, Joe. There's not enough buoyancy in this damned raft for the pair of us. You wouldn't want to put another weight on it, would you?"

Carney, ceasing paddling, stared helplessly at his companion.

"You don't understand, Tony," he explained with care. "It's the girl that was in your shack—it's Laura Dilney—it's the blue-eyed girl, Tony. Great God, you wouldn't go by without giving her a hand, would you?"

"I saw you were out of your head about her," said Miller. "But get your wits back, now. We can't work the raft that far over, anyway. And even if we could, nobody but a crazy man would put another big weight on this craft."

IN THE whirling of the water they had changed ends, now, and Miller was on the down-stream side of the raft. Carney heaved his board into the air and snarled: "Dig that paddle of yours into the water, and work, Miller, or by God, I'll brain you! I'll make this raft light enough to hold another!"

Miller, staring back over his shoulder at the impending weight, groaned with rage and with fear; but he started paddling obediently. And once he had begun, trusting to the impetus of a decent act which had been commenced, Carney joined in the labor.

They were luckily between two main currents. The greater one swept down the center of the draw; and off to the side another cut into the nearest hill, causing small landslides every moment or so. Between these two running forces the water was comparatively slack and even the clumsiness of the raft yielded a little in the direction in which they were urging it.

And now the heat of the work—or, perhaps, some decency of heart which had been long buried and forgotten—made big Tony Miller throw himself heartily into the task, forgetting all his objections. He cheered with a great voice as the raft made perceptible headway. So with one soul they worked together, and the dangling figure that hung from the top of the post took note of their advance at last. Carney, straining until his eyes thrust out from his head, saw the wave of her hand.

It was reasonably certain, after a few moments, that they could not reach to the post. There was sufficient drift to the water to sweep them at a fair pace down-

stream, and only by inches could they thrust their raft ahead. That was why Carney presently dropped his paddle and began to coil the rope.

He waved it over his head as the girl slid down the post and lay half submerged in the water, holding up her head and one arm as a signal that she was ready to make the catch.

The waterlogged loop of the rope flew as true as a stone to its mark, and in another moment Carney was bringing her in towards the raft, hand over hand.

Chapter IX

CARNEY pulled her in on the raft. She lay half awash, sleek as a brown seal in her soaked clothes, exhausted.

The raft was slowly turning end for end as it wheeled down the stream. Carney sat cross-legged with the head of the girl on his lap; big Tony Miller had turned and was staring at the pair.

The light had grown. The sky was now a bowl of penetrant blue and it showed the face of the girl pale, marked with a stain of darkness about the eyes. Wisps of wet hair streaked across her skin. Carney gathered it carefully and tucked it into the strong knot at the back of her head.

She put up one hand and held him by the arm, with a grip that gradually grew stronger. In another moment her eyes were open.

She had been no more than a child, before; now she was a woman again and enclosed from him inside that mystery which men cannot invade. He had always tried to tell himself that women are just the same as men, except that they need a little more knowing. Now he was sure that they are infinitely removed. They are things to despair over or to thank God for.

He was aware of another thing. He had been resigned to the almost certain death. But now that he was touching her he wanted life with a terrible want. He was afraid!

A little after her eyes opened, she sat up.

"I was giving up. I was just giving up," she said. "Thank you, Tony."

"Thank Joe," said Tony Miller, staring at her.

"I don't have to thank Joe," answered the girl. She put her hand behind her and touched Carney with it.

"You and him are like one piece of cloth, eh?" asked Miller, rather sourly.

She looked back over her shoulder, and she smiled at Carney. He watched the smile, dizzily. "Yes, Joe?" she asked.

"Yeah—one piece of cloth," he managed to say.

She faced Miller again, and Carney found that his breath was gone. This thing had not happened. In books, a fellow loved a girl for years. Every time he got close to her, every time he thought that he had her, she kicked him in the face. There were long trials, deep perturbations, and at last, reluctantly, he was allowed to hear that she would marry him.

And this girl—he had met her for the first time the night before. They had talked—the talk had flowed through them like light through glass, in a way. The talk had carried them along to a strange destination.

And to-day her head had laid in his lap while she was panting back from a state of exhaustion. That was all. The feel of her wet skin was still in the tips of his fingers. But in a gesture she had said that she loved him and admitted him to a partnership.

Seeing how her clothes clung to her body, now, soaked with the flood water, he felt a sudden sense of shame and possession mingled. He wanted to cover her, but he had no coat.

And all the time, big Tony Miller was staring at her.

She was saying, "I've something to pay my way, Tony."

She pulled out a twist of wet cloth from her dress. "I tried to make a raft out of the floor boards," she said. "And after I'd

worked for a while I saw that I couldn't make a raft that way, but I'd got up several boards, and under them I found a tin box with—around eight thousand in it. I guess you're glad to have that back, Tony?"

Miller took the money. He was still staring at the girl, but now he began to smile.

"You're luck, that's what you are," said Tony Miller. "I've been wondering what you were, and now I know. You're luck!"

"And you're *my* luck, too," agreed the girl. "When I saw you struggling away at that board, for a paddle—I was thanking God for two such men in the world, Tony. If it were eight hundred thousand, I'd be only that happier in giving it all to you."

"Ay," said Tony. "You mean that, all right. You're the kind that mean what you say. I never met that kind before."

He began to laugh. The laughter jarred to a pause.

"You give me eight thousand dollars. You give Joe yourself. That's paying your fare, I suppose."

He went on with his laughter. He had a bad look while he was laughing. His mouth pulled over to one side and his teeth showed, through a snarl.

"Trouble ahead!" called Joe Carney.

For the raft had slipped through the quieter stretch of water and was gathering speed, now, towards the place where the two stronger currents met. As they met, they tossed sharp waves up and down and the surface was whitened by foam.

"Paddle on the left!" shouted Carney. "Veer it into the main stream, Tony!"

THEY struck their boards into the water and oared with all their might. And the crazy raft turned to the side, staggered as though resisting with a malicious purpose, and then shot ahead straight for the danger-point.

The joined currents jumped under the raft like a horse under a saddle.

"Ware behind! Look out—Joe!" screamed the girl.

He looked back and saw a log come out of the water and shoot at him like a spear. It was so like a javelin that he could almost see an immense, dark hand wielding the tree trunk for the stroke. He caught at the blunt, splintered head of the log.

The wrench tore at his right arm with red hot agony. The force of the pull twisted the raft half around, but the stroke of the jumping log was averted. The monster plunged into the water beside the raft and disappeared.

A yell of relief and thanksgiving was coming from the throat of big Tony Miller.

"Good work, old son! You saved all our bacon, that time."

But the girl was saying: "What is it, Joe? Why's your head down? What's the matter?"

"Nothing," he answered.

His right arm was dangling. When he tried to lift his hand in from the water in which it dangled, there was no response.

"Joe, what's wrong with your arm?" cried the girl.

"Nothing," he said. "I'm all right."

"Let me see!"

"Keep away!" commanded Joe, panting. For the pain reddened his vision and clouded his brain.

"It's broken!" moaned Laura Dilney. "Joe! It's broken!"

HE HAD to have his left hand to hold onto the bucking raft. She raised that right arm and laid it across his lap. There were two elbows, now. The second one was only a few inches below his shoulder.

"Is it gone?" asked Tony Miller.

"It's broken between the elbow and the shoulder," said the girl. "But I'll make a

splint. I know how to make splints and use them. I've been taught that, Joe. That arm's not going to be ruined!"

"Look," said Joe Carney. "Everything has to be paid for. Maybe this arm is the coin that we pay to get out of all the trouble. It's a cheap price, Laura."

"Paddle right! Paddle right!" yelled Tony Miller.

They had come down on the danger unsuspecting; besides, it had been hidden by the curve of the draw which the flood was now following. It was a small reef that thrust up through the rush of the water in the very centre of the strongest current. It had a prow like the prow of a boat. The water split away on either side of that point, which was a gleaming rock; and straight at this danger the raft was being thrown.

Joe Carney could only grit his teeth and cling with one hand. It was the girl who caught up the board and plied in. Slowly, little by little, stroke by stroke they pulled the raft to the side, with Tony Miller working like a madman at the forward end.

They were almost clear when a side sway of the water struck the heel of the raft in. It whirled, and crashed sidewise on the very point of the snag. There was weight enough to crumple the boards and fling Carney forward. With his left arm he gathered the girl to him and was rolled headlong onto a stretch of wet sand beyond the reaching rock.

Big Tony Miller landed in a heap beside him. And as Carney sat up, he saw the girl springing to her feet, and watched the wreck of the old roof spilled in a worthless slack of boards down the face of the rapid stream.

Tony Miller, having seen their situation, threw his arms high above his head and stood like a stone, a great statue of despairing prayer.

Chapter X

WOMEN have the practical minds.

Tony Miller was frozen in an attitude that might have been imprecation and that might have been prayer. Joe Carney, a man who had made his way in the world, took note that they were on a little high ridge that jutted a foot or so out of the water. It was shaped like a boat some thirty feet long, and every moment the sandy sides of the island were eaten gradually away by the current. Before long, this last abode of safety would be swallowed by the flood and then would come the end—a few moments of rolling in the sweep of the waters, then choking, silence, darkness, death.

But the girl would not look even these few moments ahead. She had gathered some shards of wood which had been thrown from splinterings of the boards on the island, and with these she made splints. Her underskirt she tore off and ripped into narrow bandages with which she wrapped the splints in place, having first, with the desperate face of one inflicting pain, set the bone of the upper arm of Carney straight.

The pain which she gave him stifled his breathing, stopped his thoughts, but when once the splints had taken hold, relieving all the pull of the muscles, the relief was immense. He could breathe again. He felt again a master of himself, and therefore he began to be master of the situation in which they were placed.

Calmly he looked around him. The dawn was still growing. In the sky there was not a cloud. Towards the east the heavens were turning green, and toward the northwest, where the lightnings and the clouds had been concentrated, there was now only the clear outline of the naked mountains. It was exactly the picture which he had looked out upon so many times when he rose in the morning to begin the work of the day.

Work seemed a rather foolish thing, now, and the counting, from year to year, of the increase of the herd, the struggles through every drought, the bitter fight through the cold of the winter, the glorious sense of triumph in tearing a living from the bleakness of the waterless desert, all

of these things seemed to him folly. For now he was confronted with the end of life.

Big Tony Miller was striding up and down the narrow confines of the island. And Carney stood up and looked calmly around him. He put his left arm—he wished that it could have been the right—around the girl. And she gave to him. Her head was back on his shoulder. He watched the hopeless hills, the sweep of the waters that began to gleam with day; and the girl watched his face.

He thought of the future, of death, of some possible heaven.

And she thought of him.

She said, "It's been a hard life, Joe. It's thumbed away all the joy of living, for you."

"No," said Carney. "Not all the joy of living."

He shook his head. Now that he thought back upon the past the sense of failure left him.

"Your face is thin with the work, Joe," said the girl. And she added, "Is there a great pain in your arm, now?"

"There's no great pain in my arm," he answered. "And as for the work—what else is living? But listen to me, Laura."

"I'm listening," she said.

"Suppose that we'd lived to marry——"

"Ah, God, suppose——" said the girl.

"There would have been children, eh, Laura?"

"There would have been," she said, and she sighed. She looked down at the ground and up again at Carney. "There would have been children," she repeated.

"But mind you, we wouldn't have had much money."

"I know that," she said.

"They would have had to grow up a good deal ragged."

"Love is the clothes that keeps a child from nakedness," said the girl.

"Ay," said he. "We would have loved them, Laura. Let me tell you a thing."

"Tell me," said she.

"If I'd never seen you, I could have loved the name of Laura."

"I knew a Laura with freckles and rusty hair," she said.

"That isn't the Laura I mean," said he.

"I knew a Joe," she went on, "that was a fat boy who couldn't learn his lessons. The fat had gone into his brain, perhaps."

"There's yourself and myself," said he, intelligently.

"There is," said the girl. "There's nothing else—much!"

"Well," said Carney, "we have each other, my dear."

"We have," said the girl. "But we've missed the children, and the long days together, and the fight, and the winning, and the failing—all together."

"Ay," said Carney. "But in the end there's always the dying. And here we have the chance of dying together."

"I thank God for that," said the girl, devoutly. "Do you hear me, Joe?"

"I hear nothing but you, Laura. All the roar of the water that's trying to drown us out—it's nothing to me! What do you want to say?"

"Let me think. I'll say it pretty soon. Words are not much good."

"That's true. They're not much good."

"D'you know, as I stand and look at you, Joe, the years sort of melt away, and it seems that I've always loved you."

"That isn't what you were going to say," he corrected.

"No, I wanted to say this: that it's a strange thing people want to have prayers and reading out of a book to marry them. I'm married to you, Joe."

"Ay," said he. "And that's why we'll die happy."

"And there's a pity in me for poor Tony. Because he dies alone."

"He dies—alone," answered Carney, grimly.

"You wouldn't have it that way?"

"No," said Carney, "if ever he's done me wrong, I forgive him."

"He *has* wronged you, Joe."

"Yes. I know it."

"He's lied about you, and called you a fool, and a coward. But do you forgive him?"

"With all my heart," said Carney.

THE girl looked up at him, quietly, steadily.

"You're better than I am," she said. "But we're going to die. Tell me—do you love me?"

"Ay," he said. "And better than breath."

They staggered a little as a cross current struck them, then regained their feet. The slush clung to them, more than ankle deep, as they waded back into the narrow strip of the island where there was still dry footing. It was much narrowed, much shortened.

The voice of big Tony Miller rushed in on them: "It's falling away! D'you see?"

They stared at Miller. He was waving his arms, yelling.

"The water! The water, you fools! It's falling. That was the last wave. Look! It's a foot down, now, from the top of the island!"

They stared, and they saw that the thing was true. The water had ebbed suddenly from its full flood, and still as they watched it declined. Before them the rout of the flood increased, as it seemed, and passed the bend in a wave after which followed a lower height of the river.

They could not believe. The girl leaned, and touched the top of the stream.

"It's true," she said, straightening. "The water's falling!"

It was indeed true, and with every moment the strength of the flood diminished. The lank, dripping, black sides of the hillock were revealed little by little.

"It's life!" yelled Tony Miller. "D'you hear? The flood's going down as fast as it came. It's life! I'm saved! Oh God, I thought—I thought it was the end!"

Joe Carney looked almost sternly down at the girl.

"He's right," said Carney. "D'you see? We're saved, Laura. Does that mean you're going to forget? Does the old life and the old world come back on you, now? D'you remember the girl you were riding to see?"

"All that is gone," said the girl.

"Well," said Joe Carney, "it's a dog-gone queer thing, Laura. I'm minus a house and the things that were in it. But I've gained you."

"And a friend?" said the girl.

He looked over her turned head towards Tony Miller. And it was Tony who answered, "He'll have no friend in me! D'you hear, Carney? I'm no friend of yours. You've learned too much, and by God, the world's too small for the two of us to live in it!"

CHAPTER XI

TO THE girl, it came as a joke. She looked towards the brightening east, and then she stared at the two men.

"What do you mean, Tony," she asked. "Too small? After what we've been through together? Too small? Why, we could live together forever in a corner and still be friends——"

"You," said Tony, extending his long, powerful arm and pointing towards Joe Carney, "how could I trust you? You know—you know——"

He paused, and made a stride forward to finish his sentence.

"Tony!" cried the girl.

He paid no attention to her. Joe Carney had shrunk a little. He glanced away as though to seek a means of retreat, but the wide flood of the water extended, beneath the muddy bank of the island.

Carney said, "There's no good my tell-

ing you anything about myself. You know what you've told me."

Suddenly Tony Miller exclaimed, "Will you swear to God that you'll never tell a human soul what I've said—out there!"

He waved backwards, towards the descending river, towards the past, towards the terrible night in which he had spoken too much.

And Carney said, "You see, Tony, I've just been talking with Laura about God—about things like that. I don't know. I'm not swearing by Him—except the things that I ought to do."

"You ought not to keep your face shut about me?" said Miller. "Is that what you mean? Damn you, is that what you mean?"

He made another step forward. He was within striking distance. And Joe Carney, turning pale, faced him steadily.

"I mean that," he said.

"Then take it!" shouted Tony Miller, and rushed.

There was no retreat for Carney. There was only the thick, sleek mud of the bank behind him. He had not his right hand, which is to the rest of the body like the executing brain. But desperation made his left fist a lump of iron and with it he struck Miller in the face.

The weight of the blow made the big fellow slump to one knee. He had not been prepared for a blow. His hands had been open, ready to seize and to break. They were still extended as Carney slipped past him onto the opener face of the island behind.

"Tony! Tony! Tony!" screamed the girl. "Are you crazy? He only has one hand—you can't fight him—you can't——"

Tony Miller got to his feet.

There was plenty of light, now. The sunrise was still at a distance of time from them, but the rose of the coming day had commenced to pour from a thousand fountains into the horizon.

Miller wiped his face, and the back of his hand was red. He looked down at his blood.

"I wanted that," he said. "That was what I needed. Now—I'm gunna make you——"

He rushed straight in.

The girl, with a despairing cry, threw herself at him, catching him above the hips in her arms. He struck her, backhanded. She only clung the harder.

Carney, poising himself, was about to hammer home a punch, but something restrained him—one of those schoolboy maxims that rule the American man blindly—a man who is being held cannot be struck by another. Therefore he held his blow back, groaning.

And the girl was crying out, "Tony, you can't hurt him—he's crippled. He's crippled saving both of us."

Tony Miller looked down. He selected the place like a marksman drawing a bead. He struck with the heel of his fist, behind the ear. And the girl slumped sidelong at his feet. He stepped across her.

A frightful oath tore from the throat of Carney as he sprang in. His fist met the face of Tony Miller. It landed again and again. The blood sprang out from the slashing of the hard knuckles that ground the more tender flesh of the cheeks against the bones. His fist found the chin, and big Tony Miller slumped backwards again, to both knees.

Then might have been the time for Carney to finish the battle. Instead, he leaned over the girl and caught at her.

"Laura!" he cried. "D'you hear? Can you speak?"

She made a vague motion towards rising, and he turned to face big Tony Miller again.

Tony was on his feet once more.

He had been stunned and cut and bruised, but he came in with the confidence of one who knows that he must win. His long left arm was extended, now, as every American schoolboy knows it should be when he enters a real fight. With that left, accurately, he battered at Carney, driving him away. The right hand was poised, ready for the finishing blow.

And Joe Carney, retreating, realized that he was gone. With both hands to use, he might do something. With one, he was hopelessly gone.

THE left was a stopping punch, and the right was the punisher. When he balanced to strike, it was the muscles all down the right that pulled and jerked, to be ready to hit out. And the only answer was an agony along the injured arm. That part of him was a hanging weight, an anchor.

He swayed aside from a right cross. He ducked under a driving left, and found himself caught close to the breast of his enemy.

"Now!" said Tony Miller, gasping. "Now, now, now!"

And he put all his might into his grip, and lifted Carney, and hurled him to the ground. He drew back a foot and kicked the fallen man in the head. The toe of the boot opened a gash in the scalp of Carney, knocking his head to the side. But he was not stunned.

The force of the kick threw Tony Miller off balance. He saw that he must fall, and he cast himself at the prostrate figure of Carney.

Even to turn from the descending weight of Miller was hard enough for Carney. He did not try it, one-armed as he was, but struck up with a stiff left arm, and met the jaw of Miller with the weight of the big man fully behind the blow.

The head of Tony snapped back. He dropped an inert bulk across the body of Carney.

And as Carney struggled, vaguely, to be free from the burden that had knocked the wind from his body, he saw the girl come, staggering, to her feet. She put a hand to her face, where the crushing blow had fallen. She had the look of a sleepwalker, striving through an agony to discover what it was that she must do next.

At last she saw them. She picked up a fragment of rock from the mud and moved uncertainly towards the two.

But Tony Miller was already recovering. By spasms he regained control of his muscles. And the next moment his grip was fastened in the throat of Joe Carney.

The left hand of Carney seemed blind. It struck on the thickly muscled shoulders of Miller. It struck vaguely and uselessly against the head of the big man. It tore with fingers no stronger than feathers at the wrists of Tony Miller.

And the thumbs of Miller, digging into his windpipe, sent shooting red flames through the brain of Carney. He dug down his chin, but it was powerless to break down the iron wrists of Miller.

He threw out that left arm in a vain effort to turn himself, and his hand closed on the soft of the sand.

"Take that!" yelled Miller, shaking his prey as a bulldog shakes another by the throat. I knew I wanted daylight—to murder you—damn you—and now—I've got you!"

He had flung back his head to shout his triumph. Carney, half blinded, flung his left arm between him and the horribly contorted, bloodstreaming face of Miller. He jerked back his arm, and the elbow struck home against the temple of Miller.

And again, a loose, soft bulk weighed him down.

He kicked and fought his way from beneath the burden—and he saw, as he gasped back his breath, how the girl stood ready, with the rock poised in her hand.

Lurching to his feet, Carney grasped it from her clutch.

"Not you!" he said. "My God, Laura—not murder—not you!"

And he flung the stone away from him.

It fell in the water, and a bright flash of the stream leaped up from the place.

Rose—all rose and gold was the face of the flood. And the splash from about the thrown rock was a streak of silver.

"What have you done?" groaned the girl. "It's the last thing! We're lost, Carney!"

IT WAS true. There was not another rock on the surface of the little boat-shaped island. And Carney, looking

vaguely about him, still half dazed, saw the bulk of Miller roused, quicken to life, rise slowly to its feet.

"The third time tells the trick!" mumbled Miller, through bleeding lips.

And he flung forward at Carney, running low, his arms poised to strike.

There was no chance for flight. There was only attack, attack, attack. Who was it that said to reduce the enemy's fire one must get at the root of it?

One of those old sayings. One of those maxims which are garnered in the fifth or sixth grades of the public schools. Carney, instead of running or trying to dodge, sprang forward and struck from a crouch with all his might.

It was a lifting blow, and his power was behind it. He felt and heard the fist crack home beside the jaw. He felt his arm go numb, suddenly, to the shoulder.

That was the last. After that, there was no effort in him.

And the weight of the punch straightened big Tony Miller and made him stagger sidewise. His right foot dipped over the edge of the bank—his whole body jerked suddenly after that foot.

Carney, dizzy, unrealizing, heard the crash of the body in the water.

He went to the edge of the sandspit.

It was already a fall of ten feet from the top to the surface of the flood. He could see where Miller had struck the soggy side of the slope. And now he saw the face of Tony rise from the water, a dozen yards down the stream.

He was striking out, his face contorted with effort, to regain the island, but the current was much too strong. Narrowed as it was now, it seemed to have increased in speed. In spite of the efforts of Tony Miller, it laid hands on his body and turned him.

"Help him!" cried Laura. "Joe, help him!"

But Joe Carney was already down at the water's edge, knee deep in the mud, holding out a useless arm towards the drowning man. He heard the frightful scream of the swimmer. A log, smooth-sliding as a swimming snake, struck across the place where Miller had been—and he was seen no more.

THEY saw the water fall, slacken. There was only a little creek, eating its way down through the mud and the sand of the bottom.

And then, on the farther shore, there were men, shouting, signalling with their arms. One of them was the gray-headed sheriff.

They had to wade down through the thick of the mud. They had to struggle up the farther slope. Some younger gallant caught up the girl. It was the sheriff himself who helped Joe Carney back to the dry ground.

His first glance saw the cattle far away, lined up along the edge of the black ground which the water had covered.

Then he saw the girl. And she was laughing, and holding out a hand to him.

Well, she could laugh. She had not been through so much as he had seen in the heart of the night.

He had a vague memory that he had prayed, or tried to pray.

He heard the girl saying words which had no meaning.

He was lying on the soft of dry sand, and the brilliance of the intolerable sun filled the sky.

Somewhere there was peace. The murmuring, deep, respectfully quieted voices of the men held the promise of it.

THROW OUT A HOT ONE

By LEO F. CREAGAN

Author of "Smokestack," "Tunnel Smoke," etc.

OUT upon a main line of three hundred miles of heavy steel cushioned upon a foot of river gravel, Number 97, the Missouri Western beer train, rumbled behind an engine of graceful lines and mighty strength. Down through the orderly confusion of moving traffic the engineer—Speedy McGrath—jockeyed his Big Pacific through the St. Louis yards, his cap pulled low to shade his eyes from the evening sun. Clear of the switches he notched throttle and reverse lever in perfect coordination and leaned back against the cushion. At short intervals he blasted warning signals; studied steam gauge, water glass and air brake pressure. He performed his duties as perfectly as the locomotive performed hers, but his mind was filled with questions.

Why had three men laid off to permit an extra man to haul a run they were all keen about pulling? and what had Harder, the master mechanic, meant when he had clamped a heavy hand on the engineer's shoulder and shouted in his ear at leaving time that he trusted him?

97 was a slick run all right, but why shouldn't any engineer be trusted with it? Nothing hard about hauling a dozen or so cars of beer and time freight, and blowing an engine whistle. Whistle and run, that's how the trainmen described the engineer's duties on 97.

Speedy glanced at his fireman. The man was a stranger. Two new men on 97 tonight.

"What's your name, lad?" Speedy shouted.

"Sims," the stoker replied without looking up.

"This run mean anything to you? Anything out of the ordinary?"

"Sure, it means three hundred miles' pay. First job firin' I've had in eight months," Sims panted. "It may mean I can't keep her hot."

Speedy remembered then. The caller had told him he was to have a student fireman. What the hell! Why had everybody laid off on the last day of August, contrary to railroad practice? He blasted a call for the signal at an interlocking plant. Down through

Well, He Guessed that No One Would So Much as Whisper, "Whistle and Run" to Him Again

Tower Grove, Webster and Kirkwood the rain rumbled; sixteen reefers loaded with cold beer and a little red caboose. Then they were in open country, with the blaze of the afternoon sun glinting upon the twin lines of tapering rail.

SPEEDY gave his engine another notch of throttle and reached for his pipe. His hand touched the letter which Master Mechanic Harder had delivered when he slid out of the gangway in the train yard. With a heavy thumb he ripped the envelope. The wind streaming through the cab window fluttered the sheet and almost snapped it from his hand. He turned and pushed the letter toward the fireman.

"Read it aloud, Sims."

Sims braced himself against the coalgate and shouted the contents of the communication:

You have been reinstated to your position of locomotive engineer on the M. & K. C. Railroad, effective September first. Report at once for your regular run.

(Signed) T. J. Fogerty
Master Mechanic

A slow grin spread over Speedy's face as he reached for the whistle lever. One blast, two, then the valley of the Meramac echoed with triumphant noise from Speedy's engine whistle. Reinstated, after a long year of waiting! The engineer muttered into the streaming wind. Maybe the men knew about it before he did; maybe that was why three engineers had marked off the board. A gesture of friendliness, letting him pull 97 on his last trip.

"No," he spoke aloud to no one at all, "they wouldn't give me nothin'. They resented me comin' here from the M. & K. C. They call me 'Speedy' sarcastic like, not like the boys does over on my old pike. Har, goin' back, after a whole year fightin' the extra board over here."

"Some people have all the luck," Sims leaned upon his coal scoop to remark. "Look at me; I haven't had a job firin' since January, an' here you got two jobs."

"Yep, guess you're right, lad."

"If I was you, I'd stay here, instead of goin' back over there. Th' M. W. is a better railroad than——"

"Think so, lad?" Speedy interrupted. "Well, maybe you're right. But a man can love a poor railroad just the same as a fine one. It's the men over there—it's the men anywhere that makes a railroad."

HEAVY feet beat time as the engine drivers clicked over alternating rail joints. Pulling 97 on his last trip would be something to remember the M. W. by, even though it required little more than whistle and run.

Sims shoveled coal, his face pitted with perspiration.

"Pretty damn hot for the last day of August," he grumbled, sinking to his seatbox. "Some of that cold beer we got back there would go pretty good."

Speedy jerked his thumb toward the steam gauge.

"It'd go better if you'd give me some more steam."

"Yeh, sure. I'll get my wind in a minute, then we'll have steam to whistle with."

Rocky cuts shut off the sun glare at intervals, and now the Missouri River bluffs curtained it off for the day.

Speedy drank noisily from a jug and offered the jug to Sims.

"Too much water will rust your pipes," Sims remarked when he had drunk. "We'll fill up on beer and beefsteak at Pacific."

"Nope, this run don't eat at Pacific," Speedy said.

Sims threw a scornful glance at the engineer.

"When do we eat?" he demanded.

"K. C., at two in th' A. M."

"Sez you! Y'think a man can fire a Big Pacific without eatin'?"

"Lost yer lunch bucket, eh, while you was cut off th' board?"

"Hell, I can't eat cold stuff. I got to have my steak an' French fries. I was out of work so long I got used to eatin' regular an' often," Sims explained.

The train rumbled to a stop under the coal chute at Pacific.

"Remember what I said—we eat at K. C."

Sims mumbled as he attended tank spout and coal dump. Then he slid from the gangway and crossed to the lunch room.

Speedy muttered as he poked his oil can about among the rods of the engine. The conductor came forward.

"Well, what's th' big delay?" he demanded. "Ain't you th' guy they misnamed Speedy over on that wooden axle railroad where you come from? Ain't fixin' to throw th' race, are you?"

SPEEDY snapped erect and rubbed the side of his nose with a greasy thumb.

"What you mean, Cap—throw th' race?"

"Cripes, if y'don't know about it, now's no time to explain. Ain't you got a timetable? You know damn well what'll happen if we go into K. C. late this A. M."

Speedy glanced toward the restaurant.

"Th' fire-boy's havin' himself a little banquet," he explained. "I tried to talk him out of it."

"Yeh, you extra men," the conductor sneered, "just because a run don't belong to you, you don't give a damn whether it comes off or stays on."

Speedy stared at the man. He appeared to be excited about something. What was going on, anyway? Why the hell couldn't they tell a man what was so important about 97 tonight?

"What's all this lousy mystery, Charlie?"

"Whistle for that damn fireman," the conductor snarled, "or you'll wish you never hired out on this railroad."

Speedy threw his oil can into the gangway and strode toward the eating house. Inside he swung a long arm around the fireman's neck. Through the door and across the cinder platform he dragged the struggling Sims.

"Get up in that cab, you hunk of cheese."

"If fightin' wasn't against th' rules," Sims began. "I'd——"

"Yeh, you'd go eat or somethin'," Speedy finished.

97 was on her way. Passing the yard-limit board the conductor slid into the fireman's seat and glanced at his watch.

"Thirty-five minutes late."

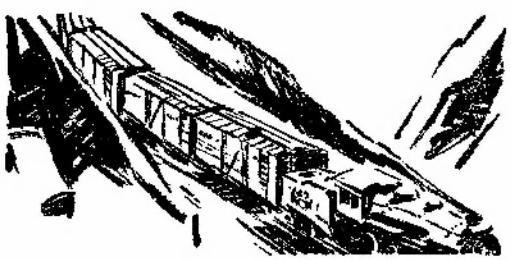
"Yep, thirty-five minutes late," Speedy relayed the news to his fireman. Sims muttered and sullenly shoveled coal.

Grays Summit: 7:35.

"Thirty minutes late," the conductor yelled, accusingly.

"Half an hour late, the captain says," Speedy shouted.

"What's thirty minutes?" Sims grumbled. "I was four days late once."



The conductor glanced sharply from fireman to engineer.

"What's th' matter with you fellows?" he shrilled. "You act like you knew even less than enginemen is supposed to know. Didn't nobody tip it off to you that 97 has got to go in ahead of the M. & K. C. run tonight? If she don't, she comes off for good, an' that wooden axle outfit over there where Speedy gets his title, they haul th' beer hereafter?"

So that was it! 97 a test run tonight, and she must not go in late.

SPEEDY galvanized into action. He barked an order at Sims and widened on the throttle; he hitched his cap lower and thrust his jaw forward. Semaphore lights slid by, green and clear. But nothing else was clear to Speedy. He knew he had to win, that he was supposed to

go back to his old railroad tomorrow, but then what?

Washington: 8:05. Twenty-eight minutes late. And Kansas City was 228 miles away. Sims was stoking the engine with the indifference of a section laborer shoveling cinders.

At 8:50 the placid water of the Gasconade glinted in the moonlight. 97 was now twenty-five minutes late. Speedy grunted and gave his engine another notch of throttle.

"Move over," Sims growled at the conductor. "Let a man have half his own seat."

"Get back on th' job," Speedy snarled at him, "or I'll leave you at Jeff City."

Sims struggled to his feet. He stood clinging to a hand hold.

"You know why they call engineers 'hogheads'?" he called to the conductor. "It's because they got no brains," he went on to explain. "Lookit 'at guy there!" He motioned toward the engineer. "Speedy, he calls hisself. All he knows is whistle an' run! He can't figger out nothin'!"

"You'll eat that when we get to K. C.," Speedy called across the deck.

"Yeh, an' a couple of steaks," Sims laughed. "What d'you think of a guy, Cap, that don't know enough to feather his own nest?"

Speedy slipped from behind the reverse lever and crossed the engine with a long stride. His powerful right hand shot out and caught the fireman's face in a vise-like grip: four fingers pressing the man's nose while this thumb clamped under Sims' chin. Backward against the coalgate he thrust the man.

"Fellow, you been idle too long," he snarled in his face. "Th' railroad spirit is gone from you—if you ever had any."

"Hey, let my face go, you big ape," Sims howled. "Leave me explain what I mean."

SPEEDY pushed Sims into the coal pile and returned to his side of the engine. Sims gently massaged his nose and turned to the conductor.

"What I mean is this: Speedy has a letter sayin' he's reinstated on the M. & K. C.," Sims explained. "If he wins tonight, he gets nothin' for it. He don't get th' run, because he's an extra man, an' he's leavin' here anyway. If he loses, th' beer run stays on over there where he's goin', an' then who gets it?"

"I do, you louse," Speedy snarled. "Now I'm just commencin' to understand things. So get busy with that scoop, Sims, or out you go on your head."

Sims grasped the scoop with a gesture of disgust. The conductor grinned and relaxed on the seatbox.

Tipton slept peacefully in the moonlight. Lamine River, a sluggish cat-fish stream, appeared to stand still.

Approaching Sedalia Speedy glanced toward the rear of the train. A roar broke from his lips.

"Hot box! She's blazin' like a camp fire, Cap."

"O. K., keep your shirt on," the conductor replied. "We'll fix it good and plenty while you take coal and water."

When the fueling operation had been completed, Speedy hurried toward the rear of the train. Impatiently he stood while the crew raised the twelfth car on a jack and dragged out a worn brass. Speedy groaned. The new brass might run and it might not. No brass would run on a rough journal.

"We got to be careful with that hot one," Speedy said to the conductor. "You know, Cap, why they canned me off——"

"Fast runnin', wasn't it?"

"No, hot box trouble. I knew the box was hot, could see it blazing up the side of the car, but I wanted to put that train in on time. Now, we can't have another case like that."

"No, we can't drop no wheels tonight," the conductor said, "and they won't let us set this car out here. We got to fix it up an' make an attempt to take it through."

"Sure, but if the journal is rough——"

"We'll have to set it out," the trainman interrupted.

"Exactly, an' we won't have time to do it, an' go in on time."

"Nope, guess you're right, Speedy," the conductor admitted. "Looks like we're blowed up."

Speedy stepped between the cars and turned the angle cock on the car just ahead of the "bad order."

"Men have been fired for doing that, Speedy."

The engineer grunted and strode to the other end of the car. When he had turned the angle cock on the car just behind the one the men were working on, he joined the conductor. The trainman eyed the engineer thoughtfully.

"Speedy," he grinned, "I'll never call you a hoghead again. This may be your last trip over here. It may be my last trip. I'll put in with you. We'll only do it as a last resort."

"Better bleed the air off that bad order, then," Speedy said, "so things will be set."

THEY were gone again, with air brakes in operation from the engine back to the hot box car. But eleven brakes were ample for the needs of that night. For the time-table told Speedy that 97 was an hour late, and something within him kept prodding him to clean up that lost time. Speedy filled and lighted his pipe. Whistle and run; a train of reefers, a fine rolling country and a cooling breeze streaming through an open cab window. They'd be talking about him around the sand houses of two railroad a few hours from now; one group would be calling him an engineer, the other would designate him as hoghead. Well, there was no help for it now; he had been drawn into a tough spot through no fault of his own. One course was open to him; any other was unthinkable. Now he knew why he had drawn the run on 97 tonight. The men of the M. W. had resented his coming to the road with a title of "Speedy" following him. They knew about the reinstatement letter; knew that the run tonight was a race for rail traffic which meant many jobs for the men of the winning railroad. They hadn't feared the outcome of the race, for they believed that the M. W. could win with any engineer. But here was the phase of the thing that revealed their resentment toward him; they had contrived to put him in a position to win at the expense of the railroad to which he would be returning. Moreover, his winning would automatically cut off his own fast run on the M. & K. C., and thus reduce him to a drag freight run.

"A lousy outfit," he muttered into the streaming wind. "All except Harder. He gave me a job when I needed one. He trusted me with this run tonight, with the traffic of his railroad at stake."

Warrensburg forty-five minutes late.

"Any signs of hot boxes?" Speedy called to the conductor who had boarded the engine leaving Sedalia.

The conductor jerked his head inside the cab and blinked.

"Not sure," he said. "Thought I saw something a mile or so back. I'll know when we round the next curve."

Sims banged the furnace door and leaned against the coalgate.

"How long's it been since you run a switch engine?"

SPEEDY snorted. Sims was guessing, of course, but at that he might be right. If the fast trains came off the M. & K. C., there might not be a road run for him. Engineer on a yard goat! Fifteen years of road seniority thrown to the winds!

" 'Tend that fire," he snapped, "I'll 'tend my——"

A yell from the conductor left the statement unfinished.

"Blazing like hell," the excited man shouted, "we'll have to——"

"Set it out," Speedy broke in. "Get goin', Cap."

The conductor barged through the coalgate and up over the coalpile. A swing to the roof of a reefer and he was running toward the rear of the train.

"Goin' to throw out a hot one," Speedy yelled at the fireman.

Sims sank to the seatbox and stared at the engineer.

"You're—we're not goin' to make a drop of that car—slide it into a siding without stopping?"

"Stick around and see."

Speedy knew that the operation which they were about to attempt had long since been outlawed because of the dangers it involved. But it was a drop or——

Three lanterns gleamed atop the train near the caboose. The fireman grinned and reached for the scoop.

"Don't spill yer beer, Speedy," he piped.

A mile. Two miles since the trainmen had signaled their understanding. Speedy hung from the cab window, his eyes toward the rear. Four short whistle blasts. Three lanterns swung in unison; then two of them disappeared. Speedy grunted his satisfaction.

"Two of the boys have gone down the end ladders to lift the pins," he muttered.

Thirty seconds he waited; then he touched the air brake valve to slacken the pull on the couplers. Two lights reappeared, joined the other one atop the train. Speedy chuckled. Cap knew what he was doing. The engineer released his air brakes and pulled gently on the throttle. They were moving at half speed. The lights appeared to be drawing apart; the bad order had been uncoupled from both front and rear portion of the train.

One minute. Two. Now the lights were widely separated. Speedy blasted a broke-in-two signal. Three lanterns answered him, swinging in wide cart-wheel circles. And thus they rumbled down upon the siding.

A short distance from the switch Speedy pinched his drifting engine down to a speed safe for a man to swing off. A lantern hung poised; the man was ready to jump. A little way behind a second light gleamed atop a car with a blazing hot box; farther back the conductor's lamp swayed gently to the motion of the car he was riding. The Big Pacific passed the switch. Speedy's hand trembled on the throttle lever. The lantern nearest the engine bobbed wildly; Speedy's heart almost stopped.

A man's awkwardness, a stone to trip a foot—anything could ruin the play at the switch. The light on the switch stand changed from green to red. A roar broke from the engineer's lips. The switch had been successfully turned, was now open, ready to shunt from the main line the lone hot-box car. Ten seconds. Half a minute. The light atop the bad order swerved from the main line, and again the light on the switch stand changed. For a long anxious minute the light had been red—long enough to receive the dropped car—but now a clear green signal blinked at the engineer hanging from the cab window.

The "bad order" reposed in the siding at Lamonte. Two brakemen swung catlike for the steps of the caboose as the rear portion of 97 clanked by the siding. Speedy wanted to yell, but he waited. The rear end was closing in on him; there was a sudden jarring movement, a sharp rattle as automatic couplers met and meshed, and three wild high balls from the rear. Then he cut loose, a succession of triumphant whistle blasts unheard of in any railroad book of rules.

Whistle and run. Speedy widened on the throttle, fingered his watch, thumbed his grimy time-table.

"We got to beat that other train to the switch at Pleasant Hill," he snarled at Sims.

"Yeh, joint track from the Hill to K. C.," Simms grinned. "Th' first train to reach th' switch wins."

A mile a minute over a fifty-mile an hour roadbed. It couldn't be done, and

yet it had to be done. Hadn't the trainmen risked their jobs in an effort to win? And what of Harder's confidence in him?

Pleasant Hill at one o'clock, and a pair of red tail-lights receding in the distance.

"There goes your lousy M. & K. C. beer train, Speedy," Sims shrilled. "You're a blowed up hoghead; you've lost your title."

The engineer's jaws snapped; he swung to face the fireman.

"Write me a message," he boomed.

"Gettin' ready to send in your resignation?"

"Shut up! Wire the train dispatcher—throw it off at Lees Summit. Tell him if he'll put me over the outbound track at Independence, I'll pass that fellow on the double track."

Greenwood at 1:06, a low-hanging canopy of smoke from the stack of the leading train. Lees Summit sleeping the sleep of one-fifteen in the morning. Except the grave-yard shift telegrapher who scrambled after the butterfly which Sims threw from the cab. The valley of the Little Blue, an ideal roller coaster country for a couple of K. C.-bound beer trains. Independence on beyond, and twenty minutes left to cover the distance to the Kaw Valley yards.

APPROACHING Independence Speedy muttered to no one at all while he fingered throttle and air brake valve. The other man had him licked unless——

The signal at the cross-over changed behind the first train. Speedy roared his delight. Carefully he piloted his engine through the switch to the other track. Leaning from the cab window he grabbed a train order giving him right to run against the current of traffic.

"Har," he snorted as he pushed the flimsies into Sims' hand, "a man's never licked till he thinks he is. Let's go to market, fire-boy."

Lights of K. C., and nothing to do but open up a sweet steaming Big Pacific and put a train of sixteen—no, fifteen—reefers around an M. & K. C. hoghead who had become careless at the last minute.

A mile from the switch 97 shot by the other train, and Speedy wakened the East Bottoms with his whistle blasts.

He was splashing under a shower in the washroom when a call boy located him half an hour later.

"You Speedy McGrath?" the caller piped.

"Yep," the engineer sputtered, "tha's what they sometimes call me."

"Message fer ya."

"Read it, lad. I'm takin' a bath."

"It says: *Meet me on arrival Number seven this A. M. Have proposition that may interest you*

(*signed*) *Harder.*"

"O. K., lad. Leave it on the table," Speedy mumbled.

Fully dressed he read the message and thrust it into his pocket. Sims was tying his shoes.

"Let's see, Sims," Speedy began, "wasn't there something I was goin' to say to you when we got in?"

"Sure," Sims grinned, "you was goin' to say, 'come on fire-boy, I'll stand treat fer a big steak feed.'"

Speedy whacked his fireman across the shoulders with a heavy hand.

"O. K., lad, let's eat."

DESERT DREAMS

By W. C. TUTTLE

Author of "Shorty's Kid," "Sunset," etc.

HE SAT on a broken piece of sandstone in the meager shade of a saguaro, his chin in his hands, eyes half-closed. Near him stood a pinto horse, relaxed under the heavy saddle, head hanging.

Nature had not been kind to Arthur "Pecos" Pelkey, the sheriff of this heat-scourged desert county. The natives pronounced Pecos as being a "queer-lookin' little devil"—and he was. Without his heavy, bat-wing chaps, cartridge belt and the heavy Colt in his holster, he would weigh a bare hundred and ten.

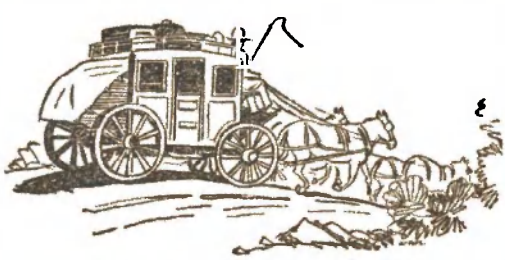
His face was long, bony, freckled, and under his button-like nose was a wide gash of a mouth. His hair was the color of new bricks; a mop of flame, in which each individual hair seemed to have a different idea of growth direction. His eyes were wide and very blue; and behind those eyes, which were trained to look through the notched sight of a rifle or revolver, was the brain of a dreamer.

Pecos did not dream of wealth or power. He was satisfied to be what he was, as far as wealth or power was concerned. But in his dreams there was always a woman —a woman who saw him without all his physical imperfections. Pecos was forty. Year after year he had dreamed—and each year the woman's age kept pace with his own age. She was forty now, a big, buxom, sweet-faced woman. They had all been big, buxom women.

But no one had ever guessed his secret. Outwardly he was as hard as the cliffs of granite that threw the late afternoon shadows across the street of Piute. Not even did "Handsome Jack" Kirk, his deputy, guess his secret—and no man knew Pecos as well as did Handsome Jack.

Strangely enough, Pecos did not envy Handsome Jack his good looks. Handsome Jack was over six feet tall—a bronzed god on a horse, and an adept at everything

Sheriff Pecos Pelkey Had One Sort of Dream—and the Celebrated Outlaw, Kid Blanco, Was Due for Another



required of a desert officer. A queer pair, these two. One man who dreamed of *the* woman, and the other who trembled at sight of one. Handsome Jack was not a woman hater—he was woman shy. When not together on the range or at their little office in Piute, they were together at the little ranch, owned by Pecos, located three miles from Piute.

TODAY Pecos had wandered away alone, riding Pintado. There were things to be thought about—alone. And for more than two hours the little sheriff had sat in the shade of the saguaro, trying to battle things out. It concerned a woman—a woman Pecos had never even seen in his dreams.

He got to his feet and went slowly over to Pintado, who looked at him with evil eyes. With all his slouching attitude, Pintado was a devil on hoofs. Only Pecos cared to ride him. His muscles slowly stiffened, when Pecos picked up his reins, and the little sheriff looked gloomily at him.

"You start pitchin' with me today, and I'll break yore spotted heart," he told Pintado. "We're even now. You've throwed me six times and I've rode yuh six times—in fair fight. Relax, you damn paint-pot! I've got somethin' to think about besides ridin' you."

He swung into the saddle, yanking up the pinto's head quickly. The animal squatted, lurched ahead, throwing weight against the reins, trying to get its head down, but to no avail. Then the mood passed, and they rode off the mesa to the highway to Piute.

Handsome Jack noticed a change in Pecos. His sense of humor seemed to have gone, and he laughed at things that were not at all humorous. He seemed nervous, and several times Handsome Jack caught Pecos looking at him, a peculiar expression in his eyes.

"What's ailin' yuh, Pecos?" he asked bluntly.

"Nothin' ailin' me, Jack."

"Un-huh. Well, yo're actin' like there was. If yore stummick is kinda out of joint, you'll find bakin' sody in the cupboard."

But Pecos did not take the baking soda. He drew the conversation around to the subject of travel. Neither of them had traveled further than to the borders of their state.

"You ain't thinkin' of goin' away, are yuh?" asked Handsome Jack.

"Thinkin'?" replied Pecos absently. "I—uh—no, I was jest wishin' I could go—be gone—uh——"

"What the hell's wrong with you?" demanded Handsome Jack.

"Huh?" grunted Pecos, blinking at his deputy. "What was I sayin', anyway? Thinkin' of somethin' and keepin' on talkin', I s'pose."

"Yeah, I guess you was. If yuh want to take a trip—Pecos, you ain't losin' yore nerve, are yuh?"

"Losin' my nerve?"

"About Kid Blanco."

Pecos grinned foolishly. "Oh, that feller! Yuh know, I almost forgot about that letter he sent me."

"I didn't," said Handsome Jack. "He'll come. When that paper printed yore invitation to him to come to Piute——"

"I had one drink too many," said Pecos sheepishly. "Anyway, he don't scare me none with his promises to clean out the bank and warnin' me to pick out a tombstone for myself. Let him come."

"Ain't nobody stoppin' him," said the deputy grimly.

PECOS' fingers trembled a little when he rolled a cigarette, and Handsome Jack noticed it. That was unusual. The little sheriff seemed grim and hard, as he leaned back in his chair and eyed his deputy through the smoke.

"Handsome, I often wonder why you ain't been married."

The deputy straightened quickly. "You ain't goin' plumb loco, are yuh, Pecos?"

"Don't fight yore hat! I jist was a-wonderin', that's all."

"And you knowin' me as long as yuh have?"

Pecos took another tack. "If I was only as good lookin' as——"

"We'll pass that hand, too," interrupted Handsome Jack.

Pecos sighed and tossed the cigarette into the fireplace.

"If I was as crazy as you are, Pecos, I'd ask yuh if you was in love. But I ain't that crazy, pardner."

Pecos got to his feet and brushed the tobacco from the folds of his faded shirt.

"I'm ridin' down to Agua Frio in the mornin'," he said. "Got to serve some papers on the Box O people."

"While yo're at it, yuh better see a doctor," said Handsome Jack. "Yo're comin' down with somethin', if yuh ask me."

Pecos went down to the stable and shoved the door open. Handsome Jack came out on the little back porch, hung a small mirror on a nail and proceeded to strop his razor. Pecos' little face twisted painfully and he shook his head.

"I hope Gawd will forgive me," he muttered. "But as far as Handsome is concerned, I can't expect much."

TO THE average eye Piute was about as unattractive as any town might be. The one street was narrow and dusty, bordered by false-fronted, frame buildings, sand-blasted until not a vestige of paint remained. Signs, long since faded, had never been renewed. The wooden sidewalks sagged badly in places, and the loose boards rattled xylophone-like under the tread of high-heel boots.

The mining industry, which had made Piute, had dwindled to a mere handful of prospectors. There was nothing much left for the town, except the cattle industry. The county seat remained at Piute, because it was the only settlement in the county big enough to house the county officers. Agua Frio, twenty miles away and on the railroad, was merely a handful of houses around a depot; and the stage to Piute made the round-trip every two days.

There were always a few curious people around the stage depot in Piute when the stage was due. Rarely were there any passengers, not even traveling salesmen. The one hotel, The Piute House, struggled along. Several saloons still invited the thirsty, but the big gambling house and honkatonk were closed. Even the one minister of Piute had accepted a call to another county.

"Nothin' left for him to fight here," was the way Pecos Pelkey explained it. "In a place like Piute, yuh can't even make sin attractive."

Handsome Jack Kirk was at the stage depot that morning, jackknifed in an old chair, tilted back against the shady wall. The stage made an early start from Agua Frio, in order to reach Piute before the sun made traveling unbearable. Old "Galena" Jones, the stage driver, swung his four weary horses in close to the sidewalk, shoved on the brake and drew up his team.

He squinted curiously at Handsome Jack, spat copiously, and got down from the seat. With a flourish he flung open the door of the stage.

"Piute, ma'am," he said huskily. "End of the line."

Handsome Jack jerked forward and got to his feet, as a woman stepped from inside the old coach. She was wearing a gray traveling suit and a small hat, her feet neatly shod. She was a buxom, sweet-faced woman, possibly forty. In her youth she had been beautiful, and she was still beautiful.

"Thank you," she said softly to the driver. Then she turned and looked at Handsome Jack. For a moment she hesitated, as though embarrassed—then she smiled and held out her hand to him.

"Well, I am here," she said. In sort of a daze Handsome Jack shook hands with her. Her hand was as soft as velvet, and her eyes seemed to be searching his face.

"You got my letter, dear?" she asked softly.

Handsome Jack swallowed heavily and the strength seemed to leave his knees.

He looked at her, as though through a haze.

"Letter? Oh,—uh—letter—well, yeah —yuh see——"

Galena Jones was chuckling, as he placed a suitcase on each side of Handsome Jack.

"Oh, yes, my baggage," said the woman. She brushed a clean handkerchief across her face and looked at it amusedly.

"It was terribly dusty," she said. "I believe I'd like to go to a hotel, dear."

Handsome winced, stumbled against one of the suitcases, as he picked them up.

"Uh-huh," he said. "Over—across the corner."

THEY walked over there together. Jim Caveny, the old proprietor, saw them and lined himself up behind the dog-eared old register. He wiped it off with the sleeve of his coat and handed her the old pen. She signed her name.

"Room twenty-two," said the old man. "Best we got. I'll have the chambermaid come up and swamp around a little. I'll take yore valises, ma'am."

"Thank you very much."

Jim Caveny came around the counter and picked up the baggage. He glanced at the woman and looked sharply at Handsome Jack.

"Up the stairs, ma'am," he said.

The woman nodded and turned to Handsome Jack. "You will be here later?"

"Well——"

"That will be fine. We will have supper together—I rarely eat at noon—and then we can have a good long talk, dear."

Handsome saw Old Jim's jaw muscles tighten, as he turned away.

Handsome swallowed painfully, but he nodded to her. He seemed rooted to the spot, watching her go up the stairs. Then he shook his head violently, like a fighter who has received a blow on the chin, and started for the door. But he came back and looked at the register. Her name was Evelyn White, no residence indicated.

Old Galena Jones was outside the doorway, as Handsome Jack came out; but if Galena expected any explanation he was disappointed. Handsome Jack headed for the sheriff's office, went inside and locked the door. Then he sank down in a chair.

"In the name of Seven Toed Pete, what's it all about?" he asked the four walls. "Am I crazy, I wonder? Letter? What the hell letter is she talkin' about? Callin' me dear!"

Handsome tried to reason this situation out calmly. He had never heard of any Evelyn White. He had never written a letter to a woman or a girl in his life. The whole thing was ridiculous. He calmed his nerves with a cigarette.

"She must be crazy," he told himself. "Crazy as a loon—but I'll be seven kinds of different liars if she ain't pretty. White teeth, and a skin like—gosh! A woman like her—crazy. Hell, it ain't right. But what can I do? Jack Kirk, you can't go to supper with that woman. But she knowed me! It can't be a joke. If it was one of them honkatonk girls, I'd know it was a put-up job. But she ain't—not by a million miles—and then some."

IT WAS very confusing to Handsome Jack. Undoubtedly a case for the medical profession; so he went to see Doc Sutherland, an ex-veterinary, who had turned to human practice. He found Doc in the shade of his adobe house, examining a dislocated heel on one of his boots. Doc was tall and cadaverous, nearly bald, his spectacles habitually crooked and nearly always on the end of his long nose.

It was rather difficult for Handsome Jack to explain clearly, but he was finally able to give Doc the information.

"Did she call yuh by name?" asked Doc.

"No, she didn't, Doc."

"Uh-huh. You ask her what yore name is."

"I know what my name is, Doc."

"What I'm gettin' at is this; who does she think you are?"

"Yeah, that might help a little. I hate to think of her bein' loco, Doc. She's—nice. And so doggone clean. I dunno how anybody could git that clean. Why, she jist makes yuh *feel* dirty."

"Bein' crazy don't mean yuh have to be dirty, Handsome."

"Mebbe not. But, Doc, what'll I do? I don't want to eat supper with her."

"You've got to," declared Doc. "You've got to humor crazy folks. I'll tell yuh what I'll do, Handsome; I'll be there to watch her."

"I ain't scared of her!"

"I mean that I'll observe her. Kinda look over her symptoms."

"Well—all right, Doc," sighed the deputy. "I'll be eatin' with her at Louie's place about six o'clock. I tell yuh, I never was in a jack-pot like this before. I'm all skittery."

Doc looked at him critically.

"Are yuh sure that you ain't the one that's locoed, Handsome?"

"I ain't sure of nothin'."

"Well, I'll kinda watch both of yuh."

IT WAS just six o'clock when Handsome Jack brought Evelyn White to Louie's little restaurant. Louie specialized in mingled odors, oil-cloth table-cloths, assorted cutlery and a bland, Chinese smile.

The place was crowded. Never since the heyday of the mines had so many men come to eat supper at Louie's place. They had left one table vacant in the center of the room. At the nearest table to the vacant one sat Doc Sutherland, Galena Jones, Judge Bright, renowned for his queer verdicts, and Old Jim Caveny. All conversation ceased, as the man and woman came in.

To Evelyn White the crowded restaurant was nothing out of the ordinary; but to Handsome Jack Kirk it was a catastrophe. He fairly staggered behind the woman, evading all eyes, and cursing Doc Sutherland. No doubt the worthy doctor had spread the news that Handsome Jack was dining with a crazy woman at Louie's place.

They all knew how Handsome Jack avoided women; and this would be rare entertainment. Louie recited his menu in a sing-song of broken English, and somehow Handsome Jack managed to order their simple meal. Louie only served simple things as "Los'a po'k, ham a egg, libba bacon—sloup?" Handsome would have gladly bitten into a cyanide sandwich.

The woman was carrying on a one-sided conversation, of which Handsome only grasped an occasional word. There was something about his picture. His picture? In a locket? She was holding it across the table for his inspection.

The locket was open—and it was his picture. Handsome stared at it in dumb amazement. His picture! He stared at her. Through sort of a haze he could see the long, thin face of Doc Sutherland, his eyes looking wisely over the tops of his glasses as he studied the woman.

Then Handsome Jack knew. It was a kodak picture that a man had taken last year. He had given Handsome Jack the one print, and weeks ago Handsome had seen it on the mantel of their fireplace at the ranch. Had somebody sent it to this woman as sort of a joke, he wondered? The woman was talking——

"You see, dear, I have been married before—unhappily. That is, I was unhappy, until I found I was mistaken. It was too late to mend. I have been so terribly lonesome. Then I saw in that little paper where you wanted to correspond with a woman of my type. Do you realize that your first letter came a year ago today?

"Just a year. You never asked me for a picture, even if I did ask you for one every time I wrote you. And when it came a few weeks ago, I was so happy."

Louie interrupted with an arm-load of dishes.

"And do you realize," she continued, as soon as Louie shuffled away, "it was not until a few weeks ago that you told me you were the sheriff of this county?"

The mystery was solved. Pecos Pelkey! Corresponding with women and sending them pictures of another man. Handsome Jack took a tight grip on his nerve, managed to smile weakly, and attacked his food. He saw Pecos Pelkey come through the doorway, stop short and look around, possibly a bit puzzled at the crowd. Then his eyes shifted to Handsome and the woman. Handsome blinked—and Pecos was gone.

Handsome Jack knew it was not a joke. This woman was not the kind to be mixed up in a cheap, practical joke of this sort. He tried to give her the proper answers to her questions; tried to act naturally, but it was difficult with all those men looking at him. She asked him about Piute.

"You won't like it here," he told her. "It's awful, unless yuh don't know any better."

"I believe I shall like it," she replied. "It is peaceful, at least."

Handsome thought she might change her views about that, when a bunch of wild cowboys would come in on payday and try to take the town apart. They finished their meal. Handsome was surprised at himself, when he found himself talking calmly to her, as they walked back to the hotel.

There was no one in the little hotel lobby, as he reached across the desk and secured her key. As he turned to give her the key she put her hand on his arm. Their faces were very close together, and through no volition of his own he swayed toward her. But she gently shoved him away.

"Not yet," she said softly. "Neither of us know—sure—yet. Good night, Sheriff."

She was running lightly up the stairs, before he realized it. He drew a deep breath and walked to the doorway. Doc Sutherland and Jim Caveny were just outside the door. Jim Caveny had a toothpick held jauntily between his teeth, and Doc still had his glasses on the end of his long nose.

"Well, I'll tell yuh, Handsome," said Doc, "I've got to study that woman at a lot closer range, before I can make a decision. But if I had to use snap judgment, I'd say that if either one of yuh was crazy —it's you."

"That's my vote," said Old Jim Caveny dryly.

"Mine, too," added Handsome, and walked swiftly down to the sheriff's office.

BUT Pecos was not there. Handsome saddled his horse and rode to the little ranch, where he carefully stabled the animal. There was a lamp burning in the little living-room of the ranch-house. He went in through the kitchen and stopped in the doorway. Pecos was sitting beside the table, his shoulders hunched miserably, but he looked up at his tall deputy. Neither of them spoke.

Handsome walked past him and sat down in a chair.

"Don't look at me thataway, Handsome," said Pecos.

"Why did you do this, Pecos?" asked Handsome softly. "Don't yuh realize what you've done?"

The little sheriff's eyes were filled with misery, as he looked at Handsome.

"I know," he said softly. "I done it. I lied to her—sent yore picture. I'm a dirty dog, that's all I am."

"But why did yuh do it, pardner? It ain't like you."

"Anythin' is like me," replied the sheriff savagely. "I jist ain't fit for nothin'—doin' like that. Oh, I dunno. Look at me, Handsome. I'm a funny lookin' person. No woman would ever look twice at me—

unless she wanted to laugh. I know what I look like. I got cheated. Even a good Colt gun don't make me equal to other men.

"But Gawd knows I ain't homely inside. I love kids and dogs and things like that. Sometimes I think things . . . about findin' somebody . . . somebody who might care . . . about me. All my life I've been thataway, Handsome—dreamin'."

"I didn't know that, Pecos," said Handsome. "Why, I never had any idea you ever thought about women."

"Not women," replied Pecos. "Jist a woman . . . somewhere. Dream women don't care how yuh look. Well, I found that little paper, kinda like a magazine, tellin' about lonesome fellers and women, who wanted to write to somebody. So I wrote to 'em and told what sort of a woman I wanted to write to. This woman wrote me."

"She's fine, Pecos," said Handsome softly. "Mighty fine."

"I know she is. Ain't I had a letter a week from her for about a year? But, my Gawd, Handsome, what are we goin' to do?"

"Go and tell her the truth."

"I can't. Won't you tell her?"

"Yo're a queer little jeezer, Pecos. To think of you dreamin' about women."

"She's pretty, ain't she?"

"She's a mighty handsome woman. Says she was lonesome. Did she tell yuh she'd been married before?"

"In her letters—yeah. She says it was her fault. She thought he wasn't on the square; so she left him, and he got a dee-vorce in Mexico. Then she found out she was wrong—but she never knowed where he went. She was awful honest in tellin' me everythin'."

"And you lied to her—even sendin' my picture."

Pecos bowed his head miserably. "Yeah, that's true. I—I couldn't send *my* picture. I never expected her to come here and find me out."

"You told her you was the sheriff."

Pecos stared at the wall for several moments.

"Yeah," he replied huskily. "I—I reckon I bragged."

Handsome got up and stepped over to the little sheriff. He put his hand on his shoulder, and Pecos looked up at him.

"It's all right, pardner," said the deputy. "I reckon I understand what it's all about now . . . jist dreamin'. Mebbe we all do a little of it; and it's because we lack nerve to make dreams come true that we have to jist keep on dreamin'. Let's go to bed."

"If I ever git awake from this dream," said Pecos softly, "I—I'll—prob'ly have another dream."

ONLY Pecos and Handsome Jack knew of the threat sent to Pecos by Kid Blanco, who was rather an elusive person. He robbed banks, stages, saloons or individuals, always working alone; and was either a mighty smart outlaw, or a lucky one.

The Camarillo City Bull's Eye, a two-sheet weekly, published a letter from Kid Blanco, who had recently robbed a bank at Mercedes and escaped from a big posse, in which the Kid intimated that Western sheriffs, as a whole, had deteriorated to a point where even a half-witted outlaw could baffle any and all of them.

Camarillo City was the county seat of the county due north of Piute, and Pecos Pelkey happened to be there on the day this screed came off the press. Pecos, carrying too much liquor, took violent exception to such slander, and announced to the world at large that if Kid Blanco was looking for a smart sheriff and hot lead he was hereby invited to stick his nose into Piute or the surrounding county, in which Pecos Pelkey had authority to operate.

It was only a few days until Pecos Pelkey received a letter from Kid Blanco, in which Blanco stated that some day he was coming to collect tribute from the Bank of

Piute, and intimated that if Pecos Pelkey had any foresight at all he would proceed at once to have his epitaph suitably engraved on a block of marble, in anticipation of the unhappy event.

This threat did not bother the little, red-headed sheriff, who had been elected because of his cold-blooded nerve. In fact, he rather hoped that Kid Blanco was not bluffing. As far as the Bank of Piute was concerned, Pecos did not believe it would survive the next inspection of the bank examiner; and if Kid Blanco did not make his threat good very soon, there would be nothing for him to steal, except the copper handle off the big front door. And the bottom had fallen out of copper.

IT WAS the morning after Pecos' confession to Handsome Jack, and Pecos sat alone in his office. A battered old alarm clock on his desk showed that the time was nearly ten o'clock. Pecos had not seen Handsome since they had left their horses at the little stable behind the jail that morning.

Handsome had not promised to tell Evelyn White the truth about Pecos Pelkey; but Pecos felt that, due to Handsome's long absence, the blow had probably fallen. He was silently praying that he would not have to face her, when he heard footsteps on the loose boards of the sidewalk. He shut his jaw tightly—but it was only Doc Sutherland and Jim Caveny—and he relaxed again. They sat down.

"Pecos, what do you know about this White woman?" asked Doc.

Pecos rubbed the lump out of his throat and shook his head. Old Jim cackled softly.

"She must be a old sweetheart of Handsome Jack," he said.

"Why?" asked Pecos huskily.

"It's got me fightin' my head," declared Doc. "Handsome comes and tells me she must be crazy. It kinda sounds like she was. He says he never seen her before in his life, until she come on the stage. He takes her to supper last night—him actin' more crazy than her. Why, he even acted crazy, after he left her at the hotel."

"He shore did," agreed Old Jim heartily. "Hell, he admitted he was. This mornin' he met her at the hotel, and I heard——"

"What did yuh hear?" interrupted Pecos.

"Well, I heard her sayin', 'Dear, I'd love to see yore ranch; the one you tol' me about in letters. It——'"

"What's he say?" interrupted Pecos weakly.

"I dunno what he said. But he got a horse and buggy at the livery-stable and they went away—goin' out toward yore place."

"I've been studyin' diseases of the mind," said Doc, "but I can't find——"

Somewhere up the street a shot was fired. A man yelled sharply. Pecos sprang from his chair, knocked Doc Sutherland aside and darted through the doorway. It was less than a block to the front of the bank, where there seemed to be a commotion. A man was trying to get on a black horse, which was kicking up a cloud of dust.

A man ran from a saloon door across the street, and the man, who was in his saddle now, flung up his gun and fired. Glass tinkled from the saloon window, and the running man ducked into an alley, like a frightened groundhog going into its burrow.

Pecos, gun in hand, was running up the sidewalk. Somewhere down the street a rifle bellowed, and splinters went dancing from a porch-post in front of the bank. The rider whirled his horse and sent a bullet fanning past Pecos' ear, who ducked sideways and snapped a shot at the rider.

Unfortunately Pecos sidestepped close to the outer edge of the sidewalk, and a cross-board, loose at the opposite end, flipped up, sending the little sheriff to a staggering fall in the dusty street. Another bullet tugged at his neckerchief, as he was falling.

Through the cloud of dust he saw the black horse galloping away from the bank. Scrambling to his knees, he emptied his gun at the horse and rider. As the last of his roaring forty-fives crashed out he saw the black horse lose its stride. The rider lashed it back into a gallop—but Pecos knew that one of his bullets had taken toll of the black animal.

A moment later Pecos was running toward his office. Doc and Old Jim, peering from the doorway, stepped aside and watched him grab a loaded rifle from the gun-rack. He raced out to the stable, where he quickly saddled Pintado.

Someone was yelling, "Kid Blanco! It was Kid Blanco, but he never got a cent!"

"Kid Blanco, eh?" gritted Pecos, as he mounted Pintado in the stable. Ducking low he came out in a lurching gallop. Someone yelled at him, offering to ride in pursuit, but Pecos merely jerked his hat low over his eyes and spurred the half-wild pinto after Kid Blanco and his faltering black.

HANDSOME JACK had fully made up his mind to tell the truth to Evelyn White that morning. He cursed himself for a fool, when he agreed to take her out to the ranch; but he secured a horse and buggy, and they drove away.

It was not a good road, being somewhat hump-backed and rutty, and Handsome Jack's time was taken up with keeping the buggy from disaster. He was no longer afraid of her; he merely felt like a liar and a cheat. He could tell that she was not impressed by the country.

He drove the horse up to the little porch of the ranch-house.

"Is this the place?" she asked.

"This is the ranch," he replied. He could read the disappointment in her eyes. But she smiled and patted his arm.

"It's all right, dear," she said. "I suppose things always sound different in a letter."

Handsome Jack got out and tied the horse. So Pecos had lied about the ranch, too. He helped the woman out, wincing a bit at her probable impression of their bachelor quarters. Neither of them would qualify as housekeepers. She stepped up on the porch.

"Gee, I just thought of somethin'!" exclaimed Handsome Jack. "We put a new horse in the stable last night and forgot to feed him this mornin'. You go right on in; the door ain't locked. I'll be back in a minute."

"All right, dear."

Handsome Jack hurried to the stable. There was no horse in the stable; he merely wanted to get away from her and try to build up enough courage to tell her the truth. He had to get away from her, because when he was beside her his courage oozed away.

He half-closed the stable door, watching through a crack. She was still there

on the porch, looking around. Then she turned to the door and went inside. Handsome Jack drew a deep breath and reached for his tobacco and papers.

Several times he paced the length of the stable, trying to rehearse his speech. He would have to tell her now—before they left the ranch. He came again to the door, turned back. A slither of cloth against wood, and he whirled to look into the muzzle of a heavy Colt gun. The man behind the gun was nearly as big as Handsome Jack, black-haired, black-eyed, his skin pale in the dim light of the stable.

"Unbuckle yore gun," he ordered, huskily. Handsome Jack obeyed and the man

kicked the belt and holstered gun aside. There was blood on his right boot, and he favored that leg with his weight.

With a twitch of his hand he jerked a rope off a peg and flung the loop open. The man was no novice with a rope, and in a few moments Handsome Jack was tied tightly.

"What's the big idea?" asked Handsome Jack curiously.

"I need a horse and saddle," answered the man. "One of them in the corral will do—and I had to play safe with you. Damn bullet cut through my leg and ruined my horse. *Adios.*"

He staggered a little, as he went out.

"Horse and saddle," muttered Handsome Jack. "Two saddles in the house—and that woman's up there."

He tried to loosen the ropes, but to no avail. Then he sank back against the manger and prayed that this man would not do any harm to Evelyn White.

AFTER his first wild burst of speed Pecos drew the pinto to a slower pace. Kid Blanco had taken the road toward Pecos' ranch, but there was always the possibility that Kid Blanco would not stay on the road. There was also the possibility that Kid Blanco might ambush a lone follower and take his horse. Pecos was sure he had wounded the black.

He thought grimly of Handsome Jack and Evelyn White at the ranch. If Kid Blanco met them there was no telling what he might do. Pecos rode high in his saddle, gun ready for trouble, his blue eyes alert for any movement, sweeping the hills ahead.

A quarter of a mile from the ranchhouse he jerked up Pintado. Here were slithering marks in the sandy road, the spoor of a stumbling, sliding horse. Twenty feet off the road, half-hidden in a tangle of low brush, was the saddled horse. Kid Blanco was on foot.

Pecos only halted long enough for a close inspection. There was a bullet hole through the right fender of the saddle—and blood on the fender.

"Looks like I got 'em both," muttered Pecos, and spurred back to the road. "He'll be lookin' for a horse—and the ranch is near."

Two hundred yards from the ranchhouse, Pecos dismounted and tied Pintado in a clump of mesquite. Then he took his rifle and wormed his way along the stunted willows of a dry-wash. From behind a pile of corral poles he studied the house. There was the horse and buggy at the front porch. A quick glance showed that no horses had been taken from the corral. Pecos rubbed his nose thoughtfully.

"Mebbe he ain't got here yet. But he's got to have a horse."

Slipping out from behind the poles he worked around the corral fence and came in swiftly to the back of the house. The kitchen door was open. Leaning the rifle against the wall, Pecos advanced with a cocked Colt in his right hand. There was not a sound. He eased softly into the kitchen—stopped.

A woman sobbing! Pecos gritted his teeth. A dozen reasons for that sobbing flashed through his brain. Handsome had told her the truth. Kid Blanco or no Kid Blanco, Pecos wished he was miles away. Then a man's voice—not Handsome's.

"Don't cry, sweetheart. It's all right now. I didn't blame yuh for throwin' me over. It hurt like hell. I don't blame yuh for what you've done. Everybody is entitled to what happiness they can find. The past is wiped out, Evelyn."

"But your wounded leg—and the officers."

"It isn't hurt bad, dear. I'm not afraid of officers. They're all runnin' around wild by this time. Sheriffs and deputies haven't any brains, anyway. Here's two saddles, and there's several horses in the corral. We can cut straight across the hills to Camarillo City, to the railroad. Honey, we can start all over again. Will

yuh go back with me—back where nobody ever heard of Kid Blanco?"

THIRTY minutes later Pecos Pelkey walked down to the stable from the house. There had been four horses in the corral, but now there were only two. He flung the door open and a shaft of sunlight illuminated the miserable Handsome Jack. They looked at each other, and Pecos proceeded to untie his deputy.

"Evelyn?" queried Handsome Jack huskily, anxiously. Pecos cleared his throat and hitched up his belt.

"Handsome," he said, "did you ever stop to think that Blanco means White, in Spanish?"

Handsome shoved him aside and stepped out of the stable. His eyes swept the corral.

"Two gone," he said hoarsely. His face twisted painfully for a moment.

"Was she his——?"

"She was," replied Pecos. "He tried to stick up the bank, but failed. I smacked him through the right leg and ruined his horse."

"And you—you saw 'em—here, Pecos?"

"And heard what was said," nodded Pecos.

"And let him—let Kid Blanco git away?"

Pecos nodded slowly. "I did, Handsome. After all is said and done, everybody is entitled to what happiness they can git. I got mine by writin' lyin' letters, I reckon."

Handsome Jack drew a deep breath and turned away.

"Entitled to what happiness they can get," he said slowly. "That's right, pardner—what they can get. Some of us prob'ly ain't entitled to a hell of a lot."

"I'm not," said Pecos. "But if I was as good-lookin' as you are——"

Handsome Jack smiled crookedly and glanced northward, where the heat waves danced across the barren hills.

"It sure helps a lot," he said simply.

When Death Awaits

By CLIFF FARRELL

Author of "The Strong Cold," "King (Sourdough) Solomon," etc.

"FAT" RENO drew a long, squinting bead on the flat belly of a heavy biplane from Fairbanks that droned overhead. He did not have his finger on the trigger however. He clicked his tongue in simulation of the shot, and lowered the rifle.

"I coulda got him easy," he commented.

"He won't be flyin' that low when he comes back," his partner, "Twoface" Slack, grunted. "That's the time to pot him. I heard that he brought five thousand ounces into Fairbanks from the Iditarod on his last trip."

Reno thrust his gun under the toboggan lashings, and stirred the three dogs into activity again. "Them pilots are wise nowadays anyway," he grouched as they began slogging ahead through the early, clinging, wet snow. "They've got two inches of steel plate under them an' their engines. Too many o' the boys has been takin' cracks at 'em from the bush."

"I wouldn't mind bein' around if that feller got wrecked on his way back," Slack said, with greedy anticipation on his ugly face. "He'll be bringin' out the last clean-up o' the season from the dredges. It'd be worth while."

Reno swore in hearty agreement, mixed with self-pity. Neither was looking forward with any eagerness to a winter of honest toil in a prospect shaft they proposed sinking on a creek off the east fork of the Kuskokwim.

The two mushers were not numbered among the best citizens of Alaska. Twoface Slack was a monkey-like, smallish man of forty. He had served a short stretch in San Quentin before he came North. A mistake in cutting a dynamite fuse had pitted one side of his face with countless tiny pockmarks. The explosion had relieved him forever from the necessity of shaving on that side. As he rarely shaved on the other either, he presented a remarkable contrast, according to the point of view. Therefore his nickname.

Reno was akin in spirit, though bigger of physique in a blubbery way. Life to them was simplified down to the primitive problem of existing with a minimum of

An Old Sourdough Has a Keen Son in This Flyin' Business

labor and a maximum of life's comforts. Their idea of comfort was a plethora of food and liquor. Both were gross of mind and body. Their parkas were hide-bare in spots, and greasy. They shambled along, and did not help the dogs who were having a hard time with the toboggan in the heavy trail that Slack broke for them.

THE mechanical drone of the plane diminished ahead. Then it died suddenly. They heard it resumed briefly. Then it died again.

They looked at each other quickly. The whip sang. They dug in their mukluks to help propel the toboggan faster.

"Motor must 'a' quit," Slack cried. "Mebbe he's smashed up. Ain't much room to land aroun' here."

"Just our luck," Reno panted pessimistically. "He won't be carryin' nothin' worth while. Why couldn't it have happened when he was comin' out with the clean-up?"

They labored on through the spruce. The timber thinned, and they saw a mile-long flat ahead. They halted the steaming dogs abruptly.

"Hell!" Reno exploded savagely in disappointment.

The plane had not cracked up. It stood on the flat half a mile away, its prop glinting in the dull sunlight as it idled slowly. A prospector's cabin stood near it. Beyond was the windlass and dump that marked a shaft. The ski marks made by the plane were the only scars on the white surface of the flat.

The pilot was walking toward the shaft. They saw a muck-stained figure rise from beneath the windlass, and the two met and clasped hands vigorously.

"Just visitin'," Slack remarked glumly. "That prospector is old Tim Whalen, the flannel-mouth. He's been workin' this crick for three years, the damned fool. There ain't nothin' here. I forgot about this flat. It's a good landin' field for planes."

"Sa—ay," Reno growled speculatively. "Seems t'me that Tim Whalen had a son what is flyin' for the aviation outfit. Do you reckon that's him that is pilotin' the plane?"

"Must be," Slack said as they peered over a screen of snow-laden willows. "There ain't no doubt about it. Look at 'em. They're arm in arm, an' headin' for the shack."

Reno chewed his heavy lower lip. "Maybe young Whalen will call on his dad on the way back," he observed reflectively, a cold, hard glint in his eyes. "Maybe it would pay us to hang around here. I'm sick o' grubbin' for day wages."

"No chance. Them planes that carry gold, don't land any place but at Fairbanks. They got orders."

Reno remained silent for a time. He stood staring, his shoulders hunched forward, greed flushing his face.

"What if the old man needed him right bad?" he said hoarsely. "What if somebody was hurt an' ought to have help?"

Slack's lop-sided face suddenly sharpened as he caught the drift of his partner's thoughts. Then on second thought Slack calmed down. "Hell, ye're crazy," he said. "How could he let the boy know?"

Reno pointed. "See that flag."

The Stars and Stripes floated from a peeled birch pole in front of the shack. "Sourdoughs don't waste labor makin' flagpoles. That's a signal for the lad to land, I'm tellin' yuh."

Slack considered that. "Maybe. But it don't mean that the boy will land when he's got a load of dust aboard."

"How do we know they ain't got some special signal in case o' accident?"

Slack's slow mind worked that over. Again he nodded. "Might have. We'll make him tell us."

Reno snorted. "Yuh don't know Tim Whalen. We couldn't *make* him tell us anythin' if he didn't want to. He'd laugh at us while we was heatin' the iron."

Slack remained silent, knowing that Reno merely wanted to confound him with some crafty plan. Reno wailed, but when

Slack refused to further expose his own incapacity for imagination, the blubbery scoundrel went on:

"Here's what we'll do. One of us will act like he's hurt. Hurt bad. Gunshot wound is the best. We'll kill a rabbit or somethin', an' use the blood. You'll be the victim Twoface. It'll keep your mouth shut, which is a good idea."

"I don't savvy," Slack scowled.

"You wouldn't."

TIM WHALEN and his son Johnny were in the shack and Johnny was staring in surprise at a big cake, four layers high and equipped with candles, that stood on the table.

"I knew ye had forgot," the father grinned proudly. "Tomorrow is your birthday, me lad. I have practiced for a month an' now ye see the result. Sure, it is a grand bit of work, now, is it not?"

"It's colossal," Johnny admitted. "Dad, you make me ashamed of myself. I never remembered your birthday, but you never forget mine. I ought to be kicked."

"Sure and it is no time for sentiment," the bluff, red-cheeked old sourdough said. "It does not seem long since I could have up-ended ye an' spanked ye, but by the saints, I would have a hard time of it now. Twenty-five ye are, me b'y, an' a fine lad if I do say it myself."

Johnny grinned, and advanced on the cake. "You must have used the shaft for an oven by the size of it. Chocolate icing, too!"

His father intercepted him. "No, ye don't. Ye do not touch it till tomorrow. Then we will celebrate in style."

Johnny's brow clouded. He was indeed a fine broth of a lad. A chip off the old block in truth. A shade under six feet, rugged of shoulder, lithe of waist and hips and with a frank, freckled face and smiling blue eyes.

"Tomorrow—" he said doubtfully. "But I'm hauling out the clean-up for the dredge company. I'm on my way to the Iditarod now."

His father tried to mask his disappointment. "I forgot," he said. "That damned flyin' job. I distrust them devilish airplanes, Johnny. Heaven speed the day when ye will do your work on the ground like decent people."

Johnny laughed and slapped his father on the back. The muscles under Tim Whalen's shirt were solid and had depth, for Tim carried his sixty years with deceiving lightness. He was straight as a drill and rugged as a granite boulder. His sandy hair was taking on a tinge of frost, but his blue eyes were as keen as his mind.

"I mind you telling me how you ran White Horse in a canoe once upon a time," the son countered. "And how about the time you——"

"That was different. I was able to——"

"Yep, you were twenty when you ran White Horse, but of course I'm still only an infant at twenty-five." Johnny was grinning, but on the defensive. Flying always had been a matter of contention between them.

"Can ye not stop on your return trip tomorrow? Only for a few minutes it is. I have another surprise for ye."

Johnny shook his head reluctantly. "Can't. Against the rules. I would lose my job. But—" he added, brightening, "I've got it. I'll hop early, take the load to Fairbanks, and come back. I'll be here before evening. I'll fly over on my way out with the load, and if there's any reason why I can't come back I'll drop you a note."

"Fine. Now get away from that cake. It is not ready yet."

"I'll be hopping," Johnny said. "It's getting late, and that field at Mosquito Bar is no picnic at best. If I get there after

dark I'll probaly wash out the crate trying to hit it."

Soon he roared into the sky, banked above the cabin, waved an arm, waggled the wings, and droned westward into the distance above the snowy, spruce-clad ridges.

TIM stood sucking at his pipe for a long time after the hum of the plane had died away. There was wistful hope and mighty anticipation on his rugged face. But mingling with it, like a dark thread, was dull apprehension. It was the fear Tim always carried in his heart when his boy was flying.

"Heaven protect him a day longer, an' he will need fly no more," he told himself as he returned to the shack.

There he became busy on the cake again. First he scooped out a sizeable hole in its center, working from the bottom. Then he dug out a weighty poke from a cache beneath the floor back of the stove, and dumped its contents into a new poke of clean moosehide. It was raw gold, and was only half of the amount in the cache.

With much heavy breathing he gingerly placed the cake over the sack of gold and stood back proudly to view his handiwork.

"That will be a present worth while," he said aloud. "Johnny's eyes will pop from his head when he uncovers that poke. An' the lad thought the claim was worthless! Many's the time he hinted that I should give up, an' live in Fairbanks."

There was tremendous triumph in Tim's soul as he ate his lonely meal that night. He looked at a faded, framed picture on the wall. It was Johnny's mother. Tim had loved her. But for the son she had given him, life would not have been worth living since she had gone.

"I hope ye can see us tomorrow, Nora," he whispered. "And if ye can help prevail on him to quit this flyin', it would ease my old age. Ye know how I feel about our son. If he should leave me too, I could not go on."

This was a big strike he had made. After three years of burrowing along this nameless creek he had hit it. Tim had made strikes in the past, all small ones that had lured him onward in the hope of getting a real one. He had stayed on in Alaska, always on the edge of the rich ones but never in the real paydirt.

Dawson, Nome, Fairbanks, Candle Creek, the Kuskokwim, Bettles. He had seen all of them fulminate, have their roaring days, and lapse again into stagnation. He had followed the will-o'-the-wisp from the McQuestion River to the tundra of Kotzebue Sound, and from the soaring flanks of the Alaskan Range to the high passes of the Endicotts beyond the circle.

And now he had hit it at a time when he needed it more than ever. For three years Johnny had been flying, and grubstaking Tim. Tim always had carried a black belief in his heart that he was accepting blood money. He could not reconcile himself to this roaring, swift new means of transportation that had invaded the North. He could see nothing in it for Johnny except crashing death somewhere in the wild country over which he flew.

Tim had tried to dissuade Johnny from flying, but with no more success than had older heads been able to deter Tim himself from taking risks in the past.

Money! That was Johnny's winning card in the debate. They were broke. And Johnny had no faith in prospecting after three decades of gold-seekers had panned every bench and creek in Alaska. Money! It was to be had in flying. Think of it! A thousand dollars a month and expenses. And it was sport.

TIM found the hours dragging as he heaved about in his bunk for the most of the night like a child on Christmas Eve. Two more hops for Johnny. From the Iditarod to Fairbanks, and then back to the flat. After that Johnny need fly no more. The claim was rich. Thousands in it. Hundreds of thousand no doubt. Tim had struck it at bed rock ninety feet down.

"I will smash that ship with my ax," he assured himself. "I will buy the company a better one, but not for my boy to ride in."

On the strength of that comfortable thought he slept. He was cheerful as he awoke, and sang as he cooked his breakfast.

Then he saw a musher emerge from the timber, driving three dogs furiously. The toboggan rode heavy in the snow with the weight of a man.

"Fat Reno," Tim muttered as he identified the musher. Then Tim pulled on his mukluks, and went to meet the outfit.

"It's Twoface Slack," Reno panted as they met. "Shot himself this mornin'. Accident. Trailin' a moose an' fell. Bullet went through his lungs. He's done for."

Slack, covered to his chin by a robe, lay with his yellow-toothed mouth agape and red-rimmed. He breathed laboriously, and his eyes were closed.

"We will take him into the shack," Tim said. "Tough luck, it is."

He and Reno with great care placed Slack on Tim's bunk. A sodden crimson bandage, made from a shirt, encircled Slack's chest.

"He's done fer," Reno repeated. "Ain't it hell? Pore feller. He might have had a chance if I could have got a doctor. He won't last long."

Tim reached for the bandage, but Reno stopped him. "No use," he said. "I plugged up the holes. The slug went clean through. You'd just start 'em goin' again."

Tim snapped his fingers, a thought striking him. "If ye could get him to the hospital at Fairbanks the doctors might pull him through, bejabbers. We'll do it."

Reno shook his head. "He'd never live that long. It's a week's mush at best, an' a tough trail for a dyin' man."

"Begorra, he will be in Fairbanks this very day," Tim cried. "By airyplane it is."

Reno looked blank and Tim hastened to explain. " 'Tis me own boy that will do it. He is to fly over this very spot soon. I will have him land an' pick up Slack."

"How can you talk to an airplane?" Reno objected. "They fly too derned high."

"I will only have to hoist Auld Glory upside down on the flagpole an' Johnny will not overlook it. It is a signal we have arranged in case of accident."

Twoface Slack's eyes popped open momentarily, but Reno shot him a fierce, brief glance of warning, and he resumed his pose.

"I will send up the flag at once," Tim said, already on his way to the door. "Johnny will be due inside an hour or two."

"Let's give it to the old mick right now," Slack whispered after Tim had gone out. "He'll only be in the way. He might get hep to us an' start trouble."

"Naw," Reno disapproved. "It'll look better if he is standin' out in the open where his son can see him. There's no hurry about him. If he does get suspicious that'll be time enough."

RENO looked around. Tim's rifle stood in a corner. Reno tip-toed to it, and found it loaded. He ejected and pocketed the shells.

"That'll make it a cinch," he grinned. "Twoface, you an' me are rich. It's goin' to be like shootin' fish in a barrel."

"Gawd, I wish I had a smoke," Slack complained.

"You'll have to wait," Reno warned, and went out to watch the sturdy old sourdough work the halyard. The flag ascended, its blue field inverted.

"That will bring him," Tim nodded.

Tim produced his pipe, loaded it with a powerful black mixture of the weed, and lighted it. The day was mild, barely at the freezing point, and the six-inch snow was softening under the sun.

"Do ye smoke?" Tim asked, proffering his pouch.

Reno refused, and drew a plug of tobacco from his pocket. "This is the way I like it," he grinned, biting off a chunk.

Tim cupped a hand to his ear and lis-

tened. But there was no sound except the ripple of the breeze through the spruce.

"He will come," he muttered. "It would not be right that he would have an——"

Tim did not conclude the thought. The black fear was gnawing at him again. What if Johnny's luck had run out on this day of all days? What if——? Tim forced the fears into the background.

"We will put up your dogs," he said, heading for the three animals who still lay in their harness.

That took fifteen minutes. Still there was no sign of the airplane. Tim and Reno entered the shack again.

Twoface Slack lay on the bunk. Apparently he had not moved. Tim looked at him, and began filling his pipe again. He found his hands shaking. He was thinking of Johnny. Had he crashed somewhere in the waste of muskeg and ridges to the west? Was she lying in the wreckage of his plane, dying, with nobody to help him? Why didn't he come? But it was early yet.

Visions that had plagued Tim ever since Johnny had taken to the air, shouldered into his mind in an unnerving flood. Tim remembered that Johnny would be carrying gold on this hop. Maybe he had been bushwhacked by some of the sneaking scum of the trails who tried out their marksmanship on airplanes?

Perhaps it was the recollection of the gold cargo that jogged Tim's faculties. But it was at that moment that he became aware of a faint odor of unfamiliar tobacco smoke in the shack. It was cigarette smoke. Tim recollected that Reno had declared he did not smoke. Tim himself never used anything but his pipe.

Then it must have been Slack. And a dying man, with a hole through a lung would not likely be rolling a cigarette.

Tim knew Reno and Slack for what they were. He had cut their trail in many camps. His mind flashed back over the events of the past busy, twenty minutes. The fact that Reno had dissuaded him from examining Slack's wound now stood out like a beacon.

Tim turned away to conceal the shifting expression on his startled face. He stared out at the inverted flag that whipped from the twenty-foot staff. Had he really volunteered to call Johnny to a landing here, or had Reno craftily planted the suggestion in his mind? Tim could not recall clearly. He had taken a lot for granted. That much he realized.

HE PUFFED his pipe and took note that Reno had brought his rifle into the shack, and that it was leaning against the table within quick reach of its owner.

Tim's own gun still stood in the corner where he had placed it in readiness for a foraging bear that had attempted to enter the shack a day previously.

Tim yawned, walked casually across the shack and reached to pick up his gun. He heard Reno's indrawn breath and a quick movement. He knew that Reno had seized his own rifle.

Tim was convinced then. He meant to whirl, shooting. But he did not. The instant he lifted the thirty-thirty he knew by its weight that its magazine was empty.

For the space of a heartbeat Tim hesitated. Then, with rigid command of his taut muscles, he lifted the gun overhead and placed it on the caribou antlers that served as a rack. Still, without turning to look at Reno, he moved to the door, opened it and listened.

"Not comin' yit," he grunted. "But he will come."

He turned, his face impassive. Reno was pretending to polish the barrel of his rifle with his sleeve.

There came a long pause during which Tim puffed his pipe and stared out the window at the snow on the flat. His mind was racing desperately. There was a sick chill in his body. He must save Johnny somehow. He knew now that Reno was watching his every move. The first sign that he suspected them would bring a bullet. No doubt they meant to kill him eventually anyway. Johnny too. If they could dispose of the plane they would be safe from any chance of discovery forever.

"I had better cut some firewood," Tim finally remarked, and went out.

SLACK raised his head. Reno gave him a savage glare. "You dizzy fool," Reno whispered furiously. "You did smoke a cigarette while we was out there unhitchin' the dogs. I could smell it. I don't see how Whalen overlooked it."

"Well, I rolled one an' took a drag," Slack admitted. "No harm done. He give me a scare when he picked up his rifle though."

"He damned near signed his death warrant," Reno said. "But he's dumb. He ain't wise."

"I hope that plane shows up soon," Slack complained. "My nose is gittin' sore from havin' to breathe so hard all the time."

They heard Tim at the rear where a heap of spruce limbs and trunks were piled for fuel.

Then came silence. Reno arose and looked out the window. He saw Tim out on the flat beyond, kicking at the snow with his mukluks as he wandered about aimlessly.

Reno went to the door. "Whatcha doin'?" he called.

"Lookin' for that damned ax," Tim replied disgustedly. "I had drove it into a trunk that I dragged in yesterday. It must have fell off somewhere, blast the luck."

Reno bit off another chew of tobacco, and watched for a minute while Tim circled about, kicking at the snow. Then he closed the door and sat down again, moving his chair to a point where he could watch the flagpole.

Ten minutes passed. Then Slack sat up abruptly.

"It's comin'," he said, his voice thin and squeaky.

Reno heard it too. The distant drone of a plane. Tim came hurrying toward the shack.

Reno's teeth were bared and Slack, shedding his pose of injury, slipped out of the bunk and drew a revolver.

Tim found the two guns jamming into his body as he entered. He simulated stunned surprise.

"Stand over there an' keep your mouth shut," Reno growled.

The drone of the plane grew. Reno crouching at a corner of the window, muttered that he could see it. Slack stood with his gun pressed against Tim's back.

The plane was overhead. It was flying high. The hum of its motor was thin, like that of a laden bee.

Then the sound changed. It slowed, and almost died away. Tim breathed a desperate prayer. He heard the whir of great wings above the shack, and the crackle of backfiring stacks, as his son came banking down toward the flat.

Reno, his face pallid, his gun ready for the death shot, crouched like a cat at the window.

A shadow passed across the window. Tim could hear the whistle of the wind around the ship as it passed overhead. Then, abruptly, the motor in the plane roared into full power, its vibration seeming to shake the shack.

Reno hesitated a moment, puzzled. Then suddenly, with a furious curse, he leaped erect and whirled on Tim. There was flaming, red murder in his eyes.

"He ain't goin' to land," he screeched. "He's headin' east. You double-crossed us, damn you."

"That's right," Tim said calmly. "I

tol' him ye an' Slack was here, waitin' to murder him."

RENO'S rifle had started up. He meant to kill Tim. But he paused, his jaw dropping in startled dismay.

"You—you told him?" he gasped. "You're lyin'. You couldn't. I watched every move you made."

"Ye dirty, poisonous snakes, ye would have me bring me own boy to his death would ye?" Tim blazed, his own voice breaking into a roar of rage. "Go on. Kill me. Ye will hang for it, by the saints. Johnny will hunt ye down. He will know ye are guilty."

Twoface Slack, for once, reached the solution ahead of Reno.

"You dumb ox," Slack snarled at his pardner. "The snow, the snow. Don't you savvy? He wasn't huntin' for no ax out there. He must have wrote somethin' in the snow. An' you sat there an' watched him and never got next."

"He is right," Tim nodded grimly. "I thought ye would not be able to read big letters, because ye was too much on a level with the surface. So I made them fifty steps long. But if ye will go up on the ridge beyond the flat ye will see it. It says DANGER."

Tim produced his pipe and lighted it. "And as an afterthought I added yer names under it. Ye had better be hittin' the trail. Johnny will be back soon. An' he will seek to kill ye, no doubt. But I do not want any violence this day. It is Johnny's birthday. I have a surprise for him."

Reno and Slack looked sickly at each other. Then they hurried out, hitched up and mushed desperately away.

But barely had they entered the timber when a figure appeared magically from behind a bush. Fat Reno saw angry blue eyes. Then a fist seemed to explode on his face, flattening his nose, and sending a wave of painful blackness to his brain.

It was Johnny Whalen. Twoface Slack, who was breaking trail, turned with a startled shout, and lifted his rifle. It was knocked spinning from his hands.

Again the fist cracked, and Slack joined his partner in the snow. Johnny had set the plane down on a snow-covered bar half a mile beyond the shack, and had come racing back on foot.

Tim looked out the window of the plane at the panorama a mile below. Fairbanks was appearing in the distance ahead. Reno and Slack were prisoners on the floor, and Tim had been bulldozed by his son into accompanying him to guard them. The birthday cake with two slices removed, and the moosehide poke exposed, occupied a place of state behind the pilot.

"Do ye know Johnny," Tim observed, clearing his throat. "I am sixty. I am thinkin' of gettin' me an airyplane. Bejabbers I am gittin' too old to follow a pack of dogs."

And Johnny looked startled.