
WEST

MID OCTOBER, 1935 EVERY OTHER FRIDAY

WEST

Every Other Friday One Shilling

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"And Don't Forget That the Law's in the Saddle Yet in This Man's Country"—Smoky Smith, Sheriff

CHAPTER I

RED BOARD AT POVERTY BEND

"SMOKY" SMITH, sheriff of Yermo County, rode west on No. 11, the Sun Coast Flyer. The train roared across a desert world of deep canyons, high mesas and broad flats, while beyond wild peaks rimmed the horizon. Squawman, Wild Horse, Mad Mountain Beggar's Head.

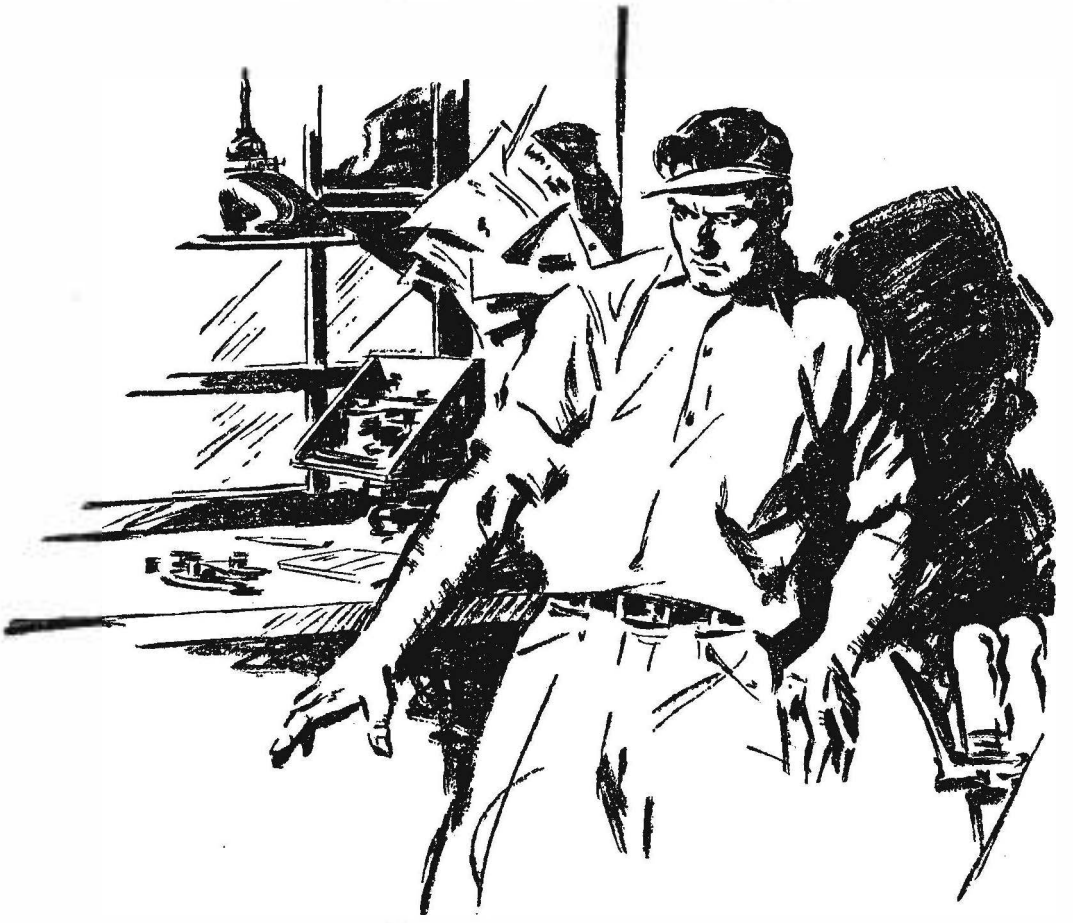
Smoky sat in the club car with Pat Scully, of the railroad police. Black guns nestled beneath the arms of the bullet-scarred officers. Star and six-gun, riding the rails, Caliente Junction to Del Rosa, one railroad division of the Pacific Coast and Transcontinental.

Bill McCuen, the burly superintendent of the Canyon Division had put it squarely up to the sheriff a short time before when he had said, "Smith, the brass hats on this

GUNS OF THE GRAVEYARD TRICK

By CHARLES W. TYLER

Author of "A Firing Fool," "Outlaw Frontier," etc.



man's railroad want action. Twice in the last six weeks our passenger trains have been stopped and looted by a gang of outlaws. You are as familiar with their *modus operandi* as I am. They ride up to a telegraph office at some isolated point. One of them sticks a gun in the ribs of the operator on duty, demanding that he hold the order board at red. Then they paw through the Pullmans, cursing the men and insulting the women, as they strip every last soul of anything of value they can lay their hands on.

"What the hell's the matter that you don't cut some tracks? Losing your grip? You generally deliver the goods, when it comes to cracking down on renegades of this sort. Have these birds got the Indian sign on you and that man, Furlong, your chief deputy?"

Smoky had squinted up his eyes and considered the burly, bushy-browed McCuen thoughtfully. He spoke in his usual soft drawl. "But," he reminded the superintendent, "nobody has ever seen these hombres ride into the picture, or ride out

of it. They're right mysterious jaspers, and what they use for transportation before and after said train robberies is where they hold pat cards.

"Furlong and I have yet to find tracks of horses in the vicinity of either of these hold-ups. A few old hoof-prints, maybe, but no fresh trail at all. You can't ride sign when there ain't any sign to ride."

"How about ridin' one of those varnished hot shots now and then?" suggested McCuen. "We got two coming through from the east at night, No. 11 and No. 3. Both of 'em have been stuck up. No. 3 got a red board one night at Aguajito and looked into gun barrels. No. 11 took it on the chin out at Dos Palmas. So far they haven't bothered trains going east over the division at night. Seems that these bandits have got it figured out that folks going to California have more money than those riding the other way.

"Reckon your suggestion is good," said Smoky. "I'll have Furlong ride one of the westbound trains you mention, and I'll ride the other for a couple of weeks. Maybe we'll get to know these hombres a little more intimate."

"Good!" cried the superintendent. "You do that. I'll get in touch with Pat Scully. He'll probably want to ride with you."

Tonight Smoky had slipped quietly aboard the Sun Coast Flyer at Wagon Tire. Pat Scully, coming through from Caliente Junction, was in the club car forward. His eye went to the rangy form of the sheriff. Pat was a veteran officer, a man close to fifty, tough, rugged, wintry. It seemed to him that Smoky was too young for the position he held. He estimated the other to be but little more than twenty-eight. Still these desert men never showed their years, being of a lanky, weathered type that might be either sixty, or twenty.

Tempered steel, Pat told himself. Smoky, for instance—slender of waist, calm of eye, indolent of movement. And yet a fighting fool when guns began to smoke.

"Hello, cowboy," greeted the railroad detective. "Riding the iron horse, hey?"

"Howdy," said Smoky. "Yup, toppin' 'er off."

The train conductor came through, his lantern cuddled in the crook of his arm.

"Evening, sheriff. Looks as though we are well protected tonight."

"A watched pot never boils," quoted Smoky. "I'll be right surprised if we see any bad men at all."

THERE was, at that moment, a shrill, impatient whistle blast ahead. The roar of the exhaust ceased. Followed a service application of brakes, and a backward tug of crowding cars.

Pat Scully peered from the window. "What the hell is that hoghead stopping down here on the flats for?" He got up nervously.

The conductor glanced at his watch and frowned. "Poverty Bend," he said. "Funny. They don't usually have anything on the order board for us." He started for the vestibule.

Pat Scully and Smoky followed him. "It was a red signal that put Eleven on the spot," said the former. "And a red board that got Three. It was train robbers instead of train orders. Watch your step, Smoky."

In the vestibule the three men paused. A second service application of the brakes had reduced the speed to a crawl.

"Open the door and get down on the step," Pat Scully directed the conductor. "Act like the train stopped here every night. I'll stand in the passageway out of sight." He glanced at Smoky, evidently waiting for the other to shape his own course of action.

"I'll go on back to the vestibule of the next car," said Smoky. He moved away, loosening the Colt in the shoulder holster under his left arm.

The special agent swore softly. "Trouble is, the damned stickups never happen when you're all primed and cocked."

The dim light of the telegraph office painted yellow squares on the platform one car-length forward of the open vestibule where the conductor now swung from the step. The trainman became aware at once of a strange quiet. No movement here at Poverty Bend; no life. He was watching the telegraph office. He could see the figure of the operator seated within.

Mechanically the ears of the man in uniform picked up the beat of the air pumps on the engine, and in the background was the subdued chatter of the telegraph sounder. These sounds offered relief from the otherwise dread stillness. The gaze of the conductor swung to the deep pools of gloom about the building. He half expected to see sinister forms taking shape there. A gust of night wind shook the leaves of the sentinel-like cottonwoods, and their whisper was like that of some watcher, warning of terror as yet undetermined.

Half way back down the train there was the twinkle of a brakeman's lantern. At the rear of the sleeper coupled behind the club car, Smoky Smith stood in the vestibule. The door on the opposite side from the station was open, and he wondered at it. He stood for a moment looking up and down the length of the train; then crossed to the other side and opened the door. Desert-bred instinct warned the sheriff of unseen danger.

He saw the conductor step down and start toward the telegraph office; then suddenly stop and stare through the window. The veteran railroad man felt a cold chill shoot down his spine, as he looked with startled eyes at the thing within.

THE operator was slumped in his chair his head tilted forward on his chest. His arms dangled at his side. Down the front of his shirt in the region of the heart was a horrible crimson stain. His grotesque posture could spell but one thing. The man was dead.

At that moment there was the muffled sound of a shot. It came apparently from somewhere in the forward part of the sleeper through which Smoky had just passed. The sheriff slipped his Peacemaker Colt from its shoulder holster, and moved to the open door on the far side of the vestibule. He glanced up and down the side of the train, but saw nothing. No skulking forms took shape in the gloom. It seemed impossible that the outlaws could have already made their way into the Pullmans.

Smoky entered the dim-lit pasageway and started ahead. There was grim portent in that single shot. He came opposite the curtained door of the washroom, and paused to glance within.

It was then that the porter, dozing on a cushioned seat, awoke. A frightened yell broke from his lips. However, it was not in time to save the sheriff from the lurking form hovering just inside.

The heavy steel barrel of a Colt smashed down on Smoky's head with fearful force. Because it was instinct with him to shoot quickly, the sheriff's finger was already at the trigger, his thumb across the hammer. The gun in his hand exploded, but the bullet sped wide of its mark, and the desert officer dropped to the floor with a bloody gash across his skull.

PAT SCULLY, standing inside the vestibule door at the forward end of the car, had no warning. There was a movement behind him. He whirled. A masked figure was moving toward him. Fire spurted from the outlaw's gun, and the chief of the railroad police went down.

The train conductor, staring through the window of the telegraph office at the dead operator, turned at the sound of the shot. Invisible death was stalking at Poverty Bend. Mysterious desert raiders were again closing their red talons over one of the Canyon Division's crack limited.

A figure in sombrero and clothes of a range rider was advancing along the side of the sleeper in front of the station. Where he had come from the veteran in uniform did not know. A cold terror gripped him. A train-load of passengers

was in his charge, and he was powerless to spare them the outrage of search and abuse.

"Stick 'em up!" The command was punctuated by an oath.

The conductor obeyed, his lantern bail caught over his arm. The outlaw ran a hand over him in search of a gun.

"All right, signal them hombres in the engine to pull ahead," the husky voice of the bandit directed. "We're goin'out west here about a mile an' shake these dudes loose of their valuables. Ought to make a nice haul off your varnished drag, Mister."

On the sagebrush flats of Poverty Bend, the Sun Coast Flyer was looted with deliberate thoroughness. No one escaped the profanity of lawless hands. Tragedy in the curtained aisles of the Pullmans. Snarled threats, coarse jest, taunts; a woman's scream, a child's sob, a masculine protest silenced by a blow.

And then, at last, it was over. The brigands faded from the scene as swiftly and mysteriously as they had come. No one seemed to know when they went or where. The desert night guarded their secret well.

Chapter II

SMOKY SMITH CUTS SIGN

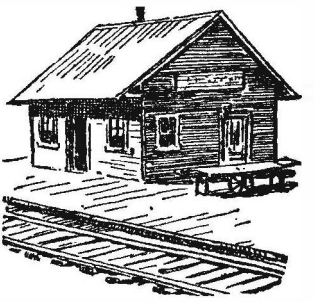
SMOKY SMITH opened his eyes. Stars of the wasteland, clear, low, brilliant, were hung above him. The fog in his brain had cleared, and left in its place a throbbing ache. He sat up and looked around. A switch lamp glimmered close at hand, and there was the dim outline of low buildings. A lighted window drew his gaze. It was the telegraph office.

He got to his feet and identified his surroundings as Poverty Bend. He was a little dizzy and a little sick, as he started toward the station.

"Wonder where Pat is?" he thought. Then, remembering the shot, shook his head. "Not so good."

The sheriff of Yermo County and chief of the railroad police, train guards. That was a joke. He felt his head. His hat was gone; his hair was wet, sticky. His gun was gone. He eyed the squat little desert depot, and wondered that there was no sign of life.

He could understand that the train robbers had probably ordered the crew of No. 11 to proceed. That being the case, the outlaws would make their escape into the desert from here. He should be able



to find plenty of fresh sign. He'd wire his chief deputy, "Flash" Furlong, to bring horses and a posse.

Smoky stopped suddenly. Through the window he saw the operator slumped in his chair. He remembered now that he had seen the train conductor staring at something within, almost at the moment that he had heard the shot. Perhaps the trainman had witnessed the killing.

The sheriff found the door ajar. He pushed it open. For a moment he stood on the threshold, surveying the interior with the practiced eye of the man hunter. His lids narrowed. He forgot his own hurt. He was for the moment, Smoky Smith, tracker.

THE oiled floor of the telegraph office showed the prints of rubber heels, new heels. Smoky moved forward, his eyes on the shoes of the dead operator. They were worn, dilapidated; the heels run-down, smooth. They had not made the imprints that had drawn his attention.

The telegrapher was hardly more than a boy. He had been shot through the heart. There was no hole through the panes. Smoky's conclusion was that the

operator had turned as the intruders entered, possibly arisen. It was quite evident that the victim had been placed in an upright position in his chair, for his body was crowded against the edge of the table.

After a little, Smoky went to the door. East of the station was the water tank and pump house. A few starved cottonwoods were upthrust against the sky. Squatting beneath them were the black shapes of a number of buildings, sprawled along the right-of-way.

There was no light, no sign of life anywhere, no sounds, except the intermittent chatter of the sounder and the whisper of a relay. Strange, he thought, that none of the track workers or their families who lived here should have been aroused. Still, had any of them heard the shot, they might have thought it to be a torpedo on the track.

Smoky found a faucet and washed the blood from his face. His scalp would require a few stitches, he imagined, but otherwise he was in very fair shape. A lot better, he put forth mentally than the young fellow at the key.

He left the station and walked toward one of the buildings beyond. A dog barked. Others added their yapping voices. A door opened and a Mexican demanded brokenly who was there. Smoky asked for the foreman, and was directed to his house, a building nearby.

Mike McCurdy came to the door in his nightshirt.

"What the hell's the matter out here?"

The belated inquisitiveness of the section boss struck Smoky as being slightly ludicrous in view of what had transpired. His voice cut back curtly.

"Plenty. Reckon you're a right smart sleeper."

"Who are you?"

"The sheriff."

"Oh."

"Dogs wake you up?"

"Yeah."

"First time you heard 'em barking tonight?"

"Shure, an' there wa'n't a yip out of 'em until now."

"Any chance they could bark and you sleep through it?"

The foreman shook his head. "No, there ain't, Sheriff. I sleep pretty light."

"Damn funny dogs," Smoky said.

"What do you mean?"

"I'll tell you what I mean. Train robbers showed up here a little while ago. They shot the operator, stuck up No. 11 and got away. And you and these kioodles never heard a thing."

"Glory be to God!" cried Mike McCurdy incredulously. "What is it ye're sayin'? That couldn't happen. Them dogs would've barked, an' woke us up like they did just now."

"Well, it happened just the same," Smoky declared. "And you missed the show."

The seamed old Irishman stared wide-eyed at his visitor. "I can't believe ye. Shure now, it ain't a joke is it?"

"Yeah," said Smoky grimly. "It's funny all right. Put on some clothes and come over to the telegraph office. There's a kid operator holding down the graveyard trick. He'll tell you what kind of a joke it is."

CHAPTER III

STRANDS OF A WEB

A CRIMSON desert dawn smeared the wasteland with its soft-tinted glow. Like a cleansing flood, it wiped away the last vestige of murky blackness. A new day, bathed by the rising sun, stood smilingly on the threshold. And yet there were red stains at Poverty Bend that sunshine could not destroy.

A special train, made up of two cars and a locomotive, stood in the siding. A black undertaker's wagon from the establishment of Sam Chase in San Angelo was backed up to the door of the telegraph office. Near the water tank was a long-bodied, high-sided truck. It had brought

horses and deputies from Palomas, the county seat.

"Barrel-hoop" Charley, a grizzled veteran of the range, directed the unloading of the mounts. Lean, bronzed riders began saddling up. Saddle-blankets were smoothed into place, cinches tightened and carbine scabbards settled beneath stirrup leathers. There were no wasted motions, no bungling hurry; for it is the law of the desert to make haste slowly.

Flash Furlong, chief deputy, lighted a cigarette. A rider, tugging at a latigo strap said, "Smoky was in right close touch with things, I reckon."

"Yeah," drawled Flash. "One of 'em whacked 'im between the horns."

"How's the other feller?"

"He may live. They tried to gut-shoot the railroad cop, but hit a little off center. They got 'im in the hospital at Amargosa diggin' lead out of his claim."

"The operator got it, too."

"Sure did. Sewed a pair of wings on 'im an' turned him loose. Nice hombres."

Flash Furlong was a born tracker, among other things, which was one reason why Smoky Smith had pinned a deputy's badge on him. Furthermore, he was a true son of lariat and saddle-leather.

Smoky was the general, quiet, shrewd and possessed of a fighting heart. Flash, the lieutenant, was quick of retort, ready to fight from the drop of the hat—or before—and inclined to leap first and talk afterward. He always looked hopefully for the worst to happen.

They struck a balance—Smoky and Flash—and teamed beautifully, as riders of the star.

Flash, lean, brown, wiry, walked toward the telegraph office. Smoky, his scalp patched by a doctor, who had arrived on the special from Amargosa, grinned wryly as the other came up.

"Them jaspers sure parted yore hair," said the young deputy. "I done warned yuh not to play with bad boys." He surveyed the sheriff with a critical eye. "Which way they headin', yuh reckon?"

"Don't know," Smoky replied. "They looted the train out west of here about a mile. Made their get-away from there."

"Ought to cut fresh sign," Flash said.

Smoky shook his head a little dubiously. "I don't know about that. The Keyhole moved a trail herd across the flats yesterday, the section foreman tells me. Everything is tracks."

"Maybe the bandits had a car," suggested the other.

"Might have," admitted Smoky. "We'll look for tire marks."

BILL McCUEN and J. J. Renslaw, the general manager of the P. C. & T., came up. The coroner, Mandin, was with them. The superintendent regarded the sheriff with a cold eye.

"Well, you and Pat Scully didn't go so big."

"I reckon not."

"Huh!"

"How is Pat getting on?"

"He's in bad shape. Saw him in the hospital at Amargosa before we left. The doc got the bullet."

"Forty-five?" Smoky lifted an inquisitive eyebrow.

"That's what they said."

The sheriff glanced at the coroner. Their eyes met. An unspoken something passed between them.

"It's the same gang that pulled the other two jobs," declared McCuen. "Five of them, according to the crew. Wore endgate overalls, sombreros and cowboy boots."

Renslaw swore, and his scowling glance went from the sheriff to Flash Furlong. "It seems damned queer to me," he flung out angrily, "that outlaws can hold up a train, make their escape and remain in hiding in this desert country around here, and you fellows not get any trace of them."

Flash ran his tongue-tip along the seam of a brown-paper cigarette, while his eye caressed the pompous general manager with a look of patient resignation. Brass hats made him tired.

"When them hombres travel," he said, "they don't make tracks on the ground."

"You mean you can't *find* any," Renslaw shot back.

"Not in this man's desert," Flash said.

"How do you know?" demanded McCuen gruffly. "It's a big place."

"Wanted men on horseback ride the water holes," the young deputy pointed out curtly. "If they don't find 'em, they make one dry camp this side of hell."

Smoky nodded. "Our posse is heading for Last Chance Well," he explained. "It's the only water one day's ride from Poverty Bend. Ghost Tank is dry, and has been for two months. So is Disappointment Spring; that's never reliable. Bad Water Spring is poison. If we don't find the trail of five riders at Last Chance Well, we'll scratch off Pulpit Pass and the Lost Canyon country.

"South of the railroad they wouldn't have a Chinaman's chance, everything's burned up. There's nothing but dry watering places and dead cows."

Renslaw's gaze wandered to the ash-colored mountains that rimmed the horizon to the south; then swung north, where blue cathedral spires were thrust into the sky. There was truth in what the sheriff said. For men who must find refuge quickly, the vast flats of Poverty Bend and those distant and elusive mountains offered scant security.

Smith and Furlong were desert men, and knew whereof they spoke. Weather-bronzed, capable, confident; and yet the train robbers had moved in on them with a smartly plotted scheme of outlawry that was possessed of the most baffling qualities. It seemed to Renslaw that it was a case for special investigators. Their own cinder dicks had failed as completely as the sheriff's office.

SMOKY spoke to McCuen. "Who is this young feller?" He moved his head to indicate the undertaker's somber van.

The superintendent shook his head impatiently. "I don't know," he snapped, "and I can't see that it makes much difference anyway. The main thing is to catch those outlaws." He paused; then added, "Poverty Bend is a day office eight months in the year. We only have night men here during the rushes."

"Thought it might be sort of interestin' to know who was dead," said Smoky. He puffed at his cigarette. "Seein' that he wa'n't the regular third trick man."

"What do you mean?" demanded McCuen. "First I knew of it."

"The section boss says he never saw the boy before," the sheriff explained. "Man named Dracutt has been holding down the job for the last couple of weeks." Smoky glanced toward a battered car, parked behind the station. "That's his Chevvy."

McCuen turned on his heel. "I'll call the despatcher," he said over his shoulder, "and get the dope on this thing."

He was back in a few minutes. His face heralded news. "Say, this man Dracutt, was the fellow sitting in at both Aguajito and Dos Palmas when Three and Seven were stood up. I remember him now; he was up for questioning after those jobs. He gave a good word picture of the bandits that covered him. You talked to him, Smith, didn't you?"

"Yeah," said Smoky, nodding slowly. "I remember the feller. Where was he last night?"

"Sick," said McCuen. "He wired the despatcher that a friend of his would take the graveyard trick at Poverty Bend for a night or two, if it was agreeable."

"Right fortunate for this Mr. Dracutt." Smoky's comment carried a note of irony. "The gentleman was sure side-stepping a hot spot."

Sam Chase closed the doors on his silent passenger and waddled down the platform. There was a peculiar squint to his round, moon face. He glanced from the coroner to Smoky.

"Funny," he ventured, "but it looks to me like a sorta small bullet plucked that operator. Mighty small." Mr. Chase

was a man of long experience in the desert country. He had prepared many victims of gun-fire for Boot Hill. His opinion was not without some authority.

"Yeah," observed the sheriff dryly, "so I noticed." His eye caressed Sam Chase tolerantly. "Funny as hell, Sam. But what you know, you keep under your hair."

"What do you mean?" demanded McCuen, his brow furrowing.

"Big gun nailed Pat Scully," said Smoky tersely. He turned to the coroner. "Hold the inquest this afternoon, I reckon?"

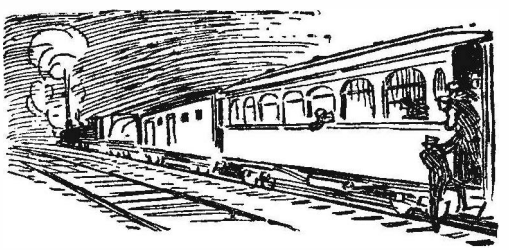
The other nodded. "About three. No sense in delayin' it."

Smoky said, "A dead man can be a hombre's worst enemy. The train robbers were ridin' a sunny trail until they dropped the kid. From there on they left plenty of sign, and it ain't out here on the flats."

SMOKY SMITH and Flash Furlong walked toward the water tank. Here the sheriff gave a few brief instructions, and a few minutes later a line of riders were moving across the desert in the direction of Last Chance Well.

A scowl clouded the leathery face of Mr. Furlong, who had been left behind. "What's the idea of leavin' me out?" he demanded truculently. "I ain't a stepson."

"I've got a few chores closer to home for you," Smoky advised the impatient



Flash. He gave brief directions, and then rejoined the group near the telegraph office.

The special from Amargosa was ready to depart. Flash Furlong climbed aboard. Smoky drove to San Angelo in the big sheriff's car in which the chief deputy had come from Palomas.

Already the mind of the desert manhunter was sketching the thin strands of a web, weaving together frail filaments for the elusive outlaws of Poverty Bend. He toyed with fragments that had come to his attention as one might sort over pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. The dogs that did not bark; heel prints on the floor and the little crimson puncture in the breast of the dead man at the key.

CHAPTER IV

.25 CALIBER BULLET

SAN ANGELO is a sun-blistered and desolate desert community, sprawled beside the tracks of the Pacific Coast and Transcontinental. In its heyday it had enjoyed the distinction of being a rooting-tooting town, for its early history had been written in gun-smoke, the chronicle of which was largely incorporated now in a closed book called Boot Hill.

San Angelo, drowsing in the sun, was aroused from its lethargy to find that a dead man had been deposited in its lap. Sam Chase had a customer.

Smoky nosed his car to the curb in front of the weathered old Central House, and entered the lobby. Already the echo of the holdup at Poverty Bend was finding expression in the excited groups gathered on the sidewalks and hotel piazza. A number of men spoke to the sheriff, and all eyes centered on him as the man of the hour.

The clerk at the desk bobbed his head. "Well, they done it again," he offered.

"That's what I hear." Smoky's glance went about the room, and returned to the red, vein-marked face of the man behind the counter. "You have a man named Dracutt staying here?"

"Yair. Telegraph operator. Lucky he didn't go to Poverty Bend to work last night." He added, with a smirk and a knowing wink. "He was sick."

"Sick?"

"Mm—not feelin' well. Went to bed with a quart. Heh, heh!"

"What time was that?"

"Oh, 'bout nine."

"Had he recovered this mornin'?"

"Yair; good as new. There he is now."

The eye of the sheriff had already fastened to the man coming through the arched door that led to the restaurant in the annex. Dracutt was solidly built and carried his forty odd years on slouching shoulders. He had a defiant, uncompromising air that was reflected in the square, out-thrust jaw and cruel, tight-lipped mouth.

His gaze fixed itself promptly on the sheriff with a narrowing flicker of a lid. He paused to light a cigarette, and a pair of cold eyes looked across the flame of the match with animal-like alertness.

The clerk beckoned, and said as Dracutt approached, "This is the sheri'f. He just come from Poverty Bend."

"We met before." Dracutt's voice contained a contemptuous inflection. His opinion of Arizona cowboy sheriffs was not high.

SMOKY'S gray eyes moved up and down the other with a faint crow's-feet squint, much as he might estimate the hidden secrets of an ash-colored range.

"Howdy, Dracutt." His salutation was soft-spoken. The contrast between the two men was graphic. One held the colorful perspective of the length and breadth of the desert; the other reflected the cold menace of a loaded gun. There was depth, mystery, to the man of the star. Strength. The man who faced him bore the stamp of a fanged reptile.

That brief moment when they stood eye to eye spelled conflict. Both knew instant aversion, a renewal of the antagonism born at their first meeting.

"Heard train robbers got under the guard of you cops again," said Dracutt.

"There was a holdup at Poverty Bend," admitted Smoky. He added, "How are you feelin' today?"

"Me?" with the lift of an eyebrow. "Oh, I'm all right. Thought I had a cold comin' on, so I laid off and took care of it. Lucky I did."

"Goin' to be around for a little while?"

"Oh, sure; I'll be here." Dracutt's mouth curled into a half sneer. "Guess you'll want to ask some questions, hey?"

"Yes," Smoky said. "I might."

"Same old bunk." The other laughed unpleasantly. "Well, I don't blame you, Smith. That's easier than ridin' the trail."

"Deputies are leadin' a posse into the mountains," Smoky replied, ignoring the taunt.

"Oh, you found tracks then?" There was instant interest in the interrogation.

"There were plenty of tracks," Smoky said. "I wouldn't exactly say that train robbers made all of 'em though."

"They tell me this man, Furlong, is good at reading sign."

"Yes. Good tracker, Flash."

It was at this moment that Sam Chase appeared at the door. He motioned at the sheriff. "Smoky, c'mere."

The sheriff said, "Just a minute." It was evident that he would have more to say to Dracutt. He walked to meet Mr. Chase. They conversed in low tones.

"They got the bullet," wheezed Sam, his chest pumping from his hasty transit. "Little jigger. Twenty-five. Young feller's name was Manners. Vic, they called 'im. He was kinda up against it. Chummed around with Dracutt quite a little."

"All right, Sam. We'll be over in a few minutes."

Mr. Chase departed. Smoky rejoined the telegraph operator.

"Mind goin' over to see Vic with me a minute?" The sheriff's voice was low.

"Vic?" Dracutt's eyes widened. He wondered what the little fat man had wanted of the sheriff.

"Vic Manners."

"Oh!" Dracutt's eyes grew hard. He had not looked for this, though he had expected that he would be asked to identify the dead youth. "Yeah; sure."

"Nice boy, Vic," as they moved toward the door.

"You know 'im?" Dracutt was perplexed. It was reflected in the quick interrogation.

"I met him out at Poverty Bend last night," Smoky said slowly.

"You *met* him?" incredulously.

"Yes. I happened to drop in right after the bandits stood up Eleven."

DRACUTT opened his mouth as though to speak; then bit his lip. It had been on the tip of his tongue to voice an instantly aroused suspicion. He stared at the imperturbable Smoky, and tempered the interrogation that had leaped to mind.

"What brought you to Poverty Bend?"

"I was on the Sun Coast when they got the red board."

"You—" Dracutt's hands dug nervously into his pockets, as he fumbled for a cigarette. He did not finish his exclamation of amazement. He found his brain clouded with bewilderment.

"That your Chevrolet over to Poverty Bend, Dracutt?"

"Yes."

"What's it doing there?"

"I let Manners take it. The kid had been hangin' around a couple weeks. He was out of work. I staked him. He offered to go over and sit in when I said I was feelin' on the blink last night."

A solitary bulb glowed in the austere and forbidding little room at the rear of Sam Chase's furniture store. The victim of the holdup at Poverty Bend lay stark and silent beneath a sheet. Dracutt's eyes were drawn toward the body with grim fascination. He steeled himself for the ordeal. He wished that it was all over.

"Little more light, Sam," Smoky said.

The undertaker reached for a switch; then turned back the sheet.

"Like to have you identify the dead man," the sheriff told Dracutt. "Mind stepping a little closer."

Dracut shot a quick glance at the chalky face, and nodded. "It's Vic Manners." He turned to find the sheriff watching him closely.

Smoky spoke to Sam Chase. "I'd like to look at this boy's shoes."

The undertaker brought them. The soles were paper-thin and had holes in the center. The rubber heels were run-down and smooth. The uppers were badly scuffed and here and there stitches had given away.

"Sure was plumb hard up for footwear." Smoky shook his head. "Feet was on the ground."

The eye of the young sheriff strayed to the nearly new shoes that Dracutt wore. A few moments before, he had noted closely the imprint of the sharply stenciled rubber heels on a sandy bit of sidewalk outside.

"I did all I could for him," Dracutt was saying.

Smoky flashed a hard, straight look at the other. "I reckon," he said. "And that was a-plenty."

A pasty leer masked the dull, smouldering hatred that burned in the eyes of Jig Dracutt. His fingers clenched. "What do you mean by that?" he asked.

"Me an' Mike McCurdy cut some sign out there at Poverty Bend last night," Smoky said. His voice was soft, almost drawling. "And what we found wa'n't the tracks of horses."

Mandin, the coroner, blinked his sharp little eyes and stared for a moment at the sheriff. Then he turned to Dracutt.

"Inquest is this afternoon," he said briefly. "Three o'clock. Like to have you here."

Dracutt jerked his head impatiently. "All right."

Sam Chase fingered a can of "snoose," and deftly planted a thumb laden with Copenhagen inside his lower lip. His round face glowed in seeming anticipation of events to come.

"M-m, man-tracks, mebbe?" he suggested.

"Man-tracks," Smoky said, "and the reason I found them was because I was

the first person to go into the telegraph office after Vic Manners was shot. Later, the sign would have been fouled."

With breath-taking suddenness, the sheriff had revealed the fact that he had found the footprints of the killer at Poverty Bend—heel marks stamped on a freshly oiled floor.

"You're a smart guy." Dracutt's sneer was punctuated by an oath. He turned and went out.

He returned to the Central House. The clerk was at the telephone. The man at the desk spoke into the mouthpiece.

"Wait a minute. Here he is now." And to Dracutt, "Somebody on the wire. Calling from Amargosa."

THE hours rolled by quickly. Men gravitated toward San Angelo like the calculated flood of a tide. The conductor and trainmen who had been on No. 11. Several passengers from the ill-fated Sun Coast Flyer. Renslaw, McCuen and other officials. Officers of the railroad police. The atmosphere was charged with excitement.

The inquest, there in the somber back room, held the center of the stage for a little. Smoky reviewed the events up to and including his finding of the body. The train conductor told of seeing the youth through the window, slumped in his chair and a crimson stain on his shirt.

The coroner said, "Did you enter the telegraph office?"

"No. It was just then that I heard a shot on the train. I turned and saw a masked man pointing a gun at me."

"Did you get a look at him?"

"Why, yes. He was not six feet away. The light from the window was on him."

The coroner glanced at Smoky. The sheriff turned to the conductor. "Was he wearing spurs?"

The other hesitated, a frown of perplexity on his face.

"Think hard," said Smoky.

"I am not sure," the veteran railroad man said at last, "but I don't think he was."

"All right," said the sheriff.

Mike McCurdy, the section boss from Poverty Bend, was called. Mandin prodded a few short interrogations at the Irishman.

"What was the first you knew of the holdup, McCurdy?"

"When the sher'f there come to the door an' told me."

"Dogs barking then?"

"Shure an' they was that."

"Did you hear any dogs barking previous to that?"

"Only before I went to bed. A coyote started 'em off."

"Do they generally bark if there is anybody around?"

"Yes, they do."

"That's all."

Dracutt was questioned concerning the youth who had substituted for him at Poverty Bend. He repeated the story he had told the sheriff. There was little else. The coroner's jury reported that a man known as Vic Manners had met death at the hands of a person or persons unknown.

The operator was scowling and surly. He had expected that the sheriff might interrogate him further. Smoky, however, appeared not to have the slightest interest in him.

Men drifted away from the undertaking establishment in little groups. Smoky walked to the railroad station with McCuen and Renslaw. It was while they were in the telegraph office that a message came over the wire from Flash Furlong at Amargosa.

It was for the sheriff. It read:

"Maybe you ain't so simple as you look. Or else that sock you got between the horns did you plenty good. You stick with me and you'll hold a lily in your hand. Call me back. I'm at the telephone office dazzling the beautiful women. A faithful and a loving soul.

(Signed) Mr. Furlong."

The telegraph operator said, "That blankety-blank damn fool could put it all in three words. What the hell's he think —I ain't got nothin' to do but copy a lot of smart cracks?"

Smoky grinned, and handed the yellow telegraph form to Renslaw. The general manager read it with a perplexed scowl.

"It looks like the raving of a moron to me," he snapped. "What is it all about?"

Smoky stepped outside, and motioned McCuen and Renslaw to follow. As the door closed behind them, he said: "It's about train robbers."

"The hell you say!" The superintendent was instantly alert.

"Furlong points out that he's cut a hot trail," explained Smoky. "There are no train robbers headin' for Pulpit Pass and the Lost Canyon country. He has found fresh sign at Amargosa. It is just a matter of making sure of ourselves before we close in, for they are tough hombres. A telephone operator gave him a tip."

"Say," said Renslaw, "let me look at that telegram again."

Chapter V

SMOKY LOOKS AT A GUN

DESERT night folded down on San Angelo quickly. Things moved pretty much as usual, except that there were a considerable number of strangers in town. The chief topic of conversation, of course, was the train robbery. The tension had lessened somewhat. It was a period of let-down after the storm.

The Central House lobby was crowded. Several bridge games started. In the little room back under the stairs, men in shirt-sleeves settled themselves for an evening of stud poker. A radio squawked in a corner of the office.

Dracutt was slouched in a chair before the plate glass window at the front. He was reading a Phoenix paper. Black headlines screamed of the holdup at Poverty Bend. Now and then he glanced into the street.

Smoky called Amargosa from the dingy privacy of a littered little office at Sam Chase's place of business. He talked with Flash Furlong. Their conversation was brief, laconic.

Flash said, "'Lo. Smoky?"

"Yeah."

"Say, this dizzy blonde in charge of the phone office here is a swell little critter. She thinks I'm cute."

"She's dizzy all right."

"A jasper called a bird at San Angelo by the name of Dracutt this afternoon."

"I know Mr. Dracutt, and I got that dope from the hotel clerk."

"Well, if you're so smart, what did they say?"

"I don't know."

"This man, Dracutt told this hombre to

come to Angelo for a powwow and to bring Bolan. Reckon I'm not doin' so bad."

"You're just keepin' your head above water."

"Say, for a jughead, you ain't so simple, Smoke. I worked Amargosa like you said. Five hombres checked in at two hotels 'round three o'clock this a. m. They've kept under cover since. Had their meals sent up."

"What time are those two men comin' to San Angelo?"

"I was waitin' for that one. Well, they rented a Buick coupe at the Amargosa Garage. The boss there told me they would want it about eight o'clock. He's got to send it around to the side entrance of the hotel."

"I'll be looking for them."

"Smoky, that dame ain't really a blonde. She's more on the aluminum. Her name is Doris."

"Fast worker, eh?" See you later. Good-by."

TEN o'clock came. Dracutt yawned, got up and walked to the cooler for a drink of water; then returned to his seat at the window.

It was a little before ten-thirty when a Buick coupe swung to the curb on the darker portion of Depot Street, and not far from an alley at the side of the Central House. Two men got out. They stood for a little looking about them; then walked quickly into the alley, the gloom of which swallowed them.

Dracutt got up, lighted a cigarette and moved toward the stairs. He nodded at the night man at the desk.

"Guess I'll hit the hay."

Smoky Smith, shortly after his telephone conversation with Flash Furlong, had climbed under the wheel of the sheriff's car and driven out of town heading east toward Wagon Tire. Here he left the machine at a local garage.

"Like to have somebody drive this car back to San Angelo about ten o'clock," he told the night man. "I'm changin' horses."

"Monkey business, eh? All right, Joe's a good man. Joe, lend an ear to the sheriff."

"Take the dirt road along the railroad track when you get back to San Angelo, Joe," Smoky directed. "Park the car at the end of Depot Street near the station. Leave the ignition key under the floor mat. And keep your mouth shut."

"Right, Sheriff."

Smoky went to a restaurant and ate supper. He had felt that his presence in town might cause embarrassment to Mr. Dracutt and his clandestine friends from Amargosa. For all eyes were watching the movements of the sheriff with avid intentness, there in San Angelo. It would be whispered about almost at once that he had driven east at dusk.

AN hour later Smoky was riding west in the caboose of a freight train. He dropped off in the yards, and made his way past the loading corrals and toward the empty back street that was a relic of San Angelo's early days. He came at last to the vacant space behind the Central House which was used as a parking lot for the cars of the hotel's transient guests.

The old Central House, like others of its kind, had been designed for convenience rather than architectural magnificence. A second-floor piazza extended across the front and along the two sides. An outside stairway connected one of these side piazzas with the broad piazza below. It was situated at the back, thus affording access to the upper rooms through a door that opened into the second-floor hallway.

Hence a person approaching the Central House through the alley might make his way to the rooms of the second floor without coming under the eye of the clerk or persons in the lobby. Likewise, it provided a means of exit, should one desire to take departure covertly.

Jig Dracutt occupied room number 32, at the extreme northwest corner of the hotel, and on the side of the outside stairway. The door of this room was the first on the left at the end of the hall.

As a point of strategy, it could not have been equaled, and for this very reason it had been chosen.

For a little the two men who had arrived in the Buick coupe, lingered in the shadows. Satisfied at last that prying eyes had not observed them, they made their way stealthily up the weathered stairs. It was not the first time that they had thus approached the rendezvous above, and they moved with the assurance of those who have traveled a road until it is well known to them.

The night was warm, and the door opening into the hallway above stood open. The corridor was lighted by a single dim bulb, dangling unadorned from the fly-specked ceiling. Mace Bolan, the taller of the pair, crossed the threshold and carefully turned the knob of room 32. The

door opened. It was dark within, but he entered quickly, followed by Ike Cordis. The door closed behind them.

SMOKY waited ten minutes. Somewhere a stationary gas engine coughed with monotonous regularity. An engine was switching cars in the yards west of the depot. Came the faint click of balls from the pool room across the alley from the Central House, and now and then low voices filtered through the blackness.

The sheriff's eye held with a peculiar fascination to that second floor room. No glimmer of light marked its somber windows. He moved closer to the hotel, picking his way gingerly. The secrets of the mysterious train robbers, he felt sure, were guarded within the walls of the old Central House.

He reached the steps of the side piazza. He waited a little, listening; then slowly mounted the stairs. They creaked under him, as they had under the two men who had preceded him. But Smoky timed his ascent with the laborious puffing of the engine switching cars, and thus reached the top without the betraying plaints of weathered treads heralding his presence.

He hugged the wall close by a window. He heard a low murmur of voices, vague, indistinct. Small hope that he would be able to overhear anything that was said. The engine in the yards had finished its local work and was ready to highball. It whistled sharply twice; then picked up the slack with deep-throated snorts.

Suddenly there was a shadowy figure moving up behind the sheriff. A gun muzzle was jammed into his back, while a familiar voice hissed:

"Hoist 'em!"

Smoky stiffened, hesitated.

"Up with them mitts! *Up!*"

Smoky obeyed. Funny little chills played pranks along his spine. Vic Manners had been caught in this same insidious web, there at Poverty Bend. And Vic Manners was dead. Fogging it out with roaring forty-fives was one thing, but it was something else again to know the intimate pressure of a runty gun against a man's back.

Death nestling in a tiny .25 caliber pellet, but death nevertheless. No doubt but that the gun Dracutt gripped now was the same one that had written killer at Poverty Bend.

"Hello, Dracutt." Smoky's voice was low, cool.

"Hello, Sherlock Holmes," in a rasping sneer. And then, "You make a phony move and I'll kill you as sure as hell."

"Yes, I guess you would."

"Into the hall here. Quick! Open that door on the right."

Smoky turned the knob and entered the darkened room, with Dracutt prodding him hard with the blunt-nosed weapon.

A flashlight cast its dazzling glare in the sheriff's face. A man swore hoarsely.

"What's up?" It was the voice of Mace Bolan, alarm reflected in the sharp interrogation.

"Oh, this sagebush cop tried to pull a fast one," rasped Dracutt. "Get his gun. Look him over careful for a second one."

"Snoopin', hey?" said Ike Cordis. "Lucky yuh got 'im, Jig."

"Oh, I had him sized up. He may be a sheriff to some folks, but he's just one more yap to me."

"Sounds plausible," admitted Smoky ruefully.

"Don't forget for a minute," Dracutt cautioned, "that this little rod don't make much noise, and I could prob'ly time it to blend with that gas engine that's poppin' down back here."

"I won't forget," said Smoky.

"Shades pulled?" asked Bolan.

"You're damn right," Dracutt answered. "And blankets hung over the windows."

"Let's have some more light then."

THERE was the click of a switch and an electric bulb illuminated the scene. Smoky's eyes went to the strangers in swift appraisal, while he checked through the files

of his mind for the pictures of wanted men. He did not recognize either of them.

Bolan, the taller, was swarthy, heavy-set. He had a big nose, a ponderous jaw and beady little eyes that squinted out from under shaggy brows with the unblinking, ruthless stare of a wolf. Cordis was short, lean, with a hatchet-face and a mouth twisted into a perpetual sneer.

Both men were attired in well-fitted clothes of late cut and design, clothes in which they seemed out of place.

Bolan endured the sheriff's close scrutiny for a little; then he said with a harsh laugh, "Take a good look, while yuh got the chance, because what yuh see now is goin' to last you a long, long time."

Cordis hefted the veteran S. A. Colt .45 that he had pulled from the shoulder holster under Smoky's left armpit, balancing it on his palm, settling his fingers about the gracefully curved butt, lifting his thumb over the long, slender thumb-piece.

"Cripe, I didn't know anybody still packed these single action museum pieces. Six shots, and you're all washed up. Look at the rod ejector," he said to Bolan. "Take a week to reload the damn thing."

Smoky's eyes narrowed. He was thinking back to the train robbery at Poverty Bend. "Yes," he said, "*range* men still carry them out here, because gunsmiths are few." He paused then added significantly, "If you haven't stopped your man with the first shot out of one of these old pocket cannons—well, you won't have to fret much about reloadin'."

Dracutt said, with a curl of his lip, "These little guns do the work." He gave emphasis to the remark by jolting the sheriff in the ribs with the weapon he held.

"That one did," Smoky admitted. "We've got a dead man's word. Told me plain enough, Vic did, that it was no range rider that pumped lead into him."

"So you didn't expect to find tracks of outlaws' horses on the trail to Last Chance Well?"

"No. Men with that size gun don't ride the water holes in this man's desert."

"Maybe there's things Vic didn't tell you," said Dracutt meaningly. "It would be sociable if you went over and kept him company." A pause. Then, "You don't think you're goin' to walk out of here do yuh?"

SMOKY looked very straight at the other. "*I* may not," he said slowly, "but the law will. Some other man with a star will be waiting down trail."

Bolan said to Dracutt, "What happened?"

"Aw, this hick sheriff found some footprints in the telegraph office at the Bend."

"Your rubber heels," Smoky said, "tracking up the floor around Vic Manners like wolf tracks around a carcass."

"Oh, ho!" Cordis leered at the prisoner. "You was lookin' to make a little trouble, ah?"

"Keep that gun on him," Dracutt told Cordis.

"You tellin' me." The bandit cocked the big Colt and pointed it at Smoky's stomach. "Look 'er over, Sheriff."

Dracutt turned the key in the lock; also shot the bolt above. The close-blended clicks were grimly significant. Smoky shifted his weight from one foot to the other. His back was brushing the wall beside the door. His eyes went about the room in a quick survey; then came again to the faces of the outlaws. His lips tightened a little. He had walked into something that he had not exactly bargained for.

For the second time in the past twenty-four hours he had come in contact with this outlaw gang, and as a result of the first meeting had a stitched scalp. And they were going to tag him again.

Smoky looked into the muzzle of his own gun. The man behind it was holding it very steady. He wished that he had not filed the trigger quite so fine. A very light pressure, and Mr. Smith's Peacemaker Colt was going to plunk him dead center.

It stood to reason, however, that this trio of bad men would much prefer to ease him

out of the picture without unnecessary noise, and herein lay his one hope. He touched the wall with his left elbow, and moved it back and forth ever so gently in an exploration of a very small area there beside the door moulding. At last the quest was rewarded.

Smoky drew a long breath, like a swimmer preparing to dive into deep water, and set himself—every nerve taut as a singing gut.

Chapter VI

Star and Six-Gun

"YOU was last seen headin' west," Dracutt told the sheriff in a low voice. "You ain't supposed to be in San Angelo at all."

"That's funny," Smoky said. "My car's parked down by the depot."

"The hell it is!" Dracutt's eyebrows lifted.

Bolan spoke from the side of his mouth without moving his lips. The muffled words were for the ear of Dracutt, who

stood beside him. "We got to get this bird out of here. What do yuh say?"

Cordis said nervously, "Watch this hombre!"

"Be careful," warned Smoky. "That trigger is set on a hair. You wouldn't want that gun to go off. The town would be around your ears."

Dracutt still held his .25 automatic. He was counting to himself—checking the interval between the pops of that stationary gas engine. He held a kind of grudging respect for the sheriff. Smoky Smith had a reputation as a fighter. They'd never tie him up without a struggle. Any kind of a commotion would invite investigation. The sheriff was waiting for their next move; you could tell that. The damned gas engine missed a beat now and again. It would be his luck to shoot when it skipped. He'd have to try and catch their prisoner off guard.

"Say, I've got a proposition to make." Dracutt turned half around, the blue-steel thing in his hand held tight against him. Its muzzle slowly focused on the sheriff's heart.

Four feet. Five, perhaps. He couldn't miss. The count again. These little gats had their place.

Smoky was not watching Cordis now. He looked straight at Dracutt. The one thing a killer cannot hide is the involuntary spark that burns in his eye when murder is at his finger tips. The grip about the butt of the thirteen-ounce Colt tightened.

"Yeah, a little proposition——"

The tip of Smoky's left elbow jabbed hard against the knobby projection on the wall. The filament in the room's single bulb snapped out. Total blackness crashed its blanket over the scene.

The next instant this curtain of night was stabbed by two orange lances, and the room was filled with the shattering impact of twin explosions. The crack of the little automatic and the booming roar of the forty-five in the hand of Cordis were almost as one.

The leaden missile from the smaller weapon drilled the panel clean and embedded itself in the wall across the corridor. The bullet from the Peacemaker Colt, striking at an angle, ploughed a vicious furrow along the plaster.

Smoky was moving when the light went out. Not a panicky lunge for safety, but a perfectly timed side step that left him balanced on the balls of his feet and ready for battle. His school of life had long since demanded that he major in the art of whittling tough gentlemen down to his size. Desert law, as maintained by Ari-

zona sheriffs, was a tradition that he intended to uphold to the last, long amen.

AGAIN a vicious spurt of fire from the muzzle of the little automatic, making a hungry quest for Smoky Smith. Ike Cordis backed away, his six-shooter swinging before him, as he attempted to solve the riddle of that gloom-shrouded room. His brain, muddled by the unexpected turn of affairs, was sluggish in its reaction.

Mace Bolan pulled a gun from a shoulder holster and stood, feet spread, trying to orient himself.

A board creaked, and two guns thundered. The cool breath of a bullet caressed the cheek of Dracutt. He screamed a warning: "Don't shoot you fools! We'll kill each other. He ain't got a gun."

A moment of silence. Then, "Push that button—quick!" It was the voice of Bolan.

Already the hand of Dracutt was brushing the wall by the door in frantic search for the switch. His fingers found it, but before they could jab it home, sparks flew from the ceiling fixture of the dangling bulb itself. Smoky had jerked the cord loose.

Somewhere a fuse popped. Lights went out. In the hotel lobby that breathless moment of listening, as the sound of shots was heard, was broken by a woman's scream. A man swore. Then a confused babble of voices.

Feet pounded on a plank sidewalk. A man yelled, "Where's the shootin'?" And San Angelo began to live again.

Cordis moved along the wall. He brushed against a table. A hurtling body struck him across the knees with terrific force. He went down from the impact. The table crashed to the floor.

Dracutt cried, "Get my flashlight! It's in the drawer!"

Cordis mumbled an oath. He still retained his grip on the sheriff's .45. He thrust the gun against the body of his antagonist and pulled the trigger, forgetting that the gun was single action.

"Damn old relic!" he muttered.

Before he could cock it, steel-like fingers seized his wrist and twisted it savagely. He gasped with pain, and released the gun. It clattered along the floor. The outlaw grabbed Smoky by the throat

"I've got 'im!" he snarled.

Bolan took a step forward. He put out his left hand to guide him past a chair, his right was poised for a quick blow with his six-shooter. "Hold 'im!" he barked.

Smoky rocked back on his heels, one hundred and seventy pounds of desert-bred wildcat. He jerked Cordis up, spun him in a short arc and catapulted him at the voice. The chair crashed and the bodies of the two bandits slammed against the bed, sending it along the floor on shrieking casters.

Dracutt fumbled for a match with blundering, frantic fingers. A fight was the last thing in the world that he had wanted. A beautifully planned scheme of outlawry was crumbling like a mudhouse in an earthquake. They'd have the town mobbing in on them any moment.

THE place was a bedlam. The floor shook beneath lunging bodies and crashing furniture. Smoky had no intention of allowing his antagonists to sort themselves out and get set for the counter-attack. A bit of light, and they would pump him full of lead. His foot hit the chair. He caught it up and swung it. Legs and rungs splintered on Bolan's head.

Dracutt had found a match in his pocket. He scratched it on the wall in mad haste. It broke. The head leaped away in a briefly flaring arc. He had a momentary glimpse of the sheriff, and fired. But again Smoky was moving too fast. Two midget bullets spat from the muzzle to the accompaniment of dagger thrusts of fire, only to drill the plaster.

Shouts came from below. Feet pounded on the stairs from the lobby. There was the wheezy, piping voice of Sam Chase. Other voices bawled excitedly. A fight. Gun fight! Happy days!

"Hey, where is it?"

"Down here!"

"No! This hall!"

"What room?"

Dracutt leaped toward a window. He was concerned now with escape. He snatched at a blanket hung across the casing, ripped away the shade and flung up the sash. He snarled a command at his companions, as he threw a leg across the sill.

"Come on, beat it!" He spat out an oath. "The pack is coming."

Cordis flung himself across the room toward the window, sudden panic eating at his heart. Capture meant the pen; perhaps the noose. Dracutt yelled back, "We'll see you again, Smith, and finish this little job."

Bolan still gripped his revolver. He came out of the corner where he had sprawled after the blow from the chair. Blood and slobber flowed from his mouth. Berserker rage convulsed him. A square of dim, gray light from the window beyond revealed the shadowy form of the sheriff moving toward him.

He swung his gun on the target thus presented and fired, but jerky nerves echoed to his finger tips; his hand was unsteady. The bullet creased Smoky, whipping a neat, red furrow along his ribs. The sheriff launched a flying tackle, but Bolan leaped clear. He vaulted across the bed toward the window.

Smoky jerked to his feet. His fingers plucked a match from vest pocket and he hooked it across his thigh. The first quick flare was enough. It revealed the Peacemaker Colt on the floor in front of the bureau.

Smoky caught it up. It was like clasping the hand of an old friend, to again know the feel of the weapon's grip against his palm. He sprang toward the window and straddled the stool. Men were already crowding through the door that led from the hallway to the second-floor piazza.

The pudgy Mr. Chase was foremost. "Hell has bust!" he croaked.

"You and the rest of these hombres keep back," barked Smoky, "or it's liable to bust you." He leaped down the stairs, three at a time. Bolan was running along the alley toward the empty lot behind the hotel.

Once more star and six-gun were riding the law trail. Smoky Smith, desert manhunter, was closing in on the phantom outlaws of Poverty Bend. He called sharply:

"Game's up, outlaw! Stand and surrender!"

"Go to hell, you——"

The bandit's gun blasted fire. Once! Twice! The crashing detonations of a big gun. Smoky's .45 answered. Livid lances slit the gloom of the alley. Bolan swayed. His knees folded, and he was spilled to the ground.

Once more old Judge Colt, sitting on the bench of Frontier Law, had pronounced sentence.

Chapter VII

"Hello, central!"

THE telephone in the office of the Central House shrilled long and insistently. Again and again it poured forth demands for attention, but the clerk had joined the rush for the stairs.

The operator said at last, "They do not answer."

Mr. Furlong boiled over. "Who in heck ever heard of a hotel not answering?" he cried. "Somebody's there, sister! They got to be. You ring 'em again. What's the matter with your cock-eyed telephone line?" The deputy was talking from a booth in the railroad station at Amargosa.

"You don't need a telephone," a tart voice assured the irascible Flash. "Just go outside and yell—they'll hear you."

"But, confound it, this is important. Ple-ease, *lady*—this is the law."

"Stop bellowing! They do NOT answer."

"Great Judas, what a dump!"

Flash slammed out of the booth and headed for the telegraph office in determined strides.

"I want to get a message to the sheriff in San Angelo," he blurted at the man at the key. "Can you get the blasted place?"

The operator pushed up his green shade and cocked an eye at the deputy sheriff; then jerked his head toward a madly chattering sounder.

"Mister," he said, "I've got San Angelo right now. And that man's town is blowed up higher than Gilroy's kite." He fingered some yellow train order tissues. "Four sections of Eight; two sections of Nine; Five running late; the fruit rush is on, and now *this* blasted thing."

"What blasted thing? What's the matter at San Angelo?"

The operator wiped his fingers across his forehead and snapped off imaginary sweat beads, and rambled on in wordy condemnation of fickle gods.

"Last night—outlaws at Poverty Bend, and one man dead. Tonight San Angelo lays another guy on a slab. And the graveyard trick coming up." He glared at Mr. Furlong. "And you want the sheriff—like a policeman hollerin', 'Cop!'"

"You mean to tell me there was a fight in Angelo?" demanded Flash.

"Well, if it wa'n't a fight, feller, it will do until they have a better one. This guy"—nodding at the sounder—"says there were guns poppin' up by the Central House plenty."

"Every time .45's smoke," lamented Flash, "I'm some place else."

"You're alive, ain'tcha?" crabbedly. "You must hanker for a worm's eye-view of grass roots?"

"Tell that brass-pounder at Angelo to forget the railroad business for a couple of minutes," Flash snapped. "I want him to start somebody on the trail of Smoky Smith. Tell him to have the sheriff call me."

The sounder cracked the Amargosa call. The operator answered, and the wire flashed: "31, copy 5."

The man at the key swore. "The despatcher with train orders." He pulled carboned yellow blanks toward him. "Try the telephone again——"

"To hell with the 'phone." Furlong clicked his star with a thumb nail. "The law is talking to you, juice slinger. Put that message through, *muy pronto!*"

Grumblingly the operator obeyed. The despatcher broke, to demand an explanation. Tersely the key clicked a curt exposition, and followed it with a message for Smoky Smith at San Angelo. It read:

HERD STAMPEDED BY IRON HORSE. TRAIL CUTTERS AT WORK. I AM STILL IN FAVOR OF BLONDES.

(*Signed*) FURLONG.

"Good cripe!" complained the operator. "You would break in on a rush with a lot of tripe."

"You just don't speak our language, kid," said Flash, swinging out of the door.

BILL McCUEN and Renslaw entered the telegraph office at San Angelo. They found the operator on duty copying a message. When he had finished, he showed it to his relief, who was to take over the transfer at eleven o'clock.

"Of all the nutty guys I ever saw, that Furlong is the craziest. "Look at the message. The desert is full of train bandits, and he hangs around Amargosa composing stuff like this."

The man who was to take the graveyard trick had hurried to work from the scene of the fight. "Say, feller, I just saw a gun battle, no foolin'. The sheriff and some big guy. The big lad is done for I guess."

"Let's see that wire," Renslaw said curtly.

He glanced through the message, and handed it to McCuen. "Another one from Furlong. Make anything out of it?"

The division superintendent shook his head, his eyes squinted perplexedly. "We'd better try and get hold of the sheriff as quick as we can. If it means as much

as the last one he sent, it's darned important that Smith knows about it."

San Angelo was fast becoming an armed camp. Smoky Smith, aided by the town marshal and two railroad special agents, was organizing for a search. There was no doubt but that the same brains that had directed the train robber gang had arranged a second hide-out, one that could be reached quickly from room 32 and those outside stairs at the Central House. There were many places in the abandoned, false-

front buildings of Railroad Street where men might conceal themselves for a considerable period.

Dracutt and his companion would, however be on the alert to slip away at the first opportunity. There were two lanes open to them—the highway and the railroad—and two only. Smoky set men to guard both. All cars leaving town were to be searched. Men were detailed to watch the yards and outgoing trains.

Mandin, the coroner, had remained in town. He viewed the body of the outlaw in the alley, and ordered that it be removed to the undertaking establishment. Sam Chase performed his duties in this connection with considerable satisfaction.

"Well, my boy," he told the bit of clay that had been Vic Manners, "cut a notch for the law. There's one less to hang."

SMOKY returned at last to the Central House. He wanted to make an examination of Dracutt's room. There was the possibility that he might find something that would give him added clues. He found Renslaw, scowling and impatient, in the lobby. The general manager handed the telegram to the sheriff. Smoky read it with a deepening frown.

"What is it?" asked Renslaw. "Bad news."

"I don't know," Smoky replied. His lids narrowed to a speculative squint. "But there's something funny here."

The general manager reached for the telegram and reread it. "Yes, there is," he said with a grimace.

Smoky smiled. "Can't you make it out?"

"No more than the other one. What's the idea of these clandestine messages. Why the secrecy?"

"This wire from Furlong," Smoky pointed out, "informs me that three men who were under surveillance in Amargosa boarded a train. Flash had arranged to check on their movements. He is asking me to call him at the telephone office, where a blonde young woman has shown readiness to coöperate."

"Blondes are flighty," growled Renslaw. "I have no confidence in them. I hope this man, Furlong, hasn't fallen for the silly smile of some telephone operator, now of all times. He might inadvertently let something out."

Smoky shook his head. "Furlong was hand-picked. I trust him."

"I hope he's all right. Struck me as being headstrong and irresponsible."

Smoky went on. "You notice Furlong says the herd stampeded. When cattle stampede, they leave in a hurry and without stoppin' to make any examination of facts or fancies. An unusual noise, a strange smell, a sudden movement—and they've gone yonder, hell for leather. Panic grips them. These men in Amargosa were evidently startled by something, and they high-tailed."

Renslaw shook his head. "I don't get the connection."

"Dracutt knew we had sure picked up a hot trail in the telegraph office at Poverty Bend," Smoky elaborated. "He was mighty careful not to make any quick moves, but he was frightened and prepar-

ing to get away. He chanced a secret interview with the pair that came over in the Buick, probably hoping to mend his fences and lay out emergency plans.

"The thing did not exactly turn out like he figured it was goin' to." There was a tightening of the muscles of the sheriff's jaw. "But, bein' a bright gent, he still had two hole cards. One was another hide-out close. The second was an open line of communication to those hombres waiting in that hotel in Amargosa. They evidently got a tip to pull their freight right after that fight broke up in thirty-two here."

"But how could they?" demanded Renslaw. "Nobody knew what was happening for some little time."

"You can't shoot at one crow," said Smoky dryly, "without all the crows in the next county knowin' about it. We're trailin' crows—with fangs. Those fellers in Amargosa knew what was happenin', and they knew what to do about it."

SMOKY walked toward the telephone booth near the desk. McCuen, the superintendent, entered the lobby.

"Either Smith is a fool," Renslaw told the latter, "or a lot smarter than I gave him credit for being. Desert riders held up those trains. There is a posse hunting them out north of Poverty Bend. Yet it appears that the leaders of the band are remaining close to the railroad. I tell you, McCuen, it's scary. No telling what will happen. They might even attempt to avenge themselves for the killing of one of their number."

"Looks as though Dracutt was the brains of the outfit," said McCuen. "I wonder if we have any more traitors working for us."

"Smith hinted that there was a leak here somewhere."

"I guess we are reasonably safe from further attempts to loot the trains."

Renslaw pursed his lips and frowned thoughtfully. "No doubt but that they will be pretty well shaken after the exposure of Dracutt and the shooting of the other outlaw. I imagine most of their energies will be directed to getting safely out of the country. But that gang is still dangerous, and the sheriff and our special agents will have to make a thorough cleanup."

Smoky, having established a connection with the telephone office in Amargosa, asked for Furlong.

"Mr. Furlong is not here," the operator informed him.

"Well, is there a lady named Doris there?" asked Smoky, impatient because the deputy had not waited.

A pause; then a pleasant voice said, "This is Miss Haveland."

"Doris?"

"Yes."

"This is the sheriff. Have you any idea where I can reach Furlong? He wanted me to call him. I understood that it was very important."

"That's right, Mr. Smith."

"What did the idiot go bu'stin' off for then? You see, marm, this fellow, Furlong, has spells of bein' right salty, and I have to keep a tight rein on him sometimes."

"Oh, but, Sheriff, I am sure you are misjudging him. I think he is very smart and capable. A fine officer."

"I reckon you're prejudiced, miss. Come to think of it, he did mention a—er——"

"Was it a blonde?"

"Yes'm. An' I'm pleased to meet you. And now if you can tell me where that ranny went, I'd appreciate it."

"I don't know anything about a ranny, Mr. Smith, but Mr. Furlong swung onto the caboose of a westbound freight not five minutes ago. I could see him right from the window here. He just made it. No. 217, I believe, the manifest. You should be proud to have a clever assistant like that. Aren't you ashamed to be calling him names?"

Smoky muttered something in an undertone.

"What did you say?" sweetly.

"I said I wondered what the big idea was?"

"Briefly this, Mr. Sheriff. Five men registered in town here early this morning—two at the Desert Inn and three at the Lawson Hotel. Mr. Furlong got the numbers of the rooms assigned to them and their names from the clerks. He then asked us to check on any calls they might put through. Also, he asked that we trace back either local or long distance calls for them. We did this, with the coöperation of the girls at the hotel switchboards."

"You done fine, Miss Haviland. I sure appreciate it. If there's any openin's for a lady sheriff any place, I'll let you know."

"You're so kind. Flash said something of the sort. I mean, Mr. Furlong. He even hinted that it might be arranged for me to keep house for a bright young law rider, but I hate washing dishes, don't you? And now about that call from San Angelo. It came through at ten fifty-one. It was for a John Brown. A man's voice said the message was urgent, and asked that we make the connections quickly.

"John Brown answered from a room of the Lawson Hotel. The person in San Angelo said: 'This is Mike. The sheriff is up in thirty-two. They're shooting. Beat it. Contact us from the ranch. After the big job, we'll go south.'"

"That's what I call service," said Smoky. And added, "This John Brown was one of the three being watched?"

"Yes. They left by a side entrance and walked across the tracks to the station. They were all carrying large suitcases. Pioneer Five was due, and they boarded the train without buying tickets. Mr. Furlong did not know about the phone call from San Angelo, or he probably would have arrested them."

"It is much better as it is," said Smoky; "I want to know where that ranch is."

"Mr. Furlong tried to call you from the depot, but the Central House did not answer and he was in quite a lather. When I finally could get him to listen to me, I told him about the conversation, and he scolded me for not shouting it from the house tops, but a girl in a telephone office gets used to woolly sheep."

"I told you he was a salty jasper, Miss Haveland."

"Yes, I know. But Mr. Furlong and I have been friends quite some time. I call him things that I wouldn't allow others to. He asked the conductor of Pioneer Five to notify him as quickly as he learned the destination of the three men. A wire came through about five minutes before you called, and your smart young deputy caught the manifest, as I have said. He wished me to say that he will telegraph you from his present destination."

"You are a very smart young woman," declared Smoky. "I can see that my opinions concerning blondes was entirely wrong. And now, one thing more."

"Yes, Mr. Smith; we traced that call from San Angelo. We can give you the location of the telephone from which it was made, or I should say the name which it is listed under. Joe Roques. I suspect that there is an extension. And might I suggest that you be very careful when you investigate it. Good sheriffs are hard to find—almost as rare as smart deputies."

"Joe Roques," said Smoky a bit grimly. "That pool room and gambling dump of his is a clearing house for several varieties of hell. I've been trying to get something on that hombre for some time. I will check that telephone. Thank you, Miss Haveland. I hope to dance at your wed-din'."

"Adiós, my brave *jerife.* Good luck.

"Hasta luego, señorita."

Chapter VIII

'phone disconnected

"WELL," said Renslaw, as Smoky came from the telephone booth, "what has Furlong got to say for himself?"

"I did not talk with him," the sheriff explained. "He went west on No. 217, but

he left a message with a young woman at central. Three men that put up at the Lawson Hotel early this mornin' left Amargosa on Pioneer Five." He glanced at Renslaw.

"You were right then in your interpretation of Furlong's wire," admitted the other. "They were on their way almost before the smell of gun-smoke was out of the alley."

"They are headed for some ranch to the west," Smoky went on.

"Now we're getting somewhere." The general manager rubbed his palms nervously.

"West," mused McCuen. "McCarty's and Skull Valley maybe. Some ranches tucked back in those forsaken canyons that would make ideal outlaw retreats."

Smoky shook his head. "Too far from Poverty Bend, Aguajito, Dos Palmas—all of 'em. Might be where they figured to lay low between stickups though."

"Had you thought that they might have used a truck to transport their horses the greater part of the distance?" Renslaw said.

"Why not?" McCuen demanded. "You always haul your horses to the point of taking the trail, Smith."

"Yes, I know. But we haven't found anybody yet who saw horses," Smoky reminded the railroad men. "No horse tracks and no tire marks in the vicinity of the holdups—just footprints."

"You have any idea where the telephone call originated—have it traced or anything?" Renslaw put in.

"Reckon I have," said Smoky.

"You know?" incredulously.

"I'm goin' to check on it now."

AT THAT moment the third trick operator pushed open the outer door and hurried forward. He was breathless, wide-eyed. In his hand he carried a yellow message form.

"Hey, look at this!" he cried excitedly.

Renslaw took the telegram. His eyes swept the terse wording. A frown was displaced by a look of alarm. He glanced from Smith to McCuen, and thrust out the bit of paper.

"Great Scott, they're threatening us! I was afraid of something like this."

The operator fidgeted. "I got to get back," he stammered. "There ain't nobody in the office. The despatcher told me to see that it was put in your hands, Mr. Renslaw." He started for the door.

"Wait!" snapped Renslaw. "Where did that come from?"

"I dunno. There was a break in the train wire circuit. It opened an' closed a few times; then some guy begun sendin' SA, our call. I answered, an' he says take a message for J. J. Renslaw."

"Did you recognize the sending?" demanded McCuen sharply.

"Y-yes, sir. I—I think I did."

"Who was it?"

"It—I'm sure it was that guy who's been holdin' down the third at Poverty Bend."

"Dracutt?"

The operator glanced around nervously, half as though he expected to see a menacing form lurking near. "Yes, sir. I couldn't be mistaken in his touch."

Smoky was reading the message through a second time. His lids narrowed to slits. Dracutt was a devil. He had planned well his schemes of outlawry. His fingers had been on the very pulse of P. C. & T. since the looting of the trains had begun. He had built blind trails, tapped wires, planned lanes of retreat, escape, established hideouts and committed murder; in fact, gone the whole distance in spinning an insidious and bloody web. And now a menacing threat, which read:

(To) J. J. RENSLAW,
SAN ANGELO.

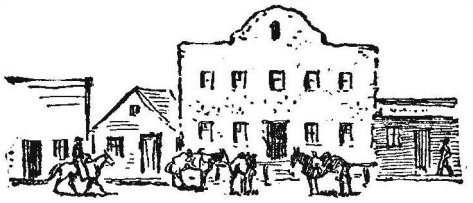
CALL OFF CINDER DICKS AND SAGEBRUSH COPS FOR 24 HOURS OR WILL DYNAMITE CRACK TRAIN. WE MEAN BUSINESS. ANS THIS MSG ON TRAIN WIRE.

(*Signed*) PHANTOM RIDERS.

"Great Scott!" cried Renslaw. "We're

getting in deeper all of the time. What will we do? We can't risk their blowing up one of our passenger trains."

"Twenty-four hours for a clean getaway," growled McCuen. "That's what they're after. And they're in a position to bargain." The veteran superintendent



was almost beside himself. The three men were standing near the desk. Voices in the room were hushed, while those in the hotel lobby watched, listened tensely.

"Too bad you let Dracutt get away from you." Renslaw spoke in a shrill, petulant tone. "He's the man to be afraid of."

SMOKY lighted a cigarette, puffed at it deliberately; then ran his fingers along his ribs, smarting under the hastily taped dressing of the bullet crease. "Too bad," he supplemented grimly, "that those hombres let *me* get away, because we're sure goin' to run the law brand on 'em."

"Big talk," sneered Renslaw.

Smoky's leathery face crinkled in a grin in which white teeth gleamed for an instant. McCuen glared. The sheriff seemed almost boyish when he smiled. It irritated the big super to see the desert officer so cool and unruffled by the swift chain of ruthless banditry that had been cast about the Pacific Coast and Transcontinental's Canyon Division, that still held a mighty railroad system in its carefully forged links. Even in those stark, unreal moments when a dead man was sprawled in the alley and the air held a faint scent of powder smoke, Smith was calm, unshaken.

"Well, what are we going to do about it?" McCuen's voice fairly cracked. He was showing strain. "What are *you* going to do about it?" He didn't care who heard him.

"Ever hear of the hombre who dug a pit for another feller, an' then fell in it himself?" Smoky's voice was low, steady. He went on. "This gang is organized for big game. Robbin' train passengers is small-time stuff. I reckon they wa'n't doin' much more than rehearsin', while they lined the iron for big loot—registered mail, money shipments."

His voice dropped. McCuen and Renslaw leaned closer. The superintendent didn't quite get it.

"What? Let me have that again."

Smoky repeated.

The three moved toward the door, wondering eyes followed them. Low voices punctuated the quick, firm steps of the trio. An audience here, on the piazza, on the sidewalk. Necks craning hushed speculation. The stage was set; San Angelo was playing to a rigidly attentive gallery. Not since the old days, when a man for breakfast had been the order rather than the exception, had the town known the suspense it now enjoyed.

Man hunters and their quarry, alert, wary, watching for the other to lead. Desperate men in concealment. Smoky and a .45 gun covering every last avenue of escape, gradually closing in. Sam Chase, moving here and there—wheezily jovial, and content that matters run their course—able citizen and undertaker.

JOE ROQUES, a swarthy, soiled-looking man, stood in the door of the pool room, a much-chewed cigar clamped in the corner of his mouth. A roll of fat lay across his sagging belt. A none too clean shirt gaped at the throat. With snake-eyed stolidness, he surveyed passers-by, the lingering sidewalk groups of the street, the curious watchers on the piazza of the Central House next door.

Billiard balls clicked behind him. Figures moved lazily about the tables in the blue haze of tobacco smoke. Loungers, hunched on chairs along the dingy, fly-specked walls, smoked and conversed. Heads nodded knowingly. There was but

one topic. The train robbery, the murder at Poverty Bend, the fight in the Central House and the dead man in the alley—all one theme for tongues of rumor, speculation.

McCuen and Renslaw hurried past. The eyes of the man in the door followed them. Brass hats, their faces reflecting the grave responsibility that rested on their shoulders, bearing the stamp of high authority. Joe Roques removed his frayed cigar, rolled a heavy under lower lip outward and spat after them in wordless taunt. They were the servants of the rich, the powerful.

A footstep; a shadow. Joe Roques turned. Smoky stood watching him.

" 'Lo, Sher'f," after a moment of surprised silence.

"Howdy."

"Quite a fight ye had."

"You got a telephone, Roques?"

A peculiar something flickered for an instant in those cold snake-eyes. Roques hated Smoky, and for the reason that the sheriff had always stood as a menace to his petty, illicit schemes. Moonshine, crooked card games, and now—bigger stakes.

His head jerked, and there was a throaty, "Yah. I gotta phone."

Smoky sucked at his abbreviated cigarette, while he flicked the soiled man before him with an estimating eye, an eye that might have speculated on the deviltry lurking under the hide of a suspected bucker he was to ride. Then, suddenly, "Mike been in tonight?" A soft-flying shaft.

Joe Roques stiffened, bristled. Eyes hot; hardness under that flabby flesh.

"Who you mean—Mike?" His voice was surly, defiant.

Smoky's glance went on past Roques to the figures of the smoke-laden room beyond.

"I don't know any Mike," sullenly.

"Mind if I use your phone?" There was an almost purring softness to the interrogation.

Roques considered the slim desert officer with a deepening scowl. Sudden alarm beat within. He said at last, "It's back there." A pudgy thumb jerked over his shoulder.

Smoky brushed past, and walked on by the pool tables. Several there spoke or nodded. Beyond was a low, sheathed partition and a room containing card tables. There were no games in progress. Several men lounged about. Play, disrupted by the gun fight, had not been resumed.

EYES were raised as the sheriff entered; then covert glances were directed at one another. A slumped figure began to shuffle a deck of cards aimlessly. A thickset man in a corner fumbled for cigarette tobacco and started to roll a smoke. A thin-faced, hard-bitten cowboy shifted position and fixed the sheriff with a fish-eyed stare.

Smoky photographed the room and occupants in one quick glance, and moved on to the dingy, cell-like room beyond that Joe Roques was pleased to call office. It contained a grimed and battered roll-top desk of ancient vintage, two chairs and a box filled with sawdust. On the rear wall was a telephone.

There were no windows here and the place was heavy with stale, musty odors, including those of tobacco and liquor. In the wall beside the telephone was a door battened by two boards.

Smoky wondered what was behind that door. The answer to many things, perhaps. Dracutt's second hide-out? The mysterious Mike, who had warned the men in Armagosa of the fight in the Central House? Tapped wires? Train robbers denned up?

The sheriff traced with his eye the braided wire that led from the outside wall to the telephone. He looked for a second wire but saw none. He moved toward the instrument and lifted the receiver. As he did so, he glanced over his shoulder. The bulky form of Joe Roques obstructed the door, a scowling beast,

hands knotted menacingly. Behind him stood the thin-faced cowboy.

A voice said, "Number, please."

Smoky's eye went down to the baseboard. Plaster, powder-fine, lay along the top edge directly beneath the telephone, as though some one had reamed a hole above. And yet there was no scar in evidence.

Again: "Number. Number, please."

"Report the telephone of Joe Roques, San Angelo," Smoky snapped into the mouthpiece, *"disconnected!"*

Chapter IX

"and you, *Amigo!*"

SMOKY SMITH seized the instrument before him in a grip of steel and wrenched it from the wall. Two broken wires dangled from a hidden hole, revealing a secret connection to another telephone—somewhere beyond.

Smoky's move was unexpected. Joe Roques stiffened, eyes wide. Then he launched his bulky form at the sheriff. It was like the charge of a maddened bull. An oath roared from his bulbous lips, and he swung a barnstorming right at the head of the officer.

Smoky weaved with it, catching the blow on his shoulder. He countered with a whipping right that caused Mr. Roques to tingle to his heels.

One flash the sheriff had of milling figures beyond. It was a long way to the front door, and in between were racks of billiard cues and men to swing them. Joe Roques was king in his dubious domain, and those who frequented the premises were largely his to command. A little ruler, Joe, who one day hoped to help depose an honest sheriff, and elevate in his place a man who could be moulded by moonshiners, rustlers and other of Yermo County's renegades.

The thin-faced cowboy had an iron or so of his own in the fire. Usually it was a running iron and a long rope; just now it had to do with blotching that hole in the plaster and those tell-tale wire ends. He followed up the grunting Roques, his angular arms working like piston strokes.

The dimensions of the squalid office of Joe Roques was scarcely six feet each way. And then there was the desk and chairs and a door that swung inward. And a telephone underfoot, and a box of sawdust.

Hardly room for four men to do justice in a fight. Four now, for the chunky man had abandoned his cigarette, as he leaped to join with Mr. Roques and the thin-faced puncher. Men with cues crowded in among the tables of the outer room; others ran shouting to the sidewalk. The hubbub attracted the attention of old Telluride Thompson, marshal. The grizzled veteran hastened to the scene.

Smoky backed against the wall in the cramped little room, and drove a foot deep into the paunchy middle of the swarthy Roques. He shoved with all of his might, driving the other violently into the arms of the chunky man. The thin-faced cowboy possessed something of a reputation as a fighter. He jabbed with his left and crossed his right.

Smoky took the left on the side of th head, caught the right on his elbow and drove home a twelve-inch punch that sounded like the crack of a ball bat. The legs of the thin-faced cowboy sagged, but before he could go down, the sheriff caught him by vest and shirt and slammed him into the heaving bosom of the bellowing Roques.

As the pool room proprietor wallowed on hands and knees, a knife flashed. He turned the point from him, knotted his fingers about the stag handle and lurched upward in a mad attempt to bayonet the sheriff in the stomach. Blinding rage and fear of exposure prompted the act.

Lightning quick, Smoky swept his Peacemaker Colt from the holster under his left arm and brought the barrel down in a swift parry of the glinting blade. Something snapped in the swarthy man's wrist, and the knife fell to the floor.

The next instant Smoky's left hand was

twisted in the collar of the other's shirt; his gun-hand was raised.

"One more move out of you, Roques," he cried, "and I'll beat your ears down. I lost the mate to this six-shooter last night and I don't want to bust this one, but I'll bend it over your greasy skull if you don't behave yourself!"

Joe Roques, his bloodshot eyes flaming with hate, jerked his head in a signal of surrender. He clawed at his throat. Smoky's knuckles were pressed against his thick neck. "Yo' choke! Yo' choke!" he gasped.

"I'll do more than choke, hombre!" declared Smoky. "I always figured you for several varieties of horse-thief and crook. This proves it." He canted his head toward the wires that hung from the hole in the plaster. "You go to the jug." He pushed the other against the wall, released his grip and handcuffs flashed from his pocket. A circle of steel bit into the prisoner's wrist.

THE thin-faced cowboy stood undecided for a moment; then he snarled, "Hey, are we goin' to let 'im take Joe?" He looked over his shoulder for encouragement. There was an angry murmur from those who crowded behind.

"And you, *amigo!*" Smoky swung forward. His eyes were like frosted steel; his tongue had the bite of a crackling lash. "I'd admire to pistol-whip you. Stick out your hand before I put a nick in your dumb head. Reckon you forget that the law's in the saddle yet in this man's country. And if you don't believe it, shake out your rope an' let's go."

As steel joined Joe Roques with the thin-faced puncher, the latter, thoroughly cowed, tried to beg off. "Aw, hell, Sher'f, yuh ain't goin' t' arrest me? I jumped in to help Joe 'fore I thought. I'm shore sorry."

Smoky ignored the protest. The marshal forced his way through the crowd.

"All right, Telluride, lock these hombres up," the sheriff directed. "I'll clear the place out. It's closed until further notice."

"Ye done a right smart job, Smoky." Old Telluride's eyes snapped. "It's allus been a damn hell-hole."

When the last of the men in the pool hall had been herded to the street, the sheriff locked the door. He wanted to make an examination of that battened door in the little room at the rear. Without doubt, Dracutt's secret hide-out was behind it. A devilish nest of vipers. For reasons not hard to understand, Dracutt had made the room in the Central House the common rendezvous.

There was always the chance that law officers might pick up the trail of strangers arriving at San Angelo and follow them to the meeting place. A second refuge made for greater security. Too, it must house telephone and telegraph instruments for keeping in close touch with other members of the gang and provide means of listening in on railroad business; garnering information and keeping posted on the activities of the sheriff's office and railroad detectives.

It had stood Dracutt and his companion in good stead in a desperate situation. Smoky walked back to the little office. He lighted a cigarette and stood looking at the closed door. At last he put his ear to the panels and listened. He thought he heard a board creak beyond, but he could not be sure.

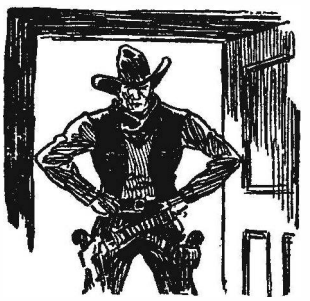
MENTALLY he sketched the details of the building he was in and those that adjoined it. There had been a time when Railroad Street had been San Angelo's one main thoroughfare. And then, as motor travel increased on the highway, the town turned its back on the railroad and that portion of San Angelo that had once been its pride and set its face to greet hurrying strangers who rode in automobiles.

The once-dusty street that had been known as Toughnut Street renounced its wickedness and stood forth with the retiring modesty of a converted sinner. It was now Depot Street. The gamblers and

painted ladies took departure. The old Central House lifted its head to see a gas station and garage where a honky tonk had stood.

Store and saloon keepers had moved with the advancing tide, some to Depot Street; others to more advantageous locations on a new Main Street. Dan Dolan's saloon stood empty, its windows, like others along that silent walk, boarded up.

Smoky had heard the story from the lips of such old timers as Telluride Thompson and Sam Chase. Sentiment and convenience entered into the selection of Dan's new quarters. He had chosen a building on Depot Street, the rear of which met the



rear of the saloon he had vacated. It was the present pool room of Joe Roques.

Old Dan had cut through the wall and put in a door—the door now battened. It had given access to the empty saloon and permitted use of his old cellar. Dan, Smoky remembered, had removed neither the bar nor the mirror. Folks said it was about that time he had begun acting queer. Late at night he would slip through the door to sell drinks to the ghosts of yesterday lined at the ancient bar.

One night he had dressed himself carefully, put on a fresh, clean apron and gone to the old saloon to greet bygone friends. The next morning they had found him there. He had shot himself.

That day the door had been nailed shut.

Those wire-ends, Smoky knew, led from somewhere in Dan Dolan's Railroad Street saloon and a full block of empty buildings. A place of refuge for ghosts and outlaws alike. A grim smile flickered across the sheriff's face. Maybe old Dan was in there now setting up drinks on the house.

"I knew their hide-out had to be here somewhere," Smoky muttered. "And now they got us hog-tied with that dynamite threat."

SOME one pounding on the outer door brought the sheriff to the front. Renslaw and McCuen were there. With them was Brady, a railroad special agent.

Renslaw's face was white. "My God, Smith, what's this?" He waved his hand at the milling crowd. "What are you doing here?"

"Roques and a couple jaspers got a mite hostile. I sort of had to remonstrate with 'em."

"Roques?" demanded McCuen. "Roques? Who the devil is that?"

"Mr. Roques was the proprietor of this spread."

"They said there was a fight here," cried Renslaw, jerking his head toward the faces pressed against the glass of window and door, "and that somebody was arrested. Where is this Roques, and the rest? The place was doing business full blast when we went by a few minutes ago."

"Yeah, I know. But Mr. Roques had his telephone taken out since then. The gent is stoppin' at the calaboose."

"You mean to say this is where that 'phone call originated?" cried McCuen.

"More or less," Smoky said. "Come and take a look."

In the little office beyond he pointed at the dangling wires. "A little extension some of our train robbin' friends fixed up. Mr. Furlong's blonde tipped me off."

"Hell's bells!" gasped the burly division superintendent. "The whole damn place is wired."

Brady, the special agent, looked about him curiously, and shook his head. "They prepared for every contingency," he said, lowering his voice. "I did a little trouble shooting at the station. Found where they tapped the local set in the basement. No

matter what wire is being used, they're in the circuit."

"I'm more convinced than ever," Renslaw declared, "that the outlaws are not bluffing when they threaten to dynamite a train. It makes me shudder, the very thought of it—explosives under the tracks, wires, a battery and switch." He turned furiously to the sheriff. "Good God, man, don't go any further!"

Brady shook his head. "It's a shame, but it looks as though they had us. I have already lifted the dragnet around the depot and yards."

"You sent a message promising 'em that we'd lay off until this time tomorrow night?" asked Smoky.

"I did," said Renslaw. "It was the only safe thing to do."

"Oh!" grunted McCuen suddenly. "I forgot." He pulled a crumpled bit of yellow paper from his pocket. "Another one of those silly telegrams from your man, Furlong. Seems he is still messing around in Amargosa. If he worked on the railroad, I'd fire the damn fool!"

CHAPTER X

OUTLAWS RIDE

"WELL," said Smoky, with a shrug, "there's nothing more we can do." He shot one last glance at the closed door; then turned and walked from the box-like little room. "Might's well go back to the hotel."

He met the marshal on the sidewalk. "Put out the lights and lock the place up," he directed.

The four men elbowed through the crowd and entered the Central House lobby.

"Back where we started from," Renslaw proclaimed wearily. He was no longer the sleek, carefully-groomed general manager. He was white, worn, disheveled. Discouragement was written in every line of his face, in every movement. His shoulders sagged. Train robbers had the P. C. & T. by the throat. The press of the nation would herald the helplessness of a great transcontinental railroad. Outlaws of the wasteland defied capture. The old west lived again. He could see the screaming headlines.

Following that second holdup at Dos Palmas, he had hurried to Amargosa from Los Angeles to personally direct the safeguarding of those trains made famous by extensive advertising campaigns. Speed—the fastest by two hours to Chicago—safety, comfort. The vivid west unfolding its panorama for the traveller. It was a ghastly travesty—this strange reign of outlawry.

Smoky was reading the latest bulletin from Flash. Like the others, it was dated at Amargosa.

Sheriff Smith, San Angelo.

Blondy, thar's gold in them thar hills. Eagles nest high.

(Signed) Furlong.

McCuen turned to Renslaw, and said, "Read that damned thing."

The other glanced at the message. "It's silly," he complained listlessly. "What's it all getting us?"

Smoky turned to enter the telephone booth. He paused to offer a word of explanation. He spoke in an undertone. "Furlong has found somethin', I reckon. It's in the vicinity of Mad Mountain. He 'phoned Miss Haveland. You notice the body of the message is addressed to her. She filed this wire herself, or had somebody do it for her."

"What do you mean, Mad Mountain?" demanded McCuen skeptically. "Where do you get that stuff?"

"Gold in them thar hills," quoted Smoky. "There was a gold strike in the old Tombstone Canyon district a couple months ago. Mad Mountain is full of prospectors. Even has been some big bugs from the east lookin' it over."

"It's a wonder he wouldn't try and contact you direct," grumbled Renslaw, "if it's so damned important."

Smoky shook his head. "With Dracutt listenin' in on the telegraph, I reckon it's plumb sensible to keep him thinkin' that Furlong, our bright young tracker, is still lopin' in circles at Amargosa."

McCuen and Renslaw exchanged glances. Smoky swung the door of the booth behind him, and called Amargosa. The pert voice of Miss Haveland answered.

"Don't you ever sleep?" asked Smoky.

"Not when there's excitement in the air. You know a telephone girl always sticks to her post."

"I sure had blondes figured wrong," Smoky said in a humble tone.

"You certainly raise heck with subscribers' 'phones. I was on the wire when Mr. Roques' building fell down. Did you discover an extension?"

"Yes, marm, but the outlaws have got us over a barrel. They're demanding a twenty-four hour truce or they will blow up the railroad."

"Isn't that lovely. Did you get the wire from Flash?"

"Yes, thank you."

"He's the sweetest thing."

"Yeah, but he's hard to curry below the knees."

"Did you ever hear of the Andiron, Sheriff?"

"Yup. Used to be Old Man Murray's spread. He sold out a couple-three years ago to a dude wranglin' outfit. Ranch is up Mornin' Canyon of Beggar's Head. Mad Mountain station on the railroad."

"Remarkable. Go to the head of the class. There's a very lovely trail leading to the Andiron from the Lawson Hotel. Mr. Furlong thought you might like to know. He called me from the store at Mad Mountain. He says the damn mountain has nothing on him; he's mad too. He spoke of looking forward to sitting around on something or other for a long time, waiting for a long-eared sheriff—I'm sure that is what he said—to make up his mind. Don't you love that?"

"It's a right smart bit from Poverty Bend to the Andiron," Smoky said, "but there's plenty of sign now. Thank yuh, Miss Haveland. May *Dios* reward you."

"Oh, you're too kind, Sheriff."

"Buenas noches!"

"Hasta Mañana, cowboy. Keep your powder dry."

RENSLAW returned to the telegraph office at the station, which handled Western Union messages as well as railroad business. He would wait there, he said, for a reply to the wire he had sent to Los Angeles a short time before.

Smoky, McCuen and Brady, the special agent, went up to make an examination of Dracutt's room. It was a place of wreckage and disorder. There was nothing to be gleaned amid the chaos, no clues to give hint of methods employed by the train robber band.

"As barren as a last year's bird's nest," grumbled the railroad detective. "Nothing here that will do us any good."

"He picked a smart location for his base of operations," declared McCuen, as they moved on out to the second-floor piazza.

"Look at the lay-out," said Smoky with a wave of his hand that included the gloom-shrouded scene before them. "Mighty simple for Dracutt to ease out of his room, slip down these back stairs an' go through the fence where boards are off. He built a nice refuge in those abandoned buildings and scouted a means of getting through to the railroad tracks."

Brady shook his head. "I can't see why he killed that kid operator. What did Dracutt go to Poverty Bend for? He was the brains of the thing. Why was it necessary for him to get into the picture at all last night? Couldn't those riders have handled young Manners?"

"Not very well. Dracutt had built up an illusion. He was on the scene at the first two hold-ups; he was afraid to chance it again."

"Three times and out, eh?" said Brady.

"All we had been gettin'," Smoky went

on, "was images on a screen—images on horseback, ridin' up out of the desert an' throwin' down on a frightened operator."

"Who saw these images?" demanded the special agent.

"Dracutt," said Smoky. "He saw 'em at Aguajito an' at Dos Palmas. That hombre put the power of suggestion to work, an' he had some of the best trackers in Arizona huntin' for hoofprints. Posses lookin' for trails of phantom riders. They just wa'n't there, neighbor."

"The hell you say!" Brady was deeply puzzled. His training on the railroad police had not included dealing with phantoms. He stared at the sheriff. "One of us is only about half bright," he declared.

"Dracutt was gettin' pretty cocky," said Smoky. "He was too sure of himself, an' he overplayed his hand. He killed a man with a little gun.

"He sent Manners to Poverty Bend to sit in for him last night. The kid wa'n't bothered none about illusions an' phantoms. It would have to be somethin' mighty real to make him hold a red order board against No. 11.

"*Señor* Dracutt told the clerk downstairs that he had a cold an' was goin' to bed. He came up to his room; then slipped down the back way here an' went through the empty buildin's an' that storehouse beside the tracks. He swung onto a freight goin' west. Pretty near everythin' is usin' the passin' track there durin' the rush.

"He got off, waited until everythin' had gone; then walked in on Manners. The doors an' windows was closed—and the little gun didn't make much noise. Even the dogs belongin' to the Mex section hands slept through it.

"No. 11 would be wheelin' west directly. Dracutt propped the kid in his chair, wedged him against the telegraph table, an' went across the tracks an' hid out on the flats."

"You must have been there," said Brady with a short laugh. "You've got it all down."

SMOKY took off his hat and felt his head. "I was."

"And was it a phantom train robber that cracked you?"

Smoky ignored the jibe, and continued "Mike McCurdy, the section boss, and I rode circle out there with a lantern while we was waitin' for the relief operator an' the rest of 'em. We found man tracks, heel-marks—the same kind that was in the telegraph office. We found where a hombre had laid beside a clump of greasewood, smokin' cigarettes, an' waitin'.

"Things was jammed up for a spell, but the freights started rollin' again after another operator got there, an' Dracutt caught an east-bound job an' come back to town. He dropped off west of the freight shed an' slipped up to his room. I reckon you'd call him a phantom rider."

"And this human hell-hound is—or was—within' a stone's throw of where we're standing," stormed McCuen, "and he's got

us stopped. I've been railroading all my life, and I never heard of anything like it before."

The three men walked down the stairs and along the alley to Depot Street. They turned their steps toward the station. A crowd still lingered in front of the pool room. McCuen looked at his watch.

"No. 11 is due." There was a little catch in the big superintendent's voice. "Twenty-four hours since the Sun Coast got the red board at Poverty Bend, and those human devils dragged men and women out into the aisles in their night clothes, and robbed them and mauled them. Good God, as though that was not horrible

enough, we are faced now with the threat of dynamite and wholesale slaughter!"

The white eye of the Flyer's headlight studded the horizon on the eastern rim of the desert. The rails lisped their refrain of rolling wheels. No. 11's whistle screamed. The dot of red at the peak of the signal mast over the telegraph office held, its sullen eye challenging the crack train.

The big 3780 came storming in out of the blackness with brakes streaming fire.

McCUEN pushed angrily into the telegraph office, demanding to know why the order board had not been cleared for the Flyer. There had been no orders for the train a short time before. The operator spread his palms helplessly. Renslaw was there, hat pushed onto the back of his head, his face chalky.

"First it was phantom riders!" he groaned. "Now it's these damned messages from phantoms of the key, from Dracutt, curse him."

The operator cried, "Hell, is *this* the graveyard trick!" And added, "I know it wa'n't the despatcher's Morse, but the wire said hold 'er. What could I do?"

The sounder began chattering madly. It was the despatcher, denying the authenticity of the order, which he himself had heard. The train conductor came in.

"Give him a clearance," directed McCuen. And to the man in uniform, "A little mix-up here. There's nothing on the board for you."

Smoky had not followed the others into the telegraph office. He turned from the platform and moved into the shadows of the nearby freight shed. He stood now between the loading platform and one of No. 11's varnished Pullmans. He watched up along the train, and made out figures moving near the store house beyond, vague, indistinct forms, coming from the building and clambering onto the blind.

The sheriff swung on his heel. The conductor was already waving his lantern in a high-ball signal. McCuen, Renslaw and Brady stood on the platform. The big passenger engine settled to its task with a labored snort, and a stream of sparks pounded upward, as the drivers lost their feet in a moment of mad racing.

Smoky jerked his head toward the open vestibule, where the conductor had already swung to the step. "Let's ride 'er!" he said quickly.

"Great Scott, man!" Renslaw's voice was gone. The exclamation was hardly more than a wheezy lament.

"What for?" roared McCuen, resorting to the railroad man's vocabulary. "Where to? What the hump-backed hell is coming off?"

"You'll find out!" snapped Smoky. "Catch them grab-irons."

Renslaw pulled himself aboard. "Anything is better than staying in this God-awful town any longer," he panted.

McCuen and Brady piled onto the lower step, the former still offering profane protest.

Smoky followed. The trap was dropped and the door closed.

"I suppose you think phantom outlaws are riding this train," growled McCuen.

"Yeah," drawled Smoky. "Up on the blind. An' they ain't phantoms tonight."

CHAPTER XI

MAD MOUNTAIN

THE sheriff and his three companions straggled back through the curtained aisles to the observation car. The seats were empty, the place deserted, except for the rear brakeman.

Renslaw sank into one of the upholstered chairs with an explosive sigh.

"Blessed peace!" he gasped, wagging his head with ponderous deliberation. "A palatial, all-steel train, affording its guests every modern comfort and luxury—lounge, shower, barber shop, drawing rooms, maid service—and train robbers, murderers, bloody souls of hell riding up behind the engine."

The brakeman jerked around as though on a pivot, his eyes fairly popping from

their sockets. He had not been on No. 11 the night before; it had not been his side of the job, but he'd heard enough about it, read enough in the extras reaching Caliente that afternoon.

"*Who* is ridin'?" he blurted out.

"Shut up!" yelled McCuen. "Get out! We want to talk."

"Y-yes, s'r." And the brakeman dragged open the door and went out to the platform muttering.

Smoky grinned aggravatingly, a habit he had when the trail got rocky. He pulled a sack of cigarette tobacco from his pocket, hunted out a book of brown papers and set slowly about the manufacture of a smoke.

There was a long pause, punctuated by the quickening beat of the exhaust, the click of wheels on rail joints and the crack of the car. Finally, when he could stand it no longer, McCuen flung out:

"Well—where are we headed for?"

Smoky regarded his finished product for a moment; then struck a match and sucked in the first satisfying drag, while resting a tolerant eye on the superintendent.

"Mad Mountain is where I get off."

"And where do *we* get off?"

"Far be it from me to try and tell brass hats that," said Smoky.

McCuen snorted. "We can go jump at an alligator, eh?" A humorous glint shone for an instant in the gray orbs beneath his shaggy brows.

"Where do you imagine those men on the blind are going?" Renslaw asked.

"Mad Mountain."

"But you can't be sure of that?"

"Reasonably so. Yes."

"We're just wallowing in a trackless swamp," McCuen complained. "If we do get Dracutt and one or two of the train robbers, we will still have the threat of other vengeful members of the gang hanging over us." He punched a button. A porter appeared. "Get us something to drink!" he ordered harshly.

"Yes, suh. Yes, suh. What will it be, suh?"

"I don't care. Black coffee. Whiskey. Or laudanum."

THE porter rolled his eyes and went away. A brass collar ordering liquor —or poison. Lawsy, it was something to write in the book.

"You answered Dracutt's threat message?" said Smoky.

"Yes," Renslaw replied. "And received an OK."

"How about that other wire?"

"I sent it in Western Union code," said Renslaw. "I asked my secretary in Los Angeles to send me a telegram, care of the operator at San Angelo, stating that No. 2, the Apache, leaving the Coast at eight o'clock in the morning, would be carrying a money shipment in the express safe and requesting that we put on guards over the Canyon Division." He got up and paced a few steps back and forth, apparently laboring under great mental strain.

"The twenty-four hour truce will be up when No. 2 comes through tomorrow night," McCuen said, looking at Smoky, "and you figure that, instead of making good an opportunity to get away, the outlaws will make an attempt to grab this loot."

"I'd look for 'em to do it," said Smoky. "The member of the gang called Mike said over the telephone that they were goin' south after the big job."

Renslaw stopped in front of the sheriff. Veins stood out on his forehead; his lips were white. He was punching his fist against a red palm.

"And the hell of it is," he cried; "No. 2 *is* carrying money tomorrow night—a lot of it. How do you like that?"

Smoky said quietly, "I reckon Dracutt an' his phantom riders will be a lot more concerned in tryin' to get their hands on the money than they will in dynamitin' trains."

"Yes, yes. I remember now. We talked that over before. About the man that dug a pit, and was his own victim. We're betting spoils against lives and property."

"If you want to get a bone away from a dog," said Smoky, "give 'im a piece of meat."

NO. 11, the Sun Coast Flyer, roared on across the desert world. Shining steel threaded deep canyons and banded broad flats. At sixty miles an hour, at seventy, the blue and gold train sped west.

The men in the observation went out to the platform. Ahead a shrill whistle blast shrieked above the iron thunder of their going. Switch lights twinkled. A few starved cottonwoods were upthrust against the sky. A water tank and pump house loomed close, and were left behind. The black shapes of sprawled buildings, a squat station, a dim-lighted telegraph bay, a glimpse of an operator at the key within.

And Poverty Bend was fading in the night.

Smoky raised his hand in salute. He was seeing again the limp and forlorn boy slumped in his chair within, and the red stain down a white shirt. Victim of a killer's gun.

"*Adios,* my son!" said Smoky. "You can look down from that camp fire Yonder an' chant the tidin's that a dead man can be a hombre's worst enemy."

McCuen and Renslaw got off at Amargosa. Brady was to ride on to Del Rosa.

"Take a bath and go to bed," Smoky advised the harassed officials. "In the mornin' everythin' will look better. Might shave too."

"Sleep!" growled McCuen. "Bah!"

"Not a worry in the world," Renslaw snapped. "Only a gang of train robbers watching our every move, and another high iron train wheeling through on the graveyard trick tomorrow night, loaded with loot."

"Drop around to the telephone office," Smoky went on. "Send Miss Haveland home. Bet that girl's still sittin' up there with her ear to the ground. Good idea if you gentlemen took her out to dinner tomorrow—on the company. You'll find her right entertainin'. She's what yuh might term a reg'lar feller."

Wild steel, reaching into the hills; two engines out of Amargosa for the heavy grades; saw-tooth ranges lacing the desert horizon; desert peaks—Squawman, Wild Horse, Mad Mountain, Beggars Head—towering in the moonlight like frowning gods.

The helper locomotive cut off at Mad Mountain Summit. No. 11 rolled on, racing the sun to California. Smoky dropped from the step of the observation car near the east switch. Brady said, "Watch your step, Smith. The world is a wicked place."

SMOKY moved away from the track and lost himself among the close-bordering piñons. A few twinkling lights identified the straggling buildings that made up the little mountain town. At last the sound of an automobile broke the silence. Headlights flashed into view, moving out along the dusty road that led toward Morning Canyon.

Smoky waited for nearly half an hour; then walked closer to the village. He stopped finally in the heavy shadow of a juniper, and a hoot owl sent forth its eerie call. A pause, and it sounded again. Came an answer. A figure moved stealthily from concealment near the rambling general store, guided now by an occasional cricket chirp.

A lanky form, moving forward with the soft-padding stealth of an Indian, pulled up in front of Smoky. It was Flash Furlong.

"Well, sheep-herder, what yuh kiotyin' 'round here for?" was the cheerful greeting, voiced in a careful undertone. "'Fraid I ain't holdin' them mossy-horns close enough?"

Smoky stabbed the deputy in the ribs with a jarring punch that was meant as a token of affection. "'Lo, cowboy. Hold it. I got a brand run on me with a hunk of lead, an' I'm sore as hell."

"You're always gettin' hurted," said Flash. "Ye must be gettin' old."

"I was talkin' with your dizzy blonde, Handsome."

"Nice little critter, eh?"

"She's got a line."

"Yuh; telephone. Say, you sabe that sign language that I shake out?"

"Clear as mud. How many hombres got off the Flyer just now."

"Three."

"Tally. That them headin' out of town in a car?"

"Sure was."

"Somebody meet 'em?"

"Nope. Them jaspers that come here from Amargosa, they fixed to have the Andiron leave a Ford in a shed. Told 'em some dude friends was liable to arrive most any time—didn't know exactly when. Stated they was at the Grand Canyon. Left word with the second an' third trick operators to show the gents where the car was an' give 'em directions. Greased the road with *dinero*. Had reservations. Nice folks."

"You think so?"

"Damn right. Exclusive as hell—ridin' into town on the blind baggage."

"That makes six, don't it?" said Smoky.

"Yup. Large population."

"Any of 'em been at the Andiron previous to tonight?"

"So they tell me. Quite some. Go an' arrive."

"This last batch, they telegraph Los Angeles when they got here?"

"Gosh, you must been lookin' in somebody's palm. Next thing, you'll be cheatin' at cards. Do yuh know anythin' beside what you was born with?"

"The operator gave you the dope, hey?"

"Yair. Him an' me belong to the same lodge. We're Buffalos. What do we do now—sit out here all night with the kioties, an' bark at the moon?"

"I reckon I could stand a little sleep." Smoky yawned. "Guns on the graveyard trick spoil a man's rest."

"Huh!" scoffed Flash, striking his chest. "Look at me, I never sleep. It will start gettin' light in an hour. No use goin' to bed now. Anyhow, what about them hombres out to the Andiron? Ain't we goin' to smoke 'em out?"

"Owls an' outlaws hunt in the dark," said Smoky. "You look at the moon when No. 2 rolls east tomorrow night, and you'll see shadows of phantom riders."

"We can get a room off of Old Man Slade, I reckon," Flash ruminated in a far-away voice. "Yeah, I reckon we can." And he began humming softly a fragment of a ballad, and walked with Smoky toward the sleeping town.

"Then rode they two through the streets of hell—
Billy Leamont an' Jack Lorell!"

CHAPTER XII

AGAIN—RED BOARD!

THE storm gods flung back the doors. Thunder rolled. Lightning shot the desert horizon with vivid flashes and savage thrusts. Black veils fringed the peaks of Squawman and Beggar's Head. The wind came in rageful gusts that blustered and tore through sage and piñion.

Squalls lashed the higher reaches. Slanting drops washed the frowsy pate of Crazy Woman, while on the slopes below

there was only the threat of the various storms that growled in the distance.

No. 2, the fast-flying Apache, dropped her helper at Mad Mountain Summit and streaked down toward McCarty's on the far-away flats. No. 2, carrying mail, express and Pullmans. Fear riding the rails. Prayers for her safety.

Renslaw paced the platform at Amargosa. McCuen stood over the operator, his ear cocked for every click of the sounder, his brow furrowed; his eyes reflecting stark fear. No further word had come from Smoky Smith; no report of happenings at Mad Mountain.

The wire broke with a sudden call. It was the operator at Mad Mountain Summit. Morse fairly sizzled from the jerking armature. Dots and dashes spelled a message.

"Found this stuck on door. Msg. to Renslaw. One word. Reads—DYNAMITE. No signature."

"Damn them!" cried McCuen. "They asked for a twenty-four hour truce. We gave it to them. Now they're threatening us again. Anything, even another holdup, would be better than enduring the torture they're subjecting us to in a menace like that."

He hurried out to join the general manager.

The despatcher at Caliente bent over his train sheet, a tense figure in shirtsleeves and green eye-shade.

"Those phantom outlaws are playing hell with us," he told the man across the table from him. "Two is carrying money, a lot of it. I understand the sheriff is riding the job, and some of his men, but a fat lot of good they will do if the blasted train robbers shoot a bundle of dynamite off under the pilot.

"I cleared the iron for the Apache all the way in, Del Rosa to here. If they don't OS (report) her on time at every telegraph office, we can make up our minds the worst has happened. She's out of Mad Mountain on the dot, and it's clear sailing now—with the grace of God."

THE operator at McCarty's looked out of his bay toward the west. Far off on the slope toward Crazy Woman, a silver speck appeared. The youth at the telegraph table opened his key. Lonely as was his post, he knew the grim tenseness with which the Canyon Division awaited word of the going of the lordly Apache.

"No. 2 coming down the hill," he flashed

"I-I, CJ," acknowledged the despatcher at Caliente.

Suddenly the operator half turned in his chair, his head rigid. His ears had caught a sound outside. It was the thud of hoofs. For days the youth had lived with the gossip of the wires, gossip of murder and robbery on the rails. He had grown to find the very thought of phantom horsemen something to start gooseflesh crawling on his spine, every unfamiliar noise or movement of the lonely graveyard trick a haunting reminder of that tragedy at Poverty Bend.

The door was flung open, and a masked rider stood on the threshold, a gun covering him. A lightning flash threw into silhouette the form of the intruder. His face white as chalk, the youth stifled the cry that leaped to his lips. It was all a dream, a terrifying nightmare. It had to be. It couldn't be he that was here in the little station at McCarty's, staring in reality at a bandit.

He had already set the signal on the mast outside to clear. Green showed, giving No. 2 the freedom to roll down the silvered rail.

A muffled voice snarled from behind the handkerchief that covered the lower part of the man's face. "Shove that board to red!" A jabbing punctuation by that cold, black muzzle. "Quick, yuh fool, or I'll let yuh have it!"

This, then, was one of those phantom train robbers, eyes gleaming under the brim of a sombrero. And yet not exactly a phantom, this person in end-gate overalls, high-heeled boots and vest. Chaps too. A sagging belt and holster; a second holstered gun lent graphic realism to the picture.

The operator tripped the latch of the lever above the table and crowded the signal to stop position.

Big Bill Kruger, at the throttle of the 3792, leaned far out across the arm-rest, blinked and swore angrily.

"Red eye!"

And the fireman called back. "Red board."

The whistle screamed, a long-drawn wail—demanding the rights that were No. 2's. The red held. There was a service application of brakes. And then another.

The despatcher, his eye on the clock, banged the train sheet with his fist, and grabbed for the key. "Great Judas! That guy said 2 was coming down the hill, and now I can't raise him at all." "MC, MC—CJ," in frantic Morse.

Minutes passed. Terrible minutes. Waiting! Waiting!

McCuen, at Amargosa, jerked his shirt open at the throat. Clenched hands went up in wordless appeal. He knew that something was going to happen. It had to come. But the hours of suspense that were packed into every full swing of the second hand ate into his railroad heart.

Renslaw stood outside of the bay, staring to the west, as though dogged watching could will the coming of No. 2. McCuen came to the platform. "Guess they got her at McCarty's."

Renslaw nodded mechanically. He was like a man in a stupor.

McCuen said, "I've got just one last damn hope for salvation. Just one cock-eyed prop that isn't all kicked to hell. It's the picture of Smoky Smith rolling a cigarette and grinning when, by all the laws of God and man, he ought to be preparing his last will and testament."

"He's done all a man can," Renslaw said despondently, "but it is not enough."

A SLIM, neatly dressed young woman walked briskly toward the depot from town. A street light revealed her to be vibrantly alive and startlingly pretty. A saucy hat was tilted on her blonde head. As she reached the station platform, she saluted the railroad men with a carefree flip of her hand.

"Good evening—brass hats!" Her teeth flashed in a smile. "Or should I say morning? And how is the high-born lady of the rail, No. 2?"

"The Apache has not passed McCarty's," McCuen said in a dead voice. "I am fearful of the worst."

"Have you gentlemen had any word from volumes One and Two of Desert Law?"

"No."

"Well, don't you worry about the Apache." The girl's voice carried a note of confidence. "My friend, Mr. Furlong, will look after your old train. Mm, flashes on the western horizon. The boys must be fogging it out with the outlaws." Came a distant roll of thunder. "Why, you can even hear their forty-fives! Can you feature that?"

McCuen swore softly under his breath. He mopped his forehead. The tenseness was gone from him. "Humph, the man who gets you will have a cheerful little optimist around the house anyhow. What brings you over here at one-thirty in the morning, Miss Haveland? Were you on your way to the telephone office?"

"Oh, no. I came to meet the sheriff, because I want to congratulate him on having so brave and capable a deputy, and suggest that he raise his pay." There was a new quality to the woman's voice now. McCuen looked at her sharply, and saw that her lips were trembling. Two big tears rolled down her cheeks. She smiled and tossed her head, and dabbed them quickly away.

McCuen and Renslaw exchanged glances. "Guess gameness runs in the breed, J. J." said the superintendent.

Renslaw nodded absently and once more turned his face toward the west; then again stared at the girl. He fumbled for a cigar, and cleared his throat. "Ahem! Harump! Match. Give me a match. Damn lighter!" snapping it without success.

"Aw, why don't you buy a good one?" said the young woman, tendering a cheap affair. "Got mine at a cut-price drug store in Phoenix. Nineteen cents. Bet you paid fifteen simoleons for that lemon."

And, as the general manager puffed nervously at the cigar, added, "Now relax. You're spooky as a range steer."

The three of them fell into step and walked slowly up and down the platform. No word was spoken. They were waiting, waiting.

At last Renslaw cried, as he thumbed his watch, "Five minutes, and I'll clear the line for wrecker and rescue train to pick up the pieces."

A freight thundered through. A little group of men in overalls stood near a big helper engine in a siding. Voices low, cigar and cigarette ends glowing in the dark.

Suddenly the telegraph operator pushed up a window of the bay and yelled, "Here's McCarty's!"

Chapter XIII

Guns of the Graveyard Trick

THE squall hit with breath-taking fury. A giant windrow of dust, of flying twigs, and bouncing tumble-weeds; then a volley of giant hailstones, and the deluge of rain. Came a blinding lightning flash and a jarring detonation from the clouds.

The outlaw that had covered the operator at McCarty's ran toward the engine at the head of No. 2. He yelled at the figure in the cab.

"Hold 'er right there, hog-head! Don't try nothin', or I'll fill yuh full of .45 slugs!"

A lantern twinkled at the rear of the train, as the flagman dropped from the observation platform. There was a second clap of thunder and the close-following flash. It revealed masked men wearing sombreros and chaps and cartridge belts, running beside the Pullmans. They had taken form with the suddenness of apparitions.

A horse stood with dangling bridle reins behind the little station. The vivid lightning display revealed no other animals.

Clerks in the mail car had taken alarm with the stopping of the train. They seized sawed-off shotguns and snapped off the lights. There were shouts outside and the quick crunch of running feet, accompanying the hiss of the rain and the wind gusts.

Something hard pounded on a door, and a voice bawled a command, punctuated by an oath.

"Open up! Make it fast, you guys if yuh don't want that door blowed with a bomb!"

Another train robber snarled at a companion.

"Damn the lightnin'! They'll be able to see that there ain't only that one horse."

"To hell with it! The fools will think we got the rest of 'em hid in a wash."

"That would be a hell of a place for horses now!"

"I thought there'd be guards ridin' 'er," the first speaker said.

"They're prob-ly in the express car with the money."

"They'll wish they wa'n't after we throw a couple pineapples at them doors. Damn the lightnin'!" as another flash came. "Some of them birds is liable to start pottin' at us."

A MEMBER of the train robber band hurried forward and placed a grip on the ground across the right-of-way ditch from the big steel car second back from the engine; then shouted at those within:

"We ain't goin' to fool 'round. We're after that money in the safe. Open the door or we'll give yuh the big cough."

A crouching figure eased out past the trucks at the front of the mail car, balanced an instant; then swung forward. The outlaw beside the grip turned. There was a brief electrical discharge in the clouds, and something glinted briefly, as the wind tugged aside the coat of the advancing form.

It was the star on Deputy Sheriff Furlong's shirt.

The bandit's gun jerked in a brief arc.

Furlong said, "It's the law, hombre!"

Two guns lanced the torrent-swept

blackness. The deputy fired the fraction of a second before the highwayman's weapon loosed its stabbing flash. The outlaw swayed, while lead snatched hungrily at Furlong's flapping coat. The man by the grip was spilled across a clump of sage, and the law had cut another notch.

A second train robber bellowed that officers were there, and turned his weapon on the new menace. The young deputy stooped to grab the deadly satchel, and the outlaw's bullet whined into space. Furlong ran a short distance into the desert, unmindful of the flaming guns that now poured forth a murderous volley from beside the cars; then stopped and flung the death-laden leather grip from him with all of his might.

There was a terrific explosion, the concussion of which knocked down officer and outlaw alike. Earth and stones were vomited into the air. There was the sound of breaking glass and the thud of rocks on the roofs and sides of the cars.

Furlong scrambled to his feet and shook his head. He was still gripping his .45. A stone had gashed his temple.

"Whew!" he gasped, and muttered, "I don't get in many fights, but when I do, it's sure a lulu."

Cordis, Dracutt's companion of the Central House, snatched off the kerchief that covered the lower part of his face and struggled to his feet. A black shape took form before him.

"That you, Mike?" he called. "What in hell happened to them bombs?"

"Plenty," was the answer. Cordis stiffened. He had heard that voice before. "And the name is Smith."

"The damn sheriff!" mumbled the outlaw in amazement. He steadied himself, his mouth slimy with foul epithets, his hot palm rigid about the butt of the big revolver he held. The gun roared, but Smoky, veteran of many encounters with desert renegades, was fading away to the right.

The outlaw bullet clipped twigs from a greasewood bush at Smoky's elbow. Lightning again flamed in the clouds. The sheriff's Peacemaker Colt boomed and the two hundred and fifty-five grain bullet shattered the wrist of the train robber's gun hand.

The bandit's brain sent an impulse to the fingers for another pull at the trigger, even as the shattered hand fell bleeding and weaponless at his side. Cordis staggered against the end of the mail car and fumbled awkwardly for a second gun hung under his right armpit with his left hand. Fools they had been, that this fighting sheriff ever was allowed to cross the threshold of that room in the Central House alive; Dracutt should have killed him on that darkened piazza when the little gun was pressed in Smith's back.

TWO running figures moved up from the rear. They pulled away from the cars in a flanking movement, and stooped to a crouch. Bullets smashed the steel sides of the mail and express cars and ricocheted off in screaming flight.

Furlong drove to intercept the oncoming bandits, charging recklessly over sage and creosote bush. His hat was gone, his hair matted. Rain falling in gusty sheets

whipped into his face, but the crashing deluge of a dozen storms could not have extinguished the savage fire in his heart. At last he and Smoky were closing with ruthless desert outlaws, men to whom lives and property meant nothing, as they moved in lustful conquest.

Furlong, like the sheriff, had clung to the tradition that hung a crown of merit on the

S. A. Colt, the gun that had blazed the western trail. Filled with the joy of battle he thumbed the long hammer-piece of his Peacemaker six-shooter.

The man known as Mike poured forth lead in a fire-streaked and mad barrage that was directed at the figure lightning had revealed as the sheriff. Smith hunted momentary shelter in a shallow gully, as he sought to identify the lunging forms. Furlong, he knew, had jumped for that black grip, once the lightning had revealed it. The deputy should be somewhere behind him, but he could not be sure of this, since the blast had destroyed the plotted scene caught in his mind's eye.

Furlong pulled up suddenly, feet spread, as a blinding blast of wind and rain smashed him full in the face. "Hey, whose fight is this?" he gritted.

The storm king, seemingly in answer, threw a bolt at McCarty's that hit a scant mile away. With the blinding flash came an ear-splitting thunder clap. And, as though in puny effort at retaliation, a .45 barked. Once.

The outlaw known as Mike reeled in the mad turmoil of the fight and storm, while the last dimming bit of consciousness seemed to whisper that the wrath of God had struck him down, rather than the shocking impact of the bullet from the gun of the deputy sheriff.

Smoky jerked from the gully and rushed a train robber, who, like a half-dazed animal, was wallowing in the murky water of the right-of-way ditch. The gun in the man's hand clicked on an empty shell. He pulled another revolver from a holster and fired with only a half-hearted attempt to establish a relationship between objects and things.

A figure loomed before him. He moved his weapon in sluggish response to a brain that was groggy from the assault of law men and the elements. Fingers gripped his wrist and wrenched the six-shooter aside. He struggled furiously until a gun barrel hit him on the head.

The next thing that he was aware of was a bracelet of steel locked about his wrist and some immovable object that bent not at all to his efforts to free himself. He was handcuffed to a steel step at the side of the mail car.

The outlaw who had menaced the engineer watched the fight with increasing alarm. Suddenly he ran to join his companions, fearful that the tide of battle, remote though it seemed, be turned against them.

Big Bill Kruger opened the sander and swung the handle of the air-brake equipment to the left; then jerked at the throttle. The telltale hiss of escaping air back along the train told a sudden story of defeat. No. 2 was free to go. There was a throaty cough in the stack and the wheels began to turn. The slack ran back, drawbars groaned.

Somewhere a voice was raised above the storm in frantic command.

"Get away! Ride!"

THOSE of the phantom riders spared the irrefutable sentence of old Judge Colt began their retreat. Cordis tried to run, but Furlong was on him like a panther. The outlaw handcuffed to the step of the mail car shrieked in a sudden terrified frenzy, and stumbled along in the ditch.

Bill Kruger was getting out of town. He damned McCarty and all the world of banditry, as he dropped the Johnston Bar into the corner and yanked again at the throttle.

A vestibule door opened and a lantern winked in the patch of shadow. Smoky moved toward it in a flash. He seized the hand holds and swung to the step. The conductor looked down into the rain-washed face, glimpsed the star that identified the sheriff and uttered a fervent ejaculation.

"Stop 'er!" cried Smoky. "I got a man manacled to the step of the mail car."

The trainman blinked in surprised uncertainty for a moment; then leaped to oper

the emergency valve. The brakes slammed on and the heavy cars buckled to a stop.

The stunned silence of the Pullmans gave way to an increasing murmur of excited voices, to exclamations and wild interrogations by nerve-racked passengers.

A few in the cars ahead had witnessed from the windows of their berths a strange desert drama, with setting, illumination and sound effects supplied not only by fighting men but by an outraged Jehovah himself.

The train and Pullman conductors hastened through the passageways and curtained aisles carrying the assurance that everything was all right, and that the train would proceed in a very few minutes.

The lightning flashes were less frequent, less vivid now, except for occasional forked streaks on distant horizons; the rumble of thunder followed the storm around the rocky ramparts of Crazy Woman toward the north like the growls of some retreating monster.

Rain fell, but without the early fury of the onrushing squall. Soon the clouds would have passed, and the stars again stud the sky.

The bodies of the two outlaws were placed in the baggage car. Here, also, were brought the two prisoners, and handcuffed to the steam pipes. A trainman secured dressings from a first-aid kit and bandaged the arm of Cordis, sullen, silent, beaten.

The operator was released. The train robber had bound his wrists and ankles with wire. The occupant of the lonely telegraph office was white and trembling. He asked for a drink, which was given him.

"I sure need a ball after that," he declared. "Say, that holdup man's gun has got a big muzzle. I thought he was goin' to plug me any minute. I tell you, I was thinkin' about that brass-pounder at Poverty Bend." He dropped into the chair in front of the telegraph table and reached for the key. "And they told me this cockeyed OS job at McCarty's would be so monotonous that I'd go nuts."

Chapter XIV

END OF THE PHANTOM TRAIL

THE train robber who had tied up the operator and later covered Bill Kruger, the engineer, had disappeared. The horse behind the station was gone.

Trainmen crowded the telegraph office, men in wet uniforms and carrying lanterns. Their voices were loud; each had a story to tell. Brady and two other officers of the railroad police came from the express car. Smith and Furlong entered.

Brady greeted them with a shout of acclaim. "You birds sure did your stuff. Hell, I thought they was going to blow us up. I tell you, I was sweating. Were you riding the train, Smoky, or waiting here?"

"We came through on the blind from Mad Mountain," said the sheriff.

"Wish we could have been some help to you," said another of the railroad detectives.

"It was just a two-man job," Smoky pointed out. "More would have made it harder to tell who was who."

Furlong lighted a cigarette. "I ain't been so wet," he complained, "since I fell in the Salt Canal."

The telegraph sounder was chattering madly. The report from McCarty's that No. 2 was safe, and that the attack of the train robbers had resulted in the death of two and the wounding of two more of the outlaw band, with no damage or casualties as concerned the train and those aboard, brought quick tidings of approbation, both from Caliente and J. J. Renslaw himself at Amargosa.

Smoky was talking to the train conductor. The latter said, "Yes. Six. They had wired Los Angeles for reservations—a drawing room and compartment. They got on at Mad Mountain when we stopped to cut off the helper. They had tickets for Chicago."

"What car?" the sheriff asked. He caught Furlong's eye and nodded at the door.

"Descanso is the name. Compartment C and drawing room D. About four cars back. I'll go with you."

Flash was waiting outside.

"Two more, eh?" said the deputy.

Smoky nodded. "Reckon they'll be a little tough."

"Can't be no tougher than ridin' the damn blind seventy miles an hour down off the hump."

"Yeah, but you only got cinders in your hair from that."

They were slopping back along the Pullman in the right-of-way ditch. Flash said, "Honest, do yuh think Doris likes me—just a little?"

"You ask me that again, and I'll crown you!" Smoky flung over his shoulder.

"Hey, I'll go in first when we get there. This killer like to run a sandy on you in Angelo."

Smoky did not answer.

THE lanky deputy persisted, his voice low. "You ain't nothin' but a cripple anyhow. Them train robbers sure pushed you around. Tough ohmbrays is my dish."

"Shut up!"

Furlong was silent for a little. However, as they climbed the vestibule steps of the Pullman he was singing softly words of a ballad.

Over the leagues of the prairie brown,
Into the hills where the sun goes down—

The conductor stopped on the platform.

"Compartment C," he said, "is the third door. Drawing room D is next. There is a connecting door, but no door through to the next drawing room."

Smoky nodded, and said, "Conductor, will you go back to the telegraph office and tell Brady and the other railroad detectives to wait under the window of this drawing room and compartment—just in case these birds go through the glass."

"You're going in there?"

Furlong was pushing through the door that led to the passageway. "An' *muy pronto!*" he said over his shoulder.

The conductor hurried down the steps, muttering.

Smoky caught the fiery deputy by the elbow. "You take the door marked C," he directed, "and I'll take D. Have your six-shooter ready. Put your back to the panel and your foot against the outside wall. And good luck!"

"Keep your nose clean, yuh ranny!"

Smith and Furlong lost not an instant. They moved into position quickly. Two range-bred desert officers, reared in the hard school of the border.

The doors of the compartment and drawing room crashed inward before the onslaught of two steel-tough bodies.

Drawing room D was vacant, though the connecting door stood open. Two men were in the adjoining compartment—Dracutt and the outlaw who had bound the operator.

Furlong's body was catapulted inward as the lock gave way. Instantly the place was filled with the deafening roar of guns.

The weapon in the hand of Dracutt was a .25 caliber automatic. His face distorted with surprise and diabolical fury, the master of the phantom riders loosed a fusillade of shots from the thirteen-ounce weapon that had killed Manners.

Four tiny bullets struck Furlong before he swung his Peacemaker Colt into action. Once the big gun roared, and Dracutt, the train robber, sank to the floor.

The second bandit, backing in retreat toward the open door of the drawing room, fired but the bullet struck the edge of the berth. The next instant a six-gun crashed down on his skull, as Smoky sprang to the aid of his deputy.

Furlong was on his knees. Blood trickled from the corner of his mouth. He grinned weakly at Smoky.

"Who—who said—they was tough?"

WIRES went hot. The Canyon Division of the Pacific Coast and Transcontinental sat back on its heels as the

wires blazed the tidings. McCarty's, from a forsaken and obscure one-man telegraph office, leaped into the headlines.

Dracutt, master mind of desert outlawry, was dead. Killer, cunning plotter, fiendish executive of dread deeds. His threatening reign was over. Two of his companions rode from McCarty's, with their leader, on the floor of the baggage car. Bolan lay on a slab in the funeral establishment of Sam Chase at San Angelo.

Smoky was battle-scarred. Furlong was kidding back and forth with Old Man Death.

Renslaw and McCuen and the girl from the telephone office did a war dance on the platform at Amargosa, as the operator relayed the news that No. 2 would soon be rolling east again. Their joy, however, was short-lived, as news came that the happy-go-lucky young deputy had been hard hit, and was unconscious.

Big Bill Kruger broke all existing speed records in the run from McCarty's to Amargosa. Furlong needed medical attention, and he needed it quickly.

As the limited sped across the desert, a riderless horse, bridle-reins trailing, made its way back toward Morning Canyon and the Andiron.

Doris Haveland was there when they took Furlong from No. 2. Flash had regained consciousness for a little. He smiled weakly at the girl, as she bent anxiously over him, and murmured:

"Hello—b-beautiful."

The other winked back tears. "Just because I said you were a treasure," she said with a moist little smile, "I didn't mean buried treasure."

SMOKY was at last alone with McCuen and Renslaw and members of the railroad police.

The officials were loud in their praise of the tireless efforts of the sheriff and his chief deputy.

"About those illusions that you said Dracutt created," McCuen began when the opportunity was presented.

"The only time the train robbers used horses," Smoky said, "was tonight, and then only one. A member of the gang rode to McCarty's from the Andiron."

"To make the operator hold a red board against No. 2."

Smoky nodded. "The outlaws rode the iron horse on those other jobs. They had drawing rooms or compartments aboard the trains to be looted. They put on sombreros, chaps, belted guns and wore kerchiefs over their faces. Even had cowboy boots—but no spurs. Some of the trainmen noticed it. You remember I questioned the conductor from No. 11 about it at the inquest.

"After the robbers had finished stripping the passengers of money and valuables, they took advantage of the resulting confusion to slip back into these compartments or drawing rooms. They stowed the cowboy stuff in suitcases, slipped into pajamas, or, maybe, trousers and undershirts, and went out to mingle with their fellow travelers.

"Dracutt was the operator the nights that No. 9 was looted and Eleven got it the first time. He told of masked riders, and of an outlaw covering him with a six-shooter and forcing him to hold the order board at red. Reckon he was afraid it would look too suspicious, if he was at the point of holdup a third time; so he sent young Manners to Poverty Bend.

"Joe Roques an' that cowboy at San Angelo were plumb bad actors anyhow. Guess Dracutt and Roques figured they might work into somethin' big, if they could get the right sheriff in. They kind of played along together, tappin' wires, fixin' a hide-cut an' featherin' their nest generally. It would have worked out better if this man, Mike, hadn't telephoned the three fellers at the Lawson Hotel, warnin' 'em about the fight in the Central House."

"You think that dude ranch at the old Andiron is above board?" asked Renslaw.

"Yes; I think so. We keep an eye on places like that. Dracutt and his gang

were smart enough to take advantage of the fact that Mad Mountain has gone in extensive for dude wranglin', an' tourists come an' go all the time. Then there was the gold rush in the old Tombstone Canyon district.

I TALKED with Cordis, the outlaw I shot in the arm, comin' from McCarty's. He is right pliable. He says the reason they got off here at Amargosa after the job at Poverty Bend was that they figured it safe enough. Everybody was lookin' for train robbers in the desert, an' five well-dressed men with expensive travelin' bags wouldn't be apt to arouse anybody's suspicion. Told the conductor they had decided to go out to the Andiron in a day or two. Wanted to take a little side trip to the Painted Desert an' the Big Ghosty.

"The hombre, Mike they call him, who telephoned from Angelo was a sort of lookout, friend of Roques an' the fox-faced puncher I tangled with in the pool room."

"Dracutt certainly had us bluffed when he tossed that dynamite threat at us," said McCuen. "I never put in such a night in my life, and I never want to again."

"He sure had the sheriff's office in this man's country pantin'," Smoky admitted with a wry grin. He rolled a cigarette, then glanced from Renslaw to McCuen. "Say, I reckon I'll get that boy, Furlong, halter-broke in time."

"His telegraph messages were not so crazy after all, were they?" said the general manager with a little twinkle. He added solemnly, "My hat is off to him as an officer and fighting man."

"You'd ought to seen him out at McCarty's," declared Smoky proudly. "He grabbed that bag of dynamite bombs an' heaved 'em down a gully with those bandits shootin' at him from all directions."

IT WAS in a waiting room at the Amargosa Hospital hours later that a tense, solemn-faced group awaited the verdict of the surgeons. It came at last with a doctor's declaration that Furlong's tough constitution was standing him in good stead—a rugged body and fighting heart would bring him out, the physician asserted.

The next morning Smoky and Doris Haveland were allowed in to see him for a few minutes.

"'Lo—yuh ranny," was Furlong's weak-voiced greeting, as he grinned at Smoky.

The sheriff just couldn't seem to find any words. He gripped Furlong's hand, while misty eyes and a look told it all.

The girl on the other side of the bed said, "I'm proud of you."

"Goin' to hitch your wagon to—to a star—beautiful?" whispered the young deputy.

The lady bobbed her blonde head. "Yes—but not a shooting star, darn you."

Any Chechako Hiring Black John as Guide Would Need to Be Dead Sure Where He Was Being Guided!

BLACK JOHN ACTS AS GUIDE

By JAMES B. HENDRYX

Author of "Black John Collects Evidence," and Many Other Stories of the Outlaws of Halfaday Creek

I

ON A sand spit, on the left bank of the Yukon, just below the mouth of White River, Black John Smith nested his teapot closer against the flame of his little fire, and eyed the poling boat that was slowly approaching from downriver. The dusk of an early autumn evening was settling, and the man frowned slightly, with a swift glance at the pack sack that rested against the overturned canoe close beside him, as he lifted the frying pan from the coals and dumped its contents onto a tin plate. "Chechakos, by the way they handle

that boat," he grumbled. "They'll prob'ly camp along side me, an' I'll have to listen to their damn talk. A chechako will talk almost as much as a woman—an' they'll say even less."

True to his prediction, the boat beached a few feet below him and its four occupants stepped ashore, drew the boat as high as possible, and proceeded to unload their duffel. While three of them busied themselves in making camp, the fourth strolled over to Black John's fire. "Campin' here?" he asked, with a glance at the blankets spread beside the canoe.

"No. At present, I'm playin' a game of pool with a couple of friends in Dawson."

The man grinned. "Just by way of openin' the conversation," he said.

"It opened foolish," opined Black John, as he skillfully conveyed a knife load of food from his plate to his mouth.

"My name's Simpson," the man stated.

Black John thoroughly masticated the food as the other waited expectantly. "Well, I s'pose someone has got to be named Simpson," he observed at length. "An' it might as well be you."

"The two larger men with me are my brothers. I'm the oldest."

"H-u-m. It's a wonder they'd of had any more. But some folks is thoughtless."

"What?"

"I say, I s'pose their name is Simpson, too."

"Why—sure. That's Fred an' Tom. Bill is my name. An' the other one, the small man—his name's Deters. We're goin' outside."

"That's good."

"Yup. We're gettin' to hell out of this damned country. We made our pile, and I wouldn't put in another winter here for all the gold in the Yukon. I didn't get your name."

"That ain't surprisin'," replied Black John, engulfing a draught of black tea, "So you done well, eh?"

"You bet. We come in last fall an' struck it lucky with a claim on Dominion. The boys was willin' to stay another winter; but I says 'to hell with it.' 'We'll sell out,' I says, 'while the sellin's good, an' take our dust an' go back to Frisco an' open up a saloon.' With the three of us in pardners we'd ought to do well. What Frisco needs is a good classy dump."

"Yeah. Every town had ort to have at least one. Ain't Deters in on it, too?"

"No, he jest throw'd in with us on the way out. He's goin' outside, too, an' we figgered that the more of us there was, the safer we'd be, seein' that we're packin' out quite a heft of dust. There's been quite a few hold-ups along the river. But since they hung O'Brien mebbe there won't be so many. You can't tell, though. You goin' outside? We might all five throw in together. I see you've got a good rifle there."

"No, I'm headin' up the White."

"Up the White, eh? If we know'd the country we'd go out by the Dalton trail. They claim there's only one police post to pass, that way. But follerin' up the Yukon there's White Horse, an' Tagish, an' the Summit, an' God knows how many more."

"Dodgin' the police, eh?" grinned Black John. "If I was so damn 'fraid of gittin' held up, the more police posts I could pass, the better I'd like it."

"That part of it's all right," replied the man, "but—well, the fact is—we ain't dodgin' the police fer nothin' ornery—no crime, nor nothin' like that. It's on account of the dust. We ain't paid royalty on only half of what we're takin' out with us. They got us fer the royalty when we cleaned up our dump—but they ain't got us fer the dust we got fer the claim. What the hell's the use in payin' the Government fifteen per cent, if you don't have to? We're packin' out twenty-four hundred ounces, between the three of us. That's thirty-eight thousan', four hundred dollars—an' worth more in the States. We've got royalty receipts coverin' twelve hundred ounces. We figgered that while one of us was checkin' through the police, the other

two could slip the rest of the dust past 'em. If we only had to pass one post it would be easier."

"THAT'S so," agreed Black John. "Is Deters packin' out some dust, too?"

"No. He claimed that gold was too heavy to pack, so he changed all his dust fer bills. When he changed 'em, Curly notified the police, like he's got to, an' they come down an' collected the royalty. What I claim—a man's a fool that'll pay royalty when he don't have to."

"Honesty is the best policy," repeated Black John in a tone of solemn conviction.

"It's a damn fool policy, if you ask me," sneered the man. "Why should I pay the Government fifteen per cent of my dust?"

"Well, a man had ort to be law-abidin,' or his conscience might git to botherin' him. An' besides, if he was to git caught smugglin' gold out of the country, the police could seize all, or any part of it, fer penalty."

"They'd have to ketch him first."

"Well—that's a thought, too," admitted Black John. "That there police post on the Dalton Trail had ort to be easy to evade. The trail runs right between the buildin's, an' like you said, whilst one of you was to check through with the dust he kin show receipts fer, the other two could slip the rest around through the hills. The post ain't so far from the line."

"Do you know the country?"

"Oh, shore. My claim's on a crick that runs into the White, quite a ways up."

"What would you take to guide us?" asked the man suddenly. "It wouldn't be worth much—seein' you're headin' up the White, anyway."

"Such arrangement wouldn't involve no extry work, to speak of," admitted Black John. "But it would raise hell with my solitude. I'm a pore man, however, an' I can't afford to turn down no reasonable offer."

"How would half an ounce a day strike you?"

"Not very hard. Nope. I figger that if a man's solitude ain't worth an ounce a day, it ain't worth a damn."

"Well—an ounce, then. You're hired."

"You to do all yer own packin' an' cookin'," reminded Black John. "I ain't partin' with no added labor."

"In case of a hold-up, I suppose you'd be willin' to do your share in standin' off the robbers?"

"Only to a prudent extent. If robbers was to git the drop on us, you'll find me as willin' as the next one to stick my hands up in the air. I ain't what you'd call a rash man in defendin' other folks' dust."

The other laughed. "At least yer honest in admittin' it."

"Well, I hold that a man had ort to be as honest as the occasion demands—so his conscience won't bother him."

"If yer through eatin', come on over an' meet the boys. Let's see, yer name is—er——?"

"Smith," replied Black John. "It's a name that, onct you git the hang of it, is fairly easy to remember."

II

LOW water necessitated much track lining of the poling boat over shallows and rapids in the ascent of the White. Deters, being a small man of light build, was of little use on the track-line, so Black John took him in the canoe, leaving to the huskier Simpsons the task of navigating the poling boat.

"It's their dust that makes it so heavy," said Deters one day, as they watched the three toiling at the track-line, thigh deep in the icy water. "If they wasn't too stingy to pay the royalty, they could of went out on the steamboat, like I was goin' to. But they know'd I could shoot good, an' they persuaded me to go out with 'em in the polin' boat, claimin' it would be cheaper. It's cheaper, all right—providin' we don't git held up. If we do, they'll lose all their dust, unless we could stand the robbers off. Has there been many hold-ups on White River?"

"Not that I've heard of," replied Black John. "But that's no sign there won't be. Ain't you got no dust of yer own?"

"No, I paid the royalty on mine, an' traded it fer bills. I claim a man had ort to pay royalty—if that's the law."

"Shore he had," agreed Black John. "It's onderhanded an' skullduggish to beat the Government out of royalties. It would

almost serve 'em right if they was to lose their dust."

"Yeah—in a way, it would. But a man would hate to see anyone get away with a robbery."

"Oh—shore."

"So, I suppose it would be up to us to fight like hell to help 'em save their dust."

"Yeah. An' besides, you'd be savin' yer bills at the same time."

The other grinned. "I don't think the robbers would bother me none—no more'n they would you. We've got on old clothes, an' we don't look prosperous like them Simpsons. Besides, they wouldn't find my bills. I sewed 'em in the linin' of my coat. I'm goin' back to Ioway an' buy me a farm. I'd rather milk a cow than crank a windlass, any day. Wouldn't you?"

"I never give the matter no thought," replied Black John. "It seems like there'd be other forms of recreation that would beat either one."

"I sure like the smell of a barn, don't you?"

"Well—what few I've smelt didn't delight me none. But I s'pose folks's taste differs in the matter of perfumery, the same as anything else. A good whiff of a saloon would suit me better. The odor is, what you might say, more frivolous."

"Men waste a lot of time in saloons," opined Deters. "If all that wasted time was devoted to some useful occupation like milkin' cows——"

"Hell," grinned Black John, "we'd all be drownded, an' nothin' but the highest mountains would be stickin' out of the milk!"

THE ascent of the river was slow and tedious, and with the passing of the days Black John grew to like the earnest little man who worked steadily and uncomplainingly at the paddle, while the three Simpsons grumbled and cursed, and in camp boasted blatantly about what they would do in the event of a hold-up.

And then one evening the much discussed hold-up occurred. The five had camped early at the head of a long rapid and were eating their supper beside a little fire that had been built on a gravel bar at a sharp bend of the river, when two men stepped suddenly from the bush, and covered them with rifles.

"Put 'em up, an' keep 'em up!" growled one. "An' anyone that tries any monkey work will git blow'd to hell."

As ten hands shot skyward, the other of the two stepped to the canoe and poling boat that had been drawn up side by side upon the gravel a few feet distant, and, gathering up the rifles, tossed them into a deep pool formed by the bend of the river.

"You kin take 'em down now," said the first robber, still keeping them covered, "but don't make no move toward them packs." He indicated the packsacks that lay close by on the gravel where the men had left them after removing their cooking and eating utensils.

Keeping his rifle close at hand, the second man turned his attention to the packs; those of the three Simpsons, being closer, came in for first scrutiny, and their contents, netting some eight hundred ounces apiece, put the two bandits in high good humor.

"You done fine!" praised the outlaw with

the rifle, as his eyes rested for a moment on the little heap of moosehide sacks. "If the other two done as good, we'll have to kidnap one of 'em to help us with the packin'."

"Here's one that ain't got nothin'," exclaimed the other kicking a pack in disgust. "Whose pack is this? Stand up till I see if yer packin' yours on you!"

Deters rose to his feet, and the man frisked his pockets, tossing a packknife, a plug of tobacco, and various other small items contemptuously upon the ground.

Black John, who was awaiting his turn, laughed sneeringly as the man turned to him. "Think yer damn smart, don't you?" he said, lifting his own pack from the ground beside him and tossing it forward. "Search this pack, if you want a couple of old shirts an' a pair of breeches! You kin see it ain't got no helf of dust in it. But I have got a little stake on me. It's in bills, in my wallet. Wait—I'll show you. Thrusting his hand into the front of his shirt, he withdrew an old leather wallet, and opening it, drew out a sheaf of crumpled banknotes. "Three hundred dollars—an' I need every damn cent of it to winter through on. I ain't hittin' fer the outside. I wish to God I was—but I ain't made no strike yet. Hell—if I had any dust, I wouldn't be guidin' this outfit fer no ounce a day, would I? Not by a damn sight, I wouldn't! Tell you what I'll do, boys—I'll dicker. Let me keep my little stake. Go through my pack there if you want to—if you think I'm lyin'—but let me keep my three hundred to winter through on, an' I'll tell you where you've overlooked ten thousan'. The little man there that you jest searched; he ain't goin' outside broke—by a damn sight. He's smart enough to cache his stuff, instead of leavin' it lay around in his pack. An' he's smart enough to cache it where you won't never find it, neither. Here's my three hundred. Take it er leave it. But if you do take it, you'll be kissin' ten thousan' goodby, you kin bet on that!"

The bandit hesitated, and glanced inquiringly at his partner, who still had the party covered by his rifle.

"Sure—deal with him!" urged the rifleman, who seemed to be the leader. "Hell, we can't lose! If we don't git the ten thousan', we git the three hundred anyway! All right—spit it out, old timer. It's a deal! Show us the ten thousan' an' you keep what you've got."

BLACK JOHN pointed to Deters who was staring at him incredulously, his face showing pasty white in the twilight. "He's got ten thousan' in big bills sewed up in his coat," he said. "Jest rip out the linin' an' you'll find 'em."

As the coat was jerked roughly from his back the little man turned on Black John in a fury. "You big yellow skunk! You dirty, low-lived mut! I'll git you fer this, if I have to stay in the country all the rest of my life!"

"An' we'll help you!" cried the elder Simpson. "The damn coward—squealin' on a man to save his own lousy three hundred! Jest wait till these guys go, an' you'll git yourn!"

As the other was busy retrieving bills from the lining of Deters's coat, the man with the rifle grinned at Black John.

"Sounds like they mean business, pardner. Yes sir—I wouldn't like to be standin' in your shoes when we leave here. You've got 'em all riled up. But you claim yer a guide. Mebbe we could use you ourselves. Do you know where Halfaday Crick is?"

"Shore, I know where it's at. But I don't want to have nothin' to do with Halfaday. The talk is that they're all outlaws up there. They might git my three hundred—after I done my damndest to save it!"

The bandit laughed. "Don't worry about yer three hundred. We'll see you through with it. Fact is, we want to lay low fer a while, an' we heard how on Halfaday there ain't no questions asked—an' how it lays right up agin the Alasky line, so if the police shows up, all a man's

got to do is step acrost an' tell 'em to go to hell."

"That's right," admitted Black John. "There's a place called Cushing's Fort where these here outlaws hangs out. I know a couple of fellas that was there an' they claim it ain't only a little ways from the line an' the Mounted can't go acrost after anyone unless they've got papers from the American Gover'ment in Washington."

"Will you guide us there?"

"Well," replied Black John with evident reluctance, "if you'll promise to not let none of them damn outlaws rob me of my three hundred, I might. But you'll have to pay me an ounce a day—jest like these men has been doin'. Only I don't collect nothin' off'n them—you havin' took all their dust."

"All right," grinned the bandit. "We'll pay you an ounce a day. How about it, in case we wanted to clear out of the country? Could we go out by way of Alasky? That way, we wouldn't have to pass no Mounted Police posts."

"Oh, shore. Lots of 'em has gone out of the country by way of Halfaday. Jest step acrost the line—an' all Alasky's yourn. The Mounted can't foller, an' there ain't a U. S. marshal within three hundred mile of Cushing's Fort—an' the ones that's even that near is so damn fat an' lazy they couldn't ketch a porkypine."

"The place sounds good," agreed the other bandit, removing the last of the bills, and tossing the coat onto the ground. "They claim it's run by a fella named Black John."

"Yeah—that's what the talk is. Him an' a fella name of Old Cush."

"This Black John must be makin' a good thing out of it, some way er other—er he wouldn't be there. I wonder what his line is?"

"I couldn't say."

"They claim he runs things damn high-handed up there."

"Well, he might, at that."

"But, it don't make no difference how much power a man's got, er how good a thing he's got—if a couple of smarter men come along they kin git it away from him."

"Ain't that the truth! Look at Napoleon."

"Who?"

"Oh, some fella I was readin' about that run hog-wild over in Yurrup fer a while. But they got him."

"Sure, they'd git him. A man's got to come to the end of his rope some day."

"Quite a few of 'em has, on Halfaday."

THE man with the rifle turned to the victims, as the other transferred the gold sacks to a couple of packs. "Pile in yer polin' boat an' drop back down-river," he commanded. "You kin take yer stuff with you an' run the rapids before dark. The boat's lighter, now you've got shet of all that heavy dust. You'll git back to Dawson in a week er so, an' you kin tell the damn Mounted to look fer us on Halfaday. Mebbe we'll be waitin' fer 'em there—an' mebbe we'll be half ways acrost Alasky. So long. An' don't take no wooden nickels."

"Turn that damn guide over to us fer fifteen minutes," implored the little man, "an' by God, he'll never double-cross anyone else!"

The bandit grinned. "Sorry—but we need him ourselves. Git goin' now. We don't want none of you divin' fer them rifles till we git a damn good start."

III

OLD CUSH, the somber-faced proprietor of Cushing's Fort, the trading post and saloon that ministered to the wants of the little communtiy of outlawed men that had sprung up on Halfaday Creek close against the Alaska-Yukon border, returned from the storeroom where he had just filled four variously labeled liquor bottles from the same whisky barrel, and arranged the bottles on the back bar. Laboriously noting the transaction in his

stock book, he called to a comely Indian girl who was returning the broom to its place, after sweeping the floor:

"Give me a hand with this slop tub, an' we'll dump it. It don't rinse good, no more. The glasses comes out cloudy. Then you fetch some fresh water from the crick. A man don't like fer to drink out of a sticky glass."

With the tub refilled and in its place beneath the bar, the Indian girl retired to the kitchen, and Old Cush glanced at the clock, whose hands indicated mid-forenoon. Reaching for a bottle and glass, he poured himself a drink.

"It's about time Black John was showin' up," he muttered. "I sort of miss the damn badger. I kind of looked fer him yisterday. Allowin' fer a three-days' drunk in Dawson, he could of made it by then."

Sloshing his empty glass in the fresh rinse water, he returned it to the back bar, and sauntering to the door, fixed his eyes on three moving black specks that showed far down the creek. Reaching for the brass telescope that was always in readiness near the door, he studied the specks minutely. "Speakin' of the devil, as the sayin' goes," he muttered, "an' up he pops. But who's them two with him? They ain't none of the boys from Halfaday. Prob'ly left the canoe down the crick on account of low water. I'm shore glad he's back. I wouldn't like fer nothin' to happen to him."

RETURNING the telescope to its place, Cush retreated to the bar where he busied himself with small chores until two pack-laden strangers entered the room, closely followed by Black John, who was pointing toward the two, and shaking his head vigorously behind their backs.

Before Cush could utter a word of greeting, the voice of Black John boomed out. "This here's Halfaday Crick, ain't it? An' this is Cushing's Fort?"

Taking his cue, Old Cush nodded without hint of recognition. "Yeah. This is the place."

"What did I tell you—I know'd I was right!" boasted Black John, as the two men paused before the bar and swung the packs from their backs. "Yes sir—what I claim, if a man knows the country he kin find a place—even if he ain't never been there before." He turned to the proprietor. "Be you this here Black John Smith they tell about?"

"Naw," answered Cush. "I ain't him. He ain't so good lookin'. Anyway, he went down to Dawson a couple of weeks er so ago." He set out a bottle and glasses. "The house is buyin' a drink," he said.

Swinging his own well-worn packsack to the floor at his feet, Black John leaned an

elbow on the bar and surveyed the room with interest. "Nice place you've got here," he opined. "They say it ain't far from the line."

"Right close."

"That makes it handy. But what would this here Black John be goin' clean down to Dawson fer—what with all a man would want to drink an' everythin', right here?"

"He took down a batch of dust, fer to git it changed into bills. He'd ought to be showin' up any day now."

"Drink up, an' have one on me," invited one of the strangers. "How much dust did he take?"

"It was quite a canoe load. Run a little better'n six thousan' ounces. He'll be fetchin' back right around a hundred thousan' in bills. This here damn safe of mine don't only hold so much—an' every now an' then it gits all clogged up with dust, what with the boys all fetchin' it in to bank it. So every onct in so often, we take a batch of it down an' trade it fer bills,

which they don't take up so much room."

Neither Cush nor Black John missed the swift glance that passed between the two strangers, as one of them casually asked, "Does he make the trip alone?"

"Oh, shore! He jest loads the stuff into his canoe an' drops on down; then he paddles back up agin with the bills."

Again a swift glance passed between the two strangers as the other bought a drink. When the glasses were empty, one of them spoke. "Well, so long. I guess we'll be goin'."

As they stooped to recover their pack sacks, Black John thumped the bar with his fist. "Hold on! Ain't you fergot somethin'?"

"What?" asked one of the men.

"Why, my pay fer guidin' you! An ounce a day, it was—fer seven days. Seven ounces it figgers. There's a set of scales on the bar. Weigh it out."

The two laughed. "Yeah, that's so," admitted one. "An' there's somethin' else we fergot, too—that three hundred in bills that you've got in yer wallet." He turned to Cush with a knowing wink. "We've heard all about this place," he said, "an' we know we're amongst friends. Watch us trim a sucker. The haul won't be big—but it'll buy a few drinks." The man turned on Black John with a scowl. "Shuck out that three hundred—an' be damn quick about it!" he snarled.

"Oh, my pore money!" whined Black John, as his hand tremblingly sought the front of his shirt. "You claimed you wouldn't let no one bother it! Please, mister—ain't you got no heart?"

"Quit yer snivvlin', an' shuck out that money before I smear you all over the place!" The bandit extended his hand for the wallet. "Put it right there—an' hurry up!"

FROM his place behind the bar Old Cush looked somberly on as Black John's hand was slowly withdrawn from beneath his shirt. The next instant the two before the bar stiffened with surprise, and the extended hand dropped to the man's side, as both stared wide-eyed into the muzzle of a forty-five six-gun.

"Step back from them rifles!" ordered the man behind the gun, in a cold, flinty voice. "Back away! Er I'll fill yer guts so full of lead they could use you fer boat anchors! An' put them hands up—an' keep 'em there!" He called to Cush, "Come on around here an' frisk 'em. An' be sure you don't overlook ten thousan' in bills that they've got in their pockets. They stole it off'n a pore little cuss that was headin' back to Ioway with it to buy him a farm so he could set around milkin' a cow while he smelt the barn. They've got twenty-four hundred ounces of dust in them packs, too—but it was stole off'n three damn scoundrels which it wouldn't sadden me none if they lost it."

When Cush had removed the bills from the pockets of the men, and satisfied himself that they had no side arms, Black John gave further orders. "Tie their hands behind their backs, Cush, an' we'll drop 'em in the hole till we kin git a quorum together an' hang 'em."

"Hang us!" cried one of the men. "We ain't done nothin' you kin hang us fer!"

"Nothin' to hang you fer! Why, you dirty two-timin' skunks! Jest the fact that yer livin' is evidence enough to hang you on! But to be specific, as a lawyer would say—yer charged with, an' practically convicted of, the robbery of four men on White River, an' also the attempted robbery of me, right here in this room, which amounts to the crime of skullduggery, an' is hangable on Halfaday. We don't tolerate no crime whatever on the crick an' its subtendin' rivers, mountains an' gulches."

"Who—who the hell are you, anyhow?" gasped one of the men.

"Smith, is the name—Black John, to be more exact. The hundred thousan' in bills Cush was tellin' you about is layin' there in my pack sack. I'm the lad you told me could be got—when a couple of smarter fellas come along! Yer prob'ly right, at

that. I know damn well you was right when you prophesied that every man must come to the end of his rope. When Cush finishes tyin' up yer hands we'll take you out in the store room an' show you the coil of it that you've come to the end of."

"Let us go," begged the other. "We admit we didn't do you right! Turn us loose, an' we'll promise to hit fer Alasky an' never show our faces no more in the Yukon. We'll give you all the dust in them packs—an' them bills, too!"

Black John grinned. "Yer ontrustworthy. We couldn't rely on yer promise. An' besides, I don't deem yer title to the dust an' bills is sound enough fer to transfer by deed of gift. There's a palpable flaw in it, as a lawyer would say—an' besides, the property you mentioned is practically ourn, already."

Aided by Old Cush, he shoved the bound men toward the storeroom where the trap door admitting to a dark little cell beneath the floor was raised. "Give 'em a shove, if they won't use the ladder, Cush," urged Black John, "an' we'll divide the stuff up between us, an' then call the boys."

IV

BACK in the barroom Old Cush eyed the two heavy packs that the bandits had deposited on the floor.

"Twenty-four hundred ounces in 'em," observed Black John, "feloniously acquired, along with them bills, off'n four chechakos down on White River. We'll take it in the storeroom an' divide it between us. The transaction should show a profit of thirty-eight thousan', two hundred in dust —an' ten thousan' in paper money—a matter of twenty-four thousan', two hundred apiece—which is pore enough pay fer the jeopardy we've been placed in by them two damn crooks." As he talked, Black John opened his own pack sack and proceeded to count out some big bills: "Nine thousan'—nine thousan', five hundred—ten thousan'—ten thousan', five hundred—eleven thousan'," he counted aloud, and, making the bills into a packet, he handed it to Cush, who was regarding him with a puzzled expression. "Stick this here in the cash drawer," he ordered.

"But—hell, John, them robbers didn't git that money! It belongs to the boys! Part of it's yourn. An' I've got some in there, too!"

"Yeah—but you ain't got as much as you had, an' neither has none of us. It's like this—when the hold-up come off I seen where I stood to lose that hundred thousan' that belongs to the boys. So, whilst that damn robber was goin' through them pack sacks, I done some fast thinkin'. One of these here chechakos had changed his dust into bills an' had sewed 'em in the linin' of his coat—which fact he had confided in me. Of course, the damn crook didn't have no trouble findin' the dust in the pack sacks; but he didn't find the little man's ten thousan' in bills. They'd passed him up, an' was startin' in to work on me, when I dickered with 'em. I tossed my pack toward 'em, so they could see it wasn't heavy with dust, an' I showed 'em three hundred I had in my wallet, claimin' I needed it to winter through on. Then I told 'em that if they'd leave me keep what I had, I'd tell 'em where they'd overlooked ten thousan' dollars. They dickered, an' I told 'em where it was at, an' they yanked off the little man's coat, an' found the bills." Black John paused and grinned broadly. "It made the chechakos mad as hell, them thinkin' I'd sold out to save my three hundred. They even threatened me with bodily harm, so when the robbers hired me to guide 'em to Halfaday, I was glad to take 'em up. I figgered that onct we got 'em here, we wouldn't have no great trouble in outguessin' 'em—an' it turned out I was right."

"Yeah," agreed Old Cush dryly. "It looks that way. But what about that 'leven thousan' you took out of yer pack sack? How does that figger in?"

"Why—don't you see? I wouldn't play no dirty trick like that on a man, without reimbursin' him, would I? The robbers

got the little man's money on account of me tellin' 'em where it was at—an' the boys has got to make the amount good! Hell—it was to save their money I done it!"

"Yeah, but I've got his money right here in my pocket, why not jest give him back his own bills?"

"Not by a damn sight! That's where the doctrine of *pro ratie* comes in! Everyone that had money in that pack has got to kick in with a per cent fer savin' it. Me an' you divides up the orignal ten thousan', along with the dust, as our wages fer ketchin' the damn thieves. You've got to consider the equity of the thing, Cush. We're each entitled to half of that ten thousan'. You helped with the capture, an' it was due to my astuteness that the boys didn't lose the whole hundred thousan'. An' besides, I wouldn't think that quick fer less'n five thousan' dollars, at no time!"

"Well—considerin' it from that angle, I guess yer right, John," admitted Cush. "But s'pose them chechakos shows up with the police?"

"We'll simply tell 'em that the robbers passed on. That's the euphonious way of expressin' death—but the chechakos an' the police will take it that we meant they passed on into Alasky."

"What's euphonious?" grumbled Cush.

"It means polite. Hell—you can't go blurtin' out everything by its common name in general conversation, er you'd soon git frowned on as a boor. A man's s'posed to use a certain amount of tack in his use of words."

"Mebbe," suggested Cush, "we'd ought to git the hangin' over with, an' do the dividin' afterward. If them chechakos was to run onto a patrol before they got clean back to Dawson, they might be showin' up quicker'n we expect."

"That's a thought. But we'll carry them packs into the storeroom, so's not to arouse no ondue cupidity amongst the boys at the meetin'. We'll hang the damn thieves fer their attempted robbery of me, right here in the saloon. That way, we won't need to mention the gold an' them bills they took off'n the chechakos. That would only be an aggravatin' circumstance, anyhow. We can only hang 'em onct."

"But," objected Cush, "if we don't say nothin' about them bills bein stole, how are we goin' to account fer the ones you took out of yer pack sack to pay that chechako back?"

"Looks like yer kind of borrowin' a bridge to cross before you git to it," retorted Black John. "No one but me an' you knows how much dust I took down, or how many bills I fetched back. Come on, we'll git these packs out of sight, an' I'll go drum up a quorum."

AT THE doorway, Black John paused and reached hurriedly for the telescope. "Damn if it didn't happen jest like you said!" he exclaimed. "Them chechakos must of run onto a policeman, right soon after they was turned loose. They're three, four mile down the crick yet—but it's Corporal Downey that's with 'em!"

"Hum," said Old Cush. "We ain't got time to hang 'em unless you an' me done the job ourselves."

"Yeah—an' that wouldn't be ethical. Even a damn thief has got a right to be hung by a duly app'inted miners' meetin', an' not jest permiscuous."

"Shore—but what'll we do? We might leave em in the hole, an' explain that they'd passed on, like you said. An' then hang 'em after Downey an' the chechakos had went back."

Black John shook his head. "Nope, they ain't gagged, an' even if they was, they might slip the gags an' git to yellin'. We've always worked hand in glove with Downey, an' I wouldn't like to put nothin' over on him." He paused, and after a moment of deep thought, hastily returned the telescope to its place. "Come on, Cush," he said. "'Half a loaf is better'n no bread,' as the sayin' goes. We'll hurry up an' divide that dust before they git here—an' put half of it back in the pack sacks,

an' fetch 'em back an' cache 'em behind the bar."

"But cripes, John—them fellas knows how much they had in their packs! How in hell do you expect to git away with half of it?"

"Don't stand there an' auger! It'll cut deep into our profit, but it's all I kin think of."

V

THREE quarters of an hour later the four chechakos, accompanied by Corporal Downey stepped into the saloon to find Black John and Old Cush shaking dice for the drinks.

"Where's them two robbers you guided up here?" demanded the elder Simpson truculently. "An' where's our dust?"

Black John ignored him. "Hello, Downey! Damn if we ain't glad to see you! You popped up jest in time to take a

hangin' off'n our hands. Step right up an' have a drink. You others is in on it, too. I jest stuck one on the house."

"It was me won that game," reminded Cush. "You never beat them three sixes!"

"Always quibblin' over technicalities," replied Black John wearily. "Have it your own way. I won't auger with you. Belly up, boys."

"Where's our dust?" reiterated Simpson.

"An' my bills?" seconded Deters. "Of all the damn dirty, low-lived tricks I ever heard tell of, that one you pulled beats 'em all! Squealed where my ten thousan' was to save yer own lousy three hundred!"

"It would seem a trifle small minded, offhand," grinned Black John. "But the fact is, me an' Cush apprehended them two rascals, an' we figgered on hangin' 'em fer the crime as soon as we got a quorum together. Corporal Downey here will take 'em off our hands, so there don't seem to be no reason to delay returnin' yer property." He called to Old Cush. "Hand the man over that package of bills."

Reaching into the drawer, Cush withdrew a packet of bills which he tossed onto the bar in front of the little man who eagerly pounced on them, and proceeded swiftly to count them. Running them rapidly through, he paused, and counted them again more slowly. Once again he counted them, fingering each bill carefully. Then he looked up with a puzzled expression.

"What's the matter?" demanded Black John. "Ain't the count right?"

"Well—no," replied the little man, regarding the bills with puckered brow. "I only had ten thousan', an' I've made it eleven thousan' three different times."

"Oh, that's all right," grinned Black John. "The other thousan' is interest."

"Interest!"

"Shore—ten per cent, it figgers. I don't aim to borrow no money without I pay interest."

"Borrow—I don't understand!"

BLACK JOHN'S grin widened. "That's easy," he explained, and reaching down, began to toss packages of bill bills onto the bar from the pack sack at his feet. "You see, I was comin' back from Dawson, where I'd traded dust fer these bills. I had right around a hundred thousan' in my pack sack, an' I didn't want fer them robbers to git it. So I dickered with 'em, offerin' to tell 'em where they'd overlooked ten thousan', if they'd leave me go—puttin' it acrost to 'em that that three hundred in my wallet was all I had. They fell fer it, an' I told 'em about your bills, figgerin' if they made a git-away, I could repay you out of the hundred thousan',

an' still be around ninety thousan' to the good. But as luck would have it, they didn't make no git-away. In fact, they was so damn depraved that they ondertook to double-cross me an' rob me of my three hundred, besides refusin' to pay me the seven ounces I earned by guidin' 'em."

"I see," grinned the little man. "But you don't need to pay me no interest."

"Keep it," said Black John. "We aim to do the square thing when a man does us a favor."

"You say you've got these two robbers?" asked Downey.

"Yer damn right! We tied 'em up an' throw'd 'em in the hole, preparatory to hangin' 'em."

"I guess you wouldn't have gone so far wrong in hangin' 'em, at that," remarked the officer. "I was hot on their trail for a murder and robbery at Five Fingers. That's why these men found me so quick."

"Where's our dust?" persisted Simpson.

"I s'pose," replied Black John, "its in their packsacks. We all seen 'em put it there—down on the White. They ain't trusted me with none of it, an' them sacks sounded tol'able heavy when they thumped 'em on the floor. We set 'em back behind the bar, in case anyone come along whilst we was shovin' the thieves down the hole."

Recovering the packsacks, the men tore into them, and hastily counted the little sacks of gold. "Hey!" cried the elder Simpson angrily. "There ain't more'n half our dust here!"

"Meanin'," asked Black John, fixing the speaker with a hard, level stare, "that you accuse me, or Cush here, of tamperin' with them sacks?"

"I don't know who tampered with 'em," retorted the man. "But half of that dust is gone. It's a cinch you had plenty of chance!"

BLACK JOHN turned to Downey. "Now—what do you know about that! Here, me an' Cush saves their damn dust fer 'em—an' they up an' accuse us of stealin' half of it." He whirled thunderously upon Simpson. "Why, damn you, if we was goin' to steal it, why in hell wouldn't we steal it all?"

"Maybe the robbers cached part of it on the trail," suggested one of the Simpsons.

"It won't hurt to ask 'em," said Downey. "It's possible they might talk." Stepping into the storeroom, he raised the trap door in the floor and called into the dark interior, "Hey, you—this is the Law. How much dust did you lift off those men down on White River?"

"Not a damn ounce!" came the prompt reply. "You don't think we're fools enough to talk, do you?"

"There was twenty-four hundred ounces—that's what there was!" bellowed Simpson. "An' there ain't more'n twelve hundred here!"

Black John turned to Corporal Downey with a pained expression. "Common honesty prompts me to state that I don't deem it probable that them robbers cached no dust on the trail, er I'd of seen 'em do it. Such bein' the case, look at the position this man's accusation puts me an' Cush in! Like we was a pair of thieves, er somethin'! I'll bet Deters here wouldn't claim I was a thief!"

"Not by a damn sight! You sure used me white!"

"As a matter of fact," continued Black John, ignoring the interruption, "these here three Simpsons look to me like men that would lie without no compunctions. Such bein' the case, a simple plan occurs to me whereby me an' Cush kin vindicate our good name. If these men had a certain amount of dust, they're bound to have royalty receipts to show fer it. Ain't that right, Downey?"

"Of course!" agreed the officer. "It's a wonder I wouldn't have thought of that, myself."

"Well, no man kin be expected to think of everything," grinned Black John complacently, as a choking sound issued from the throat of the elder Simpson whose face flamed red with rage.

Corporal Downey turned on the man. "You men have got the receipts, I suppose? Let's have a look at 'em, an' we can check this dust up in no time."

"We've got the receipts all right," blustered the man. "But the fact is we—er—we—a——"

"Let's see the receipts," demanded Downey, regarding the man curiously.

Reluctantly the men produced the receipts, and Corporal Downey totalled them. "These here receipts calls fer twelve hundred ounces," he announced coldly. "I guess you've got all the dust you started with. Men like you really ought to be kicked out of the country! Tryin' to git Black John in trouble—after him gittin' back yer dust fer you! I'm sorry yer receipts is right—I'd sure enjoy takin' a bunch like you back to Dawson an' makin' you serve a good long stretch fer smugglin' out dust, besides seizin' a good stiff share of it fer penalty! My advice to you three is to get to hell off Halfaday, while I'm still on the crick. Black John here ain't no angel—an' he might take it into his head to retaliate fer the wrong you tried to do him!"

"Oh, I'm willin' to let bygones be bygones," said Black John, grinning into the irate faces of the Simpsons, "but at that, it would be better if you took Downey's advice."

TRANSFERRING the dust to their own packs, the three strode wrathfully from the room. When they had gone, Downey turned to the others. "Well, I'll be takin' my prisoners an' hittin' back fer Dawson. I'm sure obliged to you fer ketchin' 'em. I was afraid they'd make the Line before I could overtake 'em. That was a dirty murder they pulled at Five Fingers."

"Oh, don't mention it, Downey," replied Black John heartily. "You know damn well that whenever we kin, we like to play along with you—up here on Halfaday."

"Guess I'll hit back fer the Yukon with the corporal, an' go outside on the steamboat," said Deters, extending his hand. "So long. I'm sure obliged fer that interest money."

"Oh, that's all right," said Black John. "Mebbe it'll buy you an extry cow er two to milk, er a barn to smell of."

"That sure was quick thinkin' on your part—to dicker with them robbers the way you done."

"Yeah—quick thinkin' sometimes pays a man."

Deters grinned, and when Corporal Downey wasn't looking, he favored Black John with a knowing wink. "I'm glad I paid royalty on my dust when I had it changed into bills," he said.

"Oh, shore! Honesty pays in the long run," replied Black John sententiously. "Don't it, Downey?"

"Yer damn right it does," agreed the youthful officer, with conviction. "If a man don't believe it, all he'd have to do would be to think about what's goin' to happen to these two birds I'm takin' back with me."

When the two found themselves alone in the saloon after the departure of the others, Black John turned to the somber faced proprietor. "Onder the circumstances, Cush," he said, "it looks to me like it was up to you to buy a drink. An', by God!" he added. "I jest happened to think—I never collected my wages as a guide!"

HANDS OF FATE

By J. ALLAN DUNN

Author of "Broken Trail," "The Cleanup," and Many Other SHORT STORIES Favorites

CHAPTER I

MURDER?

THERE is a dead man under the ice on Badger River. A chechako."

Corporal Terence O'Kane, corporal in charge of the Mounted detachment at Fort Arrow, Mackenzie River Basin, looked up at the speaker.

It was Malcolm Murray, dour and not too successful independent trader. Behind the trader stood the Eskimo, Itosiak, Murray's right hand man. Both of the men were tall, both lean, and their skins were leathery. O'Kane knew nothing against Murray, save that he was a pinch-penny, but of the pair he preferred Itosiak, stolid but not stupid, a famous trail-breaker and, among the tribesmen, a mighty hunter.

Murray had a face like an old dog-fox, reddish hair and whiskers a bit grizzled, gray-blue eyes over close together, a trifle faded. They had the hue of shore ice, and they looked as cold.

Itosiak had eyes like sloes. They seemed to be pinched between cheeks and brows. His features were Mongolian and masklike, with the Oriental fold to the eyelids.

For a moment, O'Kane studied them. They were just off the trail. It was early spring, the sun had appeared, the long, long nights were over, snow was melting on the tundra, ice dissolving in the lakes.

"How do you know he was a chechako?" asked the corporal. Itosiak shrugged his parkad shoulders. Murray slowly drew off his mittens. That was the way with the trader. Everything he did appeared deliberate, but he usually came out ahead.

"No sourdough would try and travel Badger River bottom in the winter," he said. "No sourdough wears a beard on a winter trail. We could see this chap's whiskers through the ice. They didn't grow after he was dead. That's a fule's yarn. The flesh may shrink, but the hair don't sprout. This one is well preserved Corporal; though there's no tellin' when he died. Badger freezes clear to the bottom in places. And the ice has been thinning for the last week."

A Dead Man in the Ice of Badger River; Witchcraft at Work—and a Task for the Mounted

"Couldn't identify him, I suppose."

"If I could, I'd ha' mentioned it," said Murray drily. "No, we couldna see that plain. The ice is rough, yet, and none too clear."

"You were coming down the river bed?" asked O'Kane. He was not much more than half the age of the man he questioned, but he had efficiency and authority marked upon his Celtic face. A corporal in charge of detachment is of greater importance than the rank suggests, though he may have, as O'Kane had, only one policeman and a special constable under him.

THIS death sounded like what was called a natural demise, though some might cite it as contributory suicide, caused by the ignorance of a tenderfoot. But O'Kane got hunches sometimes. He had a notion that there was more to it than natural causes. Also that Itosiak shared that notion; that Murray himself knew, or suspected, something out of the way.

But he was not going to get it out of either of them by direct questioning. If they did not volunteer information they did not mean to give it. That was the way of natives and old-timers of the North, as if they absorbed something of its eternal mystery and silence.

"We've been to Whiterock," said Murray. "First trip in. I took six hundred pounds o' tobacco, candy, dried fruits an' tea, wi' some tinned stuff. We came back empty, an' fast."

That was not a reply to the corporal's query, but O'Kane did not seem to notice it. He made a note or two on the pad, still seated at his official desk, with his official coat of scarlet and the chevrons of command.

"Thinking of starting a store there?" he asked.

Whiterock was a new mining camp, started the year before. It might become a town if the lode kept producing. Miners considered that placer-mining days were done, and going in for quartz and stamp mills.

Murray's face grew sour. A vague mould seemed to come out upon it. He looked down his nose, half slily.

"I might, if the Hudson Bay folk woulna cut prices to the bone; aye, to the very marrow"; he added, with a flash of warm temper. "They can buy cheaper an' bigger stocks than we free-traders. They'd grind us under foot. It was Itosiak saw the corp'," he went on, as if he had never varied from the subject. "We were on the bank. Itosiak was breakin' trail. The snow was mushy, an' made poor traveling. The wind blew the stuff in the dogs' eyes, an' they were always tryin' to quit, to lie down an' sleep."

O'Kane knew all about that, as well as Murray, but he only nodded, swung his swivel-chair towards the Eskimo, who had not uttered a word. Itosiak used the Mackenzie Basin 'pidgin'.

"How come, Itosiak?"

"I fix um dog. Go ahead, so they come along. No use whippum. They no can see, no can do. I look down, see something in ice. Look something like um seal, but no seal in river. I speak along boss. I go looksee mo' plain. Boss come down. We both look. All same as boss speak along of you."

"You didn't know the man? Never saw him before?"

For a moment, O'Kane believed he saw a deliberate attempt at unseen communication between Itosiak and the trader. It was gone, in a flash. At most it was little, if anything, more than a mere twitch of the flesh, such as a man with tic might make. It seemed rather as if the thing that passed —if it did pass—was telepathic rather than telegraphic.

BOTH men were in full range of the corporal's keen vision, but he could not see Murray show the slightest reception. But, to O'Kane, Itosiak had silently, if mentally, asked a question, and Murray had answered it, also with silence.

It did not seem vital. These men had just come in from Whiterock. The dead chechako might have been dead for weeks, for months, embalmed in the ice. It was not conceivable that they were guilty of his death, that if they had been they would have reported it—though Murray might have done such a thing. But, for some reason, they were withholding something. If they did not know the dead man, they guessed who he might be. If they were not willing to swear they had seen him before, they might not be willing to swear that they had not.

They had brought the news, turned the affair over to the police. And they were staying out of it. As for the Eskimo's complete accord with the white man, such fealties were not uncommon, and their causes often obscure, not easy to be understood.

Murray and his musher left the detachment barracks for the trader's store, and O'Kane prepared for his grisly task.

Another month, and the trails would be wide open. Now messages went by Indian runner, at twenty-five miles a day, to points where they could be relayed by telegraph. The Royal Canadian Signals, and their short-wave sets, could be called in on occasion, a plane might be chartered. But those things rested with District Headquarters at Edmonton. The burden of immediate and intelligent investigation lay upon O'Kane.

So far it was merely mystery, not crime. In the territory there were five thousand Eskimos, four thousand Athabascan Indians, and something like a thousand white men. The Mounted Detachments were expected to keep track of all of these, to account for the missing. The man beneath the ice might be on the lists sent from time to time of Missing Persons.

That was routine. It was not a routine job that lay ahead of O'Kane. He took along his constable and his special-officer, Koutouk, interpreter and musher.

They used the detachment's toboggan sled and seven dogs, and they called at Murray's store for Itosiak to go with them, and point out the spot. He went willingly enough. Murray, in his dour fashion, had little to say.

It was a ghastly detail, and not an easy

one. Not hard to get through the ice about the body, but difficult to release it from the mass that extended to the river bed. It might not have done so when the man first lay there.

The ice has many flaws, and poor refractions. It was murky, and showed the corpse as if it were the reflection of a cheap and dirty mirror. It was enshrined there much as an insect is preserved in cloudy amber.

The face was most clearly revealed, though that was only a vague, pallid shape

of flesh that stared upwards with horrible eyes, out of which all color seemed to have leached, so that they were only whitish orbs.

The man's parka hood had fallen back and the face was framed in black hair from chin to pate. Hair that was lank, like sable seaweed. The parka front was open, a long outer shirt of khaki or similar material, but its side folds concealed the arms.

They got the big block free at last, with prodigious, perspiring labor. It was a lump of ice roughly seven feet long, four feet wide, and about three feet high. Solid, save for the body in its center.

In some strange and sardonic quirk of memory, O'Kane was reminded of a salmon he had seen frozen and exhibited in the window of a restaurant. But that ice had been clear, showing every detail. This concealed more than it revealed, save for the main, insistent fact.

They wrapped canvas and tarpaulins about it, lashed it to the sled. It was a full load. In places, they had to help the dogs haul, on the way back to the detachment. There was an outhouse at the barracks that would serve as morgue.

The nearest official medical officer was at Aklavik, but there was a doctor at Arrow who had authority as acting-assistant-surgeon. He was a Scotch Canadian named Shiels. O'Kane called on him for an autopsy.

Shiels liked his nips, but he was a good medico, and a cool one. "We'll have to thaw him out," he said as he looked at the bulk that once had been a man. "Best to freeze him up again when I'm through, if it's identification you're after. He'll not last long, once he's been exposed. Neither will the winter."

"Long enough to get him through to Edmonton, it it's necessary."

Shiels looked curiously at O'Kane. "Got one of those hunches of yours? Looks to me like another case of *un innocent*.. North of Sixty is no place for tenderfeet. However, we'll soon see."

He glanced about the shed. It had a table, used as a carpenter's hench. "This 'll do," said the surgeon, "but you'll have to get a stove in here—for both of us. And a bottle of whiskey from your medical supplies. I'll not use it all, O'Kane, but this is not a sweet job ahead of me."

HIS face was grim when he poked his head into the barracksroom two hours later, and beckoned to O'Kane with a backward sweep of his head. He was perfectly sober, but the bottle was half empty.

The floor boards of the shack were wet, the air was steamy. The body lay under a sheet of light oilskin, used for sled packing.

"Cause of death," said Shiels, and dropped a misshapen bullet into O'Kane's palm. "It entered the skull at the base, by the nape of the neck; to be exact, through the top cervical vertebra, which it smashed. It wound up in the frontal

sinus, with its force spent, and its deadly duty ended. It just did not break through."

"Rifle slug, looks like thirty-thirty," said O'Kane, weighing the missile. "Common enough weapon. Killed him instantly, I suppose. And was fired from below, at a sharp angle."

"Angle of about ninety degrees," Shiels agreed. "Looks as if he were on the bank and the killer fired from the river—from behind, at that. A damned good shot, O'Kane."

O'Kane looked at the surgeon curiously. He could smell the whiskey on his breath, but the man's hands were steady as those of a diamond-cutter, his eyes were mobile and brilliant. He was distinctly not drunk.

"It's murder," said the corporal. "My hunch was right."

"Murder it is," echoed Shiels, "but you don't know the half of your hunch, O'Kane. Better take a snifter before I show you."

O'Kane shook his head. "Never on duty, and not much off," he said. "What is it?"

"This would have killed him, but it was done after he was dead," said Shiels; "or he would have been drained of blood. The murderer mutilated him, for some fantastic reason."

He drew back the shroud. Both the man's hands had been lopped off at the wrists, cleanly enough, with a sharp instrument, like a woodsman's hatchet, or perhaps an axe. The cold had seared the flesh, but O'Kane could see the ends of both radius and ulna bones at the extremities.

"Sheared through," Shiels said. "Missed the carpals, perhaps by accident. I doubt if the beggar was an anatomist. It struck me as a bit uncanny, O'Kane. That's why I half emptied your bottle. I saw that, of course, before I probed for the bullet, or found the spot it entered. Poor devil hadn't had a haircut recently. His hair hid the entry. But it was those missing hands, so obviously severed after death—and missing—that made me look for another wound. I don't see the sense in it yet."

"Might be a quick way of getting rid of fingerprints," suggested the corporal. "Faster than cutting off the fingers. Or some malformation. It looks to me like a deliberate attempt to avoid identification, if discovery were ever made. Another three weeks, and if the body hadn't been found, the wolves or wolverines would have got at it."

"I wonder if they looked at it through the ice, knew what it was? I doubt it," said Shiels. "They have to smell their meat, giving off living scent, or dead rottenness. Well, O'Kane, there's your hunch and double-hunch, your murder and your mystery. Go to it. I'll turn in my report. And I'll take another drink."

"How about distinguishing marks?"

Shiels, helping himself to raw liquor, shook his head. "A mole or two, small pigmentary naevi that only a mother or a wife would remember. Nothing significant. Chap was under thirty. Healthy. If I believed in physiognomy, which I don't, I'd say he was strong physically, tolerably mentally, and weak morally. Very likely quite a likable sort. Not the laborer type at all. Here's a tip, O'Kane, without a damn thing to back it up, mind you. He might have been a remittance-man from the old country, one of the Rover boys in search of a fortune. That's my hunch—don't take it too seriously."

O'Kane did not, although he did not ignore the hint. He felt he was going to need all the sidelights, however feeble, that might illuminate the problem of the missing hands.

His work done, Shiels was beginning to show the effect of the drinks he had taken. He wavered out into the dusk.

O'KANE lit a bracket-lamp that was in the shed, and gazed again at the grisly exhibit before he covered up the mutilated body.

He spent the evening looking over Missing Persons circulars, but he found nothing that helped him identify the handless corpse. In all cases cited there was at least one outstanding mark of recognition.

The corporal intended to ask certain picked people to try and identify the dead man, but he did not intend to mention the lack of hands. He was positive Murray and Itosiak would not talk, Shiels would be professionally discreet, the two constables silent on command.

O'Kane felt, logically enough, that the truth about the hands would be the key to the mystery, but they might—or the lack of them—be used as a surprise to trap, if not the killer, a reluctant but important witness.

It would, of course, go in his official report to Edmonton. And that would go forward by Koutouk, the detachment's special constable and musher. First thing in the morning.

O'Kane finished that report before he turned-in, close to midnight.

In the outhouse, where the stove had long since gone out and been removed, the handless, nameless relic froze stiff and stark as the temperature dropped down.

Outside, and overhead, the aurora borealis crackled sharply as the brilliant streamers shook in shifting color, like brilliant banners of Boreas, soon to retreat for the few weeks of respite from the frost.

Sap was stirring faintly, leafbuds were forming, the miracle of spring resurrection was to hand, though it might be two weeks before the first true sign appeared.

O'Kane was no heretic, but he wondered what kind of resurrection awaited what Shiels had called "the poor devil."

Chapter II

THE HAND THAT TALKED

PÈRE Ladue, in charge of the mission at Fort Arrow, dropped in on O'Kane next morning, as he was wont to do after his daily stroll of visitation and exercise.

The ruddy, chubby priest, whose tonsure was wholly natural, removed his black broadbrim, drew off his gloves and hitched up his soutane as he took the chair O'Kane offered; and regaled himself with a pinch of snuff. The Father and the corporal were good friends. Père Ladue was a staunch believer in the idea that temporal and ecclesiastical matters were best administered jointly, in a settlement like this.

There was little escaped Père Ladue, O'Kane fancied. Aside from the secrets of the confessional, the women told him everything—and more, which the astute priest discounted. His jolly, amiable appearance was cover for a great shrewdness.

O'Kane was sure that the priest knew of the departure of the sled the day before, its return with a swathed, mysterious load. Also the departure of Koutouk, the runner.

The wilderness is a hard place in which to hide anything, or anybody. The slightest incident is news, passed on, discussed. But Ladue was too politic and polite to put the direct question. The police had their own confessionals, which he respected.

He sneezed vigorously into the voluminous silk bandana, gift of grateful parishioners, folded his hands on his round belly and blandly inquired:

"Any news, my son?"

O'Kane nodded. He told the other of the discovery of the body, the finding of the bullet, but he did not mention the mutilation, even to Ladue, though he did not distrust the priest for an instant. Promising secrecy, Père Ladue would regard the pledge as sacred. But O'Kane regarded that information as an ace in the hole. It was part of the hunch.

"I'd like you to see if you can identify the man," said O'Kane.

In the presence of death, the priest acquired new dignity. His office could

pass beyond the threshold between the quick and the dead.

He made gestures of benediction as O'Kane turned back the temporary pall, looked carefully, and shook his head.

"I think not," he said slowly. "A young man who died suddenly, and unshriven. Not, perhaps, of the Faith. It is hard for the young to die early, and violently. There is something vaguely familiar there; about the brows, I think, but too vague for me to assemble into a definite memory."

He shook his head again, repeated his hallowed signs, and followed the corporal back to the warm barracks-room.

"Is there anything I can do for you, Father?"

"I don't know, my son, just how far you will feel like extending your authority in this matter. Circumstances are naturally different than in a city, where they have local ordinances. It might, I suppose, come under the Criminal Code as 'False Pretenses,' or 'Fraud and Intent to Defraud.' On the other hand," he added with a twinkle in his eyes, "your superiors might consider it largely my affair. There is, I fear, nothing in Criminal Code or either Federal or Provincial Statutes against witchcraft."

"Witchcraft? You mean shamanism?" O'Kane was aware that Père Ladue was well versed in its Code and statutes, as well probably as he was himself, with his course of lectures at Regina, and his periodical examinations, shamanism, of course, was hard to eradicate among the Indians. It interfered with the priest's conversions. Even the most faithful of his flock held secret belief in the ancient ways and superstitions.

"I mean witchcraft. Fortune-telling. You know a woman named Peekoya?"

"Widow of Mukhagaluk. He was chief of this tribe, also a shaman. He died of flu a year ago. She came here last winter to stay with relatives. She will be in this spring census. I have seen her once or twice. What is she up to?"

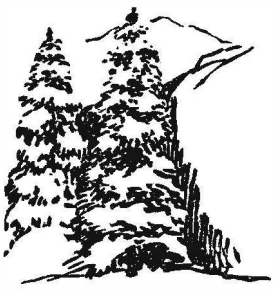
"She claims, like the Witch of Endor, to raise spirits from the dead. She sells charms that the natives wear next to their scapulars, and she tells fortunes. It is disturbing and disrupting. Lately she has acquired quite a reputation making predictions for white miners. No doubt she has information as to where they can find quartz outcrops, from her own people."

"I've heard something about that," said O'Kane. "It's pretty hard to stamp out. Does she claim the spirits give her the tips in a trance?"

"I'm not sure of the details, except that the answers are given by the talking hand."

"By the *what?*"

"I understand it is a mummied hand, supposed to be that of some distant ancestor of Mukhagaluk. Shamanism is largely hereditary. In order to become one you have to have a collection of the right sort of drums, and some acknowledged supernatural gift. Mukhagaluk had two sons, but they were both drowned. So his mantle, together with the talking hand, descends upon Peekoya."



"What does the hand do? Tap? One for yes and two for no? I've seen a rocking skull, but that was worked by electromagnetism. I'd like to see this magic hand, Father."

THE mention of a severed hand was startling, though it might be purely coincidental. Such relics were part and parcel of the shaman's hocuspocus. O'Kane decided to look up Peekoya, and her relatives. Koutouk could have told

him, or found out, but Koutouk was on trail with the report. Questions put direct by the corporal would stir up too much interest. It would spread like wildfire among the natives, the magic hand would disappear, Peekoya would instantly become a decrepit, harmless old crone.

There was probably no great harm in her, but O'Kane made up his mind to investigate.

"I'll see what I can do, Father," he said.

Père Ladue got up, took another pinch of snuff, drew on gloves and adjusted muffler and hat. Whatever he wore underneath, he used no outer coat above his soutane.

"Do that, and may le bon Dieu bless you. That sort of thing is hard to put down, of course. It undermines the prestige of the Church." The twinkle came again into his eyes. "It might make the Indians think that my 'medicine' is not as strong as Peekoya's. It inclines them to ride the fence between the two of us."

"There is, or was, an old man up at Coppermine, named Oksuk," said O'Kane, "who claimed he had joined so many white man's religions that, together with his own, he was sure of salvation. They used to call him 'No-can-go-to-hell.'"

"Ah," said the priest, amusedly. "See what may be done with Peekoya, my son. She is a thorn in my side. But if you take away her magic tribal relic, you may stir up trouble."

O'Kane nodded, a trifle grimly. He knew what it might mean to get under the hide of an Eskimo, through the thin veneer of transplanted religion to his own ideas of shamanism, where every stick and stone, every cloud and beast has a soul, where nothing ever happened through Nature, but always by some spirit, good or evil, controlled by charms and magic formulae. They had no native belief in anything like a god or goddess. They were not even pagans. And a generation or so of contact with what they regarded as white shamans did not go very deep.

If he made a wrong move, stirred up any sort of trouble, it would probably mean the loss of his promotion. The government was touchy about native rights, careful about the privileges of the precious "charges of the Empire." He might do Père Ladue more harm than good. O'Kane kept this thoughts to himself, but with all the Mounted, from the inspectors down, who had to do with Indians in actual contact and observation, he thought them pampered.

They were fast learning to depend upon government rations, losing their own initiative, giving up their hunting, too lazy even to catch fish for the winter, or bring in wolves for bounty at thirty dollars a head. They were getting decadent.

But if the mummied hand proved to be a genuine relic, equivalent to a nail or fragment of the cross, or the bone of a martyr, O'Kane was going to leave it alone. He might caution Peekoya against too much hokum, but he would do it in a friendly spirit.

Now, if there had been two hands——?

O'KANE set that idea aside as fantastic, yet he knew he was going to see Peekoya, not only for Père Ladue, but because of the prompting of his hunch. It pecked at his subconscious, almost as the ghost-hand of Peekoya might tap out replies from the spirit-land.

There was a man at Fort Arrow, an American by the name of Emerson, whom O'Kane thoroughly trusted. The settlement was swiftly growing in size and importance. The Hudson's Bay trading-post had many buildings, as had the mission. Murray had a large warehouse beside his store. Three mining companies had representatieves there. Emerson specialized in supplies to the prospectors passing through to the new strikes, or in hopes of individual finds of their own, in the rapidly developing mining region.

Emerson had been partly crippled in the

War. A shattered hip prevented him from active mining, but he knew the game, especially with regard to similar ores and quartzes that were being discovered. These were not limited to gold, and Emerson was in request as an assayer.

O'Kane believed him scrupulously honest. He did not overload a chechako with worthless and expensive equipment, he did not overcharge, and his assays had the reputation for averaging a high degree of accuracy.

Emerson was a mighty decent sort of chap who gave sound advice. He was likely to have warned a man against wearing a beard, sure to ice up, to become part of a mask of ice that would cover the face, burn through the flesh to the bone in bad weather and long exposure.

He was one of the men the corporal wanted to look at the face of the dead man. He might have outfitted him, or talked with him.

A large number of prospectors, chechakos and sourdoughs both, dealt with Emerson, much to the disgruntlement of Murray, who begrudged the rivalry of the Hudson's Bay Post; established long before his own arrival.

And O'Kane had another thing in mind in connection with Emerson. He put it up to him after he had got the American to look at the body, displayed, from the shoulders up, at the end of daylight, by the bracket lamp.

Emerson looked long and carefully, finally shook his head.

"I don't think so," he said, "though I won't be sure. He might as well be wearing a mask as those whiskers. It's a funny thing how many tenderfeet think they have to make up like General Grant, or Fremont, when they come north. Of course there are plenty of white men with cheaters, but they are mostly traders, not trail-hitters. There *is* something about him," he added doubtfully, as Père Ladue had done. "He would have been a good looker, if he has any sort of chin under that beard."

"Doc Shiels didn't seem to think so much of it as a chin," said O'Kane. The missing hands bothered him. He was a great believer in hands for identification. Not merely fingerprints, but the general shape, the length of fingers. He believed they could be easily classified and a man trained to recognize the types on sight. It was also his impression that there were no two sets of palms where the lines were alike. It was a theory of his he meant to work upon. And now these absent members hampered him.

"There's an Eskimo woman," he said, "called Peekoya, they say tells fortunes with a ghost-hand, mummied, I imagine, supposed to have belonged to an ancestor who was a wizard. They say she has helped her clients locate some good finds. Probably her relatives tip *her* off to white-rock leads."

Emerson grinned. "I wouldn't wonder. I know the dame. I've taken chaps down there who traded with me, and had heard about her from outside. Of course it's bunkum, but she puts it over. It's one swell show. You ought to see it. Spooks whispering in the roof, the old girl throwing a fit, and the hand tapping out the right answers. Creepy. Gets under your skin. Made mine gooseflesh, and the short hairs stand up on my spine. Worth the price of admission. And she *has* handed out good tips. I hadn't thought of her folks tipping her off about the quartz. That's a slick angle."

O'KANE mentally gave Père Ladue due credit, but he did not sap the prestige of the Force.

"I'd like to see it, Emerson. If I went officially I'd get nothing, of course. How about you togging me out as a chechako and introducing me as a customer of yours. I don't want to harm her. I won't have her fined or imprisoned. But I would surely like to see that talking hand."

"I wouldn't want to get the old girl into trouble. She paints the rainbow a bit, but

she's just an old woman trying to get by, and she has handed out some worthwhile tips. I come from down south where there are witch-doctors, male and female. Most of their conjure is on the right side. So long as you aim to give her a decent show, I'll do that. How about tonight?"

"That suits me." O'Kane reserved his own ideas about Peekoya's possible chicanery until he got a good look at the talking hand.

CHAPTER III

PEEKOYA

SWATHED in a heavy miner's coat over a Mackinaw shirt, with a muffler up to his chin, wearing a fur cap with a low peak, it was easy for O'Kane to change his military erectness to a slouch that diminished his height, and perfected the disguise. Emerson's introduction helped a lot, virtually vouching for him as a chechako.

As often happened before the true spring thaw set in, the night was cold. Beneath the moon, the air glittered with tiny particles of ice, producing a faint rainbow iridescence seen against the light. The stone igloo in which Peekoya lived had its dome covered with snow that was frosted like a Christmas card. The surface squeaked beneath their snowshoes.

They would, Emerson said, find Peekoya's more or less worthless nephew on hand, apparently acting as tiler to the shaman lodge.

O'Kane had nothing against this Amokok, knowing him as one of half a dozen Eskimo youths who affected the white man's clothing, hung about the places where illicit liquor was sold. They added the vices of the white to their own, sponged on their female relatives and friends.

"He'll hold you up for a buck," explained Emerson. "That's his own private graft, but if he wanted to queer you with the old lady she'd never talk to you, even if you got through. She's a queer one. I've seen her turn down good money and refuse to do her act for some men without any apparent reason, except that she figured them bad medicine. Might have felt them sceptical or laughing at her. If she takes a dislike to you she'll just say *'ajorpok'*, and close up like a clam."

O'Kane did not doubt that the fortune-teller had a good measure of native sagacity, a certain clairvoyance. He was considering that as they came to the igloo, with a figure in a furlined parka on guard outside.

This was Amokok. He recognized Emerson, and looked at the corporal carelessly. He had an ill-tempered husky dog with him, a big beast, ninety-per-cent wolf, with a curious saddle of yellow fur. It snarled, leaping out viciously to the end of a short chain stapled to a tree.

Amokok knocked it down with a blow on its muzzle from a club, and it retreated, still emitting its hate in guttural coughings.

"Friend of mine, Johnny Newcome, wants to get advice from the Talking Hand," said Emerson.

"Some one inside now. Through pretty soon I think. You give one dollar now. Peekoya, she tell you how much, inside."

O'Kane produced the dollar, and Amokok pouched it with an insolent sort of cockiness that made the corporal want to stiffen him up. No doubt Amokok, the modernist, was an unbeliver in the magic of his ancient aunt. Perhaps he knew the secret of the "Talking Hand" and despised all suckers who fell for the

delusion, especially if they were white men.

An igloo, of ice or stone, is entered in only one fashion, through a sloping tunnel, up which the visitor goes in crouching manner, almost on all-fours. At the end of the tunnel a curtain always hangs. You emerge in the same undignified manner. The passage and its ramp are designed primarily for ventilation, but they make also for safety in defense, or a means of advantageous attack.

O'KANE thought of that as the client of Peekoya came out like a spring bear. The husky sprang again to the limit of its tether, and the man rapped out words to it in Eskimo that silenced it.

He pulled the hood of his parka forward but O'Kane got a good look at him before the fur lining hid his features.

It was Itosiak, musher and general factotum for Malcolm Murray. Amokok said something to him in his own tongue. O'Kane's Eskimo was limited. It was hard to study when most of the natives preferred the pidgin. But Itosiak was plainly not in good humor, and O'Kane fancied that Amokok replied to him with more than a tinge of mockery.

Itosiak took his snowshoes from where he had parked them in the crust, as uprights, and shuffled off without a syllable of greeting to the two white men. He seemed disgruntled. O'Kane wondered if Peekoya had told him a bad fortune, or simply refused to function.

Amokok, the corporal remembered, had said he thought Itosiak would be "through pretty soon." The visit did not seem especially significant, save that it was Itosiak who had discovered the handless corpse, but did not know it was handless.

O'Kane made a note of it. It was a link that might not fit, but he had found odd links useful, once in a while.

Amokok motioned to them to enter. They thrust the stems of their snowshoes into the stiff snow, and crawled up the passage. At its end, a curtain of caribou hides waved gently in the draft. The interior of the beehivelike dwelling was warm enough. Some moisture crept down the walls. It stank of stale air, of seal-oil, of musty garments, of old age, and fish.

A drum stove glowed red, its pipe thrust through the top of the dome. A stone shelf ran all around, bed, settee and sideboard all in one. It was more or less cluttered up with pots and pans.

There was a table covered with a cloth in pattern of red and white squares, its folds reaching to the floor, where some pelts and a native blanket were strewn.

On the nigh side of the table was a stool. On the other a more elaborate seat, a sort of throne of wood like teak, inlaid in ivory. It had walrus tusks for arms, with two more curving above the back in an inverted V. The seat was deep and low, and seemed occupied by sacking illy stuffed with rags but mantled in a robe that a trader would have fought over.

It was made of the breasts of eider duck, edged with supple caribou skin beaded and quilled exquisitely. Undoubtedly filthy and lice-ridden, intrinsically it was a thing of great beauty and value.

An overhead lamp, shadeless, its chimney smutted, hung from the roof. Two smaller ones stood on the stone shelf. The flames sputtered and flickered on the rude, untrimmed wicks. The cross lighting was uncertain. Shadows blinked continuously.

The robe about the bundle on the thronelike chair had a peaked hood. That opened, and for a moment, O'Kane almost believed in shaman totemism and magic. It seemed as if the head of a great turtle was thrust out on a wizened neck that looked like a bundle of cords in a loose but scrawny bag of skin.

The nose was snubbed, the nostrils flattened slits. All the face was creased with innumerable plicatures, corrugated, charted with cracks that covered brows and cheeks and chin, like the glazing of old porcelain. The cheekbones looked as if

bony fists were thrust from inside against the parchmenty skin, showing their knuckles. The skin itself was blotched with freak pigmentation.

The lips were closed, beaklike, horny mandibles. The flat nose came down to meet them, the chin curved up. Peekoya looked centuries old. Her rheumy eyes seemed fixed, ophidian and baleful. They shone like beads, the only sign of life, until a claw crept from the robe.

THOSE eyes were studying O'Kane. He could see the tendons of the shrunken wrist working as the repellent fingers moved, motioning to both of them. Emerson to a seat on the stone bench near the entrance; O'Kane to the stool.

Then there was silence, save for the sputtering of the stinking seal-oil lamps.

Presently there came strange whisperings in the top of the dome, tiny, shrill sounds that seemed mutterings from little, invisible ghosts. Eskimo ghosts, according to what syllables O'Kane could catch and translate. He was not impressed, though he tried not to show that, to appear interested and credulous.

It was a typical chaman trick, a ventriloquial conjuration. The chin of the crone was now drawn back in shadow. Neither lips nor nostrils quivered. She was belly-grunting her gibberish.

O'Kane doubted if it was a true invocation. The hag knew well enough she could never be a true shaman. She had no spirit drums; no ghost trumpets eight feet long. She would not have dared to use them. Hers was the sorcery of cunning and intuition.

The whisperings ceased. She croaked out her Mackenzie pidgin.

"What you like, white man? What you wanchee savvy. I think you white-rock man. You like findum gold. You ask Peekoya. She plenty poor. You giveum two dolla, I takeun spirit sleep, tell what I see, what I hear."

"What about the ghost hand? How much for that," said O'Kane bluntly, as he felt a chechako would have spoken.

HE FELT, rather than saw, those reptilian, hypnotic eyes boring into him, as if they wanted to observe his soul. For a moment he wondered if she smelled a trap, if her native sophism, irrational and subconscious, weighed his in the balance, and found him spurious. It was quite possible.

A dog instinctively likes or dislikes. A primitive, especially if ancient, often possesses some strange faculty of selection for amity or enmity. Civilized man plays games where the thoughts of many are concentrated on a hidden object while one tries to discover it. Try that with a shaman, and he would laugh at its simplicity. Eskimo tots play it as soon as they learn to talk.

O'Kane had found that natives were apt to read his thoughts, when they came within the scope of their understanding and experience. He found himself resisting a curious, psychic pressure of Peekoya's snakelike orbs. He tried to banish his true desire, his reason for the séance, to appear like a tenderfoot, gullible, green as new grass.

HE was not too sure he had succeeded when she spoke.

"Five dolla. That make Peekoya too much tire. She have to go long way in spirit worl' to find ghost of heap-big shaman one time own that hand. Him Akkarna. Mukhagaluk him son, through many father. Akkarna speakum true. Not say much. You askum. Then hand say 'yes', mebesso say 'no'. I not know which way. You askum. Give five dolla."

O'Kane wondered if he would ever get the five dollars back. It was a private investment. Disbursement officials at Ottawa were not lavish, if just. He was backing his own hunch. Two days' pay. He placed it on the table.

Peekoya did not touch it. She was fumbling with the cloth of the table on

her side. She seemed to reach into a drawer. She produced an object she laid on the table top, in the vague light.

It was a hand, a human hand, that once had functioned normally. It seemed to have been mummified, preserved or pickled in some fashion. It had shrunk and curved inwards, so that the fingers, set close together, were also curved. They pointed towards O'Kane. Their nails were long and horny.

It was tanned, though it might once have been brown of skin by nature. There was no hair on the back. Youth is inclined to be hairless, and so are Eskimos. The fingers were well shaped. O'Kane had seen tapering digits among Eskimo artificers, carvers of ornaments.

And he had seen the hand of a white man, who was a famous organist. It had been pudgy, the fingers stumpy. This might have belonged to a Nordic, a Slav, an Indian, a Chinaman or a Japanese. It would take an expert ethnologist to classify it, he fancied, and that with close observation.

The brine, or whatever sort of natron had preserved it, had reduced the chances of identity. He knew that Aleuts mummified their dead. So might the early Eskimos, to whom they were akin. O'Kane was disappointed. If he showed his authority, and confiscated it, Peekoya and her tribefolk would let out an awful squawk. It would be an excuse for them to consider themselves injured, to get some compensation.

And if O'Kane did not submit some startling evidence, the Commissioner on Indian Affairs—always a bit touchy about Police supervision or interference with his charges—would see that Corporal Terence O'Kane was never chosen for those examinations at Regina that were preliminary to promotion.

His five dollars were up, ante'd. He had to go through with it, see how the thing worked.

Peekoya was going into her routine, the faked trance in which she could hear both the questions of her client, and the answers of her husband's ancestor, Akkarna, transmit them from astral to terrestrial plane, and work whatever mechanics controlled the hand that lay so quietly, palm down.

They were all alike, O'Kane reflected; Egyptian or Eskimo.

"You askum three question," Peekoya croaked in a faraway voice. "Hand speak. Him rap three time, mean yes. One time, mean no. Only three question."

O'Kane tried to make his voice eager. "Shall I find what I seek?"

He watched the dead hand. It did not stir. He could see no mechanism. He watched the crone's hands as best he could. They were hidden beneath her robe. He could see no movement, not even a slight twitch.

Then the hand rocked. It was uncanny. It moved as if balanced. The long nails tapped down—dulled by the cloth—more seen than heard. Three raps. "Yes."

"Shall I have much trouble?"

Again the hand poised, tapped dully on the cloth. Once, for 'no.'

"How about my girl?" He had to ask the third question.

As he put the question, O'Kane knew he had made a mistake as a man will know he has misjudged a finesse, played a wrong card, before he sees the gleam in his opponent's eyes.

He was not interested in women. His chosen job, his duty, came first. Time enough for that sort of thing later. It might happen, but he was not looking for it, did not think about it. There were no girls in Fort Arrow to stimulate that sentiment.

But it was the most primitive of emotions, the easiest for Peekoya to comprehend, to detect its presence, or absence. That was something physical, not psychic, simple for the wisewoman to deal with.

She had rung him on the counter of her perceptive and reflective faculties, and found him counterfeit. The atmosphere of the room changed, grew hostile. Her

eyes, which had been closed, opened, burning like hot coals. Her simulated hysteria was gone. She was a witch, pure and simple, swift to distinguish between congeniality and discordance, to resent the latter.

Mistrust turned to suspicion, flamed to rage.

The mystic hand leaped spasmodically into the air, fell back again, bounced lightly, still palm down.

"You go," hissed Peekoya, panting. "You no good. I savvy. My spirit tell me. You no whiterock man. You try fool Peekoya. You no talk shookum. Inside I feel. *Ajorpok! (It is not good.)* Go—go!"

Her voice shrilled and squeaked. She might not be a shaman, but she was a sybil, sensitive as a medium.

O'KANE rose. "I meant no harm," he said. The hand had twisted in its fall. He started to straighten it, to pick it up. He wanted a glimpse at the lines of the palm. He had a notion he could tell then if this was the hand of a white man or a native. The apparent age was negligible. Preservation accounted for that.

The fat was in the fire. He would not get in here again, unless he did so as Corporal O'Kane of the Royal Canadian Mounted. And the hand would have vanished. Amokok would be on guard.

Peekoya shrieked. She half rose from her seat, shaking her clawlike fist, shrilling more and more piercingly.

"Ey-eeey-yah! Ee-ee-ee-yah!"

"We'll be getting out of this," said O'Kane. He had no mind to be caught masquerading, to be ridiculous as a policeman visiting Peekoya, paying her money. That would be broadcast, reflecting on the Force, unless he could show sufficient cause—and he was not ready for that.

"She's on to you," said Emerson. "Better beat it. I'll be right with you."

O'Kane glanced at the table. It was clear of both the five-dollar bill and the dead hand.

Peekoya's screams became a continuous, high-pitched, quavering squeal as O'Kane lunged past the hide curtain to the tunnel, fearful that the sound would go ahead of him.

He was wary of Amokok. That dissolute young buck might wear mail-order clothing, but beneath it there beat the heart of a savage. He would protect Peekoya if only to save his own graft. He might start a nasty row. The igloo was in the heart of the native settlement. A whoop from him would bring trouble.

O'Kane might be forced to reveal himself. He had brought along his service revolver but he did not want to use it.

His idea had turned out badly. The old crone had been too shrewd. She had smelled out his ruse.

The cold air smote him as he came out of the tunnel, swiftly straightening up. The eldritch screech of the ancient beldame came like the screech of an owl, or the howl of a wolverine.

The wolfish husky leaped at him, and he saw it was free. It sprang, slavering and slashing, straight for his throat. All of sixty pounds, charged with hate.

O'Kane crooked his leg and blocked the charge, with the only efficient counter. His knee struck the brute in its chest and bowled it over.

Instantly O'Kane flung himself upon it as it sprawled in the snow. It still wore its collar, and he got hold of it, twisting his fingers in the leather, barely grazed by the beast's fangs, before he shut off

its wind, and got to his feet again, lifting the husky clear of the ground.

Emerson was through the tunnel, confronting Amokok, who stood in a crouch, his bow-legs apart, a knife in his hand, feral as his wolfdog. Peekoya's screams were subsiding, from hoarseness, but they had done their work.

"What is? What is?" challenged Amokok.

"Nothing," O'Kane snapped at him. "Shackle up your dog." His strong fingers vised on vein and nerve. The husky fought convulsively, clawing at him, but it was growing weaker, with wind and blood shut off.

"There is nothing wrong," Emerson cut in. "This is a chechako. He did not savvy but he meant no harm. You know me, Amokok."

The wolfdog went limp. O'Kane let it fall.

"You kill my dog, by God, I killum you!" yelled Amokok.

Emerson tried to trip him as he leaped, but Amokok sprang aside, and rushed O'Kane, lunging with his long blade. The corporal parried, forearm to forearm, stepped inside Amokok's reach, and clipped the Eskimo on the jaw. He put plenty into it and Amokok pitched to his knees, to his face, and fell full length beside the husky, which was feebly twitching.

"Let's go while the going is good, Emerson. I'm afraid I've queered you with Peekoya. Sorry. If Amokok annoys you, tell him Johnny Newcome has left for the mines."

THEY adjusted their snowshoes. Peekoya was silent. Amokok was squirming. The cold snow on his face was bringing him around.

"It don't worry me," said Emerson. "I'd just as soon forget about Peekoya. Amokok was beginning to be a nuisance. He's like most Eskimos. They've got a begging streak."

"Cadgers," agreed O'Kane. He did not have an exalted opinion of the natives. They bragged about their hunting, boasted they could shoot better than any white man, and that the Mounted had to hire one of them to follow a trail. They lived always in conditions with which for generations they had been familiar, but they were habit and superstition ridden, of limited intelligence. A white man who was anything of a wilderness man could outmatch them.

"You've seen that hand trickery before, Emerson. How long has she been working it? Have you got any idea how she does it?"

"I've never had a good chance to watch. She never told my fortune. She hasn't been here very long, I understand. But she didn't always use the hand. Just the spook-voices."

They were well away, out of sight of the igloo. Behind them, Amokok's husky howled like a wolf as they swerved off into the main trail. They were not followed. The night was unalarmed. The rose and gold streamers of the aurora darted and crackled.

"You'll drop in and have a snifter?" asked Emerson.

"Not tonight, thanks. I've got a job to do, and it takes a steady hand. Will you drop in at the barracks tomorrow, and have another look at the body?"

"Will if you want me to. But I don't think I can place him. If I ever did see him, he wasn't wearing all that spinach."

"Exactly. You said, and so did Father Ladue, that there was something vaguely familiar. Now then, when you find a dead man with whiskers, it is a general and natural assumption that the corpse wore them regularly. But they might have been grown on trail by some chechako who thought it the right thing to do, or liked the idea, or was too lazy to shave. Also, the murderer, knowing that where his victim might be known—Fort Arrow, for instance—he had gone clean-shaven, might count on nobody—even a constable—thinking he might be identified by shaving the dead face. You said the beard was as

good as a mask. But it could have been grown in a few months."

"You're right, dead right," Emerson agreed with some excitement. "I'd never have thought of it. Are you calling in a barber?"

"I'm doing the job myself," said Kane. "I don't want any gossip. The barber would tell his wife, anyhow. I may want to spring this as a surprise. Keep it under your own hat. And drop round tomorrow."

Chapter IV

DEATH SCORES AGAIN

IT was a grisly job that O'Kane took on. The body was frozen again, the flesh should be firm enough to stand shaving, if done dry, after he had used clippers, and also trimmed the trail-long hair.

Cameron did not offer his assistance. O'Kane might have made it an order, but it was certainly outside usual regulations and he did not blame his subordinate.

"When you're through wi' the scissors, you can keep them," said the constable. "I'll not be carin' for them back."

O'Kane grinned at him, but when he was in the outhouse, the shade of the bracket lamp tilted, so that it shed wan yellow light on the set face of the dead man, with its sightless, hueless eyes, he almost wished he were Cameron.

He did not light the stove, fearful that Doc Shiels knew too well what he was talking about, and the thawed-out flesh might not stand up under the pull of the razor.

There seemed a sort of desecration about this disturbance of the dead. O'Kane stuck grimly to it, trimming the long hair first, then using the clippers. The growth rapidly fell away and he found, to his relief, that he would not have to use a razor. Once he went too close. It was bitterly cold and his numbed hand slipped on the jaw. Instinctively he looked for blood, and his own seemed to congeal as he realized why there was none.

It was the marble-hard, ice-cold face of a young man that at last stared blindly back at him. The colorless orbs heightened the suggestion of a statue.

Shiels had been right. Emerson was right. The chin showed weakness, but the features were handsome. They were refined by breeding. The poor devil would have been well liked, by women as well as men. He would have been loose of morals, a happy-go-lucky ne'er-do-well.

Likely enough, a remittance man sent to the "Colonies" because of follies that banned him from society at home. He might have got entangled with a chorus-girl, or a barmaid, he might have copied some signature too well, or welched on lost bets.

O'Kane did not have too much sympathy with weaklings, but he felt a surge of sorrow for a chap, no older than himself, paid to stay away from those he had disgraced, thrust on his own resources when he had shown himself a weakling.

Some of these black sheep turned out well enough, in the long run. Some got recalled through death to entailed inheritance, and stiffened with responsibility. But this chap lay here in the shed, mutilated and unknown—unless O'Kane recovered his identity—and landed his murderer.

"I'll do my best for you," O'Kane said softly to the frozen body. He left the clipped hair on the floor, turned down the lamp, blew it out with cupped hand over the chimney, and went back to the barracks-room by the light of his flash.

THE big stove pulsed in grades of red, giving a grateful warmth. O'Kane went to the cabinet of medical supplies, unlocked it, and poured himself a stiff dram of whiskey. He took it straight, knowing he deserved it. He took off his outer coat, lit his pipe and relaxed in his pet chair.

There was some short wave news coming in over the radio receiving-set, from station KDKA. O'Kane listened comfortably, a little drowsily. Cameron had

turned in. There were five stations over which police and other messages might come: KDKA, CKY, CHYC, CNRO, CJCA. Broadcast reception varied unaccountably. The static that produced the Aurora often played hob.

There were no two-way sets. Some day there would be, and then the O'Kanes and Camerons would have to qualify as operators. Meanwhile, there was the blessing of the air-mail, going as far north as Aklavik, close to the Arctic Sea; maintained all through the winter under conditions that made unsung heroes of the pilots.

There would be a mail in, soon. O'Kane —and Cameron—would get letters from home. There would be official communications, instructions. Spring was coming, and work would be heavy. There would be the census to check, issuance of game and trading licenses, changes in game laws to be explained, collection of various taxes, income, customs, fur exports and others; the registration of vital statistics. Action made for contentment, with the kind of men who joined the service.

CALLING ALL NORTHWESTERN DETACHMENTS. CALLING ESPECIALLY NORTHERN ALBERTA. RESOLUTION, RELIANCE, RAE, HAY RIVER, WRIGLEY, NORMAN AND GOOD HOPE, SIMPSON AND FORT ARROW. REGINALD MARCH AGED TWENTY-FOUR BEING SOUGHT BY OTTAWA ON REQUEST FROM LONDON. FIVE FEET SEVEN . . .

O'Kane lost interest in Reginald March. For a moment he had wondered if Reginald March was the name of the man whose body he had just shaved. But that body had stood all of six feet when it was alive —and erect.

The radio sputtered off into space, faded, failed utterly.

O'Kane stood up, tapped out his pipe, yawned and stretched himself, wondering vaguely if his evening, and his night, so far, would prove entirely barren of results.

Kontouk had taken only five dogs on his solo trip with the report. The two bitches left behind started to bark furiously. They were kenneled. O'Kane, used to such alarms, paid little attention until there came a knock at the door.

He opened it, two figures stood there. A thin snow was falling. It had been snowing for some time, O'Kane realized, as he looked at the ground. The flakes were small, but they were sticky and had already filled in all ruts and tracks, were beginning to pile in drifts before the light wind. The visitors were sprinkled with it. They were well muffled against the weather.

"It's me, wi' Itosiak," said the foremost, Malcolm Murray, the trader. His voice was husky and sounded worried.

O'Kane could tell, despite the snow, that dawn was not far away. It amazed him, though it was no longer dark until ten a. m. as it had been two or three months before. Winter was moving out. The snow was a farewell souvenir. And his eerie night had passed swiftly.

"What's wrong, Murray? Come in."

The two advanced somberly, refused seats. They acted like mourners at a funeral.

"I've shot Amokok," said Murray. "I doubt he'll live the day. I did not know who it was when I fired. He was prowlin' about my premises, breakin' an' enterin', tryin' to open my safe. He's been a pest of late, wantin' me to give him a commission on sales an' credits with his folk. He's naught but a racketeer, like they have in the States. I saw he did not like my refusal, but he hung round the store, beggin' and coaxin'. I'd miss things. I'm thinkin' he was tryin' to catch the combination o' the safe—you know, I open it up often. I'm a sort of bank an' safety deposit for quite a few."

O'Kane knew these things. He knew, too, that Amokok had been to the mission school and was considered smart. He had been to Edmonton to the Sourdough Stampede and had no doubt picked up some ideas. One of them might be about safe combinations.

NOW he was dead, or dying. A few hours ago he had tried to knife O'Kane. A few hours ago, also Itosiak had visited Peekoya, perhaps as a client. The corporal considered these things for connection with the fact that Itosiak was now before him, presumably as a witness to what sounded like justifiable homicide.

"He chose a good night for it. If he had got clear, he would have left no trail. How did it happen?"

"I sleep in the rooms above the store. Itosiak sleeps in the back. I'm never a sound sleeper myself and Itosiak can wake at the cheep of a mouse. Yon Amokok was a fool to take the risk, but he was drunk, by the reek of him."

"Itosiak is your witness?"

"Aye. I heard a noise, and came down. He had come in through a window, and left it open for going out. I saw him at the safe with a big flashlight in his hand. I called to him to surrender and, with

that, Itosiak closed in. Amokok fired, and the bullet whistled past my ear, out through the window. I fired from the hip, and he keeled over. Itosiak brought a light, and we saw it was Amokok."

"You have this weapon?" O'Kane noticed that Murray's agitation increased his dialect.

"It would be where he dropped it."

"Where is Amokok now?"

"We stopped by Doctor Shiels'. They'll be taking him to the Mission hospital. It is hard to kill a man, even if he would have robbed and killed you."

The door opened from the bunk-room. O'Kane's subordinate, Cameron, entered.

"Take a deposition, Cameron," said O'Kane. "You'll sign it, Murray? Itosiak too."

"Surely."

O'Kane dictated for a minute or two, then took up the *viva-voce* questioning.

"You saw all this, Itosiak, as Mr. Murray described it and I repeated it to Constable Cameron? You will be willing to swear to it?"

"I see all. Amokok try to steal, to open safe. Boss, he come, call out. I come. Amokok shoot, then Boss shoot. Amokok fall down."

CAMERON completed the deposition. Murray signed it. Itosiak made his personal mark, a totemic drawing of a whale, crude, but unmistakable.

"What do you want me to do?" asked the trader. "Am I supposed to be under arrest?"

O'Kane shook his head. Murray ought to know better than that. "If you've got a clear case of burglarious entry, Murray, you don't have to worry."

"I don't," said the trader drily. "Might I suggest to you, Corporal, that if I went with ye to Amokok's cabin, I might be able to identify things I've been missin'. That might help my side of it."

"It's a good idea. We'll go at once. Cameron, you go with Itosiak to the store and check up. Get Amokok's gun."

AMOKOK lived with his mother and a younger brother, in a comfortable enough log cabin built by his father, who had died from congestion of the lungs, two years before.

Peekoya, actually great-aunt to Amokok, had been given the stone igloo because it was untenanted and, by Eskimo custom, an empty house is the property of the one who finds it so, and moves in.

The mother supported the family. She was a willing houseworker, skilled in making moccasins and deerskin clothing. For the Hudson's Bay store, she made sou-

venirs often bought by the miners to send back home or keep for mascots.

The cabin had a modern cookstove, cheap plush-cushioned furniture, iron bedsteads, a phonograph and a sewing machine. Colored holy prints were on the walls.

The mother and the younger son were at their breakfast of tea, oatmeal, and wheat bannocks. Amokok's absence had not disturbed them. He made his own hours. They knew nothing, naturally enough, of the killing. The woman was worried, though, at sight of the corporal. O'Kane guessed she would never be surprised to hear that her firstborn was in trouble.

She took his news stoically enough.

"Your son's been hurt, pretty badly. A shooting. He's at the Mission by now, and the doctor with him."

O'Kane spoke kindly. He knew that the lack of outer sign of emotion before white men did not mean she was not suffering. She said nothing, only her eyes seemed to cloud over. Without a word she put on a parka, while the boy did the same; then they tramped off to the hospital through the snow.

"That makes it easy," said Murray. "He'll have a room to himself."

O'Kane nodded. He was wondering what Amokok had done with his wolf dog.

They searched the room that was plainly Amokok's. There were many things there that O'Kane imagined had been pilfered. Knives, pipes, cheap jewelry. A pine bureau yielded up a miscellaneous collection, some of which Murray claimed had come from his store.

It was Murray who found the special cache, though O'Kane would have come to it, had it in mind. The trader seemed set to prove that Amokok was a marauder, possibly to soothe his own conscience, though O'Kane had not figured it as over tender.

There was a fireplace in the room. It was boarded-up, and through the boards ran the pipe of the squat stove. That was cold. Murray worked at the boards, found them easily removed in one section. He groped in the interior, and brought out a demijohn of alcohol, another of native wine, both almost empty.

"That's where he got keyed-up last night," he said. "There's more here."

The trader tossed the articles he salvaged on the bed. They were none too clean from soot, but the coverlet was far from spotless or greaseless.

A pair of high rubber boots, several pairs of shoes of assorted sizes, cans of fruit and meat, overalls, whose sizes also varied. A lot of briliant ties. Tins of tobacco. In a word—loot.

"Hard to prove ownership," said Murray. "We all carry such."

O'Kane was surprised he did not definitely claim it. It certainly looked like the booty from a deliberate burglary, rather than occasional pilferings.

Murray brought out, at the last, a steel cashbox that seemed to have been forced open.

"Do you recognize that?" asked O'Kane.

"'T is a staple article. I could not swear to it."

O'KANE lifted the damaged lid. The box was partly filled with rocksalt. In it was an object that made O'Kane narrow his eyes. He heard Murray gasp.

"Let's go into the other room. I want to get a good look at this, by daylight."

The trader followed him. At the corporal's gesture, he flung open the door. The windows were curtained, blurred with snow.

O'Kane emptied the contents of the box amid the breakfast things. The brownish salt-crystals skittered away, revealing a severed human hand.

It seemed to O'Kane, at the first glance, the hand with which Peekoya, great-aunt to Amokok, had made her magic. It might or might not be the mummified hand of Akkarna, remote ancestor of Mukhagaluk, the shaman, husband of

Peekoya. Brought home for safe keeping, perhaps, by Amokok.

But why keep it in salt, if it were the hand of a mummy?

Those thoughts shuttled in the mind of the corporal and suddenly showed definite pattern, part of an intricate design of which he now began to get a glimmering.

This was a left hand. Peekoya's had been a right.

It might be the other hand of Akkarna.

Murray said. "There's talk of Peekoya jugglin' wi' a hand like that, using cantrips and invocations, whisperin' the future with the help of the thing. This American Emerson sends her customers and she'd put a spell on them. She's Amokok's aunt, you know. Of course Emerson got the trade of these men. I sent Itosiak but last night to investigate, but she would not take his money, or tell him anything. I'd have denounced her to the authorities, meanin' you, for obtainin' silver under false pretences."

It seemed that Murray was mostly concerned with Emerson diverting trade of which he might otherwise have had a share. O'Kane barely listened to him. He saw that Peekoya might have recognized Itosiak, or Amokok told her who he was. She had guessed he came there for no true reason of his own, no real desire to investigate the occult. His questions had left her in a suspicious mood to receive O'Kane.

But the main thing the corporal thought, as he picked up the dead hand, was that Amokok might have murdered the unknown man. It was not quite clear why he should have lopped off the hands, why anyone should have lopped them off.

The hand was rigid. The fingers were close together. He started to turn it palm upwards. A four-footed creature came charging through the drifts, scattering the snow. As it came it snarled with the deep-throated challenge of the wolf. A yellow saddle of fur showed plainly on its back against the darker coat.

It was Amokok's wolf dog, returning from some nocturnal excursion of its own. Amokok would certainly not have taken it to the store he meant to rob.

Now it scented O'Kane, another white man with him, and it hated all the race. And then it was diverted from a second attack on the man who had already conquered it. Amokok kept his dog half-starved, and it prowled the village to fill its belly. A husky's working ration is a pound of dried and frozen fish a day. The wolfdog seldom got that much, it had no regular meals.

And eyes and nose told it that O'Kane held meat. Flesh that might be dry and salty, but better than fish.

O'Kane prepared to tackle the dog. He held the relic in his left hand, while his right hand drew back for his gun. He was tired of this ravening brute.

But the dog's leap was lower and shorter than he expected. It snatched the dried hand from O'Kane's fingers, and bolted with it.

O'KANE jerked his Colt free and fired. Just as he pulled trigger Murray, excited, lurched against him, and the snow spurted a good foot away from the fleeing beast, intent upon getting out of sight. Once it did, the hand would vanish in two gulps.

So fast did it gallop that it was close to range-limit before O'Kane thrust Murray back, stepped outside and got in his second shot. The husky rolled over in the snow after a head somersault.

O'Kane had hit it between the ears, at the back of the skull. It was dead before he reached it. Murray came with him, blundering through the snow, trampling clumsily without his snowshoes.

O'Kane was also in his pacs, but he went carefully. The hand had dropped from the dog's jaws, but it had sunk into the snow, or been thrust there by the body of the dog.

"Careful, man," he called out sharply to the trader. "You'll make it hard for us to find it."

Murray muttered something apologetic and stood still. O'Kane groped for the hand and found it without much trouble. He would have dug over every cubic yard of that snow to retrieve it. The dog's teeth had bruised and slightly crushed the dried flesh, but the hand was intact.

O'Kane thrust it into his pocket.

"Will ye be seein' if Peekoya has the mate to it?" asked Murray.

"You think there is a mate to it? I mean in circulation?"

The trader shrugged his shoulders. "Oh, aye, it might well be one an' the same. I'm not tryin' to instruct you, O'Kane."

"That's all right. I'll attend to Peekoya later. I must get up to the hospital. Amokok may have recovered consciousness."

"I'll walk with you. I cannot help but feel responsible. Do you think, Corporal, that Amokok might have killed the poor devil Itosiak an' I found in the river bed?"

O'Kane looked at him sharply. Murray was not always easy to understand. It was surprising, for one thing, that he should keep his store closed, even for the funeral of Amokok, much less to inquire about him. He knew well enough that he would not be held on any charge for shooting a burglar. He had stated plainly that Amokok was a rascal.

"Why should he?"

"I would not be venturin' that. I was just thinkin' that he owned a gun."

"The man was killed by a rifle bullet," said O'Kane.

"I didn't know that. There's been no inquest. Will you be buryin' the corpse soon?"

"I'm waiting instructions. I'm still hoping to get an identification." It was on the tip of his tongue, for the second time, to ask Murray to review the dead man, with the face now shaven; also to reveal the stumps of the wrists—but he did not. It was hard to know why, save that at the back of his mind there lingered a quick memory of the look he thought he had seen pass between Itosiak and Murray; and his conclusion that they knew—or thought they knew—more about the man than they cared to reveal.

He meant to clear that up in his own time and fashion.

Chapter V

OLD SCARS

AMOKOK was still alive. He had been shot through the head, the bullet was still inside his brainpan, and Shiels did not dare probe for it.

"He was conscious for a while," said the doctor. "He can't live, but he may linger. Those beggars are tough. At all events, he may or may not have another lucid interval. I suppose you want a statement?"

"It seems like a straight case," said O'Kane. "I'd like a talk with him, of course, if that's possible."

"Father Ladue talked with him, but he sent the nurse out of the room, and told

me to my face that since I had done all I could for the body, I should leave him to look after the soul. So I imagine that what he got was a confession, in which case, all the King's horses and all the King's men, whether they wear scarlet coats or not, won't get it out of him. The

Church still holds trumps over the State in those things. He gave Amokok the Sacrament. Amokok went to the Mission school, one of Ladue's own flock. He'd tell him what he'd never tell the Police; because he'd know it was sealed and sacred."

Shiels was a tolerant sort, as a rule. But O'Kane detected a sardonic note in his comments on the seal of the confessional.

O'Kane thought differently. He had yet to talk with the priest. When he came, O'Kane was surprised to note the stiffness with which Ladue greeted Murray. Almost as if he fancied that Murray had been over hasty with his shooting. Amokok might not have made it plain that he fired first. O'Kane knew how often a native, under oath, when the whole truth will help him out of trouble, will hold out something, for some hardly to be guessed at purpose in the innate craftiness of an Indian or Eskimo brain.

The Catholic priests had many converts among the Eskimos, but O'Kane was inclined to believe that these converts were willing to listen and watch the ritual more for amusement and for benefits that might come to them materially, rather than spiritually. As Emerson had said, and Murray corroborated, the Eskimos were essentially beggars.

Amokok was probably more agnostic than anything else. But, at the point of death, he might have confessed to Ladue, the man, rather than Ladue the priest, and still twisted the version to his own advantage. O'Kane knew that such as he think nothing of lying to a white man. If he believes the lie, he is a fool, and the liar smart. If he detects the falsehood, he gains a measure of respect.

Ladue drew O'Kane aside.

"It is possible that Amokok may become lucid again towards the end," he said. "So the doctor tells me. Now he is under a sedative. If he recovers consciousness, I shall make every endeavor to have him repeat to you, freely, what he has told me, under the seal of my holy office. There was no time before. He had a collapse, I thought him gone. But he has been shriven and anointed. If he rallies, I will send you a messenger immediately, my son."

"Thank you, Father." That was just what O'Kane had expected from Ladue. "Murray's story is corroborated by Itosiak, but I should be glad to get an antemortem statement, of course."

"I might as well open the store," said the trader as they left the Mission. "I suppose Ladue thinks a Presbyterian no better than a heathen. Not that I profess to bein' very active in any church—I'm more of a Free Thinker—but yon priest treated me as if I'd murdered Amokok, instead of shootin' in self defense."

O'Kane made no comment. He was not over fond of Murray's company at any time, glad when they met Itosiak with Cameron, coming towards the hospital.

Itosiak went on with Murray. Cameron joined his corporal.

"You got the gun?" Cameron showed the weapon. It was a cheap revolver, nickeled, thirty-two caliber; just the sort of gun Amokok would be likely to own, whether bought or stolen. "Keep it till you get back to barracks. Go over to Emerson's store and ask him if he can step over—now. I spoke to him about it last night. It's important, tell him."

O'Kane was still studying the hand he had retrieved from the wolf dog, when Cameron arrived with the American. He swept the relic into a half-open drawer and closed it before they entered.

Then he took Emerson out to the impromptu morgue once more and unsheeted the shaven face.

"Good God! It's Ford. Austin Ford! I'll say that beard masked him."

"Friend of yours?" O'Kane had not known the face he had shaven but he had hardly expected to. He had only gained his promotion and been transferred to Fort Arrow the previous August, taking

charge of the detachment just before winter set in and shut it off the world.

Since then there had been few transient in Arrow; few miners, even old sourdoughs, cared to risk the trails when there were only a few hours of twilight, called daylight by hardy optimists.

"I got to know him quite well," said Emerson. "He hung round here most of the summer. He was always talking about starting out some sort of trip, but he didn't get around to it. First it was trapping, then it would be radium, or gold. He finally elected to go to Whiterock but at the last minute lit out for Round Rock Lake. Somebody started the rumor that there was gold there, but I doubted it. The Indians claim no white man has ever been there, and I imagine it was that made him choose it as much as anything."

"Did you outfit him?"

"No. He sort of apologized for that. He was a Britisher, had a certain amount coming monthly. Murray was his banker, and he felt he should buy from Murray. Fair enough."

"When did he leave Arrow?"

"The last of July."

"By himself?"

"Yes. He might not have gone so early, but I heard talk about his getting into a mess with some Eskimo girl. He was a bit that kind, but a likable chap enough."

DOC SHIELS had come mighty close in his guess, O'Kane told himself, despite the surgeon's avowed disbelief in physiognomy—and that covered by a beard.

"Ever take him to Peekoya's?"

"Yes, I did. He wanted to go and learn his luck, as he put it. He kidded her, but he made quite a hit with her. And —listen, O'Kane, this sounds like hooey, but she didn't want to take his money. She wouldn't answer him when he asked if he would come out with a big stake. She told him he would come out; and then she shut off. All he could get out of her was that pet phrase of hers. The one she handed you. *Ajorpok!* She didn't have the hand then. She hadn't been here long."

"She wouldn't have had the hand," said O'Kane grimly. "Emerson, I wish you'd try and fix a date when she did start to use it. Try, will you?"

"Of course. I may be able to place it——"

He stopped, staring, as O'Kane pulled down the shroud and showed the lopped wrists. His lips closed to a thin line. The American was a quick thinker.

"Look here, you mean you think that hand Peekoya uses——?"

O'Kane nodded. "Still keep what I'm showing you and what we're saying under your hat, Emerson. Peekoya's hand was a right. I've got another, a left, in my desk drawer. I found it at Amokok's. I suppose Cameron told you what happened to Amokok."

"You think he murdered Austin Ford? What for? Not just to cut off his hands. It don't make sense. I suppose he might have got word, through some native, that a white man had made a strike at Round Rock, and was coming in. He could then have stuck him up, but—"

"There has been no strike at Round Rock. I know that. Did you ever notice Ford's hands?"

"Not especially. As a matter of fact, he nearly always wore gloves. I used to think it was because of the flies, or was just a quaint British custom. He was what they'd call 'a bit of a toff' over there, I imagine. Good family, college education, and all that. But it seemed he'd had an accident of some sort. He didn't say much about it. Sensitive, though you'd hardly notice it."

"What was the accident?"

"Some sort of explosion with a gasoline blowtorch, I think, when he was fiddling with surface assays. That's how he came to mention it to me. It was a nasty burn, of course, and some fool who fixed him up forgot to tie the fingers separately,

The flesh stuck, and it was a mean job to get them apart. They actually grew together at the base. Made them sort of webbed. But he handled himself so you'd not notice. The palms were badly scarred. He asked me if Peekoya would want to read his hand—and then he showed me. We were quite chummy."

"The hand I've got is slightly webbed, and the inside of the palm is puckered," said O'Kane. Looks as if a burn had eaten away part of the thumb pad. Ford grew that beard after he left here, Emerson, and the man who shot him from the back knew that fact. He did not think anybody else would recognize him, except for his hands. So he cut those off, kept them in rock-salt, for some definite reason. Peekoya has one of them. Amokok had the other. But I don't think Amokok killed Austin Ford."

"Know who did?"

"Not yet. I think Amokok could tell me. There's a bare chance he may. I believe he's told Père Ladue, in confession."

"It's a bit spooky, old chap, standing here, remembering Ford sitting in front of Peekoya, who said he would come out, and then *'ajorpok'*. She using his dead hand later on, calling it the hand of her ancestor. Pretty thick. I could stand a drink, O'Kane, aside from its being damned cold in here. And then I'll take a look at the hand. I only glanced at his palms when he showed them to me, but I ought to know that scar on the thumb. Murray should know about that. He could identify him."

"I'm going to ask him to, presently. We'll have that drink. Do you happen to know the name of the girl Ford made an ass of himself over?"

"There were two or three of them. You know these young Eskimo squabs are not bad looking. Only they giggle too much for my taste. But the one he was warned to leave alone, and to clear out of Arrow if he didn't want a knife in his ribs, or a bullet in his heart was a girl named Kaiaryuk. Later on, she disappeared. She was a flirty bit, and we supposed some prospector took her along."

CAMERON was working on a report in the barracksroom.

"Was there an Eskimo girl named Kaiaryuk on the last census?" asked O'Kane. "Look her up."

"I don't have to. She was the native belle of Fort Arrow. Her old man was named Niptinatchiak. Died of delirium tremens. It was a good thing when the girl cleared out. She was a trouble maker, and they all ran after her. Made bad blood between whites and natives."

"Thanks, Cameron," said O'Kane. Emerson did not seem to have heard. He was staring at the hand, lying palm up in the drawer, with a fearful fascination. Automatically he reached out for the rest of his drink.

"I'll swear to the hand," he said. "Of course I know that was Austin Ford. And Murray——"

"Much obliged. Another spot?" O'Kane was also thinking of Murray, thinking of remittances that must have been piling up. But he had no doubt that the canny Scot would have them all properly audited, entered and accounted for.

Emerson left, with a final promise that he would forget what he knew until O'Kane asked him to remember it.

O'Kane sat frowning at papers on his desk without seeing them The hand was again in his drawer He filled a pipe slowly and carefully, lit it, smoked deliberately.

Since Murray was Ford's banker, there might be a motive there for the murder of the remittance man. No doubt Murray was in direct touch with Ford's family, duly accredited by them. His own acknowledgment of the money would be satisfactory, together with reports upon Ford's welfare. So that it would pay to keep Ford's death a secret. Murray might

have known Ford intended to grow a beard, know where he could find him.

There was another thing. Ford would be likely to be a poor correspondent in any case. As a remittance man, probably shipped to the Colonies because of some mess with a girl, he would not be grateful to his family. A lawyer might be attending to the money end of it. And, with his scarred hands, writing might be awkward.

Then, if it were Murray, why keep the hands?

Because, some day, it might pay him to be able to prove that Ford was really dead. That was plausible enough. Ford might be a possible heir. Murray would know that sort of thing, if he had been appointed as a sort of Canadian guardian. And the next in line would be willing to pay for information that would clear the way.

Peekoya had had one hand, certainly for several weeks.

Amokok had kept the other in his fireplace.

How did they get hold of them?

O'Kane, chewing the horn stem of his favorite briar, began to get a glimmering of how that might have come about. But it did not suit him. Admittedly fond of money, grouching about trade, it was still hard to place Murray as having deliberately murdered Ford. The motive of remittance money had to be rejected. The trader was too canny to take any such risk.

But if one piece did not fit exactly into the pattern, another might. There was Kaiaryuk, the settlement Delilah. There was——

THE outer door abruptly opened. A boy tumbled in, breathless. He spoke in an excited splutter of French. His brown eyes rolled. Ordinarily he would not have dared to enter the barracks without knocking, without permission. It was one of Father Ladue's altar boys, the son of a trapper named Regnier.

A member of the Mounted Police speaks French—Canadian French—of necessity. And O'Kane knew what had brought the lad pell mell, before he got out the words.

"Père Ladue, he says to come swiftly to the hospital, *M'sieu le Caporal.* Am okok, he comes to his senses."

O'KANE stood up, straightened belt and tunic, gave an order to Cameron in a tone that bespoke its importance. The constable would have been useful in taking down and witnessing a statement from Amokok, but O'Kane felt he had greater need of him elsewhere.

It had stopped snowing. The sun was breaking weakly through. The wind blew from the south, and it bore the faint but positive presages of spring.

At the gateway to the Mission, O'Kane looked back. He saw Cameron, in scarlet and blue and gold, without the regulation buffalo outer coat, his Stetson set at official angle; striding through the slushy snow towards Murray's store, eminently efficient.

Cameron was sometimes a bit slow on the uptake, but he was a good man. And he knew that the corporal had set him upon an important errand.

Chapter VI

Mystery's End

THERE was a little delay before O'Kane could see Amokok. A nurse was administering a stimulant. Shiele came out of the little emergency ward, holding now no other patient. Father Ladue remained inside.

"He won't last long," said the surgeon. "Better let him do all the talking while he can, without bothering him to answer questions. A cerebral hemorrhage is certain. May come any moment."

O'Kane nodded. "You're a grand guesser, Doc, if it wasn't something better than guesswork. The dead man was a chap named Austin Ford, a remittance man, a philanderer with women, especially with a young belle named Kaiaryuk."

"Ford? How did you find out?"

"Shaved him, and got an identification. Murray was by way of being his banker, I understand."

"And Kaiaryuk was Itosiak's girl," said Shiels. "At least he considered her so. She was born wanton. And those two found Ford in the ice, and didn't know him—for the whiskers."

Shiels whistled softly, looking at O'Kane's tanned face with its clean cut features and Irish eyes, grave now with purpose, sighting to the end of a definite quest.

"You wouldn't be telling me you found the hands, O'Kane?"

"I've got one. I know who had the other. Peekoya, Amokok's witch-aunt. She may have destroyed it now. I'm not broadcasting any of this, Shiels."

"I understand." Shiels did understand the potential ability of the non-comissioned officer, young, strong, earnest, well-educated and well-trained; typical of the high standard of acceptance of the force.

The Sister-nurse came to the door. Spoke in her low voice to the doctor. "It's all right to go in," he said to O'Kane.

Amokok, with bandaged head, the flesh of his face and hands like gray putty, lay very still. His eyes moved from O'Kane to Father Ladue, back again. Ladue talked to him quietly, motioned the corporal to a chair drawn to the side of the hospital cot. The Eskimo began to talk.

"Murray, he shoot me. I no shoot him. I not in store, not this time. One time, two, three month ago, I go along that place. Murray talk hard to me plenty time. So I get even. I savvy combination. I take some good. I catch some money in safe. I find steel box. I no open it then. Take it home. That box home now, in my house, inside fireplace along my room."

His voice trailed off. Shiels, watching him, gestured to the nurse who again administered a stimulant. Shiels dared not use anything with a violent reaction.

"In that box I find two hand, in plenty salt. I think that damn funny thing to find in safe. I think Murray think I steal those thing, but he not say anything. He not speak to anyone that store was rob, safe open. I ask him for some things and he give and not ask for pay. I tell Peekoya. She say dead hand plenty good for her to make magic. I fix hand so it move. I think bimeby Murray hear about that hand. If something wrong, he give me more thing I ask, for nothing. He send Itosiak to see. Peekoya no tell him anything.

"Murray he afraid maybe I talk about hand. Then you want to know too much. So last night Itosiak he look for me, find me, tell me Murray want to be friend with me, maybe I catch money. We walk along. Little way from store I stop, say I no wantum see Murray. Then someone shoot from behind tree. They carry me to store. They fix so it look like I rob store that night. I tell you true."

He turned his eyes to Father Ladue. They were growing dull. The priest held up a crucifix. Shiels stepped forward. A shudder ran through the Eskimo. He suddenly seemed deflated, his jaw dropped, his eyes held nothing.

"He's gone," said Shiels.

He left the room with O'Kane, leaving the dead man to Father Ladue and the Sister who served the hospital.

"He didn't say positively that he knew Murray shot him, or that he recognized him," suggested Shiels.

O'KANE cleared his throat. Not that he meant to say anything. The time had come for action. The design was plain now though the puzzle was not complete. Shiels had given him a key-piece when he said that Kaiaryuk had been Itosiak's girl.

"Want me along?" asked Shiels, accepting it that O'Kane was going to Murray's trading post.

"Not now. You might be needed later," said O'Kane grimly. "But I'll handle it right now."

He had it fairly straight now, he thought. Straight enough to go ahead. He found Cameron lounging in the front of the store. There were no customers. Cameron nodded to the back, and Murray came forward from his little office. Itosiak was behind the long counter, handling some barrels.

"Is Amokok still alive?" asked the trader.

O'Kane parried with his answer.

"I've just come from the hospital," he said. "I've been having a talk with him."

He watched Murray's face. It showed little expression that could be read.

"I'd be glad to think he wouldn't die," said Murray. His gray eyes were dour.

"It might be better for you, Murray. Itosiak, I want a talk with you. First, I'll tell both of you what you knew when you brought in the news of the dead man on Badger River. His name was Austin Ford. You handled remittances for him, Murray. His hands had been cut off, and you knew that too. And why. You can stay where you are, Itosiak, until I'm through. Murray, I'm giving you credit for good sense."

Itosiak stood stock still. What color he had drained from his Mongol-Aleut features, drained back again. He did not move, even when O'Kane took out handcuffs and let them jingle a little as he set them down. Cameron had another pair, but he did not produce them. He was watching both the men, alert, his ungloved hand hooked in his belt.

"Ford fooled round with your girl, Kaiaryuk, Itosiak. And I think she was willing enough to fool round with him. Then you told him to leave her alone. You threatened him. He left for Round Rock Lake. Badger River flows out of that. And he grew a beard. You see, Murray, all this happened before I came to the detachment, but there is plenty of evidence. I shaved Ford myself. At first I took it for granted he was a man who had always worn a beard. But there were one or two who thought they saw some resemblance. I was pretty sure you and Itosiak knew more than you tried to show."

THE lids of Murray's eyes narrowed to slits when O'Kane spoke of shaving the dead face.

"Peekoya has one hand," the corporal went on. "You and I found the other, Murray, in Amokok's house. He got them both out of your safe, but not last night. We'll get back to you, Itosiak. Kaiaryuk did not go away with Ford, but not long afterwards she left Arrow. You thought she had gone to him—you may have been told, but you made sure. You found them. I don't know yet what you did with the girl. But you killed Ford with a thirty-thirty rifle. We can check that bullet. The beard did not disguise him from your jealousy. If it did, Kaiaryuk gave it away. You knew his hands would identify him so you cut them off. And you left the body where the springs still flowed in the river, knowing they would freeze up later on.

"You came back here and told Murray what you had done. I don't know, yet, why he made himself an accessory after the act. Perhaps because of the remittances that would keep coming in his care. But he did condone the act. Then Amokok broke into the store, opened the safe, found the steel box, and the hands. You kept quiet about the robbery. Amokok blackmailed you in a small way. You heard about Peekoya and her talking

hand. Itosiak went to look. I saw him coming out just before I entered.

"Last night Itosiak picked up Amokok, and tolled him to where you, Murray, stood behind a tree and shot him. Killed him. He was dead when I left the hospital. But he spoke first."

Itosiak made a guttural noise in his throat, like a bear. Now his face went black with rage. He picked off the barrel head the tool he had used to open it. It was shaped like a small hatchet, with a hammerhead projection, a notch in the sharp blade.

He flung it at O'Kane as the corporal vaulted over the counter, one hand upon it, picking up the handcuffs, the other reaching for his gun.

The little axe struck him on the side of the head, a glancing blow, but a sickening one. Blood spurted.

Itosiak turned and dived through the window by which he had been standing. He took the frame with him, shattering rails and mullions and glass, landing in a frogleap in a drift of snow, with O'Kane after him, showering crimson drops.

The crust was already disintegrating. Both men disappeared from sight in a flurry of whirling crystals.

Cameron had drawn his gun but he had no chance to shoot, for fear of hitting O'Kane. But he covered Murray, warning him not to move.

THE corporal landed on Itosiak, grappling with him, but it was like trying to grapple with a walrus in its own element. The Eskimo was all steel and rubber, fighting desperately for a chance to escape. It would have been a slim one at that time of year—his fellow tribesmen would not have sheltered him.

O'Kane got one iron on him, then he jerked loose, just as he had dived through the sash. Now, since O'Kane's gun was somewhere in the drift, it was man to man. O'Kane had the handcuffs, and Itosiak had a knife. He kicked and clawed and tried to free the blade. They thrashed down the drift until it was only a wallow.

O'Kane was bleeding like a stuck pig. The snow could not stop the flow, but his head was clearing. He got Itosiak's arm and thrust it up between his shoulders in a hammerlock until the musher squealed with pain. With a frenzied effort he rolled over, and the bone snapped.

Itosiak was savage as a trapped wolf. The pain of the break sickened him, but he snarled and spat like a lynx. He got his left hand on his knife, striking with it, as if the hand were a taloned claw.

O'Kane smashed him on the jaw and got his forearm slit through the fat. He snapped on the other handcuff and got to his feet, panting but triumphant.

Itosiak was out. O'Kane climbed in through the broken window, his sleeve slashed, sodden with scarlet as red as its cloth. There was blood all over his face, spattering on his shoulder.

"Come and collect this," he called to Cameron. "Leave me your handcuffs. And your gun. Mine's in the drift."

Cameron dropped out the window and O'Kane turned to Murray.

"You'll not be needin' a gun," said the trader, "or the irons for that matter, thought I presume they're regulation. You'll not mind me takin' a wee pinch of snuff, O'Kane, before we talk?"

O'Kane wiped the blood out of his eyes, mopped at the cut over his ear. From his vest pocket, elaborately displaying all absence of trickery, Murray took out a snuff mull made from the end of a horn, capped with silver.

O'Kane knocked it from his hands. The cap opened and the contents were scattered on the floor.

"'Twas naught but King's Mixture, with a wee bit of Tonka bean," said Murray deprecatingly.

"I'm taking no chances. You might have thrown it in my face."

Murray nodded, blinking mildly.

"You're a braw policeman, O'Kane. You'd better put on the irons, maybe."

He stretched out his wrists and O'Kane manacled him.

"Anything you say, Murray—" he stared.

"I know the formula. I'll not say much. You're right, in the main. Itosiak killed Ford, but he didn't kill the girl, though she deserved it. She fled when she saw him before Ford did, the little wanton. I said nothing when Itosiak told me, because I owe him my life. He went through the ice to save me one time, you know. I'm not such a God-fearin' man, Corporal, but I like to pay my just debts.

"And then—well, you did not ask me or Itosiak to identify Ford. You sent a runner out. You said nothin' about the hands at all. You saw Itosiak at Peekoya's and he saw you. Mind you, I did not credit you with shavin' the dead man's face. That's not far from genius, O'Kane. But it was closin' in. I don't know what Amokok told you before he died, but I misdoubt it was all the truth. I never saw an Eskimo who did not hold back something. But it is the truth that he tried to hold me up for a thousand dollars, after havin' robbed me an' blackmailed me. If he told what he knew, Itosiak was doomed. I paid my debt—to Itosiak—when I shot Amokok. And now, thanks to you, I'll be payin' my debt to what they call society. But there was no thought of money in all this. That's all accounted for. If it was ever necessary, I could have produced the hands, you see, say they were brought to me by a native—but no doubt you've thought of that. You'll go far, and I've followed my fate to the bitter end."

SHIELS and Emerson were in the barracks. Koutouk had got through to the end of wire. The Commercial Airways third spare plane had flown up from Edmonton by way of McMurray, picking up an inspector at Fort Smith. O'Kane's case was complete, his responsibility transferred, his promotion assured.

The inspector had been talking to Shiels and the American. It was Emerson who put the query to O'Kane.

"Did you ever find out how Peekoya made that hand move?"

"It was simple enough, though it had me puzzled. I imagine she had Amokok to thank for that. There was a mail-order catalog in his room, another smaller one, with trick gadgets for sale. I'll give you a demonstration, if you've no objection, Inspector."

"Go ahead."

O'Kane got a hand from the small detachment safe—he had both of them now. He set a paper on his desk, placed the hand upon it.

"Twice for 'yes', once for 'no'," he said. The hand rocked, lifted, tapped.

O'Kane displayed the gadget. It was a length of slim rubber hose, a bulb at one end, a little pouch at the other.

"In the catalog they tell you to set it under somebody's dinner plate, and press the bulb beneath the cloth. Amokok went one up on them."

The inspector looked at the contrivance, passed it to Emerson.

"What will you do with Peekoya?" asked the latter.

"She settled that for herself this morning," said O'Kane. "It's the one thing I regret in the affair. But she ran true to tradition. She was old, infirm, likely to be a not-wanted burden. She had been exposed, she was probably afraid though I told her not to worry. She hanged herself in the stone hut some time last night. Doc says she had been dead for several hours when we found her."

The Town's Bad Man Loved to Hold Nightly Target Practice— on the Railroad's Yard Lights!

TARGET YARD

By DUANE HOPKINS

Author of "Silver Dollar Division," "Presidential Special," etc.

SURE I'll tell you a story! Glad you asked me, stranger. It'll be a pleasure. Did you ever see an old-time railroader who didn't like to spin yarns? Certainly not. We veteran heads would rather tell a railroad tale than draw a pension check, any day.

What kind of a story do you want to hear, mister? A tale of the wild old days? Of pioneer railroading in the Old West? Good! You bet I can spin a yarn about those rip-snorting times on the prairie frontier.

First let me introduce myself. I'm John Weller. Former yardmaster here at Sundance. Went to work in the railroad yard here when I was a kid. I'm retired on pension now. Half a century in the service and then out. Nothing to do but sit and tell stories. Kind of hard for an old man, sometimes, just dreaming, remembering.

The story? Well, let me see. Something unusual, you say? No old fiction stuff that you can read in any magazine? All right, I'll tell you something different. The story of Target Yard. How it got that odd nickname—and lost it. A strange tale, but true as gospel. Many of the facts can be dug out of the road's old records. But I tell only what my own eyes saw.

So make yourself comfortable, friend. Wait till I get the corncob smoking. There now. All set? Well, here goes.

First off, let me try to give you a

picture of Sundance here as it was when I started to work in the yard. Otherwise you can't appreciate what we early railroaders were up against. The town today is real peaceful and respectable. But in those days Sundance was known as the Hell Hole of the Prairies.

It wasn't a railroad town then. The railroad was new. Sundance was a cow town. Wide open and the devil's very own. Nine-tenths saloons and gambling hells. Shooting scrapes at any hour. No law except gun law. That's what the railroad found when it built into the cattle country on its way to the Coast.

For want of a better spot, the road laid out a freight yard here. Not much of a yard at first, mind you. Half a dozen spurs off a lead of scrap rails. Just enough to handle the material for the construction west and a little paid freight. Still it was a railroad yard, and it soon earned the nickname of Target Yard, with top ranking in the ROR list—the old-time boomer's pocket manual of places that were Rough On Railroaders.

You see, this was in the days of the early cattle drives north from Texas. The big trail herds were a lure to cattle thieves. Rustler gangs operated all along the route. Many of the rustlers made Sundance their headquarters. Besides, the town was full of gamblers, outlaws, and cutthroats of all kinds. Scum of the frontier, they made a deadly crowd indeed.

Why, you ask, should this have affected the railroad? Train robberies? No. We weren't hauling much of value then. Heavy traffic in mail and express came after the line went through to the Coast. Our early troubles centered in the Sundance freight yard.

For all the town's villainous population, nobody really bothered us except Bat Laroup. He was the kingpin of the Sundance badmen. Town boss, cattle thief, braggart, bully, killer. That was Bat Laroup, whose greatest delight was to drive us railroaders crazy.

LAROUP'S favorite hangout was at Gai Spang's saloon, just off our freight yard. On quiet evenings Laroup loved to stand outside Spang's place and hold night target practice with his six-guns. He and his band of desperadoes must have burned up a fortune in ammunition in that way. Unfortunately for the railroad, the targets they always aimed at were our yard lights.

Laroup and his henchmen shot away our lamps faster than the supply department could ship us new ones. Switch markers, engine lights, yardmen's lanterns, all fell in the nightly bombardment. Whenever a switchman swung a signal after dark, he fully expected his lantern to be shot right out of his hand. Often it was. And if the bullet missed the lantern, like as not it clipped the switchman instead. Which was all the more fun—for Laroup and his marksmen.

Naturally this state of affairs was a little tough on the switching crew. But what could we do about it? Call the law? There wasn't any. Ask the company for protection? Railroad police were unheard of then. Take things into our own hands? Including the yardmaster, we were five against a mob. We just had to grin and bear it. Or quit. Mostly it was quit. Few yardmen lingered long in Sundance after receiving Bat Laroup's baptism of target fire.

That is how our unhappy freight yard came to be known far and wide as Target Yard. It got an evil reputation as being a public pistol range and a good place not to work in. That is the way things stood when Engineman Tibbs came out from the East to run our switch engine for us.

ANDY FRAKE was our yardmaster then. He was a tall stooped man, with a sandy mustache that drooped down forlornly over the corners of his mouth. Nothing ever excited old Andy Frake, not even Bat Laroup's target practice. So I was surprised one morning to find him in a pretty bad humor.

"It's the new yard engineer," he told

me as we walked to work together. "I asked headquarters for a engineman with a boiler-plate nerve and a bullet-proof hide. What do I get? A timid little tenderfoot by the name of Jefferson Tibbs. And this letter."

He showed me a note from General Manager Lenfield.

"Yardmaster Frake: 'Am sending you Engineman Tibbs for the yard. Believe we should fight fire with fire. Take a tip and handle Tibbs with asbestos gloves. Lenfield, G. M."

"Lenfield must have gone bats in the belfry," grumbled Frake. "If this Tibbs isn't a sissy-boy I never saw one. There he is now—look at him!"

We rounded a corner of the station and found the new engineer oiling up the yard engine. One glance showed me why Frake was complaining. Jefferson Tibbs was about the timidest looking man I've ever seen. He was small, frail, nervous. He had a habit of glancing back over his shoulder every few seconds, like he was scared somebody was sneaking up behind him. Somehow he reminded me of a cottontail rabbit getting ready to jump.

"How long do you suppose he'll last here in Target Yard?" asked Frake. "Likely he'll quit the minute Laroup pops a light out. Then you'll have to fill in at the throttle, Weller, till I can get another engineer."

I was firing the switch engine then. I began that morning to fire for Jeff Tibbs. And I found it a pleasure. He really knew his job. Despite his frightened look, he could handle a locomotive with the best of them.

From that day on, and for several weeks, the yard was unusually peaceful. Laroup and his crowd were out on the trail after cattle, and Spang's saloon was a quiet spot. That gave us a breathing spell; but we knew the rustlers would return and we dreaded it. Also we avoided speaking of it to Jeff Tibbs, for fear he'd become so frightened that he'd quit flat on us right away.

At last the return took place. Laroup and his outfit came galloping back into town with a whoop. Gar Spang's dive burst out in all its evil glory, and Sundance sat up and roared.

Still there was no shooting at our yard lights. This was because there were no lights in the yard at night. With Jeff Tibbs running the goat like a master, we got all our switching done in daylight. It began to look like Target Yard would lose its nickname and bad reputation then and there, just because of an engineer who was a fast switcher.

However, we were soon disappointed in that regard. About that time the road began to rush the construction west. They were trying to finish a high stretch in the Rockies ahead of the winter freeze. That autumn they put on another scheduled freight daily, Number Fifteen, to help push the material to the front.

Number Fifteen was due in Sundance at four in the afternoon. When it was on time we got through in the yard by sunset, for all the extra work. But Fifteen was seldom on time. Generally it was long after dark when she got in. Whatever the time she arrived, we had to stay on duty to break her up and remake her for the company run west to the mountains. There were no eight-hour days on the pioneer steel.

THE very first night that Fifteen pulled in real late, Laroup went into action again. We couldn't switch cars without lights, so our poor yard became a target range once more. The crowd at Spang's place took up their merry sharpshooting where they had left off before Jeff Tibbs arrived. And with the first volley from their guns they rang up a perfect bull's-eye on our switch engine headlight. The big lamp snuffed suddenly out with a tinkle of glass and a puff of smoke from the wick.

This startling event caused Jeff at the throttle to jump half out of his skin. I

dropped my coal scoop and looked for him to faint dead away in my waiting arms. But Jeff didn't swoon. He only jumped and blinked his pale eyes in surprise. Then he went right on shunting cars by moonlight, as guardedly signaled by Andy Frake, who had managed to save a switchman's lantern from the six-gun fusillade.

The next night that Fifteen worked us late, the barrage again set in and raked the yard. This time Jeff didn't even blink

at it. He took the hail of hot lead as calmly as that scarred veteran of the siege, Yardmaster Frake. Which surprised us no end.

The third time, though, was different. Very much different. That night things went to popping for sure. Just as Laroup's snipers rang up another kill on Jeff's headlight, a stray bullet wandered into the engine cab by way of the closed window. The glass pane shattered not six inches from Jeff's right ear. Whereupon Engineman Tibbs showed plain signs of becoming annoyed.

We were throwing Fifteen together when the headlight went out that night. The job was finished cautiously with a blind goat against the drawheads and shaded lanterns out in the yard—what we used to call a "ghost round-up." Soon as the string was tied together, Jeff nosed our bullet-spattered switcher into the rip track and eased to a stop. Then he started to get down from the cab.

"Keep her stoked, Weller," he told me. "I'll be back soon."

I was curious at once. "Where you going, Tibbs?" I asked. I couldn't imagine what he was up to.

"I'm going," he announced, "over to Gar Spang's saloon."

WELL, that was good. Spang's place was the unhealthiest spot in Sundance for railroad men. Even tough old Andy Frake kept clear of that death trap. I thought of course Jeff must be joking. But he seemed serious enough.

"I'm going over to Spang's," he said, "for a word with Bat Laroup. Reckon it's time somebody put a stop to this shooting nonsense of his. His fire scattered pretty bad tonight. Besides, switching by starlight isn't safe. I don't want to pinch anybody between cars in the dark."

It began to dawn on me then that he was in earnest. Hard as it was to believe, he intended to beard the lion Laroup in his den. Timid little Jeff, alone, unarmed. Ridiculous! I told him so.

"Are you insane?" I yelped. "The last railroader that stuck his nose into Spang's joint came out feet first. Laroup will skin you alive, man."

He paid no attention. Without answering he walked off. All I could do was run for the yard office to tell Frake. And old Andy sighed and sucked his mustache, and opined that I could run the engine next day.

Our two switchmen had gone off duty already. I sat with Frake in the yard office, a board shack with one desk in it, and we waited for the bad news about the fate of Jeff Tibbs.

Minutes dragged slowly. I was in a growing sweat of anxiety. Frake himself was nervous, the only time I ever saw him that way. Once he opened the top drawer of his desk where he kept a revolver. It was a nickel-plated thirty-eight that he used sometimes to pop at coyotes. He fingered it for a while, then put it back and closed the drawer. We heard gunshots beyond the yard now and then, but that was nothing out of the ordinary for Sundance.

After an hour the door opened and in walked Jeff. His face was gray under its coating of engine grime.

"Well, did they put you through the paces?" Frake asked bluntly.

Jeff nodded. "Where's your gun, Andy?"

"What happened?" Frake leaned back in his chair and put his foot up against the desk drawer that held the revolver.

"I wanted to ask Laroup and the others to stop shooting at our lights," related Jeff. "They wouldn't let me talk. First they danced me. With bullets. Shot the heels clear off my shoes. Then Laroup tossed my cap up in the air and put six slugs through it before it came down. Afterward they tied me to Spang's heating stove and joined hands for an Indian dance around me while I fried."

He turned his back and showed us his overalls scorched brown. The hair on his neck was singed. Bullet holes showed in his cap, and his shoe heels were practically ripped off.

"And finally," he added, "they made me buy drinks for everybody at the bar until I was broke. Yes, Frake, they put me through the paces. Now give me your gun!"

Frake kept his foot against the drawer. "When you came to work here," he said, "you brought a letter from Lenfield. He wrote something about fighting fire with fire, and to handle you with asbestos gloves. What did he mean?"

"I used to have a pretty violent temper," explained Jeff. "Lenfield knew me back East. I was tried twice there on charges of manslaughter, because I'd killed men who—put me through the paces. Now will you give me that gun?"

Frake stroked his mustache. "I'm afraid I misjudged you in the beginning," he admitted, and took his foot away from the drawer.

MINUTES later, Frake and I watched the whole thing through an open side window of Spang's saloon. Nobody inside knew we were there, not even Jeff himself.

Bat Laroup and about twenty of his cutthroat cattle thieves were lined up at the bar when Jeff pushed through the butterfly door. None saw him enter. No doubt they didn't expect him to return, ever, after what he got the first time. But there he stood, with Frake's revolver and a clean drop on the whole crowd.

"Come here!" He beckoned Laroup out to the center of the barroom. "And everybody keep your hands up—high!"

Laroup stepped out from the rest, hands half raised. He was a black-browed giant of a man, with fierce glaring eyes and a mouth twisted with cruelty. At the moment he wore a scowl that would have scared off a hungry grizzly.

Jeff relieved him of his two hefty six-guns—a pair of plow-handle forty-fives whose worn walnut was fringed with carved notches. Jeff stuck the extra weapons in his overalls pockets. Then he backed to the far wall facing all the others, and ordered Sundance's top badman to do a solo jig—pronto!

Laroup looked foolish, no less. He glanced around at his men appealingly. But not one moved a finger in his defense. The railroader's pose looked too deadly. Jeff's pale eyes glittered cold as blue ice.

"Hop!" And a bullet from Frake's revolver ripped into the floor to back up the command.

Red-faced with the shame of it, Laroup began to trip and shuffle clumsily. And the others began to smile. They had all suffered their share of the big killer's cruelties, and their loyalty to him was only luke warm. Afraid to laugh outright, his underlings turned their heads and choked.

Satisfied with the dance, Jeff next ordered Laroup to lay his hat and boots on the floor. Then with Laroup's own guns he poured six bullets into the broad-brimmed hat, and six more into the spurred riding boots. After which he invited the town's overlord to take off his pants also.

This done, Jeff tossed the trousers on

the heating stove and left them there until they were smoking like an overstoked locomotive. Then he collected back from Spang the twenty-odd dollars he had been forced to spend at the bar on his first visit. All of which just about evened things up for the night.

But there was one more act to the show. Jeff dropped his quiet manner and proceeded to curse Bat Laroup so vividly that even the cow wranglers were mildly shocked at the language.

That was too much for Laroup. He was already galled by being made to dance and half disrobe. Now he became desperate to save some of his crumbling prestige. His own men were laughing at him. His reign of terror was tottering. Blind with rage, he swore he'd run Jeff out of town so hard he'd never get back.

"Try it and I'll kill you!" promised Jeff. "I ought to do it right now while it's handy. But I've pledged myself never to lose my temper until I've counted to a million. So you're safe tonight. But the next time you tackle me—watch out!"

THE news was all over town next day. Every soul in Sundance was talking about it. Bat Laroup at last getting a dose of his own medicine, and from a railroader of all people! Sundance began to look up to us instead of down on us. Gambler, killer, thief—they stared our way in open admiration.

Kidlike, I strutted around town like a peacock on parade. The two switchmen spent a month's wages setting up drinks for all comers. Even Andy Frake celebrated the occasion. He got real reckless and bought himself a ten-cent cigar. Jeff Tibbs himself was about the only one who seemed unconcerned.

Two nights later Number Fifteen held us late in the yard again. While we were waiting for the delayed freight, Jeff decided to fix the safety-pop on our switch engine. The pop had been sticking all day; and now it had stuck fast, closing the safety blow-off valve completely. Things like that were always happening to the old 147. She was an ancient goat, all ready to fall to pieces.

We stopped her just off the west yard lead, and Jeff began rummaging around the cab for pop wrenches. Before he found them we heard footsteps in the gangway. We thought of course it was Frake and the switchmen coming aboard. But it wasn't. They were all in the yard office, at the far east end of the yard. The newcomers were Bat Laroup and four of his chief lieutenants, fairly bristling with guns.

My eyes must have popped at that sight. Laroup had never come over into the yard before; he had been content to shoot out our lights from Spang's. Now, from the hate written in his face, it looked like he meant to add another notch or two to those carved gun handles of his. Jeff, however, didn't flick an eyelid.

"Let's us ride, Engineer," Laroup rasped out. "Put spur to this iron bronc of yours. Head west for the open range. I told you the other night this town is too small to hold both of us. We're leaving it right now, together. And only one of us is coming back!"

Jeff grimaced, not with fear but disgust. "You're a fool, Laroup," he declared flatly. "Do you think I'd run this switch engine out on the main line without orders?"

"Orders?" roared Bat, waving his six-guns. "You got your orders—from me. Follow them!"

Jeff paused to think it over. Finally a fleeting smile crossed his face.

"Reckon you're the conductor," he said meekly, and reached up for the latch.

As the engine headed down the west lead track, Jeff looked over at me. "Mind your fire, lad," he cautioned. "We'll need plenty of steam now that we've turned into a road special."

I stared at him thunderstruck. We were leaving town without a clearance of any kind, and nobody except those in the cab knew it. If there was anything coming against us from the west—well, Jeff was the engine boss; or rather, Laroup was.

I grabbed the coal scoop and set to work.

We made no stop to open the lead switch. Just split the points and barged out on the main line. While I fed the fire Jeff opened the stack blower wide for extra draft.

After the grates were well stoked I glanced up at the steam gauge—horrors! The pressure was forty pounds over safety! Then I remembered the stuck pop valve. The boiler was corked tight as a sealed bottle. To boot, I had let the water gauge drop to a dangerously low level. With the draft blower and the throttle both eating steam, the water in the glass was falling like a wounded bird.

At once I made a plunge for the water injector. But Jeff plunged after me. He

caught my shoulder and whirled me away.

"Give me a white fire!" he barked. "I'll attend to everything else. You pound that steam up."

Well, I was stunned. I was paralyzed with amazement—nothing else describes it. Then like a flash I realized what Jeff was doing. Laroup and his companions couldn't understand, for they knew nothing of railroading; but I understood.

JEFF TIBBS was deliberately going to blow up that engine!

Already there was danger of it, from steam pressure alone. The gauge needle was pointing off at a crazy angle. Far worse, the water level was fast sinking toward the bottom of the glass. The minute the boiler water dropped below the crown sheet over the firebox—*Bam!* Engine and all aboard it would be blown to bits.

I remembered Jeff's promise to Laroup—to kill him next time. So this was the way he'd do it! I began to look for a chance to jump from that ride of death. But Laroup's men held too sharp a guard for any escape.

Only a few miles out of Sundance, Laroup called for a halt. Jeff twisted the brake valve and we stopped on the desolate prairie.

By that time the water glass was practically dry, and I was a nervous wreck. Jeff took pity on me then. He asked Laroup to let me go.

"You can both go," was Bat's surprising verdict. "On one condition, Mr. Engineer—that you never set foot in Sundance again. I said I'd run you out of town for good. So I'd rather do that than just shoot you."

I figured it out, later. Laroup undoubtedly thought that by driving Jeff out of town he could restore his own lost standing in Sundance. Killing Jeff wouldn't turn the trick; anybody could kill an unarmed railroader. But to scare him out—that was harder. If he could do that it would wipe out the old disgrace, and make Bat Laroup a dreaded name once more.

Only Jeff declined. "I've got to take this engine back to Sundance," he stated. "I can't leave it standing out here on the main line."

"I'll herd it back for you," offered Laroup, almost anxiously. "Just show me how to handle the reins. How about it? Do you keep walking on from here, or land in a pine box?"

Jeff turned to the cab locker and pulled out his jacket. His face was utterly expressionless.

"It's a bargain," he said without feeling. "You run the goat back to Target Yard. I'll never return to Sundance. Never! That's a promise."

"Good!" Laroup grinned a cruel grin. He had whipped the one man who had dared to cross him. Now he could climb back on his throne, king of badmen.

Jeff showed him briefly how to work

throttle and brake, set the engine in reverse for him. Meantime I sprinkled more coal on the roaring fire, the while fearfully eyeing an empty water glass and a sprung steam gauge.

"Don't forget," warned Laroup in farewell, "to keep that promise about staying out of town."

"I always keep my promises," declared Jeff. "I'll keep both of my promises to you, Laroup."

"Both? What do you mean?"

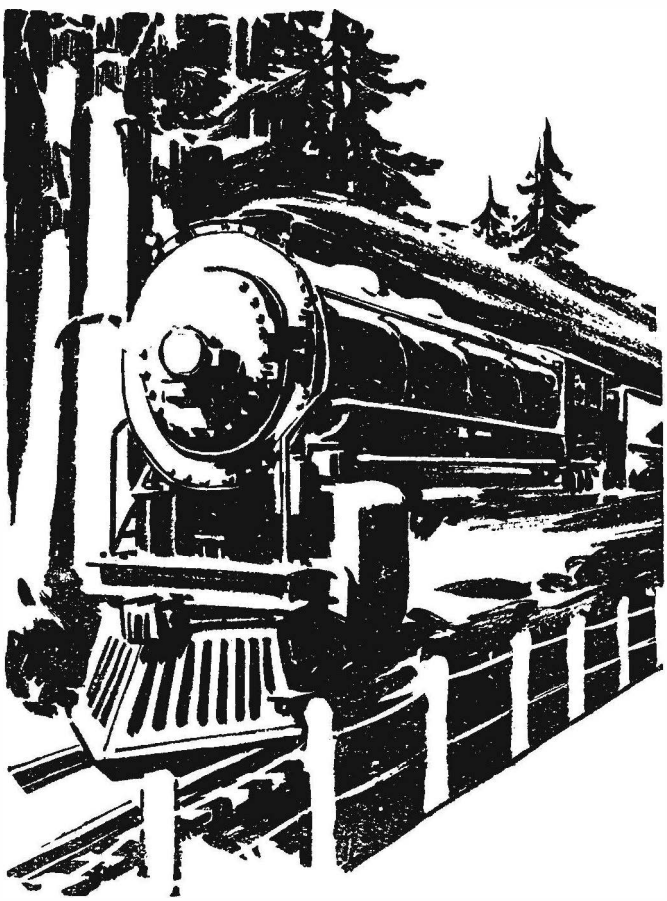
"First, never to set foot in Sundance again. And second, to kill you for running me out of town, as I promised you in Spang's saloon."

Then Jeff and I were gone.

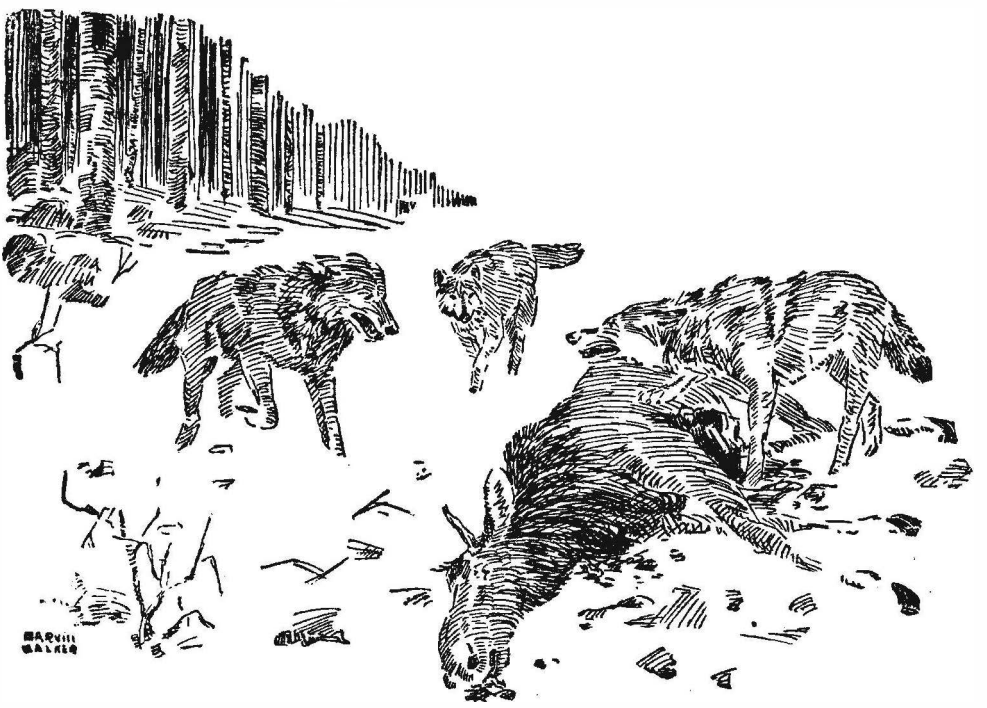
Laroup eased the throttle cautiously open. The engine wheezed, groaned, stirred. And with shouts of "Ride 'em, cowboy!" from the outlaw crew, the old 147 started back toward Sundance on her last run.

She never reached the yard. A mile short of the lead switch her crown sheet let go. The boiler explosion shattered half the windows in town. About all the wreckers found of her was a set of driving wheels standing beside twisted rails. They found even less of those who had been riding. And so with the passing of Bat Laroup, Target Yard passed also into memory.

Jeff Tibbs had kept one of those two promises. He kept the other promise, too. Long afterward we learned he had got a swell job in the East, running passenger. But he never came back to Sundance after that night; not once, even for his pay. His last pay check still waits here to be claimed. Fast fading yellow now, it hangs framed in the yardmaster's office. You can see it there today, friend—the last souvenir left of old Target Yard and the wild days of frontier railroading.



The Northern Lights Looked Down on an Epic Battle of the Barren Lands



WILDERNESS HERITAGE

By HAROLD F. CRUICKSHANK

USAM bulged out his magnificent ruff as he pulled himself to his haunches, to cast his muzzle up into the wind. His splendid wolf physique rippled in every muscle, every nerve center, as faint wisps of seductive scent was carried downwind. Out close to the frozen Pembina River, where a fringe of spruces etched the gray-blue night sky, a cold moon lolled on his back. Shortly, that moon would fill. An important moon, a moon that meant a lot to Usam, the great. It was the moon which brought the gray wolves together again to remate.

Usam made an impatient throat sound. His gleaming eyes now filled blood red. The last mating moon had brought disaster, for out of an alien territory had come a massive black wolf, an usurper whose fangs had been long and sharp, and whose weight had exceeded that of Usam by many pounds. In a bitter clash of fang and claw, the black had beaten the young gray leader out of his leadership. He had eloped with Usam's mate. But with the coming of this moon, Usam's body was bigger. He was now fully three years old and weighed over a hundred pounds. Greater than that, he was the son of a mighty gray wolf leader—Okimow, the king of all wolves in the far-flung frozen North.

Usam's big moment had not yet come, though. There would be a few sleeps before he would hurl his big frame out in search of his former mate. It was a law in the wolf family that they mate for life. Otawana, the sleek gray she, was his. He

licked his chops and smacked the dry, powdered snow with his muzzle.

Now the sky seemed to be robbed of its moon charm. Another, more fascinating light had sprung from out of the amazing sky void—a delicate, seductive light of lemon-yellow tint, which swept the sky like the kiss of some flimsy wedding train. And then it flitted from view, only to reappear in company with a floating purple edge which shuddered, as though loath to expose its frail daintiness to this wide expanse of frozen snowland.

Usam cocked his head at the brilliant main. He had fought many a grim battle beneath the flaunting train of the Aurora. His big frame rippled. The dancing, multi-tinted lights above seemed to revive in him the urge for action. Last night he had made a kill near the timber, when a yearling moose bull had gone down at a single slashing stroke of his strong fangs—hamstrung. Usam wasn't hungry, but there was a certain definite charm and glory for the wolf in rolling in the gore of a former kill. He loved to smear his body with the stench, and strut stiff-legged in the wind.

He catapulted his frame through space, breaking into a swift run. Usam was famous for his speed. Cree Indians who knew him had given him his name, Usam—Snowshoe. But suddenly he chocked back on his haunches. Above the pleasing odor of the remains of the moose kill there had come another scent, a scent which brought Usam's upper lip up in a snarled curl. Le Carcajou, the jackal of the wilds, was at the kill—that terrible, malodorous devil, the Wolverine.

Le Carcajou knew no laws. Fiendish spoiler of meat that he was, he feared no beast on the long white trails. He ate his fill and smeared the remainder of a kill, or cache, with his pungent odor. Many times had he spoiled the kills of Usam and his kin. But tonight Usam's mind was charged with a bitterness that was deadly. This devil of the wilderness must be killed.

Usam chopped about on stiffened legs, grumbling to himself, while his ruff stood out almost straight. Now he wheeled, and like a gray phantom, whisked his big shape to the cover of a spruce thicket. A disturbed horned owl voiced protest, and some small four-footed denizen scampered deep into the thicker timber.

THE gray wolf slunk belly down, in a wide arc about the kill. He wanted the wind in his favor. Suddenly his fangs bared. He had spotted that black and white shape of the skunk-bear in a crouch above the offal of the moose kill. Although upwind from the kill, Usam's keen nostrils still caught the unpleasant odor of the wolverine. It nauseated him, fired him with the urge to rush and make a swift kill. But his better judgment prevailed. There was no more fierce battler in the wilds than this strange, hybrid-looking animal who stank almost as strongly as the skunk.

Usam began to sluff his long body noiselessly over the snow. From above, those bewitching festoons of brilliance seemed to dip to the snow plain. Le Carcajou's black and white frame now shone in the dozen different hues as the Aurora swept not only the sky, but the very snowland.

Nearer and nearer drew Usam. His big jaws slavered in anticipation. Fifty feet—now thirty. He caught the grinding of hard teeth on softer bone, and the grunts of content from the throat of the wolverine. His own throat convulsed as he tightened his claws. For a brief moment, the big wolf's body hung poised, trembling, and then it bolted through space. There was a scurry of fur, a snarl from the wolverine, who rolled back eight or ten feet under the terrific driving force of Usam. Then the smaller shape coiled over on to his back. His deadly claws slashed upward. Usam backed away like a flash, dripping blood. He dipped his head and took a swift look at a skin cut in his belly. The taste of his own blood acted as a stimulant. Wasn't be a lord of the North! Wasn't he the

son of Okimow the great! Wasn't he now ready to run the trail of the big black who had caused him to abdicate!

A low snarl broke from his massive throat. With the fighting heritage of Okimow had come a great wisdom, a stratagem. Hadn't the young Usam made good use of this in defending himself against the traps, snares, and rifles of the hunters along the far Pembina?

He made a swift feint attack on le carcajou, sheering off like a gray ghost as the other flashed those deadly, tearing claws. Usam then hurled his body high in the air, above the coiled body of the intruder, to flash down in a swift pivot which flung the smaller killer momentarily off guard. Then the big wolf struck. His fangs made contact with fur, but le carcajou rolled clear, leaving a piece of shoulder fur in the wolf's fangs. Usam spat this out and again feinted. Again le carcajou coiled himself in that wicked defensive position.

From a point close to the timber, a cross-fox licked his jaws expectantly as he crouched down to wait. The scent of blood had seemed to revive the smaller wild life. From downwind came the call of another timber wolf, faintly but appealingly. But Usam made no answering call. This was no time to gloriously call in hungry wolves to share in a kill, or feast. This was his own fight. The wolverine had fouled his kill. It was his job, this, a job for the fangs of Usam alone.

THE wolverine showed not the slightest trace of fear. His beady eyes flashed green and red as they caught the lights of the swiftly increasing sky dancers. Usam was belly down now. His body was shuffling along, snakelike, toward the enemy. Each strong muscle in his frame rippled, or drew tense by turn. He felt in his killer mind that his moment had come. When within ten feet of le carcajou, with no warning movement, his long frame leaped high. Legs close together he chopped down, landing just to one side of those slashing claws. His left shoulder, one of the toughest parts of his iron frame, was exposed to the stroke of those wolverine claws. His belly was protected. And now he began to exert the strategy of his great sire. He rammed his shoulder in close. The pain of a savage sideswipe was like the sear of a rifle bullet through his shoulder, but he continued to use his weight. He swung his muzzle. The other snapped savagely, and for a moment Usam was blinded by a newer pain, in his nose. But he quickly recovered. Le carcajou now began to show fear for the first time. He made to uncoil his black and white shape and hurl himself clear, but Usam suddenly whipped about and with a throaty snarl struck down with gaping jaws which sank deep into the vitals of the wolverine's throat.

While those strong fangs crowded his jugular, the fiendish killer below continued to fight. His stench became vile as it penetrated the wolf's lungs. But Usam was on fire with the determined urge to kill, and soon, he felt the warm body beneath him relax. He buried his muzzle deeper into the smelly fur, then snapped back his head. Le Carcajou's frame was convulsed, then stretched out to stiffen on the white-red snow. No more would he plunder; no more would he gnaw through the poles of a cache to bespoil the food of man.

Usam backed stiff-legged away. He stalked about the dead shape in a couple of circles, then bounded to a small rise of land and hoiked his long muzzle up into the furious, dazzling dance of the sky nymphs.

"O-o-o-o—Ou-u-u-u-u—A-h-h-h!" He had not meant to call, but his long, resonant victory wail rang out to reverberate through the timber, echoing, and re-echoing long down the valley.

Suddenly he snuffled. Again from upwind came that scent which tickled his nostrils—a stray wisp caught on some vagrant breeze. Could that be Otawana?

The mating instinct was powerful in Usam. For with it came the majesty of leadership. With a hard lunge he drove himself across the frozen white plain.

ISKWASHISH, a young mule-deer doe leaped high from a patch of meadow on which she had been browsing where the wind had swept the snow clear. Her distended nostrils seemed to flash flame as, panic-stricken, she attempted to bound to the cover of the thickets. But her first leap bogged her down deeply in a five foot snow drift where she trembled in every limb. A long, powerful gray shape hurtled by. Her knees buckled and she cringed

delicately down. But Usam, the gray wolf, was not hungry, save for his former mate. This was no time to wheel and make a kill. That sixty odd pounds of trembling succulence in the snow drift must wait.

As he cut distance down, Usam's fire of desire was almost overwhelming. Perhaps in his wolf mind there were already visions of strong new whelps which would, at maturity, become the solid, staunch backbone of his new pack, the pack he intended to build up.

He suddenly paused in his flight across the snow plain and smacked his muzzle high into wind. There was no mistaking the subtle scent of his kind; but as well—bringing a curl to his upper lip—came a faint, acrid odor—the scent of wood smoke.

The big dog wolf drove his forefeet hard into the snow. He snapped savagely at the itching wolverine scratches below his brisket. His whole being flamed with anger, for beyond the meadow some man creature burned wood.

A sudden whimper arrested his attention. He cocked up his head and bristled his ruff. A low murmur escaped his throat. He flung himself off to the southeast, to a knoll, from which point he sniffed the night air. Again that plaintive whimper. Usam moved on, cautiously padding, head erect, sharp nose quivering. And then the crack of a twig! Usam leaped high, and to one side, to melt with the shadows. He searched the atmosphere for that dread scent of man, but its absence was reassuring. The urge for his mate became a burning passion, but it did not rob him of that instinctive craft of his kind, part of the great heritage passed down by the big leader, Okimow. There was smoke in the air, wood smoke, and though very faint, it marked the presence of man in the district.

Now Usam made no throat sound as he moved toward a shadow which began to cavort by the edge of a thicket. The whimpering he had heard was a genuine appeal to his doghood. A mate was calling, pleading, cajoling—and in the last mating moon Usam had gone mateless.

It was the sudden rattle of a length of chain which brought Usam to a halt, and a snarled gasp from his throat. In a flash he wanted to kill. The creature whimpering to him was a husky she tethered out by man—a dupe, a decoy. And then the big gray caught the sound of a footfall at his back. Instinctively, at the click of a rifle, he hurled his form through space. A monstrous crash of thunder blasted the silent night. In mid-air, Usam felt a tremendous, shocking impact. He dropped. A man-made cry of exultation sounded. It seemed to revive the last spark of the big wolf's consciousness. He got to his feet, staggered forward, then stumbled to his knees.

Now the glory of the northern lights above became the blinding fury of an inferno, as those multi-tinted streamers swept the glade to which the half-stunned wolf staggered drunkenly.

IT WAS the unmistakable crunch of a man's feet in snow which brought clarity to the wolf's mind. He flattened and began to snake hurriedly forward. Blood oozed slowly down from his scalp, and at its taste his nerve fibers stiffened. He was now practising the wily craft taught him by his great father. Bellying along behind a slight fold of snowland, he suddenly jerked himself to his feet. For a brief second he hung dizzily swaying. He took a choppy pace forward and nearly stumbled. Suddenly he caught, dimly, the metallic click of a rifle bolt. He bit savagely at the snow as he forced himself to the edge of the timber. Another frightful streak of orange-red flame spat into the night, followed by a valley-quaking explosion.

Tongue out, gasping, Usam was snaking a way through the underbrush, his blood-red eyes almost glazed by the fog which had returned to his brain. But with that indomitable courage which was his sire's, he refused to go out. He caught the growled tone of a man's voice, a voice which suddenly keened its pitch. He heard also the thud of a club against the ribs of the husky bitch. Henry Lamotte was venting his spleen on the unsuccessful husky vampire, who had failed in her effort to bring the splendid pelt of Usam to the trapper's fur cache. Of course there would be other dog wolves who would fall for the whimpering decoy, but none so grand as Usam, the big gray.

It was with a definite weariness that Usam crawled out of a small frosted cave in the bank of a creek. It was daylight, but of what day following his adventure which had almost cost him his life, he didn't know. He had slept, drugged by that powerful anaesthesia unconsciousness—slept until his every muscle now ached. Shakily he began to make a short tour of the creek. Once he reeled forward, but recovered himself. In his head there seemed to rage a roaring tornado. But there was left to him more than a spark of the great spirit of his father. His had only been a scalp wound and while it had, for the moment, rendered him next to helpless, he knew that it would only be a matter of time before he could stretch his big frame across the snow wastes in search of Otawana, and her new lord.

HE SLEPT and prowled by turn throughout the short northern day. With the coming of night, a bitterly cold night, he flung the drug from his brain and began to exercise his cramped limbs. A hunting snowy owl hooted dismally in a tamarack swamp nearby. Usually Usam paid little or no attention to such night sounds, but tonight, the "who-too-whoo" of the winged plunderer told him that small game was running in the swamp. He broke into a trot, a drunken sort of a shamble at first. But his head was high. No longer did it loll heavily; and then he found his feet. He broke from the north creek bank and struck a rabbit run through the willows.

In less than ten minutes, he was belly down in the snow ravenously devouring the whole of a snowshoe rabbit. He caught another, and a third, leaving little even of the fur before his monstrous appetite and consuming hunger were appeased.

For three days and nights he lived this sort of life. He spent little time in sleep. When not hunting, he was coursing the flat frozen bed of the creek, stretching his powerful limbs until he found his top speed return. He rolled in the snow, cleaning out the last remnants of his former wounds. And then came a night when the moon glowed fitfully yellow and large above the spires of the spruces. Usam's ruff stood out, making his head and neck appear massive and grotesque in the moonlight. His red blood surged through his strong being at mill race speed. The time had come for his great test of strength, and wolf craft. A plan to attract Otawana and her chief was already percolating in his mind. He would not spend valuable time in hunting up the sleek, light gray she. There was another method. Game was comparatively scarce. Usam was a great hunter. He would make

a kill—perhaps a deer, or young moose, and then his resonant call would go out, a call to the feast. It would be a feast of death for either he or the big black usurper. For one, it would be a wedding feast. Tragedy would attend it.

In the big gray's mind there worked feverishly the plot of a great drama. Sniffing the wind, he stretched his huge shoulders up to their fullest height, then like the monster gray phantom shape he resembled, he cut through the night, headed away from the haunt of man, on toward the red willow swamps where, if anywhere in these big snows, the moose family would be yarded.

Usam had not run many miles before his keen nose detected the faint musky smell of moose. He licked his chops expectantly, and shifted course, to fetch up with the swamp upwind. But he suddenly caught a waft of man scent. It stopped him in his tracks.

HENRY LAMOTTE was short of fresh meat. For upwards of two days he had patiently tracked a small bull moose which had strayed some distance from the general yard. For one full day his sled dogs had gone without food. This winter had been one of the most trying in his many years of experience as a trapper in the northern wilds. Big snows had avalanched down, shutting up game, drifting out his traps—forcing moose and deer deeper into the heavier timber. The man swore bitterly. His mood was still sour at the loss of Usam, the big gray timber wolf.

Usam intuitively knew that there were few nights of the mating moon left. To carry out his crafty plan he must make a kill, and right on the very eve of this execution he had come on the tracks and scent of man. He must not be cheated and yet —there was that deadly rifle to contend with.

Now he caught the odor of birch-bark smoke. He snuffled sharply and coughed the acrid taste from his throat. Man was close at hand. He was bedding down for the night. With the dawn, he would be well up with the moose yard. Usam smelt out the dogs of Lamotte's sled team. His back bristled with anger. His first impulse was to stalk in close to the camp and tear out the throat of one or more of those dogs. He wanted to kill, so bitter and passionate was his mood. But back of his mind there throbbed that wisdom which was the heritage of Okimow. Usam backed away on silent pads. Then he swung in a wide circle and struck the swamp off to eastward.

Sinking to the snow, he allowed the hours to drag by, while his body became fired with the realization of his closeness to at least one moose. But the wolf was patiently biding his time, restraining the urge to rush and kill.

A false dawn paled the frosty haze of the eastern horizon. But its fitful light was suddenly smothered by a sweeping flash of lemon-yellow, tinged with purple. Out of the great nothingness above, the northern lights once more began to flaunt their brilliance in the face of the mating moon.

Usam snapped at the snow. His big moment was near. His great plot was about to burst from his crafty, scheming mind. He was timing his hunt with the precision of a human mind. As the heavens seemed to burst asunder, to pour out a cataract of brilliance such as Usam had never seen equalled, he stretched himself and twitched his magnificent tail. His peering eyes became two orbs of living flame. He thrust his muzzle forward and sniffed sharply. The tang of moose brought warmth to his chilled body.

SLOWLY he stalked into the willow yard. He was making no attempt at speed. Nor did he attempt to mask his scent. Instead, he wanted the moose to get that scent. Now he was between the bedded creatures of the woods, and the man camp. Came a sudden frenzied snort. A gangling year and a half old bull jerked himself up on his slender legs. His over-

hanging upper lip trembled in unison with the quivering of his tapering body. And then Usam rushed. The big wolf struck a sharp fang stroke at the bull's heels. The moose lunged forward, too young and too frightened to attempt to use those keen-edged forefeet. He broke into a trot. The big gray wolf was herding him out into the open, making no attempt to hamstring him.

The progress of the moose was slow. His trembling legs broke down through deep snow. Time and again he turned his grotesque head to snort at the gray shape at his back, his large eyes full of terror-stricken appeal. But there was no pity in Usam's heart. This night was his. This range was his, by right. This moose was part of his great plan to attract Otawana and the big black.

Slowly, but surely, the young bull was being forced into the open. He floundered along, gasping and gurgling for his breath. Each time he attempted to turn, a set of

sharp fangs struck him. To run was a torture; to stand flank deep in the snow was as bad.

Now he was clear of the yard. His kin had moved on during his absence, on to the heavy spruce timber to the northeast, where there was browse of a kind in the underbrush.

Suddenly Usam's lips slid back over his long fangs. From a half crouch he hurled his body through space. The moose lunged, and attempted to rear on to his hind legs for a death stroke with those cutting forefeet. He was nearly successful. By pure accident only, he tramped down, off balance, catching Usam a rocking blow with his off forehoof, rocking the big gray back on his haunches where, for a moment, he hung dizzily swaying. But his great head shook savagely. He struck forward. The moose had ambled over to a point where the snow was not so deep. Here he had made a stand. He lowered his big head and shot two puffs of steam through his flaming nostrils. Usam leaped in, then swerved cleverly as those two front hooves struck with lightning speed. Now the gray wolf commenced his circle of death. He swept swiftly about the quivering moose shape, now and then darting in to harass his prey, only to leap out and continue his deadly, circling run. Closer and closer he drew in that circle, until the breathing of the young moose came in broken throat sobs.

From above, like some alternating spot-light in a great amphitheatre, the northern lights swept the grim scene with a brilliance that was both ghastly and extremely beautiful. Now the darting shape of Usam was bathed in a spray of delicate pink-mauve; now in deep lemon-tinted purple. The gods of the sky main seemed to revel in the drama below.

Then Usam struck! His gaping jaws slashed and closed. With a low bellow of pain, the moose sank, and attempted to crush the clinging shape whose fangs were fast tearing a hamstring.

Usam ripped and slashed clear. Now he went to work with all the savagery of his kind. He had tasted blood. His fangs sank deep into the hard throat of the bull, until the snow was running crimson. Came a convulsive shudder from the bull, and Usam hoiked his bloody ruff skyward, and pulled away. For a moment he chopped about the quivering kill with fangs bared—snarling, then he wheeled and loped for a rise of land.

Grandiosely he lifted his muzzle. Deep and long his blood-chilling howl cut through the silent night. Again and again he called. . . . His call was a call to all his kin within hearing, a call to the feast. But in his mind he wanted only two wolves to

answer—Otawana, and her big black lord. *"O-o-o-o—Ou-u-u-u—Ah-h-h-h!"* His long-drawn wail was a challenge as well as an invitation.

Back at his camp, Henry Lamotte stirred, and reached for his rifle. From the distance came an answer to Usam's call. The trapper's finger toyed with the trigger of his Winchester, as a smile toyed with his lips. It would soon be dawn. There would be good hunting, for that close-in wolf had made a kill. Henry Lamotte was wise in the craft of the wilderness folk.

OTAWANA, the big gray she wolf, stirred. Her sharp muzzle smacked hard into the flank of the big black mate close to her side. She got to her haunches. The black edged in close, but Otawana struck him savagely with bared fangs. Her belly was empty, and had been for nearly two days and two nights. And now, out of the silent near dawn there had come a feast call—the call of a big dog wolf. She shuffled on her haunches. Came another call. It was a challenge which brought the big black's ruff out in hard bristles. He lifted his muzzle at the plashing northern lights and poured out his answer. Otawana whimpered. She struck out in a lope, her lord flashing past her flank to take the lead. There was blood on the snows ahead; and the scent of a kill in the air.

So far, the big she had not remated with the black. That must wait until she had gorged herself at the kill.

FAST loping shapes were beginning to smudge the snowplains. Usam, who had drunk some moose blood, stood off some little distance from the kill, his tongue lolling from his slavering jaws. He watched a young dog wolf bound up to the kill, to smack down and bury his fangs deep. Three more shapes flitted by, and then—out of the northeast, her muzzle stretching close to the flank of a big black runner, came Otawana.

Usam's body stiffened. He plunked down on his haunches and cast his muzzle skyward. A fearful howl tore from his throat, a howl which brought the racing black wolf back in his tracks. Usam had made his presence known, as lord of the kill, as a challenger to this alien black. But the black wolf was no coward. His massive frame stiffened as he chopped about on stiff legs, while Otawana slunk belly down to the kill.

Usam moved forward, a foot at a time, his back bristles up and his ruff puffed. His magnificent tail was high, its tip exuding that peculiar musky odor of the fighting dog. He was slowly closing the distance between himself and the black. His bared fangs struck down to scoop up a fleck of cool snow now and then. But his eyes never lost their focus of the black shape which now chopped toward him.

There was a sudden heave of the black's big frame. Usam swerved and struck as he swung clear. His fangs met with shoulder fur, but the black wrenched clear. A savage snarl broke from the usurper's throat. He recognized, by secret wolf sign, his former enemy. His mind burned with a sudden fury. Otawana, with whom he had had a year of matehood, was a great prize. Her whelps were handsome and strong. This younger, gray wolf dog must be killed this time. And Notwe, the black leader, put his deadly urge into action. He struck and slapped his jaws across Usam's muzzle in a terrible sideswiping blow. The great fangs of Usam rattled as he rocked back. But he came up, a fighting devil of the wilderness, a son of Okimow the great.

Their jaws locked, and they swayed back and forth on strong hind legs, each seeking for an opening to shift to a throat hold. Minutes had sped by. The part pack at the moose kill were now on their feet, their appetites satisfied. They came creeping in to the open amphitheatre of reddened snow, to slump down. Likely enough, there would be fresh blood for a new gorge soon.

All at once, Usam broke clear. He

darted toward the southwest for about a hundred feet; Notwe, the black chief, hard on his heels. The pack closed in with an expectant hope that the big gray was wilting. But this was not so. Usam, with his great heritage of wilderness craft, was drawing his opponent more into the open country. Soon the first grays of dawn would blot out the brilliance above. And back beyond the willow yard was man with his fire tube.

The big gray suddenly wheeled. He feinted in, then swooped beneath the charging black. His strong head came up with terribly accurate timing. Notwe turned a half somersault in mid air, to crash on his back on the soft snow. In a flash Usam wheeled and struck. His heavy jaws clamped a hold in the thickly-furred neck of the other, but Notwe broke the hold. Usam struck down and this time his fangs sank into the thin-skinned belly of the black. There was a quick wrench of Usam's head. Blood gouted. Notwe, by a super effort, tore clear. He came to his feet, his fangs slashing madly.

Dripping red blood, he toed in to meet the savage onslaught of the big gray. But Usam was filled with confidence. Instead of lunging at the throat, he lowered his head and punched the other hard in the stomach. Again Notwe was down; again he felt the rip of those terrible fangs in his torn belly. He slashed at Usam's neck and tore clear a strip of pelt. But the gray was besting him.

Usam was suddenly conscious of movement at his back. He jerked himself free of the black and swung, just as a long light gray shape bounded toward him. This was Otawana. She had seen enough to convince her that her former mate, Usam, had regained his majesty. She dropped to her belly beside him, but save for a casual tonguing of her bared fangs, Usam made no other sign of friendliness. Instead, his being now fully purged with the glory of conquest, he whirled and struck toward the black again, but Notwe had chosen discretion to be the better part of valor. In the first lights of dawn, he was staggering toward the shelter of the timber in whose haven quiet he would sink down to lick his terrible wounds.

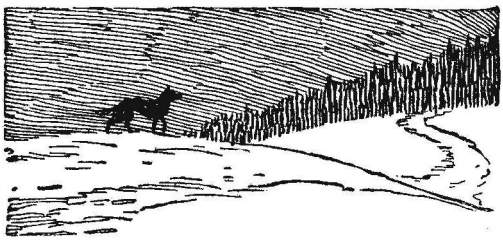
But from the edge of the timber there flashed a sudden gout of stabbing flame. Notwe's big shape leaped high as a rifle explosion shattered the ominous quiet. Henry Lamotte was astir early, with the hope for a bag of prime wolf pelts. His aim was unerring as he sighted through the gold foresight of his Winchester. Notwe dropped limply to the snow.

Lamotte wheeled. His voice snarled a crisp oath as he glimpsed two long, gray wolf shapes streaking through the frost haze out of range.

"Thunderation!" he muttered. One of those shapes was that of Usam the powerful gray, whose pelt was worth twice that of the black's.

For upwards of two miles Usam loped, with his new-found mate at his side. They paused, and Otawana licked the gaping tears in her lord's hide, while Usam ran his magnificent muzzle along her silky flank.

High on a knoll, the big gray leader now stood, lifting his head into the deathly cold dawn sky. His jaws unclamped and that long, eerie howl reverberated along the valley. Usam was proclaiming the event of his new leadership—his coronation.



Billy Two-Fox Unwittingly Aids the Law While Trying to Escape from it

BAD MEDICINE

By RUSSELL HAYS

Author of Many Stories of Billy Two-Fox

BILLY TWO-FOX had just come down the gulch from Sitshum hot springs and was waddling energetically across the salt-grass flat between the mouth of the gulch and the nearly dry bed of Logie Creek, when his beady eyes picked up the outlines of a horse and rider half hidden in the chokecherries at the lower end of the flat. Billy continued on down the path at a greatly reduced pace; that is to say, he took just as many steps as before but he didn't cover but about half as much ground.

Squinting his eyes against the glare of the sun, he finally made out that the rider wore a high-crowned brown sombrero and that he was astraddle a knock-kneed, rat-tailed roan. Both the hat and the roan were unpleasantly familiar to Mr. Two-Fox. The thick skin of his forehead corrugated harassedly.

"By golly—him Deputy Gallagher all right," he said. "Bet him seen me!"

Billy glanced over at the sycamores and willow clumps that followed the creek to the west of the flat. For a rod or more he ambled casually on in the direction of the deputy, then gradually left the trail in a wide circle to give the impression that he had been intending to go up-creek all the time, and had merely been following the path running north across the flat because it lay partially along the way.

Without turning his head more than forty-five degrees from the direction of

motion, he sighted anxiously back from the corner of his eye. Gallagher, so far, had not moved. Billy drew a worried breath and increased his rate of travel.

Billy, who was a pot-bellied, bandy legged, hawk-nosed specimen of aborigine, felt that he had enough troubles without becoming involved with deputy sheriffs. Billy had boils. He had little boils and medium boils and one on his left shoulder blade that was big around as a half a dollar. So far this latter had failed to come to a head, but made its presence known by a steady thump-thump like that of a tom-tom.

Indirectly, it was these same boils which had been the cause of Billy's getting at outs with the Law. Several days before, when the first of them had been ripening up nicely, Billy had been passing the two-roomed weather-boarded residence of Turk Dohner which stood about a quarter of a mile up Logie Creek from the willow clumps for which he was now headed. Dohner was a stocky, swarthy-faced individual who went in for polished boots and noisy shirts to a degree hardly to be expected in one who raised alfalfa for a living.

Mr. Two-Fox had always secretly admired the alfalfa farmer's choice of raiment. He pulled up his ancient buckskin to tell him about his afflictions. Billy wanted sympathy.

"Boils, eh?" chuckled Dohner, who had been rehanging a gate. "Sure hell ain't they!"

Billy slammed a moccasined heel into the buckskin's flank and started departing without comment. Dohner quit chuckling, and his wide spaced, slightly popped brown eyes looked covetously upon the Yakima's new fifty-dollar saddle. This look was replaced by one of pawky calculation, which in turn faded into one of well feigned concern. Dohner looked almost sadder than Billy as he called out:

"Come back here a minute—Chief. I got some hyiu skookum medicine for boils. Mebbe you can dicker me out of it."

Billy came back. His good iat, Sally, had been feeding him so much rock rose tea that his food splashed when it hit his stomach. Billy was sick of rock rose tea. Also, he was sick of boils, and anything that promised him relief sounded sweeter to his ears than the sighing of spring chinooks.

"What um got—let's see um?" he demanded suspiciously.

"Got to go over to the house to get it," said Dohner, and led the way over to the shack which stood between the alfalfa field and the creek.

BILLY waited out in the bare, sun glazed yard while Dohner went into the house and returned presently with a wide belt. Billy could see at a glance that it was no common ordinary belt. It had black leather trimmings, sewn in springs, fancy pockets loaded with little flat sacks, and various other do-jiggers decorating it.

"This here," said the alfalfa rancher gravely, "is a plenty skookum belt, I'll tell you. These sacks got radium in 'em. You savvy radium? Well, it's mighty good medicine. But that ain't all. This here is also a magnetic belt! The kind they use in all the big hospitals. You can strap it on you good and tight, wear 'er for three or four days, and she'll cure anything. Cure belly ache, sore teeth, fallin' hair, bad kidneys, boils, or whatever's ailin' you."

Billy was impressed, but not completely sold on the idea. He slid off his cayuse and settled down to the serious business of bartering. Dohner gnawed the end off a plug of Climax and proceeded to expound upon the miracles performed by magnetic radium belts. After an hour and a half of haggling, Billy rode on down to Johnny-Jack's place where he and his wife were visiting, minus his saddle but with the belt strapped tightly about his bulging stomach.

Sally was prejudiced against the belt from the first, having privately construed it as a slam at her rock rose tea. Billy

explained patiently for three days that Dohner had guaranteed it, then, inasmuch as his boils got steadily worse, rode up creek to swap back. Dohner would have nothing to do with the idea. He winked covertly at the lean, snaky-eyed young man who was visiting with him that morning.

"You ain't wore it long enough," he protested. "I didn't guarantee it to cure you over night. You got to wear it a week or so. You and me can't do no business. We done made a swap."

"Huh, um damn belt bad medicine!" grunted Billy. "Boils um go away mebbe next week no wear um belt. By golly, me goin' to swap um back!"

"You're just crazy—Siwash! We done made a dicker," said Dohner belligerently. "Take your belt and get the hell outta here! I got chores to do."

MR. TWO-FOX muttered several slurring remarks concerning the alfalfa farmer's immediate ancestry, and got out. Arriving back at Johnny-Jack's place, he sat around all afternoon nursing his boils and listening to Sally's prolonged exposé of a skookum warrior that would swap a fifty dollar saddle for a bad medicine belt. That night Billy journeyed upcreek again. Stealing into Dohner's cayuse house, he took his saddle off its peg, left the belt in its place, and returned to Johny-Jack's to sleep peacefully through the remainder of the night.

The next day when Dohner and his tilicum came riding down the creek en route to Satus, Billy saw them first and was cached in his brother-in-law's sweat house when the two stopped to inquire about him.

"Well—he'd better git that saddle back, an' mighty quick!" blustered Dohner to Johnny-Jack. "He stole it, that's what he done. And me and Grebe is goin' into town right now to swear out a warrant for his arrest!"

From that moment on, Billy had commenced feeling unhappy in the tum-tum. Johnny-Jack, with his usual optimism, had pointed out that white man's law was plenty crazy. In fact, he called to mind several instances where tilicums of his had borrowed cayuses or what not for the best of motives, only to be thrown into the skookum house for indefinite periods. Billy argued weakly that his good friend Sheriff Cadwell would get him out of it. Johnny-Jack insisted that sheriffs didn't have anything to do with how long he would be kept in the skookum house. Johnny-Jack seemed to know all about it.

To make matters worse, Billy's boils headed up in one place only to break out somewhere else. Nor did rock rose tea or sitting around in Sitshum hot springs for several hours each day alleviate his suffering. So far, three days had dragged by without Dohner or the threatened warrant making their appearance. Billy had begun to hope the alfalfa farmer might be going to let the matter drop—when he spotted Deputy Gallagher half hidden in the chokecherries.

In his worried condition and with his usual canniness undermined by too steady a flow of rock rose tea, the possibility that Gallagher might be snooping around Logie Creek for reasons other than serving a warrant on him, never occurred to Billy. His mind was occupied with a particularly displeasing picture of himself penned up in the skookum house. His harried gaze measured the distance between himself and the deputy and the nearest willow clumps. If he ever got safely out of sight again, he promised himself, all the deputies in Yakima County wouldn't be able to find him.

BY THIS time, Billy was within a rod of the straggling line of chokecherries at the west end of the flat. He passed around the end of them and glanced back. Deputy Gallagher had broken cover and was riding leisurely after him. Billy lined the chokecherries up behind him and angled over for the willows along the creek at a bandy legged gallop. Crossing the creek,

he skirted the east end of Dohner's lower alfalfa field, hopped across an irrigation ditch, and proceeded up-trail at a methodical, distance-devouring trot.

As he approached Dohner's shack at the upper end of the field, Billy left the trail and circled south. This brought him back on the same side of the creek as the deputy again. He slowed down and stole warily along, one inky eye searching the brush in the direction of the shack, and the other keeping a lookout in the general direction of the deputy. As a result, Mr. Two-Fox gave a startled grunt when Dohner's deep voice barked out from just ahead of him, "So you was goin' to sneak in on me, was yuh?"

Billy batted his eyes and looked around for the owner of the voice. Dohner was squatted in the shade of a mockorange at the edge of the brush. He rose to his feet, one hairy hand encircling the grip of a small bore Winchester, and the other rubbing reflectively on his blue skinned jowls. His wide spaced eyes bored challengingly into Billy's malignant black ones.

"Just what was you aimin' to steal this time?" he demanded.

Billy side-stepped around him. "Me gotta go ketchum cayuses, plenty quick," he stated and continued on up-creek.

Dohner jumped over and grabbed him by the arm. "Now looky here, Two-Fox. I ain't goin' to argue with you no more! We made that swap perfectly legal. I got a warrant out for your arrest right now. Accordin' to law, you stole that saddle from me, and you bringin' back that belt ain't goin' to help you a dang bit. You get that through that thick head of yours?"

Mr. Two-Fox got it perfectly. "Me no savvy," he protested. "Me swap um back!"

Dohner's swarthy face took on the color of over-ripe chokecherries. "Blast your dumb soul!" he said. His gaze came to rest on the highly checked flannel shirt that Billy was wearing. Covetousness again came in Dohner's eyes. Dohner didn't know that that particular shirt was Billy's good luck shirt, or that the only reason he was wearing it at the present time was in the hope that it might help his boils. Dohner saw only a high grade flannel shirt, a bit large for him to be sure, but then flannel shirts always shrank.

He tried the texture of it between his thumb and forefinger, wet his lips. Billy shied off apprehensively. The alfalfa farmer rested his Winchester across his hip and thumbed the hammer suggestively.

"No use you tryin' to get away," he warned. "I had time, I'd take you into the skookum house. Bein' as I ain't, I'm

going to hold that shirt for security. You bring me back my saddle, I'll give it to you. Come on, peel 'er off!"

Billy's massive countenance took on a wooden expression. His lower lip curled out sullenly. "No—by golly," he grunted.

At about the same time, he looked past Dohner's shoulder and saw Gallagher riding directly toward them and less than a hundred yards away. Billy did some rapid calculation. If cultus Dohner were holding his shirt for security he couldn't very well press the stealing charge. Billy unbuttoned the shirt and slid it off over his thick sloping shoulders to show the pie-sized pad of the mud poultice on his left shoulder blade. Dohner smirked sardonically and reached out to give the poultice a tentative tap.

Billy straightened up as though a bumble bee had taken advantage of his bent over position. "Hi-i-i-i, damn um you cut um out!" he rumbled.

"Ain't sore, is it?" chuckled Dohner.

He took the shirt and examined it critically. "All right, you get ready to bring back that saddle I'll give 'er back to yuh."

HE FROWNED as he heard the approaching hooves of the deputy's sway-backed cayuse. Whirling around on his heel, he jerked up his Winchester, and kept on frowning. Gallagher rode through the scanty brush and reined in beside him. The deputy had a horsey red face and sandy eyebrows that met in a tangle on the bridge of a long, slightly warped nose. His drowsy blue eyes stared puzzledly at the Yakima's naked chest, shifted over to the flannel shirt in the alfalfa farmer's hand, then came back to Mr. Two-Fox again.

"What kinda hocus pocus is goin' on here, anyhow?" he inquired.

"Is it any skin offa your nose?" challenged Dohner.

"I dunno yet," said Gallagher. "But I aim to find out."

"Huh—if you feel that way about it," sniffed Dohner, "I s'pose I'll have to tell you. 'Tain't none of your damn business, but Two-Fox and me made a dicker a while back. He's got a saddle of mine, an' I'm keepin' his shirt till he brings it back."

"Yeh!" Gallagher squinted questioningly over at the Yakima. "That right Two-Fox?"

Billy had a feeling that all was not exactly as Dohner had led him to believe. On the other hand, Dohner hadn't denied that he was holding the shirt for the return of the saddle. Billy pulled agitatedly on his nose. Of one thing he was sure, he couldn't be put in the skookum house for giving his shirt away. Still, he hesitated. His iat, Sally, was going to have plenty to say if he came home half naked. Billy wanted more time to think the matter over.

"What about it, Two-Fox? You give it to 'im?" insisted Gallagher.

"Uh huh, me give um shirt," said Billy finally.

Gallagher wasn't exactly convinced. Having more important business at hand, however, he was willing to let the matter ride. He leaned over to swat a couple of yellow-bellied horse flies that had settled on the roan's ewe neck, and asked in an off-handed manner, "By the way, Dohner—you ain't seen anything of young Grebe down here today, have you?"

The alfalfa farmer shot a quick glance back over his shoulder as though half expecting to find that another deputy or two had come up behind him. "Naw, I don't know nothin' about young Grebe," he snapped. "What's the matter with you birds, anyhow? Didn't I tell you yesterday when you was down here with the sheriff that the last time I seen Grebe was Wednesday afternoon?"

"As I recollect, you did mention it," admitted Gallagher unperturbed.

"Oh, you recollect, do yuh? Funny thing, just account of Grede bein' down here to see me a coupla times, yuh can't get over the idea he's down here now. He never was no pal of mine. Where do you get that stuff?"

GALLAGHER combed the fingers of his left hand lazily through the roan's sparse mane. His right thumb was hooked casually in his belt and some three inches from the bone butt of his revolver. Gallagher looked as if he was about half asleep, which meant that he was very much awake and capable of spraying bullets in all four directions at the drop of an eyelash.

"Speakin' of funny things, Dohner," he droned. "Seems like there's a lot of people in Satus has got the idea that somebody was settin' on a cayuse back in the alley—a holdin' Grebe's pony—while the kid was inside the store makin' old Timothy open up his safe. Just one of these rumors that goes around, I reckon. Anyhow, if Grebe did have a pardner out in the alley, this pardner wouldn't be to blame for old Timothy gettin' shot. Of course, a jury might not see it that way—not unless they was feelin' kinda friendly toward him."

Dohner was wearing a poker face. He

scowled angrily, perhaps just a shade too angrily, as he stepped threateningly toward the deputy. "Now see here, Gallagher," he rasped, "I'm gettin' sick and tired of you and the sheriff makin' these wise cracks about me bein' in with young Grebe. An' I'll tell yuh somethin' else. If I did know where he was, I wouldn't tell you! What do yuh think about that?"

"Just what I figured," said Gallagher. "If you don't care, I think I'll ride on up to that haybarn in the other field."

"Huh, a lot of good my carin' would do," snorted Dohner and added sarcastically. "I s'pose yuh want me to go along with you; so's not to tell nobody you're comin'?"

"Well, it wouldn't be a bad idea at that," complacently agreed the deputy. "Let's go." He urged the roan forward with the reins, glanced over at the Yakima. "Be careful yuh don't get sunburnt, Two-Fox."

Dohner shifted his Winchester to the crook of his arm and moved on ahead of the deputy. "You bring me back my saddle, I'll give you your shirt," he called back.

Billy scowled darkly after them and said nothing. Not having anything to say and being too busy digesting all the deputy had said to bother making pointless replies. That old Timothy Adams who ran the trading store in at Satus had been held up and shot by Dohner's tilicum, young Grebe, was news to Billy. Of more interest to him, however, was the very obvious fact that the hay farmer had not sworn out the warrant for his arrest as he had claimed.

This discovery lent strength to Billy's original belief that it hadn't been against the law for him to swap back the medicine belt. Soberly reflecting on the matter, he could see how too much rock rose tea and too much listening to Johnny-Jack's calamity howling had made him afraid of Dohner all the same as an oleman klootchman. Mr. Two-Fox's beady eyes took on a decidedly malevolent glitter and he gave a snort that spread the nostrils of his hawkish nose like the battle whistle of a fuzztail stallion.

"By golly—me been plenty damn fool!" he grunted.

The sun beating down on his naked shoulders reminded him forcibly of the loss of his shirt. If he went home without that good luck shirt and then had to admit to Sally that the deputies weren't looking for him after all, it was a foregone conclusion that home life was going to be unbearable for some time to come. The manner in which the alfalfa farmer had tricked him with a forked tongue, was becoming plainer and plainer to him with each passing moment. Billy glared up the trail where the deputy and Dohner had disappeared, with a growing sense of injustice.

"Damn um, him better give um my shirt back!" he muttered angrily.

THE trouble was that Dohner wasn't the giving back kind. When Dohner had had the saddle and Billy had had the medicine belt, it had been a simple case of swapping even. But now—Dohner had his good luck shirt, and all Billy had was a bare back and a bunch of boils. The unfairness of it rankled. Then a sudden solution of the problem gouged its way through his morose musings. What he needed was something of Dohner's to swap back!

Inasmuch as Dohner was now bound to the upper hay field, it was almost certain that there would be no one at his shack. Mr. Two-Fox could see no logical reason why he shouldn't amble over and do a bit of collecting. As the idea took hold, he nearly forgot the throbbing thump of the boil heading up on his shoulder blade. He set off purposefully in the direction of the shack.

Recrossing Logie Creek, he waddled boldly around the corner of Dohner's cayuse house and across the bare yard to the front of the Boston house. Trying the door, he found it unlocked as he had ex-

pected it would be. Cautiously, he pushed it open. From somewhere within or beyond the shack came a sound curiously like that made by a board scraping across a rafter. Billy came to a dead halt halfway across the sill. His jet eyes probed suspiciously about the crudely furnished room. For a full minute he stood there listening.

"Huh, mebbe um sage rat," he told himself at last, and stepped on into the building.

The other room of the shack was fitted with a couple of iron cots and a clothes closet. Billy tip-toed warily into the room like a tomcat exploring a strange alley. The closet, he decided, would be the best source of supply. Billy unlatched the door and judiciously contemplated Dohner's numerous changes of costume.

As regarded clothes, Dohner had been very generous with himself. Billy picked out a deep cream buckaroo shirt and proceeded to slide into it. Although a bit snug, it fitted well except around the collar band. A calfskin vest hung on the next hook. Billy eased it gently over his boil and waddled over to study the effect in the cracked mirror hung on the north wall of the room. The effect was highly satisfactory from a sartorial standpoint. But the movement that caught his eye from beyond the room's west window was not so pleasing.

In fact, Mr. Two-Fox's wide mouth drooped distressfully at the corners. "Ugh, what me goin' do?" he panted fearfully.

Emerging from the willows to the west of the shack was Deputy Gallagher and the suspected hay farmer. Evidently, they had not gone to the upper alfalfa field after all. It was equally evident that they were now bound for the shack. Billy slid into the kitchen and looked around for something to crawl under. Going out the door was out of the question since Gallagher would be sure to see him if he did. Billy had a feeling that for the deputy to discover him sneaking out of Dohner's house was liable to make the latter form some wrong conclusions.

Mr. Two-Fox's beady eyes swept the room in a panicky search for cover. He whirled around to go back to the bedroom and crawl under one of the cots. In the same breath he discarded the idea as impractical. If Gallagher were to search the shack, he would look under the beds the first thing. Billy inspected the floor for a possible cellar way. He looked up at the ceiling. Directly above the cook stove at the east end of the room was a small trap door leading up into the attic of the shack.

"Bet him no look um up there," he grunted.

Billy stepped up on the stove and discovered that it was still slightly warm. Reaching above his head he shoved up on the trap door and grabbed the edge of the rafter on which it rested. With a mighty grunt he chinned himself into the darkness of the hole, and hooking his elbows over the rafter wriggled on up. Turning back, he carefully closed the door, and perching on a rafter peered owlishly about him.

HERE beneath the roof, it was stifling hot. As his eyes grew more accustomed to the dark he could see that tiny cracks along the eaves and between the shingles, threw a murky half light into the cramped triangular room. Sweat began to ooze out on Billy's forehead and to trickle down in front of his ears.

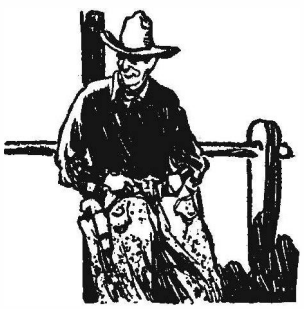
"Whe-e-ew, um plenty hot up here," he whispered.

The next instant, he had forgotten how hot it was. From the west end of the attic came a scraping sound identical with that which he had heard on opening the door of the shack. This time, however, there was no question about where it was coming from. Or its proximity. It emanated from the far end of the attic. Nor was it the sort of sound that a sagerat would make. Not unless the sagerat happened to be about the size of a yearling colt.

Mr. Two-Fox quit breathing temporar-

dly. A prickly tremor flowed down his spine. Fearfully, he peered into the gloom. Then the hair on the nape of his neck bristled up against his hat brim. Except for himself, the attic was empty!

Billy reached over and yanked up the trap door. He knew when he was well off and he aimed to stay that way. Hanging around in an attic with a bunch of ghosts what wiped their feet on the rafters was not Billy's idea of the proper way to remain healthy. He poked one leg down through the trap door and was bringing its companion down to join it, when he



heard footsteps and Gallagher's voice just outside the shack.

"There ain't no call for you to be edgin' aroun' to the side of me all the time, Dohner," Gallagher was saying. "I reckon I'll have to remind you again that this here gun of mine has got a hair trigger. Goes off awful easy."

The alfalfa farmer gave an infuriated snort. "By God—yuh got your nerve comin' down here and doin' a law abidin' citizen this a way! Give a damn fool a little authority and it goes to his head. Me gettin' around to the side of yuh! How do you get that way? It's a wonder yuh don't get scared of your shadow!"

"Y-e-h?" said Gallagher.

Billy didn't like the tone of that "yeh?". He decided that the ghosts in the attic wouldn't be liable to pounce upon him while the deputy was down below, anyhow. Billy hastily drew his leg back into the attic. He started closing the trapdoor at the same time that the deputy shoved open the door of the shack. In his hurry, Billy had taken a back-handed hold. Two inches from the sill, the door slipped from his fingers and settled into the ceiling with a faint bang.

Billy perched breathlessly on the rafter and hoped that Gallagher hadn't heard it. He hoped, however, in vain. The deputy had glanced up at the trapdoor and then darted back out of the shack with the frenzied haste of one who has blundered into a nest of side-winders. He shoved the barrel of his revolver against Dohner's ribs.

"Gimme that Winchester!" he snapped. He grabbed it out of the alfalfa farmer's hand, leaned it against the wall of the building, and ran his hand over Dohner's stocky body in search of other weapons. Finding none, he snatched up the Winchester and motioned Dohner to move back. "Stand off there about ten foot! An' don't go fidgettin' around! I thought they was somethin' fishy around here."

"What the hell yuh talkin' about?" snarled Dohner. "The county'll pay for you pullin' a stunt like this. And pay plenty!"

"Aw—shut up!"

Gallagher gave the door a kick that banged it back against the wall. Keeping one eye on Dohner, he peeked warily around the doorframe and pointed his revolver up at the trapdoor. "Come on out of it, Grebe!" he ordered. "I know you're up in that attic. No use your tryin' to stall."

Mr. Two-Fox gulped, but maintained a tomb-like silence.

GALLAGHER squinted his eyes and looked over at Dohner. The hay farmer was slightly pale along the jowls. He muttered sulkily to himself and avoided the deputy's gaze. Gallagher glanced back up at the ceiling. "The game's up, Grebe!" he called out impatiently. "Another minute and I'm goin' to start fillin' that roof fulla lead. Get that?" By way of illustration, Gallagher tilted up the Winchester and sent a bullet angling up through the ceiling of the west room and at the opposite end of the building from the trap door.

Queerly enough, this brought not one, but two responses. Mr. Two-Fox reached hurriedly for the trap door. From the other end of the attic came the sound of spirit land *tamahnawis* wiping their feet on the rafters. Billy's deep set eyes bulged in their sockets as he stared into the gloomy emptiness of the west end of the attic.

"What um hell!" he grunted.

A section of the west wall of the shack had moved, or rather a section of what Billy had formerly believed to be the west end of the shack. This movement resolved itself into a narrow doorway, which instead of opening up to reveal the bright sunlight of out of doors, revealed only the deeper shadows of a small partitioned off space at the end of the attic.

The head and shoulders of a man whom Billy recognized as young Grebe pushed out through the opening. Although the light was none too good, Billy had no trouble in making out that the fugitive was plenty cultus. Grebe's snaky eyes glistened like a spider's. His face was dewdropped with perspiration; and his long straight hair, which was usually sleekily pompadoured, now hung in greasy strings against his sallow cheeks.

In his right hand, he clutched a heavy caliber automatic, the muzzle of which was aimed at a point between the pockets of Dohner's cream colored buckaroo shirt. Billy, who was inside the shirt, began wishing there had really been a ghost in the attic after all. He belched plaintively and raised his hands. Grebe scowled, then showed his teeth in a snarl. With his free hand he motioned for Billy to descend down through the trapdoor, and to descend immediately. He touched his lips and made shooting motions with the automatic.

Billy had no trouble in interpreting the motions. He shook his head in vehement agreement. Meanwhile, Gallagher was getting impatient. He fired up through the ceiling again, this time at the other end of the shack. "I'm givin' you this last warnin'!" he threatened.

Billy had already started yanking up on the trapdoor as the bullet tore through the shingles behind him. "Quit um shootin', me comin'," he muttered sullenly, and poked his moccasined feet down through the ceiling.

Gallagher stared up at them dumfoundedly. Then started swearing. Dohner came up behind the deputy and looked up at the squat figure of the Yakima sliding down through the hole, with a surprise almost as great as Gallagher's. A decided sense of relief was also in evidence on his smoothly shaven face. His eyes narrowed as he saw that Billy was wearing his calf skin vest and cream colored buckaroo shirt. So did Gallagher's.

THE latter waited until Billy had dropped down on top the stove, then switched his cussing to remarks of a more personal nature. "By yahoo, I'll be a son-of-a-sea-captain if I can figure what you guys are up to! First you give Dohner your shirt, and now I catch you up in his attic with his shirt on! Just what the hell's the meanin' of it, eh?" His steel blue eyes bored questioningly into Billy's shifting black ones.

Billy was taking no chances. "Me no savvy," he grunted.

"N-a-w?"

Dohner chuckled nervously. "Guess it's my fault," he confessed. "Yuh see I kinda rimmed old Two-Fox in a trade the other day. Looks like he'd come in here on the sly to get one of my shirts—an' we come up on him kinda unexpected."

Billy hopped hastily off the stove as the dormant heat in it penetrated through his moccasins. Gallagher strode on into the room and wheeled around to scowl back at the alfalfa farmer. The deputy had a hunch that there was more about the shirt exchanging than met the eye. Dohner wasn't the type to take the loss of a calf skin vest so lightly.

"Oh, so that's it," said Gallagher.

"Sure—that's all there is to it. Too bad you had to get all excited," sneered Doh-

ner. Dohner had just concluded that Billy didn't know that Grebe was in the attic.

The deputy, on the other hand, had just reached conclusions of another nature. He covered Billy with his revolver and sighted up at the open hole in the ceiling. "Anybody else up there, Two-Fox?" he snapped.

"Huh, uh," said Billy promptly. He shook his head so that there would be no doubt about it.

Gallagher, however, was unconvinced. "Well, we'll dang soon find out," he announced. "Come on down from there, Grebe!" Gallagher raised his six-gun and shot a couple more times up through the roof.

In the same breath, the reports of the revolver thundering through the narrow confines of the shack, were answered by the muffled crash of an automatic. Gallagher's gun went spinning out of his hand. Gallagher hunched his narrow shoulders, jumped sideways as his hand slid back to the grip of Dohner's Winchester, and glanced searchingly about the ceiling.

"Hey—lay offa that rifle!" snarled Grebe, his voice echoing hollowly from the attic. "One more screwy move outta you, yuh snoopin' son-of-a-buzzard and I'll cut yuh down like I did old man Adams!"

Gallagher located the voice as coming from a narrow crack close to the partition between the rooms. Scowling, he let the Winchester drop to the floor.

"Put them fins up where I can see 'em!" commanded the fugitive. "Get ahold of that rifle, Turk. Keep 'im covered!"

Dohner glided over from the doorway and picked up the Winchester. Mr. Two-Fox stood silently in the far corner of the room to which he had retreated at the opening of hostilities. Billy wasn't feeling particularly well in the tum-tum. Nor did the grim manner in which the alfalfa farmer was lining the sights of the Winchester on himself and deputy improve his condition.

Footsteps pounded across the rafters above his head, and a moment later Grebe's lean body swung lithely down to the stove top. If the killer had been cultus looking up in the attic, he was doubly so now. His dark face was congested with blood, his hands twitched nervously, his eyes had a wild glitter. He glared at the deputy, glared at Dohner, as he stepped down off the stove.

"Damn it, Grebe—it ain't my fault!" said Dohner hurriedly.

"Nobody said it was your fault!" snarled the killer. He whirled around to glower at the Yakima. "Here's the sneakin' buzzard that give us away!"

MR. TWO-FOX tried to look innocent. His beady eyes huddled together in very real apprehension. "Me no do nothin'," he protested faintly.

"Naw, yuh didn't do nuthin', dang your lousy soul!" said Grebe. He stole catfootedly across the room to within a pace of the Indian. "So yuh would have to get up in that garret, would yuh? Of all the places you coulda hid—yuh had to crawl up there! Damn you—I'd oughta drill you!"

Grebe gave an impression of being liable to do it. He waved the automatic carelessly around, gritted his teeth, turned half away,

then quite without warning whipped his left fist up against Billy's jaw. Billy staggered back, batting his eyes, and trying to tell himself that he didn't mind getting hit in the siahoos. Grebe got aggravated at having skinned his kunckles on Mr. Two-Fox's jawbone. He followed through with a vicious hook that landed squarely on the Yakima's downcurving beak of a nose. Billy swayed back against the shack's south wall with a force that made the bedroom window rattle.

For the space of a second he slumped there as though half paralyzed. His eyes

took on a glazed expression. He gave a tremulus groan that started down deep among his inwards and whistled out through his nasal cavity. Billy had just broken the four-bit sized boil that was heading up on his shoulder blade. Grebe didn't know this. He concluded that the Yakima was begging for mercy.

"Yuh better whine, yuh slop faced son-of-a-buck!" he jeered, and hit Billy on the nose again.

Billy's second groan broke off about half way through the chorus. He had just passed out of the groaning stage into the massacre stage. His thoughts, what there were of them, were highly incoherent and fairly dripping with gore. Billy wanted to murder somebody just as quickly as possible, and that somebody was Grebe. He pulled his bullet head down between his shoulders and emitted a sound similar to that made by a crowbar going through a threshing machine.

At the same time a moccasined hoof chopped up from the floor into the killer's stomach. Billy's back was braced against the wall. His eyes bulged slightly as his squat body took up the backfire of the energy utilized in raising the foot. At the instant of contact, a sound was produced resembling that produced by dropping a watermelon from a great height. Grebe and his automatic went off together. The automatic took a nick out of the stove and clattered to the floor. Grebe soared along about three feet off the ground and crashed into the woodbox at the far side of the room. Billy leaped after him.

"Hi-i-i-i, damn um, me bust um you!" he screeched, and did a flying mare into Grebe's stomach. Grebe had long since passed out in mid air, but Billy didn't know it. He was too busy to bother about whether his victim was conscious or not. He looked around for something to hammer with.

By doing so, he discovered that Gallagher and the alfalfa farmer were engaged in a furious tussle for possession of the Winchester. Dohner, having lined the sights on Billy as the latter had charged across the kitchen, had given the deputy an opportunity to grab at the muzzle of it. Mr. Two-Fox's beady eyes lighted joyfully. His sinewy fingers closed about the back of a chair.

"Hi-i-i-i!" he whooped and swung it in a full arc that landed squarely on the top of the hay farmer's head.

Dohner did a nose dive under the kitchen table. Billy heaved up the chair to let him have it again with the intent purposefulness of a terrier digging into a rat hole.

"Better not," said Gallagher tersely. He had the Winchester all to himself now and was feeling a bit more assertive. "Not that I'd mind, but the old man don't like his prisoners all chawed up."

"Huh!" grunted Billy disgustedly. Sullenly he threw down the chair. Then suddenly his eyes opened wide in startled discovery.

"What's happened?" asked Gallagher puzzledly.

Mr. Two-Fox's inky eyes had a contented gleam. He turned and pointed at Grebe. "By golly, him plenty good medicine. Fix um boil. Plenty quick um get well now." Billy waddled over and gave the unconscious killer a vicious kick.

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