DECEMBER 1st ISSUE, 1927
VOL. LXIV No. 6

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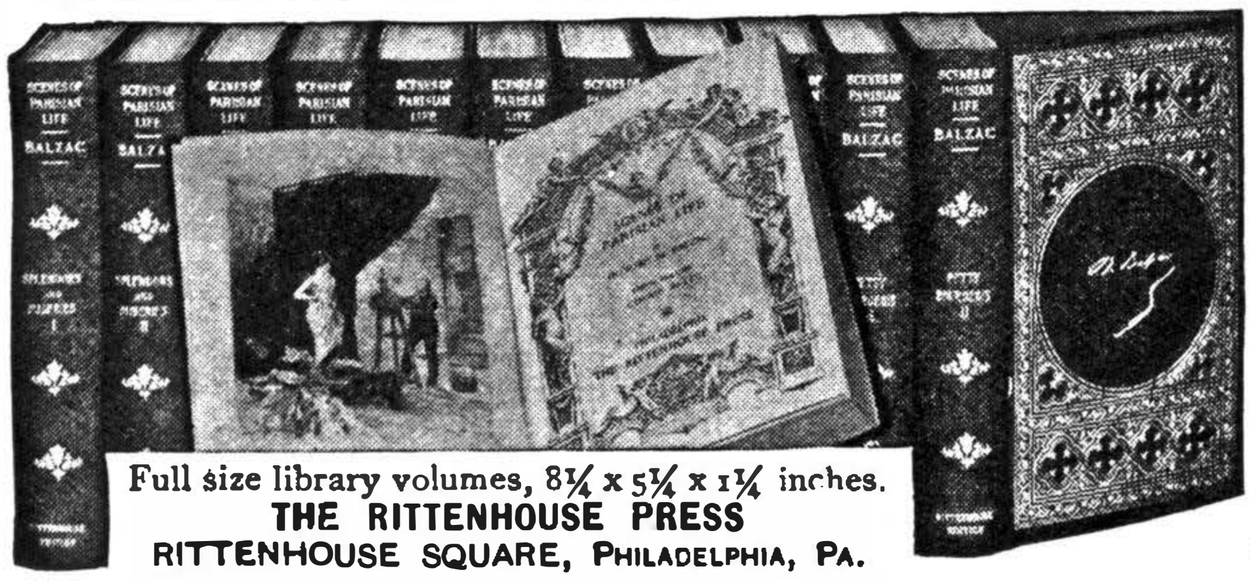

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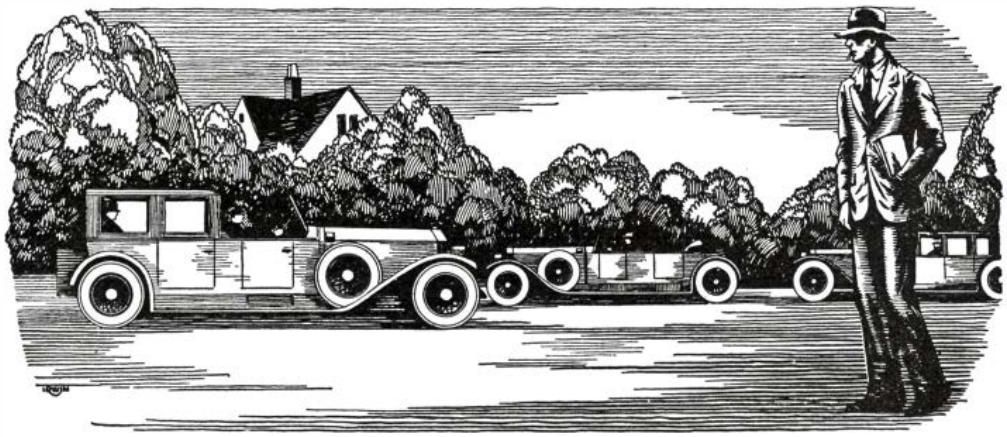

Many times in the old days, while I trudged home after work to save carfare, I used to gaze enviously at the shining cars gliding by me, the prosperous men and women within. Little did I think that inside of a year, I too should have my own car, a decent bank account, the good things of life that make it worth living.

I Thought Success Was For Others

Believe It Or Not, Just Twelve Months Ago I Was Next Thing To "Down-and-Out"

TODAY I'm sole owner of the fastest growing Radio store in town. My wife and I live in the snuggest little home you ever saw, right in one of the best neighborhoods. And I'm on good terms with my banker, too—not like the old days only a year ago, when often I didn't have one dollar to knock against another in my pocket.

It all seems like a dream now, as I look back over the past twelve short months, and think how discouraged I was then, at the "end of a blind alley." I thought I never had had a good chance in my life, and I thought I never would have one. But it was waking up that I needed, and here's the story of how I got it.

I WAS a clerk, working at the usual miserable salary such jobs pay. Somehow I'd never found any way to get into a line where I could make good money.

Other fellows seemed to find opportunities. But—much as I wanted the good things that go with success and a decent income—all the really well-paid vacancies I ever heard of seemed to be out of my line, to call for some kind of knowledge I didn't have.

And I wanted to get married. A fine situation, wasn't it? Mary would have agreed to try it—but it wouldn't have been fair to her.

Mary had told me. "You can't getahead where you are. Why don't you get into another line of work, somewhere that you can advance?"

"That's fine, Mary," I replied. "but *what* line? I've always got my eyes open for a better job, but I never seem to hear of a really good job that I can handle," Mary didn't seem to be satisfied with the answer, but I didn't know what else to tell her.

It was on the way home that night that I stopped off in the neighborhood drug store, where I overheard a scrap of conversation about myself. A few burning words that were the cause of the turning point in my life!

With a hot flush of shame I turned and left the store, and walked rapidly home. So that was what my neighbors—the people who knew me best—really thought of me!

"Bargain counter sheik—look how that suit fits," one fellow had said in a low voice. "Bet he hasn't got a dollar in those pockets." "Oh, it's just 'Useless' Anderson," said another. "He's got a wish-bone where his backbone ought to be."

As I thought over the words in deep humiliation, a sudden thought made me catch my breath. Why had Mary been so dissatisfied with my answer that "I hadn't had a chance?" *Did Mary secretly think that too?*

With a new determination I thumbed the pages of a magazine on the table, searching for an advertisement that I'd seen many times but passed up without thinking, an advertisement telling of big opportunities for trained men to succeed in the great new Radio field. I sent the coupon in, and in a few days received a handsome 64-page book, printed in two colors, telling all about the opportunities in the radio field and how a man can prepare quickly and easily at home to take advantage of these opportunities. I read the book carefully, and when I finished it I made my decision.

WHAT'S happened in the twelve months since that day, as I've already told you, seems almost like a dream to me now. For ten of those twelve months, *I've had a Radio business of my own!* At first, of course, I started it as a little proposition on the side, under the guidance of the National Radio Institute, the outfit that gave me my Radio training. It wasn't long before I was getting so much to do in the Radio line that I quit my measly little clerical job, and devoted my full time to my Radio business.

Since that time I've gone right on up, always under the watchful guidance of my friends at the National Radio Institute. They would have given me just as much help, too, if I had wanted to follow some other line of Radio besides building my own retail business—such as broadcasting, manufacturing, experimenting, sea operating, or any one of the score of lines they prepare you for. And to think that until that day I sent for their eye-opening book, I'd been wailing "I never had a chance!"

NOW I'm making real money. I drive a good-looking car of my own. Mary and I don't own the house in full yet, but I've made a substantial down payment, and I'm not straining myself any to meet the installments.

Here's a real tip. You may not be as bad-off as I was. But think it over—are you satisfied? Would you sign a contract to stay where you are now for the next ten years, making the same money? If not, you'd better be *doing* something about it instead of drifting.

This new Radio game is a live-wire field of golden rewards. The work, in any of the 20 different lines of Radio, is fascinating, absorbing, well-paid. The National Radio Institute—oldest and largest Radio home-study school in the world—will train you inexpensively in your own home to know Radio from A to Z and to increase your earnings in the Radio field.

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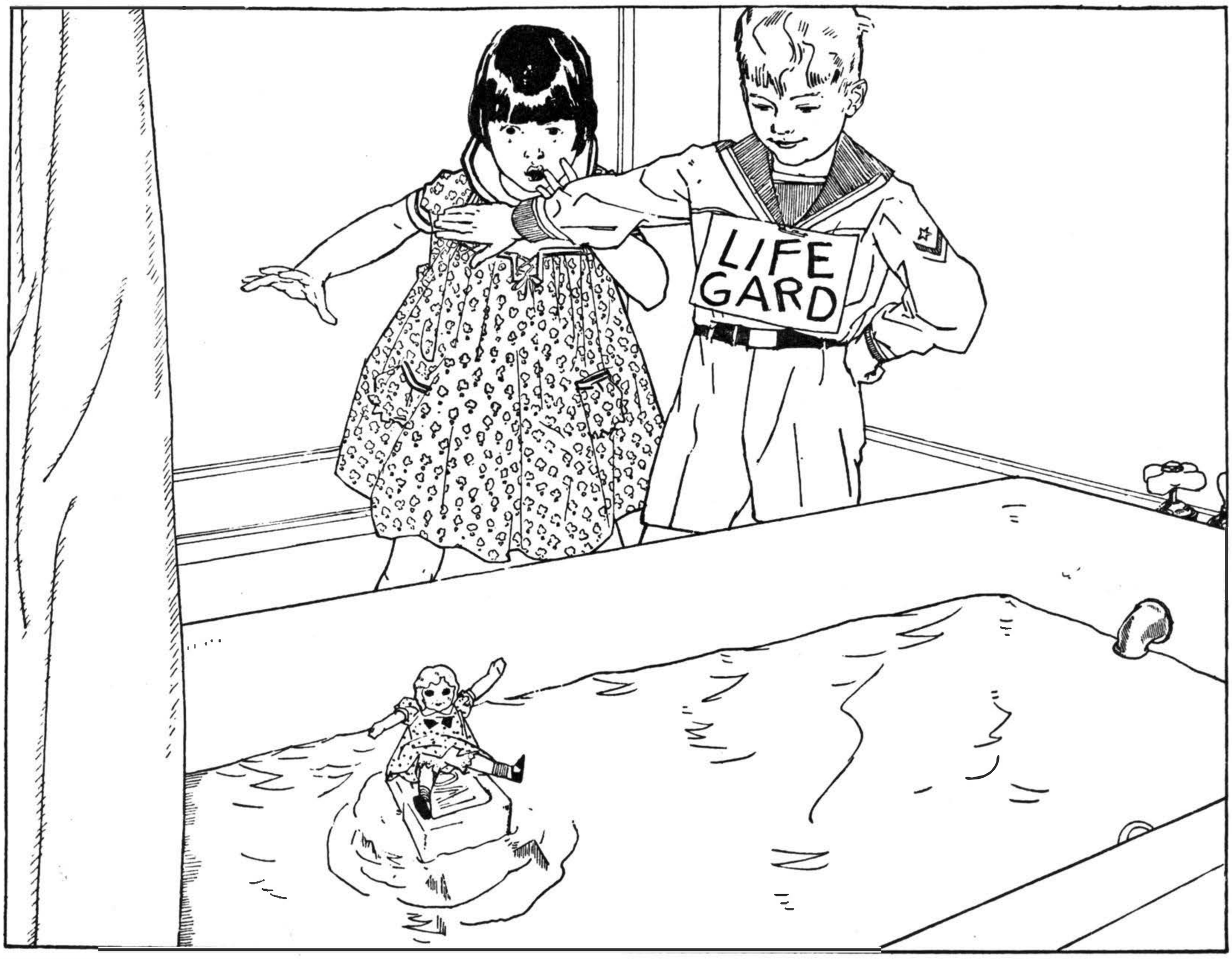

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and here's the way we Make it:

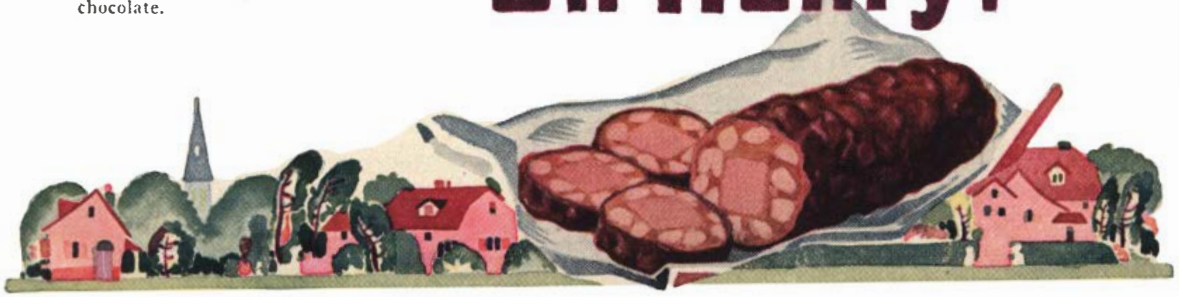
FUDGE CENTER: 1½ cups pure cane sugar; ½ teaspoon creamery butter; 1 cup rich, full cream milk; 1 cup corn syrup; white of one egg.

CARAMEL LAYER: 4 teaspoons creamery butter; 1¼ cups corn syrup; 3 cups rich, full cream milk; ¼ teaspoon salt.

PEANUT LAYER: 3 cups prime No. 1 Spanish whole nuts, roasted in oil (hulls removed).

CHOCOLATE COATING: Melt one pound pure milk chocolate.

Oh Henry!



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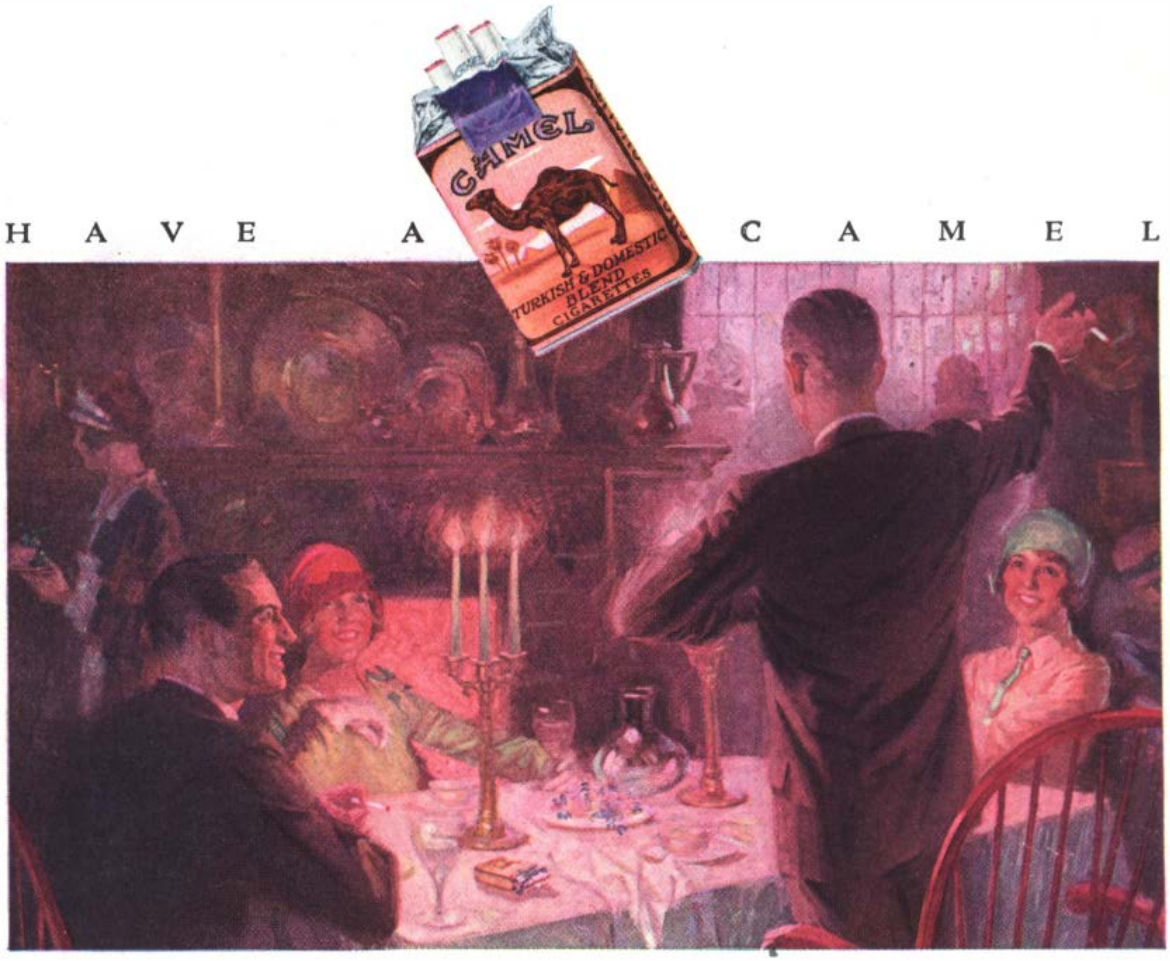

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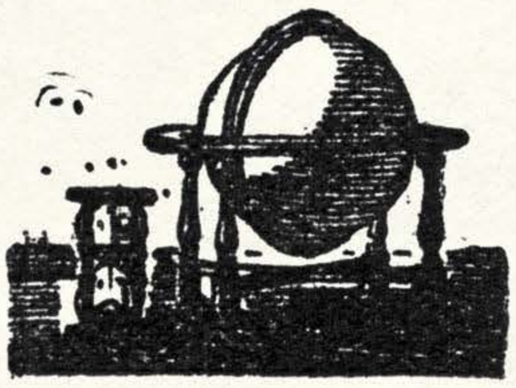

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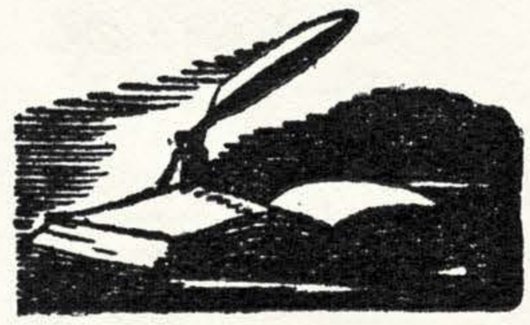

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Anthony M. Rud
EDITOR

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Hashknife rides into a mystery in Stormy River County and gets himself called

THE MEDDLER

IT WAS early morning in the town of Pineville; so early, in fact, that there was little activity. The lamps were still burning in the Stormy River Saloon, where tired eyed cattlemen, ignoring the fact that this was Sunday morning, shuffled and dealt poker hands, drinking occasionally.

At the long hitchrack in front of the place nodded a dozen cow horses, whose owners had forgotten them since early in the evening. A man came from the saloon, carrying two big buckets, which he proceeded to fill at a squeaky old pump, breaking the stillness of the sleeping town.

Two men were standing in front of the sheriff's office. One man was tall and thin, with a sad face; the other was a small, wiry, sharp faced man, with graying hair. The tall man was dressed in wrinkled black clothes that did not fit well, a white shirt, polished of bosom, and an extra high stiff collar. He wore no vest, and his glaring red four-in-hand necktie gave him the appearance of a man who had had his throat cut. He leaned against a porch post, shifting his weight from one foot to the other, as if his new boots were just a size or two too small.

"You say you busted it all to hell, eh?" said the small man, who was Pat Lynch, the sheriff of Stormy River County.

Oscar Johnson, the black clad deputy, nodded sadly.

"Tryin' to drive with one hand, Oscar?"

"No, sir."

"Had a girl with you, didn't you?"

"Shore, Annie Hall was with me, Pat. I was drivin' with both hands, though. I dunno. Mebby the horse flipped his tail over the lines. It was dark. First thing I knowed, he kicked the dash off the buggy, and then started runnin'. Busted dash didn't mean nothin'. I says fer her to set tight, and we come a-runnin'. 'Course, everythin' was all right, until we hits that culvert jist outside of town, and we does a 'thank-yuh-ma'am' that jist caved in the wheels. But I hung to the lines, and when we lit—well, as soon as I gets untangled from Annie, I finds the horse upside down and the buggy fit fer fixin'. I gets the horse to his feet and managed to drag the buggy behind the blacksmith shop. And that's where she is now, Pat."

"Annie Hall?"

"Hell, no! The buggy. Annie went home."

"Wasn't she hurt?"

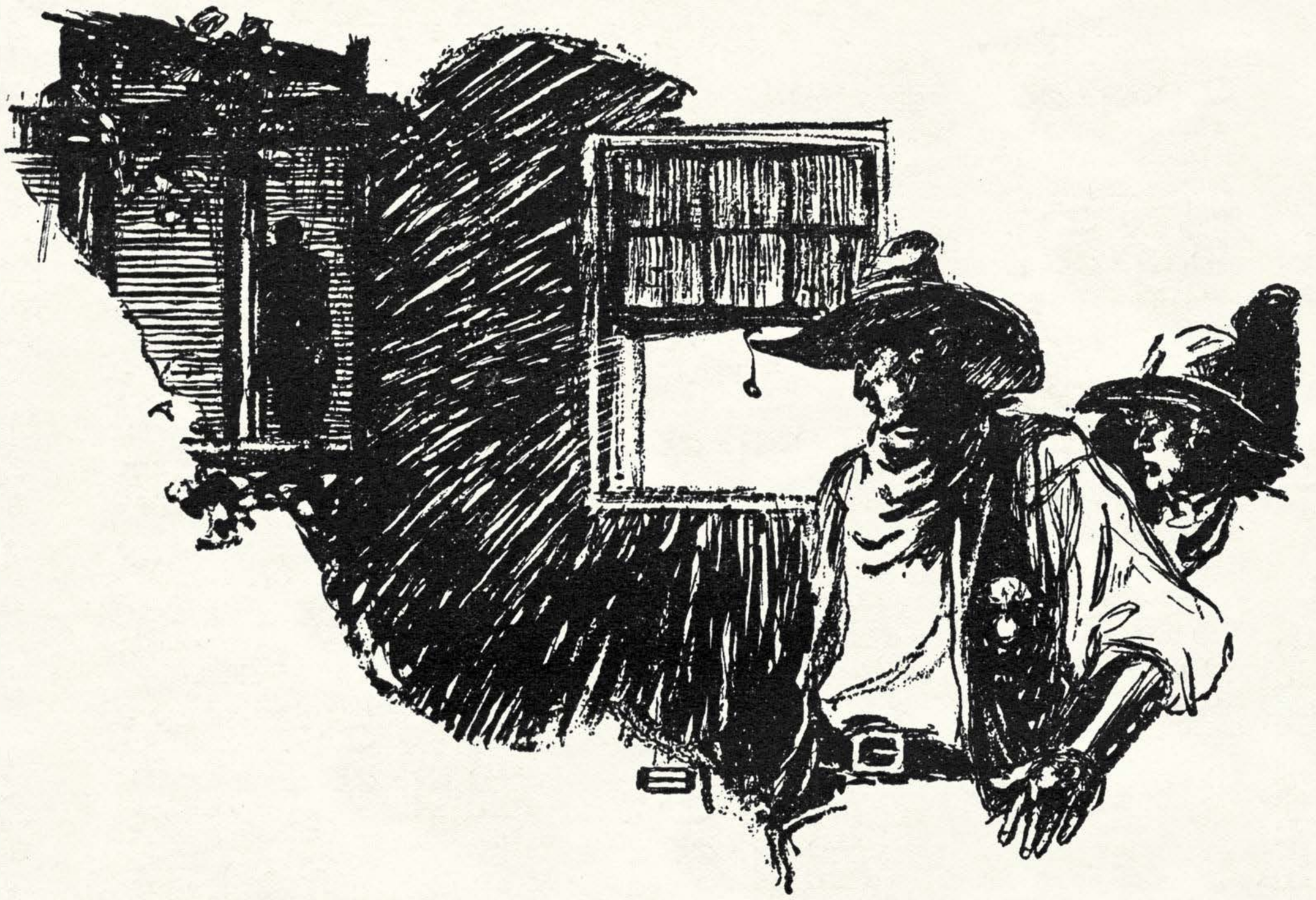
"Nothin' special; kinda limped."

"And you in that new black suit, Oscar."

Oscar sighed deeply and looked down at himself.

"I thought of that, Pat; but there wasn't no time to make a change. I'm sorry about the buggy."

"You ought to be. Cost me a hundred and sixty dollars in Cheyenne—almost



A New Novel by W. C. TUTTLE

new. Damn good buggy, I'll tell you!"

"One of the best I ever smashed."

"You don't need to be funny about it, Oscar."

"Think I ort to cry about it? You're lucky to have me back alive."

"Some folks have a queer idea of what constitutes luck," said the sheriff dryly.

"Oh, it wasn't all luck; I used my head."

"Yea-a-ah, I'll betcha. Well, let's go over and look at the wreck. I reckon you'd like to see me git it back in the same condition it was when I loaned it to you, Oscar."

"Like to—yes; but it ain't hardly possible."

"I mean, I don't like to have to pay for fixin' it."

"I don't blame you, Pat. Won't hardly be worth it. Anyway, you don't need no buggy."

"Well, you was the one who busted it."

"You can't argue with me. I did."

The sheriff snorted disgustedly. He didn't like to come right out and ask Oscar to pay for the fixing of the buggy and he knew that Oscar never would do it voluntarily.

"That was a great dance at Garnet," offered Oscar, as they crossed the dusty street toward the blacksmith shop, which was near the Stormy River Saloon.

"Best callin' I ever heard. My hoofs shore feel like I'd been on hard pasture for a long time. Fact of the matter is, I wouldn't know I had any feet, unless I look down at 'em, they're that numb. Good crowd, too. Lotsa girls."

"You ort to wear boots that fit you, Oscar."

"Fit? I got into 'em, didn't I?"

"You wouldn't call the skin of a sausage a perfect and comfortable fit, would you? Some of you cowpunchers make me sick. Ain't got brains enough to wear comfortable boots. My Lord, you'd think there was a prize offered for the most uncomfortable feet."

"There's your buggy," said Oscar sadly, as they halted at the rear of the shop, which was littered with the running gears of wrecked wagons, a wheelless cart and all the refuse of a cow town blacksmith shop.

"Yeah, that's my buggy," admitted the sheriff. "If it wasn't fer that yaller paint on the wheels, I'd never recognize her. You shore massaged it a-plenty, Oscar."

"The top's all right, Pat."

"Yea-a-ah, and one shaft. Why didn't you bust off that shaft and use it to beat hell out of the top? Might as well have made it unanimous."

"I s'pose. Still, old Sam Hall is a pretty good blacksmith, and he might put her togethera g'in."

"Oh, yea-a-ah! Take the blacksmith's daughter to a dance and— Whatcha tryin' to do—git in good with old Sam?"

"Aw, I didn't do it on purpose, Pat. 'S far as I'm concerned, I don't give a darn whether he fixes it or not."

PAT LYNCH straightened up from an examination of a smashed wheel, sighed deeply and considered his deputy.

"Sometimes I almost hate you, Oscar."

"Tha'sall right, Pat. Everybody is entitled to their opinion. I won't argue with you. Fact is, I'm too sleepy and sore to argue with you. Remember, I got drug about forty feet, with Annie on my lap. She ain't no feather piller, you know. Jist about ruined my new suit. I'm inclined to be sorry about that buggy, but at the same time—"

Oscar's voice trailed off to a stop as he stared at the corner of a little corral, which enclosed a small stable behind the Stormy River Saloon. The sheriff turned and gazed in the same direction.

"What'sa matter, Oscar?" he asked.

"I dunno." Oscar spat dryly. "Feller layin' on the ground over there by the corner of the fence. Mebby he's jist drunk, but he's in a funny position."

The sheriff stepped past Oscar, where he could get a better view.

"Too much liquor," he decided.

But Oscar wasn't sure. He walked over to the corral and looked at the man.

"You better come here, Pat," he called softly. The sheriff left the wrecked buggy and came quickly.

The man was lying flat on his face, arms spread out, fingers clutching the dirt. His hat was lying several feet away. The back of the man's head had been smashed in, and he was a welter of blood. Neither the sheriff nor the deputy spoke for several moments.

There was no use of an examination; no use in turning the body over. They both knew that it was Buck Dennig and that he was dead. Oscar reached out and braced himself against the corral fence, as he wet his dry lips with his tongue.

"Somebody's killed Buck Dennig," he said softly.

"Somebody did," nodded the sheriff. "Been dead quite a while, too; prob'ly couple of hours, or more."

Oscar nodded slowly, and they considered the murder in silence.

"We ought to tell about it," suggested Oscar.

He stepped farther toward the other corner and looked between the poles of the corral. On the opposite side of the corral, tied to the fence, was a tall sorrel horse.

"That's Buck's horse," said Oscar. "He mostly allus ties him back there. Said that the sorrel scares easy and might break loose from the hitchrack. Who do you suppose killed Buck?"

"This ain't no guessin' contest. C'mon."

THEY went back through the alley and entered the Stormy River Saloon. Only one poker game was still in progress; around the table sat Hootie Cooper, a merchant, Frank Shell, a gambler, Mort Heffner, prosecuting attorney, Lester Cline, another merchant, Dobe Severn and Bud Hough, two of the TD cowboys.

They nodded to the sheriff and the deputy. Heffner yawned widely and looked at his watch, not realizing that it was already daylight.

"When did Buck Dennig leave?" asked the sheriff casually.

"About two o'clock," replied Dobe Severn sleepily, "and it's about time for us to foller suit, Bud."

"Yeah, or get me somethin' to prop my eyes open with," grunted Bud, intent on his cards.

"Well, he didn't git far," said the sheriff seriously. "He's layin' out there by the corral, with the back of his head smashed in."

The players blinked at the sheriff, hardly understanding what he had said. Heffner got slowly to his feet, his hands on the table.

"You mean that somebody killed Buck?" he asked.

"Jist that, Mort. Smashed in his head."

"Well—well," faltered Bud vacantly, "he was all right when he left here."

"That shore sounds intelligent," grunted Oscar.

None of them waited to cash in their chips. They filed out through the rear entrance, which was only about sixty feet from where the body lay.

"Don't touch him," warned the attorney. "One of you go and get the coroner. Just let the body alone. There isn't a thing you can do now."

Dobe Severn ran down the alley, hotfooting his way after the coroner, while the rest of the men stood stiffly around the body.

"Looks pretty damn bad," said Hootie Cooper, a thin faced little man, with a huge nose and a squeaky voice.

"For Blanco," said Lester Cline, a much younger man than Cooper.

They were business rivals in everything except kerosene. Hootie wouldn't handle it, because it had been the cause of his burning out his store at one time.

The sheriff turned his head quickly and looked at Cline.

"What about Blanco?" he asked sharply.

"That don't prove anything," said Shell, the gambler, quickly.

"No, it shore don't," agreed Cline, "but just the same—"

"What's this all about?" demanded the sheriff.

"Buck Dennig and Blanco quarreled last night," said the gambler. "Buck just the same as accused Blanco of stealing a card. I didn't see it; mebby Buck had been drinking."

"I didn't see it," said Hootie. "I was watchin' the play. Blanco was dealin'. Looked to me as though it was square."

"Did they fight?" asked the sheriff anxiously.

"No," said the gambler shortly.

"They was mad enough," yawned Bud. "Blanco's lips were as white as anythin' you ever seen. And he never turned a hair, when Buck—"

"Don't say too much," advised the gambler. "Just because two men quarrel—"

"I want the straight of this," interrupted the sheriff. "You say they didn't fight, eh? Did Blanco leave the game?"

"He did. It must have been about one o'clock. He never even stopped to cash in his chips. I've still got 'em for him—about sixty dollars' worth."

"And Buck left about an hour later, eh?"

"I looked at my watch," said Hootie. "It was a quarter of two."

Little more was said, and in a few minutes the coroner came with Dobe. The coroner was an old cow town doctor, short of speech, familiar with the ailments of everybody within a radius of twenty-five miles. His examination of the dead man was very brief. Except for the smashed skull, Buck Dennig had not been touched.

"One good swipe would have done it." said Hootie.

"One *good* swipe," admitted the doctor grimly. He had known Buck for a long time.

"Take him out to the ranch?" queried Dobe.

"Take him to my office," said the doctor shortly.

After they had taken the body away,

the sheriff and the prosecutor went back across the street to the sheriff's office, with Oscar tagging behind them.

"You better go to bed," said the sheriff. "And for the love of gosh, git that collar and shirt off!"

"All right," sighed Oscar. "I'm sorry about that buggy."

"I hoped you would be."

The sheriff and the prosecutor sat down in the little office and looked at each other.

"What do you think, Mort?" asked the sheriff.

The lawyer stroked his unshaven jaw. A full night session of poker did not tend to make him abnormally bright, not that he was a tower of wisdom at any time.

"I don't know, Pat," he replied vaguely.

"You was there when they quarreled?"

"Oh, sure."

"Any threats?"

"Hm-mm. Well, there usually is at a time like that. I don't remember just what was said—everybody talking, you know. But Blanco was mad, and so was Buck. In fact, Buck was mad when he came there last night."

"Mad about what?"

"Oh, I don't know what was the matter with him. Buck was usually good tempered. But something was wrong. You know, there has been a bad feeling between the TD and the Blanco outfits. Nobody has ever preferred any charges, but I think it was over some alleged rustling."

"I've heard the same thing, Mort, but never from either side. Things like that leak out, you know. But what do you think? Is there enough to base an arrest on?"

"To arrest Blanco?"

"Yeah."

The attorney shook his head quickly.

"Not in my opinion. Blanco may be as guilty as hell, but we can't prove it. Not yet."

The sheriff sighed with relief. He didn't want the job of arresting Tex Blanco, owner of the B Arrow outfit.

"We may be able to gather some evidence," said the lawyer reflectively, and then yawned widely.

He was a sallow-faced, angular sort, with heavily pouched eyes. He wore a celluloid collar, cut well back to give plenty of room for his Adam's apple, and celluloid cuffs, with huge cameo cuff buttons.

"We may be able to," agreed the sheriff dubiously. "but it looks to me like one of them crimes that you can't hang on to anybody. If Blanco killed him, and keeps his mouth shut, how are you goin' to put the deadwood on him, Mort?"

"I dunno," said Mort, yawning again. "I guess I better go to bed."

"How did Buck quit the game?"

"Lost about fifty dollars, I think. Ho-o-o-hum-m-m! Well, I'll see you this afternoon, Pat."

He stopped in the doorway and turned to the sheriff.

"Buck had more money with him, Pat. Had a roll of bills, fastened with a rubber band. Might see if he's still got it on him."

"All right, Mort. See you later."

THE TOLMAN-DENNIG cattle outfit, known by its brand as the TD, was the biggest outfit in the Stormy River country. Cleve Tolman had been the original owner, but ten years before the killing of Buck Dennig, Buck had drifted into the valley, a youth of twenty-three, with a bankroll big enough, in the vernacular, to choke a horse.

Buck was not a cowboy in those days; merely a wild youth, who had come down through the country, pitting his luck against the games of chance. He landed in Pineville with more money than he knew how to handle. Cleve Tolman needed a partner and Buck needed an investment; so they became partners, registered a new brand and proceeded to build up a big cattle business.

Buck was a handsome, likable sort of chap, and he soon learned the cattle game, plunging into the business with the same dash he had used in beating cold eyed gamblers, whose abilities had been

as nothing against his phenomenal luck.

No one knew anything of Buck's past life—of his family or whence he came. This was no novelty in the cattle ranges. Men told their past if it pleased them to do so; nobody asked. Buck played on the square with everybody, and that was all that was required.

Cleve Tolman was a big man, with the square jaw of a fighter, but rather short of speech. He always seemed content to sit back and let Buck do it. Some of the men said that Cleve was lazy. He liked to gamble, but his bad luck was proverbial.

Neither Tolman nor Buck had ever married. They employed from six to twenty cowboys, according to the season. Buck had always acted as foreman. Tolman was a director in the Pineville Bank and always had a finger in the local politics, although he had never aspired to an office.

The TD ranch was located about five miles southwest of Pineville, on Lobo Creek, the buildings almost hidden away in a big grove of cottonwoods. Little money had been spent on the ranch buildings, and none for paint. The ranch house was a rambling one story building, that sprawled hither and yon among the cottonwoods, as if the architect had started something he didn't know how to finish. The bunkhouse was a long, low building, with a swayback. The big stable also swayed badly along the ridgepole, as did the sheds and other buildings.

But in spite of all this, the TD was a prosperous outfit, with rather a happy-go-lucky crew, until Dobe Severn and Bud Hough rode in that morning and told them that Buck Dennig had been murdered. Cleve Tolman and Shorty Gallup were in the kitchen, getting a list of provisions from old Luke Jones, the TD cook, when the two cowboys brought the news.

Old Luke dropped a dozen eggs on his own feet and never even looked down at them; and Luke was a thrifty cook, too.

"You ain't jokin', are you, Dobe?" asked Shorty hoarsely.

"I wish t' hell, I was, Shorty. He's dead, all right. Somebody smashed in his head, and he's laid out at the coroner's office right now."

Dobe went on to explain how the body had been found and what had been done; but Tolman did not wait to hear the details. He was heading for the stable to get his horse.

"What did the sheriff say?" asked Shorty.

"What could he say? He don't know no more about it than we do."

Matt Sturgis, Alex McLean and Eddie Grimes, the other cowboys were at the stable and heard the news from Cleve Tolman; so they came up to the house, eager for more details from Dobe and Bud, while Tolman mounted his horse and rode swiftly up the road toward Pineville.

Bud and Dobe gave them plenty of details, and they were willing listeners.

"It kinda looks to me as though Blanco's cinch was kinda gettin' frayed out," said Shorty Gallup meaningly.

Shorty was about thirty-five years of age, five feet six, of tough muscles, stringy, colorless hair, pale blue eyes deeply set on each side of a crooked nose over a thin lipped mouth. Shorty's reputation included a willingness to fight anybody or anything at any time.

His bunkie, Matt Sturgis, was a tall, thin, grimy featured cowboy who wore his holster tied down and said little.

"Looks thataway," he said, in response to Shorty's observation.

"Don't prove nothin'," said Eddie Grimes, who was inclined to be technical. He added hastily, "Oh, I know how it looks, but just because they quarreled over a poker game—"

"You worked for Blanco one time, didn't you?" asked Shorty.

"I shore did, Shorty. And Tex Blanco never struck me as bein' a murderer. Anyway, his punchers think he's on the square, and he's darn nice to his old woman."

"She's a funny old woman," grinned Dobe. "Sets out there on the porch, smokin' a cob pipe. Betcha she's seventy years old."

"Sixty-nine," corrected Eddie, "and she shore can cook. She thinks a lot of Tex, and the punchers like her, too."

"The first thing we know we'll be right neighborly with the B Arrow," said Shorty sarcastically. "Eddie, you ought to tell all this to Tolman."

"No, I don't need to do that, Shorty. Every man is entitled to his opinion, you know. I'm not boostin' the Blanco outfit and I ain't tryin' to prove no alibi for Tex. But he was square with me, and I'd like to bet that a lot of the stuff he's blamed for, he never done."

"Let's arise and sing hymn number thirteen," said Shorty Gallup seriously.

Eddie smiled shortly and turned away. He knew that Shorty was looking for trouble, and he had no desire to carry the matter any further; not that Eddie wasn't perfectly capable of holding his own, but he could not see where anything could be gained by fighting.

"Well, you shore run your sandy on him, Shorty," laughed Sturgis, as they watched Eddie enter the bunkhouse.

"Looks thataway," agreed Shorty.

"You did like hell!" snorted Luke Jones, standing in the kitchen doorway. "You jist think you did. Any old time Eddie Grimes backs down it's 'cause he don't want to take advantage of a weaker man."

"Go on back to your mulligan, you old spav!" growled Shorty. "What do you know about war? You never cocked a cannon."

"War? Say, I could take a umberelly and chase a whole damn brigade of jaspers like you plumb down to the mouth of Stormy River and never lay a hair. You're allus lookin' fer trouble, and hopin t' hell you never find it. Some of these days somebody is goin' to saw off your horns; and if you git comical with me, folks will point me out and say, 'There goes Luke Jones, the feller who made a hoop out of Shorty Gallup and rolled him out of the State!' "

The door slammed shut, and they heard old Luke laughing to himself. Shorty's ears were fiery red and he started for the door, but Dobe Severn blocked him.

"Don't be a fool, Shorty," he advised. "You know Luke."

"The dirty old sheep waddy!" rasped Shorty.

"Aw, I know," grinned Dobe, "he shore can git under your hide. But he does it for fun. He couldn't whip nobody, but he shore can make you mad. Let him alone, Shorty."

"I suggest that we go to town," said Bud. "There won't be no work done on this ranch on Sunday, that's a cinch. And it might look better if we went down."

"Suits me," growled Shorty. "I reckon you're right, Bud."

CLEVE TOLMAN found several people at the coroner's office, and they greeted him with a certain sympathy. He looked at the body, asked a few perfunctory questions and went up to see the sheriff.

He found the sheriff talking with Lester Cline and Frank Shell, the gambler. They had gone over the cause of the quarrel between Buck Dennig and Tex Blanco, and they detailed it to Tolman again.

"But there's no evidence that Tex killed him," said the sheriff.

"He was pretty mad," offered Cline. "It looked as though they might start shooting it our right there."

"Did Blanco steal a card?" asked Tolman.

"Nobody seems to know," smiled Shell. "Buck was pretty mad; so I reckon he thought Blanco stole it. Do you know—it seemed to me as though Buck was looking for trouble."

"What do you mean?" asked Tolman quickly.

"Well, sort of irritable."

"He came down early, didn't he?"

"Sure, I saw him in the middle of the afternoon."

"It wasn't a case of robbery," said the sheriff. "He had a hundred and sixty-five dollars in his pocket."

"Makes it look worse than ever for Tex Blanco."

"I'd like to notify Buck's relatives, if we knew where they are," said the sheriff.

Tolman shook his head.

"He never mentioned any, Pat."

"Did Buck ever have any trouble with anybody else?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, did he ever have a quarrel or a fight—I mean, lately?"

Tolman looked closely at the sheriff for several moments, as if wondering what had prompted the question. Then he shook his head shortly.

"No."

"Uh-huh. Well, it looks as though we was kinda up a stump. We could arrest Tex on circumstantial evidence, I reckon; but Heffner says it wouldn't do us any good."

"Probably not," said Tolman slowly. "When is the inquest?"

"Tomorrow mornin'."

"I'll be down."

Tolman walked away from the office, and the three men looked at one another curiously.

"He's a cold blooded fish," said Shell. "I don't suppose Buck's death affects him at all. I think he knows something, Pat."

"Knows somethin?' What about, Frank?"

"Didn't you notice the look he gave you when you asked him if Buck had had a quarrel or a fight lately?"

"You don't think Tolman knows how Buck got killed, do you?"

"Probably not; but your question froze him up, just the same."

"I guess we're all lookin' for somebody to suspect," said the sheriff dryly. "And there's too damn much talk about Tex Blanco; too much talk and too little evidence. Tex is hot headed, and about the time he hears what's bein' said, somebody will get pistol-whipped."

"Don't you suppose that the TD outfit will kinda ask Tex how about it?" queried Cline.

"Prob'ly. I'll bet I know what he'll tell 'em. But I hope they won't. There's been bad blood between 'em for a long time, and somethin' like that might touch off the fireworks. Cleve Tolman is pretty level headed, as a rule, but he might accidentally make a fool of himself."

Shell walked over by the door and stood there looking up the street.

"The rest of the TD outfit just arrived," he said. "I guess I better go over and open up a game."

As Shell started to step off of the wooden sidewalk, he looked down the street and saw Tex Blanco and Frank Judd, one of Tex's cowboys, riding up the street toward him. He hesitated for a moment, but stopped and waited for them to ride up. The sheriff and Cline came out, and Tex reined his horse over to the edge of the sidewalk. Judd rode on to the front of a store, where he dismounted.

Tex smiled pleasantly and spoke to the the three men as he dismounted. He was a trifle over six feet tall, well built and graceful. His brown eyes and olive tinted skin showed his Spanish blood, as did his coalblack hair, slightly gray at the temples. His nose was slightly hooked and his teeth were whiter than those usually displayed in the range countries.

He wore a gray Stetson, nearly new, adorned with a silver band of Spanish workmanship. His shirt was of blue silk, and around his throat was a red silk handkerchief. Around his waist he wore a multi-colored sash, with the beaded ends hanging down his left hip, and a wide cartridge belt, sagging heavily to one side from the weight of his holstered gun. He wore gray trousers, tucked in the tops of his fancy stitched, high heeled boots.

There was no denying the fact that Tex Blanco was what is generally known as a "fancy cowboy"; perhaps just a bit more picturesque than the average, but his clothes fitted him well, and these touches of aboriginal color were by no means glaringly objectionable.

He stepped up on the sidewalk, still holding his reins, while the tall sorrel came in close behind him. His saddle was hand stamped and decorated in silver, tarnished to a soft gray.

"Well, what do you know, Sheriff?" he queried pleasantly.

"Not very much, Tex."

The sheriff was uneasy. Across the street and a little farther up the block was the Stormy River Saloon hitchrack, where all the TD horses were tied. He was afraid of what the TD outfit might do if they discovered Tex.

Tex seemed to feel that something was wrong. He followed the sheriff's gaze, but saw only the string of horses at the hitchrack. Shell was looking curiously at Tex.

"WHAT'S the matter with you fellers?" asked Tex bluntly.

"You didn't hear about it, Tex?" asked the sheriff.

"Hear about what?"

"Somebody killed Buck Dennig last night."

Tex frowned slightly, narrowing his eyes as he looked from one to the other.

"Buck Dennig killed? Who killed him?"

"Nobody knows, Tex. I found him this mornin', out behind the Stormy River Saloon, layin' almost against the little corral fence. He'd been hit on the head—from behind."

Tex's eyes swept the other side of the street, and his right thumb hooked carelessly over the top of his belt, just above his holster.

"That's shore news to me," he said slowly. "Wasn't there no clue of any kind?"

"Not a thing, Tex. He'd been dead several hours. Left the poker game about two o'clock and was prob'ly killed on the way out to his horse. He kept it tied to the corral fence, you know."

"No, I didn't know," said Tex evenly.

"Well, most everybody did," said the sheriff quickly.

Tex rubbed his freshly shaven chin thoughtfully as he looked at Shell.

"Me and Buck quarreled last night," he said. "You was there, Frank."

"Yes, I was there, Tex."

"I didn't steal that card, Frank."

"I didn't see it, Tex. None of the rest saw it; but that's all past. I guess Buck made a mistake. He was drinking quite a lot."

"But he wasn't drunk. I suppose everybody knows about the quarrel by this time, eh?"

The sheriff turned from looking at the saloon.

"They do, Tex. Too bad it happened. Nobody accusin' you or anybody else. but I wish you'd pull out before that TD outfit see you. You know what I mean, Tex. They'll be drinkin', and there's always been bad blood."

"I usually do my runnin' straight ahead, Pat," said Tex coldly.

"I know you do, Tex. I'm your friend, ain't I? Do this for me. Give that wild bunch a chance to cool off. The odds are all against you, if anythin' starts, and it will start if they run into you. Give 'em twenty-four hours, and they'll see things different."

"Meaning that I killed Buck Denning, and that I better give the TD outfit a wide berth, eh?"

"Oh, Tex, have a little sense."

Tex's brown eyes flashed with resentment for several moments, but finally he laughed softly and slapped the sheriff on the shoulder.

"All right, Pat, I guess you're right. You can tell Tolman and his gang that—no, I'll tell 'em, when the time comes up."

Judd came from the store and Tex motioned for him to come down the street. Without saying anything more, Tex mounted his sorrel, joined Judd, and they rode back the way they had come.

The sheriff sighed with relief and shook his head.

"I reckon I rubbed him the right way. I shore was scared he was goin' over and meet the whole gang. And he'd do it, too."

"Didn't seem so awful surprised over Buck's death," observed Cline.

"What did you expect him to do—faint?" asked the sheriff caustically. "How did you act when you heard it?"

Cline grinned sourly, but did not reply. They walked up the street to the front of a small store, where they met Guy Shearer, the cashier of the Pineville bank. Shearer was about forty years of age, stockily built, and wore glasses. He had been with the bank for several years.

"I heard about Buck Dennig getting killed," he told the sheriff. "Wasn't it awful? Things like that are an awful shock. Any idea who did it?"

"Not an idea," said the sheriff.

"Queer, isn't it? Buck was in the bank yesterday afternoon just before closing time, but he didn't have much to say. I asked him if he was buying more cattle, but he either didn't hear me, or didn't care to answer."

The sheriff pricked up his ears quickly.

"Just what made you think he was goin' to buy cattle?"

"From the amount of money he drew, I thought—"

"How much did he draw, Shearer?"

"Ten thousand dollars. It was a lot of money to draw from a bank the size of this one. But I gave it to him."

"Ten thousand dollars?" wondered the sheriff. "Drew it on a check?"

"Certainly."

"Well, I'll be damned! Huh! That puts a new angle on it. Who knew he drew all that money?"

"I'm sure I don't know. I was alone in the bank when he drew it; so if any one else knew it, he must have told them."

"That's an awful lot of money," said Cline slowly.

"Lot of money to have somebody steal from you," said the sheriff. "The question is—who knew about it?"

"Well, he must have had a reason for drawing it," replied the cashier. "Somebody else must have know about it."

The sheriff nodded and went straight across the street to the Stormy River Saloon, where he found the boys from the TD ranch at the bar. They had absorbed a number of drinks and were in the right mood for anything.

"The law is among us," declared Shorty Gallup, seeing the sheriff step through the doorway. "Hyah, Paddy?"

"All right, Shorty."

Cleve Tolman was at the back of the room, talking with Mort Heffner, the prosecutor, who had slept only an hour. They came back to the front of the saloon, when they saw the sheriff, and the three men went outside together.

"You got any opinion on this, Pat?" asked Tolman.

"I have not," replied Pat firmly.

"I've been trying to convince Tolman that there isn't a bit of evidence to connect Tex Blanco with it," said Heffner.

"And I don't agree with him," said Tolman coldly. "Tex and Buck had it in for each other. They've never been friends. And you can see for yourself that it was purely a case of revenge. His money was not touched."

"And here," said the sheriff slowly," is just where your theory gits all shot to hell, Cleve! Yesterday afternoon Buck drawed ten thousand dollars from the bank."

Heffner whistled softly. Tolman blinked nervously and seemed unable to speak for several moments. He cleared his throat harshly.

"Ten thousand dollars," he said hoarsely. "That's a lot of money."

"A hell of a lot," agreed Heffner. "Who told you, Pat?"

"Shearer. Buck cashed his check just before the bank closed yesterday. And Buck had a hundred and sixty-five dollars in his pocket when we searched him at the coroner's office."

"How much did he lose in the poker game?" asked Tolman.

"Not over fifty dollars," replied Heffner.

"Did Tex lose very heavy?"

"I think he was ahead of the game, but he never stopped to cash his chips; he was too mad. But he'll get his money."

"Now, the question is: Who knew

Buck had that money?" said the sheriff. "Shearer knew, of course; but as far as he knew, Buck disposed of it right away. Anyway, Shearer ain't the kind of a person to do a thing like that. Cleve, did you know that Buck was goin' to draw that money?"

Tolman's eyes narrowed slightly, and it was at least ten seconds before he replied—

"No!"

"Buck had his own bank account?"

"Yeah."

"Wasn't there a company account?" asked Heffner.

"No."

"Well," said the sheriff, "it looks as though Buck was killed for his money."

"Not necessarily," replied Tolman. "Most any man could use ten thousand dollars."

"Sure," nodded Heffner. "That's a lot of money."

"It's a funny deal," sighed the sheriff. "No evidence at all. Tolman, I hope you'll order your men to let Blanco and his outfit alone. It'll only start trouble. Tex was in town a while ago, and heard all about it. I didn't want him to meet your gang today, so I induced him to go back home. But he knows what everybody's thinkin'."

"He does, eh?" Tolman smiled grimly. "I reckon you didn't have to argue much with him to get him to pull out."

"Tex is no fool. You'll speak to the boys, Cleve?"

"Is the law goin' to lay down on the job?"

"Not by a damn sight!"

"I'll speak to 'em, Pat."

IT WAS a week after the murder of Buck Dennig that Marion Evans, erstwhile of Chicago, later of Cheyenne, climbed aboard the stage at Garnet, while Windy March, the stage driver, roped her trunk to the boot, and cast quizzical glances toward the back of his lone passenger.

Windy was thin of form and face, and tanned to the texture of old parchment. His face was not classical, due to numerous and sundry encounters, and his average chew of tobacco gave him a mumpy appearance. As a dispenser of local news, Windy was an animated bulletin board, but he was just a trifle timid around the weaker sex.

He had taken one look at Marion Evans, knocked his sombrero off when he tried to be polite, and almost swallowed the contents of his capacious mouth. She was quite the prettiest girl he had ever seen. In fact, he had never seen any girl with such a lovely complexion. The girls of the Stormy River country were tanned from the sun and wind. None of them had such big brown eyes, that looked steadily at you. And her clothes were different. Windy leaned against the rear wheel of the stage and wished he didn't have to sit beside her all the way to Pineville.

But there was no way out of it. She had climbed unbidden to the driver's seat. He took plenty of time in arranging his load, but he was finally obliged to climb up beside her and drive out of town. A close observer might have noticed that Windy had failed to fill his mouth with tobacco, and that he did not anathematize his four half broken horses.

For a mile or more they rode in silence. The sun was warm, and a breeze sent the dust cloud behind them. The road was not too bad, and the stage was well enough ballasted to make easy riding.

The girl asked—

"Do you have many mornings like this?"

Windy, looking straight up the road, shook his head.

"First one I ever had," he said slowly.

"First one you ever had?"

"Mostly travel alone, ma'am. Sometimes a puncher goes to Granite and loses his bronc, you know, and he has to ride back with me. This stage don't pay much—not in passengers. Haul the mail, you know, and some freight."

"I see. What kind of a town is Pineville?"

"Oh, all right. Need a railroad. They

thought they was goin' to git a railroad, but the railroad company didn't think they was, and the railroad company built it, so they didn't let Pineville's thoughts amount to much. Mebby some day they'll extend the line over there; but I dunno what for."

"You are pretty well acquainted around here?"

"Know every sage bush by its first name, ma'am. Raised here and got m' eddication here. Could 'a' been a big cowman, I reckon, but m' tastes didn't run thataway."

"I suppose the transportation business was of more interest to you."

"Well, I—I—" Windy floundered badly. He didn't know what transportation meant, but he ended weakly, "Yes, ma'am, it was."

"This country is not what one might call thickly settled," she observed a little later.

"No, it ain't, ma'am. You're from the city, ain't you?"

"Chicago. I came here from Cheyenne."

"Chicago, eh? Well, well! I was down there six year ago. Went down with a load of TD cows. Uh-h-h-h-huh-h-h-h! I sh'd say I did. Say, you don't happen to know a Miss Smith in Chicago, do you? Had yaller hair and chawed gum. No? I dunno if she's there yet or not. I took her to a show, and durin' the evenin' somebody stole my watch and my money. She was a right good lookin' girl."

"No, I don't think I ever met her," smiled Marion. "Chicago is rather a large city, you know."

"You bet. Are you goin' to stay in Pineville?"

"For several months, I hope, Mr.—er—"

"Name's March, ma'am. M-a-r-c-h. Jussa same as the month. Most everybody calls me Windy."

"Windy March?"

"Shore," laughed Windy. "Sounds like bad weather, eh? Buck Dennig named me Windy. I got sore at a couple fellers one night, you know. Mebby I kinda overestimated m'self. Anyway, I went into the Stormy River Saloon, intendin' to knock the whey out of 'em. I reckon I announced m' intentions, so that all might gather around and see the fun. Well, it didn't happen jist the way I planned. You see, them two waddies jist nacherally knocked the tar out of me. They seemed to have a lot of fightin' that had to be done, and they shore worked me over a-plenty; and when it was all over, I went out on m' hands and knees, plumb meek and lowly. That's how I got my name, ma'am."

"But I don't quite understand," laughed Marion.

"Don'tcha? Buck Dennig said that March came in like a lion and went out like a lamb; so they shortened it to Windy."

"Oh, I see."

"Yes'm, that's how it comes."

"I am Miss Evans—Marion Evans. And unless something unforeseen happens, I shall teach the Pineville school this coming term."

"Well, what do you know about that? A schoolma'am, eh? Well, you don't look it, and that's a fact."

"This will be my first school," she confessed.

"Well, that accounts for it, I suppose."

Windy slammed on the brake and paid close attention to his driving, until they left the short grades and entered the flat country again.

"Accounts for what?" asked Marion. Windy squinted against the sun, trying to recall what he had said.

"Oh, yeah; I done forgot for a minute. Well, I meant that they don't stay so pretty after they teach school for a long time. I reckon it kinda takes all the pretty out of 'em. It's shore a job—learnin' kids. I know they had a job learnin' me. But they stuck to it, and I came out of it all right. Takes patience, I reckon."

"I suppose," smiled Marion. "It will be a new experience for me; but one must work."

"Yeah, sure."

"I feel that I was very fortunate to be accepted by the Pineville school board. I applied from Cheyenne, and they accepted immediately."

"Prob'ly had to have somebody."

Marion wanted to laugh, but she realized that there might be much truth in what Windy had said.

"I do not suppose that they are flooded with applications," she said.

"Flooded? My God! Excuse m' language, ma'am. No, I don't reckon nobody has ever had to set along the road with a loaded Winchester to keep the teachers out of Pineville. The last one we had almost died on us."

"Almost died on you?"

"UH-HUH. There's the Blanco ranch ahead of us, ma'am. It's a good sized outfit. Tex Blanco owns it. We've got to stop there and drop off a package for Tex. I dunno what's in it, but it's from the Colt Company; so I don't have to be no mindreader to know it's six-shooters."

"What is a six-shooter?" she asked.

"You don't know? Well, what do you know about that? A six-gun is a—a hawgleg—aw, you know—a revolver."

"Yes, I know what a revolver is."

"Well, that's them."

"I notice you carry one, Mr. March."

"Everybody does around here. Puncher without a gun is plumb naked."

"But they don't shoot each other, do they?"

"Not reg'larly, ma'am. It ain't what you'd call a common occurrence. In fact, it don't happen often enough to make it pop'lar. We wear 'em to prevent trouble."

As they drove up to the big gate, Tex Blanco, astride his tall sorrel, was just coming out.

"Got a package for you, Tex," said Windy.

He handed the lines to Marion and stepped down over the wheel.

"All right, Windy," replied Tex, his eyes on Marion.

His steady gaze caused her to turn her head, and he said softly—

"Oh, I beg your pardon, ma'am."

"Two bits charges," informed Windy, producing the package.

Tex paid him, and Windy climbed back to the seat.

"Oh, I plumb forgot," he laughed. "Miss Evans, I'd like to make you used to Tex Blanco. Tex, this is Miss Evans, who is goin' to teach the school at Pineville."

"I'm pleased to meet you, Miss Evans," said Tex slowly.

"Thank you," said Marion.

"I'll betcha you're sorry you ain't got no kids to send to school, Tex," laughed Windy.

Marion flushed slightly, but did not look at Tex, who said—

"I never thought of that."

Windy spoke to the team, kicked off the brake, and they went away in a cloud of dust, while Tex sat there on his horse, the package on the pommel of his saddle, until they disappeared into the hills.

"Nice lookin' feller," said Windy.

"Seemed very pleasant," replied Marion.

"He'd be jist that pleasant if he was goin' to shoot you full of holes, ma'am."

"Good gracious!"

"Good shot, too. Nobody paws him around. I feel kinda sorry for Tex. Lotsa folks think he murdered Buck Dennig. Mebby he did. 'Course, they can't prove it. The coroner's jury said somebody unknown killed Buck; but jist the same they all felt that Tex done it. There's bad feelin' between the TD outfit and Tex. The TD outfit belonged to Cleve Tolman and Buck Dennig, you see. Everybody liked Buck. I reckon somebody will git hurt before it's all over."

"I am sure Mr. Blanco does not look like a murderer," said Marion.

"Didja ever see one that did, ma'am? They most all look like ordinary folks, until they git convicted, and then everybody says they've got the face of a murderer. No, I can't say that Tex looks like a killer."

For the next mile or so Windy devoted himself to driving, as the road was bad. Once more they reached the long slope that led down toward Stormy River, and Windy relaxed.

"You spoke about the last teacher nearly dying," reminded Marion, opening the conversation again.

"Oh, yeah, but he didn't die. Kinda funny, too. The schoolhouse ain't so very big, ma'am. There's quite a few kinda big boys goin' to school, and a couple of them got so they hated the teacher, so they framed a job on him.

"At the back of the schoolhouse is a hole big enough for a man to crawl under, and at the front, under the steps is another hole, not so big. Well, the kids got to playin' around under there, and the teacher ordered 'em to keep out from under there, 'cause they might crawl over a rattler.

"Well, a couple of the big boys kinda hung around after school one night, and one of 'em went in and told the teacher that a little kid had got under there and couldn't git out. He led the teacher around to the hole at the back, while the other big kid stayed under the steps and cried through the other opening.

"The teacher tried to talk with the cryin' kid, but the kid wouldn't do nothin' but cry; so he crawled under to git the kid, and these two big boys blocked the two holes. They piled cordwood against the holes, shuttin' the blame place up tight.

"Next mornin' there wasn't no teacher and no bell rung; so everybody thought the teacher had jumped the job. And by golly, it was two days later before anybody found him."

"What a terrible thing to do!" exclaimed Marion. "What did they do to the two big boys who perpetrated such a thing?"

"I ain't sure, but I think they got dispelled."

"Literally, I hope," laughed Marion.

"I ain't sure about that," said Windy seriously.

They drove through the Stormy River crossing, where the water barely reached the hubs of the wheels. It was near the middle of September, and in a couple more months there would be plenty of snow and cold weather in the Stormy River valley. Cattle were trailing along the bank of the river, and Windy pointed out the different brands.

"There's some TD's," he told her. "Biggest outfit in the valley. I reckon it all belongs to Cleve Tolman now. Buck didn't have no folks."

"Buck was the man they think was killed by Mr. Blanco?"

"Yes'm—murdered. Prob'ly killed for his money."

"Did he have lots of money?"

"Y'betcha. Had ten thousand on him, they say."

"Gracious! Isn't that a lot of money to be carrying around?"

"I've heard that it was, ma'am; but I never had no personal knockdown to that much cash. After it gets over forty dollars, it all looks alike to me."

"I guess I know how you feel," sighed Marion.

Windy shot a sidewise glance at her. Windy was not so dumb that he did not understand that his fair passenger was not overly burdened with worldly wealth.

"Oh, I've got a few dollars salted away," he told her confidentially.

"It must be a comfortable feeling, Mr. March."

"Mm-m-m-m."

Windy had the munificent sum of eighty-three dollars in the Pineville Bank.

"Well, there's Pineville ahead of us, ma'am," he said. "That's her skyline, you can see. Looks like a set of bad teeth, don't it. See them two molars in the middle. Them's the Pineville Bank and the Stormy River Saloon; two of the big business places. They've got false fronts."

"DO YOU know Mr. James Lawrence Cooper?"

"James Lawrence — oh, yea-a-ah. That's Hootie Cooper. Runs a store in Pineville. Yeah, I shore know Hootie."

"I am to board at his home—board and room."

"That's fine. Mrs. Cooper is a great big fat woman. Awful nice woman, too. You'll like her fine. Good cook. Tell her she's gettin' thin and she'll love you. But she ain't. If anythin', she's gettin' fatter."

"Have they any children?"

"Didn't have last Friday."

Marion laughed outright.

"Well, that's the truth," said Windy seriously. "I never lie to a lady. If it came to a showdown, I'd bet they ain't, but I wouldn't make no definite statement."

"I am just a little afraid of the board of trustees," admitted Marion. "I am not so sure of my ability, you see."

"Well, you jist forget that, ma'am. There's Hootie and old Sam Hall and Hennery Goff. That's the trustees."

"Mr. Cooper said they would investigate my qualifications, but he felt sure I would do. They will probably ask me to pass an examination."

"They will? Lemme tell you somethin', ma'am? If them three old pelicans make you pass an examination, they better ask you to write out the answers of the questions they're goin' to ask you, or they'll never know whether you're right or wrong."

They drove in on the main street, and Windy drew up in front of Hootie Cooper's general merchandise store, with a squeal of brakes and a jingle of trace chains. Hootie was in the doorway, and he came slowly out to the stage.

"Hootie, this here is Miss Evans, the new teacher," said Windy grandly.

"Well, howdy!" exclaimed Hootie. "Gosh darn! C'mon right down, ma'am."

He turned around toward the doorway, cupped his hands around his mouth, and bellowed:

"Ma-a-a-a-a! C'mere, Ma-a-a-a!"

A portly figure, dressed in printed calico, darkened the doorway, carrying an armful of packages. Her face beamed like a full moon.

"Ma, this is Miss Evans," said Hootie excitedly.

"Well, bless your heart!" panted Mrs. Cooper.

She dropped the bundles and advanced to Marion, holding out her hands.

"My God!" exploded Hootie. "A dozen aigs busted. There's your omelette on the sidewalk, woman; omelette and sugar and oatmeal. Turn your team around, Windy. Here's their dinner."

But Mrs. Cooper paid no attention to her scattered groceries.

"Oh, I'm so glad to see you," she panted. "I told Hootie I hoped you'd be young and good lookin'. We've shore been fed up on men teachers and homely wimmin ones. You shore do look nice. Hootie—" she turned to her husband—"you'll have to set on the porch with a Winchester and keep the cowpunchers away."

"Looks thataway," grinned Hootie.

"Well, drive around to my house and take off that trunk, Windy," she ordered. "You didn't think the lady was goin' to pack it down there in her hand, did you?"

"Well, shore I'll take it down, Mrs. Cooper. My, my! You're a lot thinner than you was last Friday."

"I am! Last Friday I weighed two hundred and forty; today I barely tipped the beam at two hundred and forty-four, you liar!"

Windy skipped up over the wheel and landed in the seat, where he kicked off the brake and headed for the Cooper home. Marion laughed with Mrs. Cooper.

"Well, that's that," sighed the fat lady. "Hootie, put me up another order, will you. No, never mind. Bring it down when you come to supper. I've got to talk with Miss Evans, and I need both arms. What did you say your first name was? No, that's right, you didn't. Marion? Say, that's pretty. Mine's Gladys. But call me Ma Cooper. I shucked Gladys when I got over a hundred and seventy-five. Kinda outgrew it. I suppose Windy told you all about everybody, didn't he? Oh, he would. When he tells you anythin', strain it

through a sieve. He can git himself all excited over one of his own lies. But he's all right, Windy is. His heart is in the right place. You're from Chicago, ain't you? That's what Hootie told me. I've heard a lot about Chicago from Windy. He met a girl named Smith."

"He told me about her," laughed Marion, as they walked down the street.

"He would. Say, you ain't aimin' to marry no cowpuncher, are you, Marion?"

"Good gracious, no! What ever put that notion in your head, Ma Cooper?"

"Are you plumb ag'in' the notion of marryin'?"

"Well, I'm certainly not thinking about such a thing."

"That's all I wanted to know. As soon as some of these punchers around here see you, there's goin' to be a lot of punchers accidentally droppin' in at my place, and I want a talkin' point."

"Don't they think of anything but marriage?"

"They won't—not when they see you. I hope you'll like Pineville. It's a rough, tough place, my dear; but we don't have to lock our doors. This is my house. Them's what is left of my twelve rose bushes. Soil ain't so good. Hootie calls 'em the twelve apostles. A cow ate Matthew, Mark, Luke and John the first night they was set out. C'mon in and be at home."

"I just love it," sighed Marion. "Every one is so kind and so pleasant I could just cry."

"Go ahead. Tears don't hurt nobody. Half a glass of water will put all the moisture back in your system."

Windy met them at the door.

"I carried the trunk upstairs, Mrs. Cooper," he said.

"That's fine, Windy."

"Thank you, Mr. March," said Marion.

"You're shore welcome, ma'am."

He hurried through the gate and out to his team. Mrs. Cooper shook her head.

"He's plumb ruined," she said sadly. "Roped and hawgtied. That's the first trunk he ever carried farther than the front porch in his whole life."

"I TELL you this TD outfit is goin' to the dawgs," declared Luke Jones, as he served a belated dinner to Eddie Grimes and Bud Hough.

"What's eatin' you, Luke?" queried Eddie, eying a fork suspiciously. "Hey! Why don'tcha wash the soap off these implements once in a while? I got a whole chunk of soap in my mouth."

"Little soap won't hurt you. You'd think it was strychnine! Nobody told you to swaller it, did they?"

"Well, you ought to clean things better than that, Luke."

"Why is this outfit goin' to the dogs?" asked Bud.

" 'Cause why?" Luke struck a belligerent attitude, punctuating his statement with swordlike jabs of a long-tined fork. " 'Cause Cleve Tolman appointed Shorty Gallup foreman this mornin'—that's why."

"Aw, he didn't do that!" exclaimed Eddie.

"The hell he didn't! I tell you he did. You two was gone, when Cleve called the gang together and made the announcement. Shorty swelled up like a pizened pup."

Eddie smiled faintly and shook his head, as he helped himself to some baked beans.

"Aw, I suppose Shorty will make a good foreman," he said.

"If you say yes to him all the time," admitted Bud.

"Well, here's one who won't say it to him," declared Luke. "Me and him never did hitch, and if he tries to give me any orders, this here TD will be short a cook and a foreman, 'cause he'll be runnin' to beat hell, with me after him."

Eddie laughed at Luke's serious statement.

"Don't rub him wrong, Luke. We like you and your cookin' so well we don't want to lose you. Anyway, Cleve won't let him interfere with the kitchen."

"By golly, he better not. I'm strong for peace, but when I've got any fightin' to do, I do it right now. Shorty don't like me."

"You speak to Cleve," advised Bud. "Jist tell him to have Shorty lay off your end of the job."

"Lotsa good that would do me. If Cleve ain't got no more brains than to make Shorty foreman, talkin' wouldn't do me any good. I liked Buck Dennig. By grab, he knowed how to run this ranch."

"He shore did," said Eddie thoughtfully. "We lost a good man when we lost Buck. I wonder if Tex Blanco had anythin' to do with it. I hate to believe he did."

"I'd hate to say one way or the other," replied Luke. "Mebby it's best to let her lie the way she is. Ain't nothin' goin' to bring Buck back, and the money—well, it was Buck's own money, and he don't need it now."

Eddie looked closely at Luke, his blue eyes quizzical.

"Just what do you know about it, Luke?" he asked.

"I don't know anythin'."

Luke turned back to the stove and began cleaning up the dishes, while Eddie rolled a cigaret.

"Where's the new foreman?" asked Bud.

Luke shook his head violently.

"I dunno, Bud. Prob'ly gone to Pineville to get a hat that'll fit him. I was just thinkin' that it won't be so nice for you, Eddie."

"It's all right with me," smiled Eddie. "I'm just a common puncher, and I ain't wedded to no job."

"Well, don't let him run you off."

Eddie laughed and got up from the table.

"Forty a month ain't worth fightin' over, Luke; but I think Cleve will have somethin' to say about it."

"You're leanin' on a weak reed," said Luke.

SHORTY GALLUP celebrated his new job by going to town with Cleve Tolman. Cleve had business with a lawyer, so Shorty centered his attentions on the Stormy River Saloon, where he found Frank Judd, from Blanco's ranch, talking with Oscar Johnson and Windy March. Frank Judd was Tex Blanco's right hand man. He was about Shorty's height, but weighed a few pounds less.

"Hyah, Shorty," greeted Windy. "Have a shot?"

"Mebby," said Shorty, looking sharply at Frank.

"How's the TD these days?" asked Oscar expansively.

He had imbibed considerable liquor and was looking upon a rose colored world.

"Pretty good," grinned Shorty. "I'm foreman now."

"You are?" exploded Windy. "Whatcha know about that? Are they goin' to quit raisin' cattle?"

Shorty didn't appreciate the humor of Windy's question, but passed it off with a forced grin.

"I suppose," drawled Oscar, "we'll see some big changes in things around the TD."

"You might," grunted Shorty. "F'r instance, there might be less rustlin' goin' on."

"Oh, is that so?" queried Windy. "Kinda reformin', eh?"

"You go to hell!" snapped Shorty. "You know what I meant."

He looked straight at Frank Judd as he finished his sentence.

"Was you speakin' to me?" asked Frank coldly.

"If the shoe fits you, wear it, Judd."

"It don't fit me, Gallup; nor it don't fit any of the B Arrow outfit."

"Is that so?"

"Yeah, that's so!"

Frank swayed away from the bar, facing Shorty, and Oscar stepped quickly between them.

"Go easy," he warned them. "Keep your hand away from your gun, Shorty. No use killin' each other. You ort to be ashamed of yourselves."

"I'll knock his head off!" growled Shorty. "I don't need any gun."

"Then give it to me."

Reluctantly Shorty drew out his gun

and gave it to the deputy, who turned and accepted Frank's gun. He shoved both guns inside the waistband of his overalls.

Then he stepped from between them, and without any warning, Shorty rushed at Frank, slamming him against the bar, smashing at him with his free hand.

It was so unexpected that Frank had no chance to defend himself for several moments, but Shorty's blows were too wild to do more than bounce off Frank's head. Then they clinched and staggered to the middle of the room.

Shorty was mouthing curses, wearing himself out, trying to hammer Frank down, with a volley of blows to the elbows and shoulders, while the cooler Frank took plenty of time to adjust himself for the work at hand.

Suddenly he lashed out with a straight right that caused Shorty to part with two front teeth. It almost floored the new foreman of the TD. But Shorty was game. He came back with a rush, both arms working like pistons, and Frank broke ground, letting Shorty do all the fighting. But as soon as Shorty's flurry was over, and before he realized that he had done little damage, Frank's left hook caught him flush on the right ear, knocking him to his knees.

Frank stepped back, playing the game on the square, and Shorty should have stayed down long enough to allow the shower of stars to disappear; but he sprang back to his feet, still dazed, and rushed in again. But this time Frank did not retreat. In fact, he came ahead, smashing with both hands, sharpshooting at Shorty's jaw. It was all over in a moment.

Shorty was sprawled half under a card table, flat on his back, while Frank leaned against the bar, breathing heavily, unmarked, except for a skinned elbow.

"Lasted jist one round," said Windy disgustedly. "I thought it was goin' to be a fight."

"Lasted long enough to suit me," panted Frank.

"Aw, you can whip him any day in the week," assured Windy.

"That's danged little satisfaction, Windy. I didn't want to fight him."

"Well, you whipped him, didn't you?"

"I suppose that's what you'd call it."

"It shore looked thataway to me," grinned Oscar. "Mebby we better sluice him with some cold water."

CLEVE TOLMAN didn't find the lawyer at his office, so he went on down to Cooper's store. Marion was there with Mrs. Cooper, and Hootie hurried to introduce them.

"I heard you was here," said Tolman. "One of the boys said that the new teacher had arrived."

"Yes, I arrived yesterday," smiled Marion.

Tolman frowned slightly as he looked at her. It was on the tip of his tongue to ask her if he hadn't met her before. There was a great resemblance to some one he had known.

"You're a stranger in this part of the country?" he asked.

"Yes. I came from Chicago to Cheyenne, where I learned about this position. It was my first time west of Chicago."

"I hope you'll like it here, Miss Evans. It's a little rough, of course, but you'll get used to it."

"Well, we're goin' to make her like it," laughed Mrs. Cooper.

Tolman nodded quickly and glanced toward the doorway, as Tex Blanco came in. He was wearing a pair of wide batwing chaps, flashing with silver conchos and a vermilion colored silk shirt and a blue handkerchief. He flashed a smile at Marion as he removed his gray sombrero and walked past them to the rear of the store.

Marion's eyes followed him, and Tolman scowled darkly. Mrs. Cooper smiled softly, and Marion flushed slightly, as she turned back and saw them looking at her.

Mrs. Cooper had told Marion all about the murder of Buck Dennig and the suspicions against Tex Blanco.

For several moments none of them

spoke. They could hear Tex giving an order to Hootie at the rear of the store.

"You better put in about four boxes of forty-fives," they heard Tex saying. "I got them new guns yesterday, Hootie—pearl handles and all. I dunno whether I'm goin' to like 'em, but they're shore pretty."

"Pretty!" snorted Tolman, beneath his breath.

"He shore loves pretty clothes and things," whispered Mrs. Cooper. "Sends to Cheyenne and has his shirts made to order."

"Hummin' bird!" said Tolman.

"Scarlet tanager," said Marion, smiling.

A COWBOY came across the wooden sidewalk, rasping his spurs, and struck the side of the doorway with his shoulder, as he came in. It was Shorty Gallup, his wet hair still dripping water that mixed with trickles of blood from each side of his mouth.

He stopped at the doorway and looked at Cleve Tolman.

"Lemme have your gun, will you, Cleve?" he asked thickly, trying to talk without opening his mouth very far. His own holster hung empty on his right thigh.

"Let you have my gun?" queried Tolman. "What's wrong, Shorty?"

Shorty's eyes blazed as he saw Tex Blanco, who came from the rear of the store and was looking at him.

"Johnson took m' gun away from me," said Shorty, and his voice shook with anger.

"Took your gun away from you?"

"Yeah, the dirty pup! And then Frank Judd smashed me in the mouth. Gimme a gun, Cleve. I want to go back."

"Take it easy," said Tolman. "Why did Frank Judd hit you?"

Shorty wiped his lips with the back of his hand. He was both mad and hurt, and when he glanced at Tex, who was leaning lazily against the counter, a half smile on his face, Shorty almost exploded.

"Gimme a gun, Cleve," he begged. "Gimme a chance to clean up that damn B Arrow outfit."

Marion glanced at Tex and their glances met. He was still smiling. Tolman stepped over to Shorty and led him outside, where they stood together, while Shorty showed him where Frank had removed two of his teeth. Mrs. Cooper sighed deeply and shook her head.

"It looks t' me as though Shorty had found somebody he couldn't whip," observed Hootie.

"It may do him a lot of good," said Tex seriously. "They are about the same size, and I'm shore Frank didn't hit him first. It's too bad this happened in front of Miss Evans. It gives her a bad impression of things."

"I'm sure it doesn't bother me in the least, Mr. Blanco."

"Well, that's fine. You'll get along out here."

"Thank you."

"Here comes Frank and Oscar," said Hootie.

The two men came across from the saloon and stepped up on the sidewalk near Tolman and Shorty. Oscar handed Tolman Shorty's gun.

"You better keep this until your foreman cools off, Cleve."

"Kinda takin' things in your own hands, ain't you?" asked Tolman coldly.

"Would you rather have him dead than alive, Cleve?"

"Hell, I can take care of myself!" rasped Shorty.

"The evidence is all ag'in' you, cowboy," grinned Oscar.

Frank Judd said nothing. His holster was still empty.

"Who started this trouble?" asked Tolman.

"Shorty did," said Oscar quickly. "He started the conversational fight, and then he started the fist fight. And he shore got what he asked for. He jist the same as accused Frank of bein' a rustler."

Tolman laughed shortly, turned and handed Shorty his gun. Almost at the same instant, Oscar jerked out the other gun and handed it to Frank, who dropped

it in his holster, without looking at Shorty.

Tex stepped quickly to the doorway. His smile was gone now. He shot a glance at Frank, but centered his attention on Tolman and Shorty. The foreman held the gun in his right hand, gripping it tightly, but he was looking at Tex now.

Slowly he lifted the gun and socked it down in his holster. He was mad enough to bite a rattler, but he did not care to start trouble with Tex Blanco.

"Well, that's over," sighed Oscar.

"You jist think it is," growled Shorty.

"I guess you better go with me," said Tolman. "At least you'll get an even break, Shorty."

They turned and went up the street together. Blanco smiled at Judd, who acted rather sheepish about the whole matter.

"He got an even break, didn't he, Frank?" asked Tex.

"Little better than an even break," said Frank.

"And a whole lot better!" snorted Oscar. "Shorty hit a dozen times before Frank hit once."

"I don't think that Mr. Tolman should 'a' taken Shorty's part in somethin' that was his own fault," declared Mrs. Cooper."

"Well, he's one of Tolman's men," said Tex slowly. "You got to stick with your own men, Mrs. Cooper."

"I thought it was goin' to mean some shootin'," said Hootie. "Shorty was goshawful mad, I'll tell you. He was mad at you, too, Tex."

"Naturally," smiled Tex. He lifted his hat to Marion and Mrs. Cooper. "I'm shore sorry this happened in front of you ladies, and I'm glad it didn't go any further. Pleased to have met you again, Miss Evans. C'mon, Frank."

They went down the sidewalk together to the next hitching post, where they mounted and rode away.

Tex is allus like that," said Oscar. "Nothin' ever ruffles his feathers. I reckon it's 'cause he ain't scared of nobody. A feller's got to have nerve to wear colors like Tex does."

"They are very becoming," said Marion. "He looks well in red and all that silver."

"But he ain't tryin' to be no dude," declared Oscar. "His father was a Spaniard and his mother is Irish. Didn't you ever hear her talk, Hootie? She's Irish, you betcha. And Tex can sling Spanish like a greaser."

"Do you suppose there will be trouble between him and Mr. Tolman?" asked Marion.

"Is trouble," corrected Hootie. "The TD swear that—well, no, they don't swear it, but they shore hint that Blanco and his men are stealin' TD cattle. That's what started the trouble today, wasn't it, Oscar?"

"Shore, same old complaint."

"Why don't they settle it in the courts?"

Oscar looked at her thoughtfully.

"You're new to this here country, ma'am. Rustlin' is somethin' that ain't exactly on the law books of this country. Most cases are handled by the coroner."

"Do you suppose Mr. Blanco knows how every one feels toward him?" asked Marion. "It must be terrible to know that every one thinks him a murderer."

"It don't seem to bother him," said Oscar. "Tex is pretty salty, ma'am. He had a reputation as a killer, down in the Panhandle country. Got three men down in that country, they say. Folks kinda sidestep Tex up here. He downed a gunman over in Garnet two years ago, and they tell me it was the fastest piece of gunplay you ever seen. But he never picks a fight. Takes a drink once in awhile, but never more than a couple. Shorty Gallup was achin' to take a pop at Tex awhile ago, but he was afraid. Even with the gun in his hand, he was scared."

"It looked to me as though Tolman was sort of givin' Shorty a chance to start somethin'," said Hootie slowly. "He shore took a chance, handin' Shorty the gun thataway. And then you hands the

other gun to Judd, Oscar. You'd 'a' felt kinda mean, if they'd started throwin' lead into each other."

"Yea-a-ah, and I'd have been plumb mystified, too," said Oscar slowly. "You see, I took the shells out of them guns over in the saloon. I wasn't takin' no chances."

THE PINEVILLE school opened on the following Monday. The trustees had hired a swamper from the Stormy River Saloon to clean up the place, but it was far from Marion's idea of what a schoolhouse should be. It was a one story frame building, thirty feet long by twenty-five feet wide, of rough lumber walls, and with a blackboard across one end wall.

Each home-made seat was large enough to accommodate two pupils, with a two-by-six separating them. The teacher occupied an old weatherbeaten desk on a slightly raised platform, which gave her a teacher's-eye view of the whole room. The walls were undecorated, except for an old clock that refused to run longer than an hour at a time.

The board of trustees did not require Marion to pass an examination. They were only too glad to hire her. Sam Hall, the blacksmith, who talked through his nose, wanted to have an examination, but the other two vetoed such a thing.

"Well, it's all right," said Sam. "I jist wanted to ask her a problem in arithmetic to see how fast she is."

"What is it?" asked Hootie.

"There's a room with eight corners in it, Hootie. In each corner sets a cat, and each cat is lookin' at seven cats. How many cats in the room?"

Hootie took a pencil and figured laboriously.

"Four hundred and forty-eight cats, Sam."

"You're crazy."

"I'm not. There's eight cats, ain't there? One cat sees seven cats, and seven times eight is—no-o-o, that ain't right. Each cat sees—"

"I've got it;" exclaimed Henry Goff. "Each cat sees seven cats. That makes eight cats, don't it. And there's eight cats, all seein' the same. Eight times eight is ninety-six."

"Seventy-two," corrected Hootie.

"That's right."

"I dunno," said Sam dubiously. "I've heard so danged many answers that I'm kinda confused."

"Seventy-two is the answer," insisted Goff.

"Ye-e-es and no," said Sam diplomatically. "You're part wrong and part right, Hennery. I'll tell you what let's do. We'll go up to the schoolhouse and have her work it on the board. I'd like to git it straight myself."

"All right," agreed Goff. "I'd like to prove my figures. It's twenty minutes yet before the school bell rings."

And while the board of trustees, bringing their weighty question, were preparing to advance, Marion was meeting the young ideas of Pineville and the Stormy River range.

They came on horseback, on foot, in wagons, until at least forty of them had invaded the little schoolhouse. And they were of all ages, from big lumbering, sixteen year old boys to six year olds, attending for the first time. Lunch pails were stacked along the window ledges. The big boys eyed the teacher speculatively, wondering just how strict she might be, and talked loudly, as if trying to attract her attention to them.

But Marion paid no attention to them. It was all as new to her as it was to many of them. Suddenly the room was hushed, and then she heard one of the big boys say—

"What do you suppose Tex Blanco wants here?"

Marion walked to the front of the room and stepped outside. Tex Blanco had ridden up close to the porch carrying a little boy in front of him on the big saddle. Tex slowly removed his hat, a smile on his lips.

"'Mornin', ma'am," he said slowly and, leaning over, he gently deposited the wide eyed youngster on the porch beside Marion.

The little, freckled boy looked up at her, his blue eyes very serious.

"You remember Windy March sayin' that I was probably sorry I didn't have a kid to send to your school?" asked Tex slowly, his eyes on Marion.

"I remember it," she said.

"Well, I brought one, ma'am. Now, I ain't sorry."

"This is—is not your boy, Mr. Blanco?"

"No, ma'am. His name's Jimmy Hastings. He belongs toone of my men. His ma died a couple of years ago, you see. Jimmy ain't never been to school before."

"But why didn't his father bring him?" asked Marion severely. "It is the duty of a parent, you know."

"Tha'so."

"I—I want to know the parents, you see," she said rather lamely.

"Well, I'm sorry he ain't mine, ma'am."

"His father was busy, I suppose."

"Nope, unlucky."

"What do you mean, Mr. Blanco?"

"You see, ma'am—" Tex leaned forward, resting an elbow on his saddle horn—"me and Hastings gambled on it. I put up fifty dollars against the kid, you might say. If I won, I took the kid to school, and if Hastings won, he took the fifty and the kid."

Marion flushed quickly. She realized that Tex Blanco had risked fifty dollars for a chance to bring little Jimmy to school, to meet her.

"Why did you do that?" she asked.

"Well, I didn't want to be sorry, you know. And I think a lot of Jimmy, don't I, Jimmy?"

"Yes, Uncle Tex, " said Jimmy gravely.

"Shake hands with Miss Evans, Jimmy."

The little boy solemnly shook hands with her.

"Pleased to meetcha," he said.

"And I'm pleased to meet you, Jimmy."

" 'At's good. Uncle Tex says I've gotta learn a lot so I won't have to be no cowpuncher all my life."

"Oh, I'm sure you will learn very fast, Jimmy."

" 'At's good."

"Well, here comes the board of trustees," laughed Tex. "I'll leave Jimmy to you, Miss Evans—and gladly."

TEX swung his horse around, waved a gloved hand at Jimmy and rode away from town. Marion stood there with Jimmy, waiting for the three trustees, and again the children began their noise inside the schoolhouse. Marion realized that they were quiet while Tex Blanco had been there.

The three men came up to the porch, and she knew that they had been discussing the reasons for Tex Blanco's being there.

"Good mornin'," greeted Hootie. "How's everythin' comin'?"

"Oh, just fine. This little boy is from Mr. Blanco's ranch. His name is Jimmy Hastings."

"Oh, that's why Tex was here, eh? We wondered."

"You hadn't ought to have much to do with him, ma'am," advised Henry Goff, the postmaster.

"Them things," pronounced Hootie coldly, "is personal matters, Hennery. We hired this lady to teach school, you must remember."

"I know, but—"

"Drop it, Henry," advised Sam Hall. "Any old time you start preachin' morals, I'll tell about the time you slick-eared a branded calf."

"Never did! By golly, I—I—"

"Yore loop's draggin'," cautioned Hootie. "We never came up here to recite our pasts to Miss Evans, but to have her prove a problem. Here it is, Miss Evans: There's a room with eight corners, and in each corner sets a cat. Each cat looks at seven cats. How many cats in the room?"

Marion laughed outright.

"Why, eight, of course."

"Eight?" wondered Henry. "But there's eight to start with ."

"Of course, and each one looks at the other seven."

"Seventy-two!" exploded Sam Hall. "Seventy-two!"

"You didn't know, you animated jew's-harp!" snapped Henry.

"I admit it," laughed Sam, "but I knowed it wasn't seventy-two."

"Well, we better go back and let the lady start her school," said Hootie. "It's a cinch she knows more than we do."

"About cats," amended Sam Hall.

"Come any time," said Marion laughing.

"Any time Sam Hall gets a problem," laughed Hootie.

Marion spent the entire day in trying to get the grades separated and some semblance of order in the place. There was no chance for study, and her mind was in a whirl when the day was over, and the children went whooping out doors; all except little Jimmy, who stayed in his seat.

"Aren't you going out, too, Jimmy?" she asked.

"Gotta wait for Uncle Tex."

"Oh, is he coming after you, Jimmy?"

"He won me for a month."

"Won you for a month?"

"That's what he said," said Jimmy solemnly, "and he squeezed me so hard he almost busted a rib. Did anybody ever squeeze you that hard?"

"I'm afraid not, Jimmy," she answered, laughing.

"Uncle Tex is awful strong; I like to ride with him."

"You seem to like your Uncle Tex, Jimmy."

" 'At's right. He told me he was takin' me to learn somethin' from a beautiful lady. I guess he meant you."

"But I'm not beautiful, Jimmy."

"Well—"

Jimmy frowned thoughtfully. He was trying to remember something he had heard one of the cowboys say about a girl.

"Well, you ain't hard to look at."

"Where in the world did you ever hear such a thing? Did your Uncle Tex say that?"

"No'm, I guess it was Kit Carson. He's pretty tough."

"And who is Kit Carson, Jimmy?"

"Oh, he's one of Uncle Tex's saddle slickers."

A noise at the front of the building caused Marion to look up, and she saw Tex Blanco stepping up to the door. He was wearing that flame colored shirt again, and the sun sparkled on his silver trimmed chaps. He stopped in the doorway and smiled widely as he doffed his wide hat.

"I came to get my winnings," he said to Marion, as he came inside. "Was he a good boy, ma'am?"

"Just lovely," smiled Marion.

Jimmy slid out of his seat and stood beside Tex. His tousled head just reached Tex's holster, from which peeped the butt of a pearl handled revolver that flashed like fire-opal in the beam of sunlight through the window.

"I understand you have won him for a month," said Marion seriously.

Tex looked steadily at her for several moments, before he looked down at Jimmy.

"Yea-a-h," he said slowly. "Jimmy told you, ma'am?"

"Well, you did," declared Jimmy. "You told me, Uncle Tex."

"That's right, old pardner, I did tell yuh."

Tex looked up at Marion.

"You don't mind, do you, ma'am?"

"If you bring Jimmy to school?"

"Yeah."

"That is your business, Mr. Blanco."

"I'm awful glad to meet somebody who concedes me some rights, ma'am. You'll hear lots of things about me. After you hear all of it, mebby you won't concede me the right to bring Jimmy to school."

"I have already heard many things," she said slowly. "Still I don't understand why you should gamble for the chance to bring the little boy to school."

"Don'tcha, ma'am? Well—" Tex took a deep breath and patted Jimmy fondly on the head—"you prob'ly learned a lot from books. A lady must be pretty smart to teach a school, but there's some things that you don't know yet. C'mon, Jimmy."

They turned and walked straight through the doorway, and Marion saw Tex toss Jimmy to the saddle, before climbing on. She bowed her head on her arms and tried to laugh, but the laugh did not come. It was ridiculous for Tex Blanco, the killer, to come to the school twice a day, merely to see her. She knew what the people would say. She didn't want to see him. He was nothing to her, never would be.

She arranged her desk and put on her hat, but she sat there quite a while, her eyes fixed on the spot beside little Jimmy's desk, where the sunlight glinted through a window, like a spotlight trained on the floor. She could still visualize Tex Blanco's white toothed smile above the flame color of his shirt, and the sunlight flashing back from the pearl handle of his big revolver.

Finally she got to her feet and walked out, locking the door behind her. It was nearly a quarter of a mile walk to Hootie Cooper's house, but she did not hurry. Cleve Tolman and two of his men rode past her on the gallop, almost blinding her in a cloud of dust.

"They might at least have slowed down," she told herself angrily. "I'll bet Tex Blanco wouldn't have done it."

And then she grew angry with herself for thinking of Tex Blanco.

MARION was still flushed when she reached home, where she found Mrs. Cooper on the wide porch, fanning herself with a huge straw hat.

"I been wonderin' how you was gettin' along, Marion," said Mrs. Cooper. "Sit down and tell me all about it."

Marion was only too glad to sink down in one of their easy chairs and remove her hat.

"Well, I suppose everything went as it usually does on the opening day of school, Ma Cooper. It is quite a task to get them all placed."

"I'll betcha, I'd use a barrel stave m'self."

Mrs. Cooper fanned herself industriously for a moment.

"Hootie was tellin' me that Tex Blanco brought the little Hastings boy to school."

"And came after him a while ago," said Marion.

"Yea-a-ah?" Mrs. Cooper turned her head and looked at Marion closely. "Came and got him, eh? Is Andy Hastings crippled or somethin'?"

"Tex Blanco gambled with little Jimmy's father, and Tex Blanco won the right to bring Jimmy to school for one whole month."

"For one whole month?"

Mrs. Cooper's face slowly dissolved into a smile, the smile into a chuckling laugh.

"Mamma mine!" she chuckled. "Oh, can you beat that? For one whole month. That's shore a new one. Gambled for a chance to see you twice a day."

"But I don't want to see him," declared Marion.

Mrs. Cooper looked closely at Marion.

"Of course you don't, dearie. I'll speak to Hootie about it tonight. He'll see that Tex don't bother you. Hootie likes Tex and all that, but he'll jist explain it to Tex in a nice way, and I'll bet he quits annoyin' you."

"But he—he wasn't annoying me. It is just the fact that he—that he comes to the school, you see."

"I see. Well, we can stop that. Just you quit worryin' about Tex Blanco. I don't think he ever had a girl before."

"But I'm not his girl, don't you see?"

"That's right. You've probably got a feller in the East."

"No, I haven't."

"Well," smiled Mrs. Cooper, "we'll have Hootie tell Tex that you have."

"But that would be lying."

"Huh? Oh, yeah, lyin'."

Mrs. Cooper smiled broadly and shook her head.

"You're funny. I try to get you out of bein' embarrassed, and you won't let me. Just between me and you, we've got to stop Tex from comin' to see you, even at the school. Folks might talk, don'tcha see? You don't realize that Tex is sort of an outcast around here—

a man with a bad reputation. You can't afford to have your name linked with his, can you?"

"Certainly not."

"I should say you couldn't," sighed Mrs. Cooper. "But ain't he good lookin', Marion? He's the kind of a man I used to dream about—and look what I got. Dreams shore go by contraries. Hootie's got a heart as big as an ox, and I reckon the rest of his internal organs are in the right place, but as a specimen he shore don't stack up beside Tex Blanco. I love Hootie, but my love ain't blind."

Marion laughed softly.

"Looks are not everything."

"Well, they're quite a lot, Marion. Your looks made Tex Blanco gamble for the chance to see you."

"From what I hear, that is not much to brag about."

"Well, I'm glad you're level headed. Some girls might fall for his looks. You'll meet the right man some day. Can't teach school all your life. Probably get one with bow-legs—and a mole on his nose. Cleve Tolman asked me quite a lot about you. He's interested. Asked me about your family, but I didn't know anythin' to tell him. Tex didn't ask. He's the kind that would take you, even if you never had any folks."

Marion flushed and grew interested in a broken stitch on her glove.

"There isn't much to tell about my family," she said slowly. "Father died a few months after I was born, and I guess mother had a hard time making a living for my brother and me. He was older than me. We got along, somehow, back there in Chicago. We all worked, and I went to night school, after my brother left home and my mother died."

"Well, you had a hard time, didn't you? Mother and father both dead, eh?"

"Yes—both gone."

"Where's your brother?"

"Who knows? He left home when I was fourteen."

"And never told you where he went?"

"No. You see, he—he had to leave. Oh, we're not so good," she said bitterly. "He was suspected of a robbery. The police came for him, but he got away. It killed mother. She just sort of faded away after that, and a year later she died. I was fifteen then and getting five dollars a week in a department store. But I managed to live, and I went to night school until I got my diploma. I kept on working, saving what little I could. I knew I could never qualify as a teacher in a big city, so I came to Cheyenne. I don't know why I ever selected Cheyenne. There I learned about Pineville and their need of a teacher for this term of school. Oh, it was a godsend to me. I just had one silver dollar when I arrived."

Marion was on the verge of tears when she finished her story.

"I didn't intend to tell any one my story," she said, "but I just had to tell you, Ma Cooper."

"Well, I'm glad you did, honey. It seems as though I've known you all your life. Your face was familiar the first time I ever seen you. Now, you go in and clean up, while I start mixin' a flock of biscuits. Hootie likes 'em and, if I do say it myself, I mingle a good one. Mebby we better let things go as they lie for awhile—about Tex Blanco."

"Perhaps it would be best, Ma Cooper. I don't want to hurt his feelings."

"Shore, you don't. Some folks say he hasn't any, but they're crazy."

"Little Jimmy Hastings certainly loves him."

"And I've seen dogs follerin' him. You run along, Honey."

Marion kissed Mrs. Cooper and went into the house. The fat lady dropped the straw hat in a chair, took a deep breath and grinned widely at nothing at all. Then she went in and began mixing biscuits.

IT WAS several days later that five men sat in the sheriff's office, with the front door closed. There were Pat Lynch, the sheriff, Mort Heffner, prosecuting attorney, Cleve Tolman, Shorty Gallup and a detective named Sears, from the cattle association.

Sears was a slender man, about forty years of age and rather grim. He had arrived that day from Cheyenne, and wanted a few details. Tolman and Gallup happened to be in from the TD ranch; so the sheriff asked them to talk with Sears.

"How did you happen to get a detective?" asked Tolman, after Sears had been introduced.

"I sent for him," replied Heffner. "We talked it over, the sheriff and myself. As far as I could see, we were not getting anywhere in the solving of Buck Dennig's murder; so we decided to appeal to the association. Of course, the county will pay part of the expenses. We thought a range detective would be better than one from a private bureau."

"And I'm going to need help," smiled Sears. "Coming in on a case so late in the day, when all evidence is stale, I am going to need a lot of information. The sheriff has outlined things to me, of course, but only the bare facts. Mr. Dennig was your partner, was he not?"

"Yeah, he was my pardner," said Tolman.

"You understood his financial condition, I take it."

"What do you mean?"

"As I understand it, Mr. Dennig drew ten thousand dollars from the bank on the afternoon of his murder."

"He did," said Tolman shortly.

"Have you any idea why he drew all this money?"

"No idea at all. Didn't know he drew it, until after the murder."

"I believe he had the sum of one hundred and sixty dollars on his body. Doesn't it seem that some one knew he had this money, and robbed him?"

"You'd naturally think so."

"Was he in the habit of carrying a big sum on his person?"

"I don't think he was."

"Was this partnership money, or his own?"

"His own. We didn't have any partnership account."

"I see. You don't know that he owed any such a sum?"

Tolman smiled shortly.

"Not that I knew anythin' about."

"Do you know how much money he had left in the bank, after drawing this sum?"

"About five thousand, I understand."

"Mr. Tolman, do you think Dennig was killed for his money, or for revenge?"

"How would I know?"

"I understand that Mr. Dennig had no relatives, no one to leave his share of the ranch. Is that true?"

"That's true."

"And you naturally receive his share."

"Well?"

"Have you done anything personally to try and find out who killed him, Mr. Tolman?"

"That's the law's business, Mr. Sears—not mine."

"And yet you profit greatly, do you not?"

Tolman got to his feet quickly, facing the detective.

"That's about all of that," he said harshly. "It's no fault of mine that Buck Dennig had no relatives. Was it my fault that he had no will? You talk as though I had somethin' to do with his murder. You can go to hell with the rest of your questions. C'mon, Shorty."

Tolman kicked the door open and strode out, followed by Shorty, who was grinning foolishly. Sears watched them cross the street to the Stormy River Saloon.

"You got under his hide," grinned the sheriff. "Now you'll get no more information from Cleve Tolman."

"Didn't get anything worth while, anyway, Sheriff."

"You don't think he had anything to do with it, do you?" asked Heffner.

"Well, he got mad, didn't he? You were in that poker game when Dennig and Blanco quarreled, weren't you, Heffner?"

"Yes, I was there."

"Dennig accused Blanco of stealing, didn't he?"

"He did. They were both mad, and I

really believe there would have been a killing right there, if we hadn't interfered."

"And it was only an hour or so after that, I understand, that Dennig started home. He didn't exhibit a lot of money in the saloon that night, did he?"

"Not over a couple hundred dollars. He came to town early in the afternoon. Buck wasn't a heavy drinker, but this time he had quite a few. No, he wasn't drunk, but he just had enough to make him rather savage. He certainly called Tex Blanco a lot of fighting names that night."

"Did Blanco have much to say back to him?"

"Not so much. Tex isn't foul mouthed, you know; but he was mad. I don't blame him. The things Buck Dennig called him would make a jackrabbit bite a grizzly bear."

"Blanco has rather a sinister reputation, I understand."

"I suppose he has."

"And there has been hard feelings between the TD and the Blanco outfits for quite awhile, I understand."

"The TD claim they lost cattle," said the sheriff. "They never came right out and accused Blanco, of course, and they never asked my help in the matter."

Sears nodded thoughtfully.

"Don't seem to be much to work on in this case, but I'll do what I can."

SEARS met with little success in his investigations. Always the suspicion pointed at Tex Blanco, but there was no evidence. Sears did not go out to see Tex. He rode out to the TD ranch, but learned nothing. In fact, Tolman gave him to understand that a detective was not welcome on the TD.

He had been in Pineville three days when a letter was sent to him in care of the sheriff. It had been posted in Pineville and read:

> We will give you eight hours to leave this valley.
>
> —THE BUNCH.

"I guess that settles it," said Sears nervously.

"Looks thataway," agreed the sheriff grimly, studying the penciled note.

He sent Oscar after Heffner, who came immediately, and they discussed the note seriously.

"What would you do, Heffner?" asked Sears.

"I'd leave here," said Heffner. "I guess you've found that you can't do us any good, and there's no use of getting killed, Sears. The Bunch mean business, I guess. The stage leaves for Garnet at one o'clock, so you better slide out gracefully."

And Sears slid. He went to the Pineville Hotel to pack his bags, leaving the note with Heffner, who put it in his pocket.

"Let's go and find out something, Pat," he suggested.

They walked up to the bank and called Shearer aside.

"Have you a copy of Tex Blanco's signature, Shearer?" asked Heffner.

"Certainly."

"Let us look at it, please."

Shearer produced the card with Blanco's signature, and went to wait on a customer while Heffner compared it with the writing on the penciled note.

"Look at that B," whispered Heffner.

A comparison of the B in Bunch and the B in Blanco showed them to be nearly alike.

They gave the card back to Shearer and returned to the office.

"Goin' to show it to Sears?" asked the sheriff.

"No, I don't think I will. We've got to move slow in this, Pat. It would require a handwriting expert to prove that Tex Blanco made that B—and then you'd have a hard job proving it to a cow jury. No, we've got to have more than that, but it sure gives us plenty of reasons for keeping an eye on Tex Blanco."

"Well, he's in town twice a day," smiled the sheriff. "He brings Andy Hastings' little boy to school every morning and comes after him at four o'clock."

"What's the idea, Pat?"

"The new teacher."

"Miss Evans? You don't mean to say he's stuck on her?"

"Nothin' strange about that, is there? If I was twenty years younger I'd find some kid to take to school."

"But Tex Blanco—that's different," laughed Heffner. "Somebody ought to talk to the lady about it."

"Suppose you try it, Mort."

"Not me. I'm happily married, and somebody might think I was jealous."

That afternoon Sears left Pineville, riding on the seat with Windy March, having accomplished nothing. He believed implicity in warnings, and had no hankering for a bullet in his back. They met Tex Blanco between town and the B Arrow ranch, and Sears felt a contraction of the spine, until a curve in the road hid him from view.

"Do you think Tex Blanco killed Dennig?" he asked Windy.

"Well, I'll tell you," said Windy seriously, "The road is most always dusty this time of year. We need rain."

"That seems to be the general opinion," replied Sears, and added quickly, "that we need rain."

Windy spat over the wheel and cleared his throat.

"You through detectin'?''

"I'm leaving the valley."

"I didn't think you would stay long. I allus had an idea that a detective was kinda sneakin'."

"You mean, he didn't let anybody know who he was?"

"Yeah, wore whiskers and looked for nicks on the furniture."

Sears laughed.

"Well, I supposethat is one way. I was warned to get out inside of eight hours."

"Yea-a-ah? Well, well! Warned, eh? When didja get this here warnin'?"

"About eleven o'clock this morning."

"Well—" Windy squinted at the sun—"I'll say you gave yourself leeway."

IT DID not require many days for every one in Pineville to know that Tex Blanco was coming to the school twice a day, and the gossips had plenty of material. Marion heard none of the talk. She was too busy. But Ma Cooper heard it. Hootie heard it, too, and was worried. He talked it over with his wife.

"They're talkin' too much," declared Hootie. "It'll hurt Marion, hurt the school. Puts me in an awful hole, Ma. Sam and Henry both talked with me today about it."

"I'll speak to Marion, Hootie. She ain't to blame. Darn the whole bunch of old forked tongues around here, anyway!"

But Marion did not need to be told. That morning, after she had called the roll, she discovered that Joe and Mary Beebee were not present. She asked little Ella Hall, who lived next door to Beebee, if she knew why they were absent.

"Their ma took 'em out, Miss Evans," piped the little girl. "She told my ma this morning that she wasn't never going to let them come to this school any more."

"My gracious. And why not, Ella?"

"She said it was because Tex Blanco came here. She said to my ma—"

"That will do, Ella. Thank you so much."

Marion looked blankly down at the litter of papers on her desk, her mind in a whirl.

"My ma said—" began little Ella, but Marion stopped her.

"That will be all, Ella. We—will dispense with the singing this morning."

"What did she say about my Uncle Tex?" piped little Jimmy Hastings.

"Nothing, Jimmy. Go right ahead with your studies."

" 'At's good."

Jimmy glared at the back of Ella's head, but finally subsided behind a book, held tightly in his chubby hands.

That day was long to Marion. She did not go home to lunch. At recess and noon the children talked in whispers, with Ella Hall the center of their conversation.

Marion dismissed school fifteen minutes early. She wanted time to plan what to say to Tex Blanco. She did not know that he was there until she happened to

lift her eyes and see him standing in the doorway. Jimmy was drawing a picture on his slate, and the only sound was the creak and scratch of his slate pencil.

"Hello," said Tex softly.

Jimmy turned his head and looked at him.

"C'm'ere, Uncle Tex," he piped. "See what I drawed of Ella Hall."

Tex came slowly up to him, looking at the slate.

"You shore gave her plenty mouth, pardner," said Tex.

"She's mouthy," declared Jimmy.

Tex looked at Marion and laughed. But Marion was not laughing. Tex sobered quickly and walked toward her.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"You must not come here any more," she said wearily.

"Not come here, ma'am?"

"Not any more, Mr. Blanco."

"I don't understand what you mean."

"Old lady Beebee took her two kids out of school, 'cause you come here," said Jimmy. "I heard Ella Hall tell all the kids outdoors. She said you was stuck on Miss Evans; and that you wasn't fit for much, and that she wouldn't let her kids come to school. By golly, I shore told her somethin'. Ella said her pa was a trustee and she'd have me throwed out. Can she, Miss Evans?"

For several moments Tex and Marion looked at each other. The eyes of the big cowboy were clouded, his lips tightly shut. He turned from Marion and stared at the blackboard.

"Oh, I'm sorry," he said hoarsely. "I didn't know. I was a fool to do this. I might have known all the time. I'm just not fit. With the reputation I've got, I should never have looked at you; but I'm human.

"No matter what they say about me, I'm just human. The happiest week of my life has been in bringin' little pardner down here to school and seein' you twice a day. But I didn't know it would turn out like this. I used to sing, a long time ago. I've been singin' for a week now. Mother said she'd liketomeetyou,tomeet the girl who brought back her singin' cowboy.

"But that's all past now. I'm sorry I hurt you, ma'am. I won't come any more. You can tell 'em that for me. Jimmy's pa will bring him in the mornin'. Goodby."

He took little Jimmy by the hand and they walked out, without a backward glance, the tall cowboy in the flame colored shirt, his fine shoulders drooped just a little, and the little boy, his head tilted as he looked up at his big partner.

"I shore told Ella Hall where to head in at, Uncle Tex," she heard him say.

"Thank you, little pardner."

And then they rode away—the little boy who did not quite understand and the singing cowboy who had lost his song.

Marion leaned forward on her desk, chin in her hands, her eyes filled with tears.

"Oh, why don't people mind their own business?" she asked herself. "Why don't they? But they never have, not since time began, so what can you expect?"

She did not say anything to Ma Cooper about it that night, not even after she heard that the trustees were to have a meeting at Sam Hall's house.

It was a rare occasion when Hootie Cooper took a drink, but this night he came home partly saturated. From her room, Marion heard some of the conversation between Hootie and Ma Cooper.

"I ain't drunk, Ma," she heard him tell her. "But I came within about three swallers of it. I offered to lick old Sam and Hennery, with one hand tied behind me. Darn 'em! Old lady Beebee was there. Yea-a-ah, shore! I told 'em what I thought of the whole danged works, resigned as a trustee and drank straight whisky to celebrate m' return from bondage."

"But what did they decide to do, Hootie?"

"They've appointed Old Man Beebee to fill my place, and they're goin' to plant the seats of their pants on the schoolhouse steps in the mornin', and when Tex

shows up they're goin' to tell him what for."

"Ain't you goin' to undress before you go to bed, Hootie?"

"Oh, yeah. Ma, if they say anythin' to hurt Marion, I'll whip the whole works."

"You couldn't whip anythin'."

"I might s'prise you."

"You shore would. If I was you I'd unbutton that shirt before I tried to take it off."

"The dern thing has shrunk, Ma."

"No such a thing. You take them suspenders off your shoulders and it'll come off all right."

THE FOLLOWING morning the three trustees were there. They did not come in the schoolhouse, but sat on the edge of the porch—Old Man Beebee, possibly fifty, but looking seventy, with a thin crop of whiskers, bald head, sour face; Sam Hall, nasal voiced, red tipped nose; Henry Goff, querulous, argumentative—three old buzzards waiting for the kill.

And they waited, too, until five minutes of nine, while the blacksmith shop remained unopened and folks wondered why the post office was still closed.

Then came Andy Hastings and Jimmy. He put Jimmy on the schoolhouse steps and rode away, as the bell rang and the children trooped in.

"Reckon I better git to the shop," drawled Sam Hall.

"Same here," said Henry. "Folks'll wonder where I am."

"Somebody," said Beebee seriously, "must have told Tex Blanco."

"Probably was Hootie Cooper," growled Henry. "That man ain't got a bit of civic pride."

They went tramping back down along the dusty road, while Marion watched them from the window, a half smile on her face. Little Jimmy sat very straight in his seat, his eyes on the Beebee children and at Ella Hall, who stuck out her tongue at the teacher's back.

Crash! Marion whirled in time to see a pencil box rebound off the top of Ella's desk, scattering pencils in every direction. Jimmy was on his feet, his eyes snapping.

"Who threw that box?" asked Marion.

"Jimmy Hastings," said Joe Beebee. "I seen him, teacher."

"Yo're dern right I throwed it," piped Jimmy bravely. "And it didn't hit where I meant for it to either."

"He threw it right at me," declared Joe.

"Yo're a lyin' chuckwalla!" shrilled Jimmy. "I throwed it at Ella Hall. She stuck out her tongue at the teacher."

Marion struck the side of a seat with a ruler.

"Be quiet, all of you!"

She came slowly over to Jimmy and looked down at him.

"Why did you do that, Jimmy?"

He looked up at her, his blue eyes very brave and earnest.

"I don't let nobody run a blazer on you," he said.

Marion walked away and sat down at her desk. There was no punishment meted out that time. Joe Beebee stayed around the schoolhouse that night until Andy Hastings took Jimmy home, and Marion knew he had been instructed to wait and see if Tex Blanco came after the little boy.

That night Mrs. Cooper asked Marion to ride to Garnet with her on Saturday.

"I want to see if I can get somethin' different for a new dress," she told Marion. "Hootie won't keep no stock. Says that everybody sends to a mail order house for their stuff, anyway. We can get an early start from here and git back early in the afternoon."

Marion was glad to go. Hootie heard about the trustees' waiting until nine o'clock for Tex and gurgled with joy. It was his idea of a good joke. Of course, he did not know why Tex didn't come.

"I had a invite for you, Marion," he told her. "Cleve Tolman asked me if I thought you'd go to Garnet with him to a dance tomorrow night."

"I don't reckon Marion wants any second hand invitations," said Ma Cooper quickly.

"Not any, thanks," laughed Marion.

"I can tell him that?"

"Certainly."

"Well," laughed Ma Cooper, "I had the same thing put to me by Oscar Johnson, and I told him he better ask you himself. They're all scared of you, Marion."

"And Lester Cline wants to meet you," grinned Hootie. "I told him he'd wait a long time for me to introduce him. He's my rival in everythin', except kerosene. Some day he'll burn out, like I did, and then he'll quit handlin' it."

The next two days were uneventful. Things were going smoothly at the school. Marion saw nothing of Tex Blanco, but she did see Cleve Tolman and, by his cold nod, she concluded that Hootie had told him her decision regarding the dance invitation.

Came Saturday morning, and the ride to Garnet. Mrs. Cooper was a capable driver, and Hootie's buckskin team, hitched to a buckboard, desired nothing so much as open road and plenty of it. Mrs. Cooper weighted down one side of the seat so badly that Marion felt herself perched high on the opposite side, where she clung to the seat with one hand, her hat with the other.

They made the trip to Garnet in record time, and spent the rest of the forenoon in shopping at Garnet's two small stores, and watching one train go through. They ate at a Chinese restaurant, where they met Windy March. He had been at the dance the night before, and was red eyed.

"Shore had a good time," he told them. "You should have been there, Miss Evans."

"Why didn't you ask her to go?" queried Ma Cooper.

"Why-uh—by golly, I didn't think she'd go. I heard she turned down Cleve Tolman."

"News," pronounced Ma Cooper, "shore does get around. Was Cleve Tolman there, Windy?"

"Nope. Annie Hall came with Lester Cline. Oscar Johnson came alone and hated Lester all evenin'. Annie won't go with Oscar since he tried to kill her in Pat Lynch's buckboard. She's kinda walked with a hitch ever since."

"Treat 'em rough, that's Oscar," laughed Ma Cooper.

Windy finished his lunch and went out to his stage duties. He drove out of town about fifteen minutes ahead of them, going toward Pineville.

"We'll let him get well ahead," said Ma Cooper. "That road ain't wide enough to do much passin' on, and we don't want to eat his dirt all the way home."

The buckskins were still willing to travel, and they knew they were going home. Mile after mile they reeled off at a steady trot, fighting against the pull of the bits, until they came to a stiff pull up a winding grade, where they slowed to a walk.

Once over the top they surged into a trot again, across the mesa. At the far side of the mesa, where the road wound down to the valley level again, Ma Cooper drew up the team for a breathing spell.

BELOW them the yellow ribbon of road wound in and out through the clumps of brush, and far beyond, marked by a patch of green, was the B Arrow ranch. Farther along was the green ribbon, that marked the course of Stormy River.

"Why, there is the stage down there!" exclaimed Marion, pointing down the hill. "See it down there, just beyond that little ravine."

"I see it," said Ma Cooper.

Theirs was almost a bird's eye view of the stage, which was not over three hundred yards from them, on an air line. It appeared as if the driver was sitting very straight on the seat, with both hands in the air. For several moments they watched the scene below them. Then Ma Cooper fairly exploded:

"A holdup! Can't you see it, Marion? My Lord! There's a man just back of the stage. Can you see him?"

"Yes, I can see him," said Marion nervously.

They saw the driver's arms drop down, and the stage lurched ahead, the driver still sitting stiffly, apparently looking straight ahead.

"But where is the man who was behind the stage?" pondered Marion.

"He hit for the brush. I'll betcha they saw us."

For possibly ten minutes they sat and watched the brushy country below them, but caught no sight of the man. Far out toward the B Arrow ranch trailed the dust cloud of the fast traveling stage.

"Well, that's that," declared Ma Cooper. "That's the first holdup I ever seen. Giddap, broncs."

"But aren't you afraid to pass that spot?" asked Marion.

"Good grief, no! They've pulled out a long time ago."

They stopped where the tracks of the stage had turned slightly off of the road.

"This is the place where they stopped." said Ma Cooper.

But Marion did not express an opinion. Her eyes were riveted on something just beyond the fresh tire marks of the stage, where the sunlight flashed back the colors of a fire-opal.

Slowly she dismounted from the buckboard and went over to it.

"What is it Marion?" asked Ma Cooper.

Marion came back with the heavy Colt revolver in her hand.

"Either Windy or the robber dropped it!" exclaimed Ma Cooper, "and it don't look like a gun Windy March might own. Golly, ain't them handles pretty? Say, what's the matter with you, Marion? Too much sun?"

Marion tried to speak, but finally shook her head, as she rested one hand against the wheel of the buckboard.

"What in the world is the matter with you, honey?"

"Didn't you ever see that gun?" asked Marion weakly.

"Not to my knowledge; did you?"

"It—it's Tex Blanco's gun."

"Whooee-ee! Tex Blanco's gun? Then Tex—"

Ma Cooper did not finish. She leaned across the seat and touched Marion on the arm.

"Get in here," she said.

Marion obeyed, holding the gun in both hands.

"I didn't know how you felt, honey," said Ma Cooper. "That evidence would send Tex up for several years. This here is our secret. We'll throw that gun in the river and forget it."

Marion nodded dumbly.

"You are awful good, Ma Cooper."

"You forget that part of it. I'm not so good. I'm jist human, honey. Just remember that we never seen no holdup. Are you sure about that gun?"

"I think so, Ma. He—he carried one just like it."

"Any man is a fool to pack a gun you can identify him by, anyway. And that's a gaudy thing. I never had any jewelry half as gaudy as them handles. Giddap, broncs!"

WHILE Ma Cooper and Marion Evans drove on to Pineville, Windy March galloped his four horses down the main street of town and drew up at the post office. Windy had experienced his first holdup, and he wanted everybody in the town to hear about it.

Luckily the sheriff and his deputy were at the office. They came on the run, when some one yelled through their doorway that the stage had been robbed. Inside of three minutes the stage was surrounded, listening to Windy tell how it happened.

"Jist at the bottom, this side of the mesa," he told them, "rope tied across the road, belly high to a bronc, and with a cloth danglin' from it. My leaders comes to a stop. And then I hears a voice from the brush a-tellin' me to put up my hands and keep lookin' ahead. They also tells me that if I look around I'll see Saint Peter.

"Not bein' wishful to see him, I does as I'm told. I'm sure there's two men, 'cause I hears 'em whisperin'. They shore took everythin' they wanted. My

little old strong box is gone, I know that much. Then they told me to look east and keep lookin' east, or I'd git a quick chance to visit some of my very, very old ancestors. After while I hears one of 'em say:

" 'All right; look up the road again.' And then I seen that the rope was gone.

" 'Drive straight ahead and don't look back,' said one of 'em, and that's what I done. I tell you, they knowed what they was doin'. I never seen a danged one of 'em, and their voices sounded like they had a bad cold."

"At this side of the mesa, eh?" queried the sheriff.

"Jist at the bottom, Sheriff. I reckon you can see where I swung a little off the road."

The sheriff and the deputy ran to the stable, saddled their horses, equipped themselves with rifles and headed out of town. The sheriff knew that there was little use of trying to do anything, but it seemed that the public expected them at least to make a show of doing something.

Just at the Stormy River ford they met Ma Cooper and Marion, and waited for the buckboard to make the crossing. Ma Cooper drew up the team.

"Did you just come from Garnet?" asked the sheriff.

"We shore did," laughed Ma Cooper. "All the way."

"How far were you behind the stage, Mrs. Cooper?"

"I dunno. Windy drove away about fifteen minutes ahead of us. Why?"

"He was held up at this side of the mesa. You was lucky not to run into it?"

"Good grief! Held up, you say? What did they get?"

"I didn't stop to find out. We're just ridin' foolish, I suppose."

They lifted their hats and rode on across the river, while Ma Cooper chuckled to herself.

"Well, I didn't have to lie, did I, honey? They didn't ask me if we saw it. And if we hadn't seen them first, they might have seen you dump that gun in the river, if you had tried to dump it. Now, what'll we do with it?"

"I shall keep it," said Marion, "down in the bottom of my trunk, Ma. It's as safe there as it would be in the river."

"That's fine. Wrap it up in a piece of paper and get it in the trunk as fast as you can. Half the people in this country prob'ly know Tex Blanco packs that kind of a gun, and if the sheriff knew you had it, he'd put two and two together and figure you found it at the holdup."

"I could swear that Tex Blanco gave it to me."

"Don't be silly! Even in this country, men don't make girls presents of .45 Colts. Keep it hid."

"Oh, I suppose I'm foolish," said Marion. "It doesn't make him any less the criminal."

"You'd be surprised to know how many honest men are criminals, honey. And a man ain't a criminal until he's caught. Go ahead and be foolish. That's a woman's privilege, when a certain man is concerned."

But the sheriff found nothing, except where the stage had turned out—and a woman's tracks in the sand. There were men's tracks too, but they meant nothing in the dust and sand. The woman had a small foot and wore high heels.

The marks of the buckboard, with its narrow tires, also cut the outside of the road, and the tracks led from these.

"What do you make of them?" asked Oscar, the deputy.

The sheriff shook his head thoughtfully.

"I dunno. Them two wimmin stopped here in the buckboard, and one of them walked over there. The tracks show she walked straight out there and straight back. She either found somethin', or she walked out there to look at somethin'."

"Mebby we better ask 'em, Pat."

"Mm-m-m. You don't know much about wimmin, do you, Oscar? If you did, you'd know better. Either their answer wouldn't be worth a damn to us, or they wouldn't tell."

"That ain't Mrs. Cooper's feet prints,"

said Oscar. "She wears a flat heel shoe."

"You ort to be a detective, Oscar."

"Yeah, I reckon so. I could do as well as Sears did. Do you reckon this holdup was pulled by the bunch who sent the note to Sears?"

"I hope so, Oscar. I'd hate to think that there was two tough outfits in our little county. Now lemme see. They'd likely pull southwest from here, so we'll take a little ride down thataway and see what we can pick up."

But after an hour or so of fruitless riding, they swung in past the B Arrow ranch, where they found Andy Hastings putting a new brace on the big ranch house gate. He was working alone, so they stopped to talk with him.

After a few minutes of general conversation the sheriff asked him if Tex was at home.

"I ain't seen him today," said Andy. "He went to the dance at Garnet last night, I think. Prob'ly got into a poker game and stayed all night. What's new, Pat?"

"Nothin' much, Andy. How's the little kid gettin' along in school?"

"Jimmy? He's doin' fine. Tells me he's had several good fights already, and thinks education is a great thing for a man. He's shore strong for the new teacher. Wants to give her a horse, so she can go ridin' with him."

"Lotsa punchers around here feel the same about it," grinned Oscar. "She could have a swell remuda, if she'd jist do a little acceptin'. I'd start it with a couple good broncs, myself."

"I'll betcha," grinned Andy.

"Here comes Tex now," said the sheriff, as a horse and rider came into view down the road.

Tex was riding slowly and, as he drew closer, they could see that his face was rather pale. His gray sombrero was drawn rather rakishly over one eye and he did not smile. It was rather unusual for Tex not to smile. He merely nodded shortly to them and rode through the gate. They watched him dismount stiffly at the stable and lead his horse inside.

"Must 'a' had a hard night," smiled the sheriff.

"I sh'd say he has!" exclaimed Andy. "It ain't like old Tex to act thataway. Hm-m-m. Well, it's his business."

"Shore is," nodded Oscar. "See you later, Andy."

"Yeah. Drop in any time."

They rode on toward Pineville and, when they were out of earshot of the ranch, Oscar turned to the sheriff.

"What do you think of that?"

"Think of what, Oscar?"

"Tex has been in a mixup, Pat. Didn't you notice how he was wearin' his hat? Coverin' a bump, I'll betcha. And his neckerchief had blood spots on it, too. And not only that, but he didn't have no gun in his holster."

"I didn't notice," confessed the sheriff.

"And he looked as though he had slept in his clothes."

"Oscar, you ought to be a detective."

"Well, mebby that's true, but I ain't."

"Do you think we ought to go back and ask Tex what happened to him?"

"Not now, Paddy. With that expression on his face, I'd be scared to even ask him what time it is. That's the first time I ever seen Tex without his smile."

"That's true. Keep still about them tracks in the sand, Oscar. And don't say anythin' about Tex. If we're ever goin' to put the deadwood on anybody, we've got to stop tellin' the world what we suspect."

"WELL, I'm jist a-tellin' you, so you would know."

Luke Jones straightened up and kicked the oven door shut with a bang. Standing in the kitchen doorway was Shorty Gallup, a limp cigaret hanging in the corner of his mouth.

"You think so, do you?" he sneered.

"I don't think nothin' about it—I know! You may be foreman of this old TD ranch, but I'm foreman of this kitchen. Don't come around here a-tellin' me what to do, or how to do it. By golly, I was cookin' food for he-men when you wasn't weaned yet."

"Oh, you can cook, if you want to, Luke. But you're layin' down on the job. Cleve knows it. We was talkin' about it last night."

"The hell you was! You and Cleve, eh? Lissen t' me, Shorty. Any old time I don't suit Cleve Tolman, he can come and tell me and not send a dirty eared puncher to pack his messages. Yes, you are. You ain't washed farther back than the front of your face since you owned your first pair of chaps. You jist run along and be foreman of the cows."

Shorty snorted disgustedly and went down to the corral, where Eddie Grimes and Matt Sturgis were fooling around with a hammer headed buckskin. Shorty sauntered into the corral and leaned against the fence.

"Whatcha goin' to do with him?" he asked.

"Goin' to ride him," grunted Matt, working up the rope.

"Eddie goin' to ride him?"

There was a sneer in Shorty's question. Eddie did not pretend to be a bronc rider.

"I'm goin' to ride him," said Matt.

"I thought so."

Shorty came over, took hold of the rope and shoved Eddie aside.

"You better go and set on the fence," he said roughly, and then added maliciously, "and let the men do the work."

Matt laughed. Eddie let loose of the rope, but made no move to get away.

"Git out of here!" snapped Shorty. "Ain't you even got sense enough to take an order?"

"Not that kind of an order," replied Eddie evenly.

Matt turned and looked at Eddie, whose back was partly turned to him, and winked at Shorty.

"What kind of an order do you need?" queried Shorty.

"White man's talk, Shorty. You talk like a baby."

Shorty had gathered up the slack of the lariat, and now he slashed Eddie across the face. It was a cowardly thing to do, but did little damage, except to blind Eddie for a moment. In that moment Shorty dropped the rope and sprang in, trying to hit Eddie with his fists.

Eddie backed away, blocking the blows with his elbows, bobbing his head up and down to escape the flying fists, but quickly got set and came back, swapping punches with Shorty.

Neither of them showed any science. It was just a case of slug, slug, slug with both men trying to send over a finishing blow. It was Eddie who landed it. One of his wild uppercuts crashed against the point of Shorty's jaw, and the TD foreman went to his haunches.

Almost at the same moment, Matt Sturgis smashed Eddie between the angle of his jaw and the ear, and Eddie went down on his hands and knees, too dazed to realize that Shorty had surged to his feet and was trying to kick him.

"That's kinda dirty, don'tcha think?" asked a voice.

Shorty turned quickly, blinking his still dazed eyes at the two cowboys who had ridden up close to the fence and were looking at him with great disapproval. Eddie got to his feet, wondering what it was all about.

The men were strangers to the cowboys in the corral, but Shorty was still so dazed and angry that he blurted—

"Don't horn in on somethin' that's none of your business."

"I suppose not," said the taller of the two riders easily, "but just the same it shore looked like a dirty trick to me, pardner."

"Well, I'll be damned!"

Shorty came over closer to the fence and stared at the strangers.

The one who had done all the talking was well over six feet tall, rather slender, with a long, serious face, level gray eyes and a wide mouth. The other was shorter, broad of shoulder, with a rather blocky face, creased heavily with merry wrinkles, his blue eyes rather large and inquiring.

The tall one rode a tall gray horse, the short one a sorrel, and behind them was a bay mare, carrying a pack. Both

men were dressed in range clothes and both needed a shave.

Eddie Grimes walked over to the gate and let himself out of the corral, while Shorty and Matt considered the strangers.

"Jist about where did you come from?" demanded Shorty.

"That," said the tall, gray eyed one, "is our business, if you're so particular about personal business."

"Is that so?"

Shorty felt his damaged jaw. Matt Sturgis had nothing to say, but shifted uneasily from one foot to the other under the steady stare of the gray eyes.

"Is that the road to Pineville out there?"

Matt nodded quickly. The tall cowboy gave Shorty a sharp glance, before he turned his horse and rode away from the corral. Eddie Grimes was coming from the bunkhouse, carrying his war sack in one hand. He called to the strangers—

"Are you goin' to Pineville?"

"Shore am," replied the tall cowboy.

"Wait a minute and I'll ride with you, if you don't mind; I'm through with this place."

"You're right you are!" yelled Shorty.

Eddie looked toward the corral, laughed shortly and looked at the strangers.

"He's the foreman of this ranch."

They waited until Eddie had saddled his horse, while Shorty and Matt watched them from between the poles of the corral. Eddie rode up to the kitchen door and called to old Luke, who came to the doorway.

"I'm pullin' out, Luke," he said.

"Yeah? Well, be good to yourself, Eddie. I don't blame you."

"I'll probably see you soon again, Luke."

"Shore. I may not stay long m'self. *Adios*."

Eddie rode toward the gate and the strangers followed him out.

"This is the TD ranch," explained Eddie as he fastened the gate behind them. "The foreman's name is Gallup, Shorty Gallup. That other polecat is named Matt Sturgis. My name is Eddie Grimes."

He swung back on his horse and the tall cowboy shook hands with him.

"My name's Hartley," he said. "My pardner is Stevens."

Eddie shook hands with him, and they headed for Pineville.

"I'M GLAD you showed up when you did," grinned Eddie. "You see, I wasn't lookin' for Matt to pop me that-away."

"And Mr. Gallup was aimin' to put the boots to you, I observed."

"I guess he was."

"We came across the range from Piney Lake," said Hartley. "Never been over here before. We struck that creek this side of the summit and followed it all the way to the ranch."

"Lobo Creek," said Eddie. "Quite a trip over from Piney Lake."

"Took us two days. How are things over here, Grimes?"

"All right, I guess. I've been with the TD for quite a while. Everythin' was fine until Buck Dennig got killed and Cleve Tolman hired Shorty Gallup as a foreman."

"Not much good, eh?"

"Overbearin' little pup. He got whipped a short time ago by Frank Judd, of the B Arrow. Thinks he's a fighter and is always lookin' for trouble. I'll have to come back and get my wages from Tolman, I suppose."

"How did this Dennig get killed?"

"Murdered. Somebody smashed him on the head one night and stole ten thousand dollars from him. Nobody knows who done it."

"Hashknife, we must be in a land of milk and honey," laughed Stevens. "Cowboy packing ten thousand!"

"Well, it ain't a common thing," laughed Eddie.

"Don't mind Sleepy," grinned Hashknife Hartley. "He's always jumpin' at conclusions."

"Buck was the first man I ever knew who carried that much money," said Eddie.

"Wasn't anythin' done to find out who killed him?" asked Hashknife curiously.

"Sure. The sheriff talked with the prosecutin' attorney and they both talked with Cleve Tolman. They held an inquest and decided that Buck had been murdered. Then the cattle association sent a detective over here, and he lasted long enough to be warned out of the valley."

Hashknife laughed softly.

"You've had quite a lot of excitement around here, it seems."

"Plenty. Day before yesterday the stage was held up between Garnet and Pineville and three thousand taken. The sheriff rode down, looked over the spot where the robbery had taken place and came home."

"A very unmoral place," sighed Hashknife.

"You ain't a preacher, are you?" asked Eddie quickly.

Hashknife laughed and shook his head.

"Not by any means, Grimes. My father was a minister. He rode the Milk River range, packin' the Gospel and a Winchester. Sort of a bunkhouse sky pilot, you know. Me, I'm just a puncher, tha'sall."

"Lookin' for work?"

"Bein' kinda lazy—no. We might take a job."

"There's a vacancy at the TD, you know."

"Yeah, I know; but I'm afraid the foreman might not want my services. Anyway, there's two of us."

"That's right. I'm afraid you'll have a hard job gettin' on here for the winter."

"Mebby we won't want to," said Sleepy Stevens. "I shore don't want to spend no winter in a place where they hold up folks. I scare easy."

Eddie Grimes looked sidewise at the broad shoulders and the square jaw of Sleepy Stevens, noting the heavy Colt in its weathered holster, the easy sway of the body, a sway which is only acquired by years in the saddle.

"I'll bet you do," agreed Eddie.

"Any old time they start trouble, I've shore got a lot of goin' away to do," said Sleepy seriously.

Just before they reached Pineville they met Cleve Tolman, riding alone. He looked curiously at Hashknife and Sleepy, but Grimes did not introduce him.

"I quit the TD a little while ago," he told Tolman.

"Quit, eh. Kinda sudden, wasn't it, Eddie?"

"I suppose you might say it was, Cleve. Had a run in with Shorty. Him and Matt kinda double teamed on me."

"Yea-a-ah?" Tolman looked him over curiously. "You don't seem to be hurt much."

"No, I didn't get hurt much, Cleve."

"Shorty fire you?"

"I quit. And I don't mind tellin' you that you'll lose more men, unless you fire Shorty."

"I'll run my own business," said Tolman shortly.

He looked straight at Hashknife, but Grimes did not offer to introduce them. Tolman reached in his pocket and drew out a wallet.

"I owe you about thirty-five dollars," he said, and gave the money to Grimes.

"You better tell Shorty to lay off of Luke, or you'll lose your cook," said Grimes, pocketing the money.

"I can run my own business, Grimes."

"Mebby you can, Cleve."

"No mebby about it."

Tolman nodded shortly and rode on.

"That's the man who inherited Buck Dennig's half of the TD," said Grimes, as they rode on toward town.

Hashknife looked curiously at Grimes, but did not ask him just why he said that. It sounded as if Tolman might have had something to do with Buck's demise.

"Wasn't anybody hurt in the stage robbery, was there?" asked Hashknife.

Grimes laughed shortly.

"No shots fired. Windy March was scared half to death, I reckon. Got something to talk about for the rest of his life, though."

THEY rode to Pineville, where Hashknife and Sleepy stabled their horses and secured a room at the Pineville Hotel. The sheriff had seen them ride in, and he was just a little curious about who they were; so he appeared at the hotel, where Grimes had also secured a room, and Grimes was accommodating enough to introduce them.

"I saw you come in," said the sheriff. "Prospectin'?"

"No-o-o," said Hashknife thoughtfully. "You see, we ain't got no shovel."

"I noticed you didn't."

"We rode in over the divide from Piney Lake," said Hashknife. "Follered down Lobo Creek and hit the TD."

"Aimin' for Pineville, eh?"

"Well, not exactly; just aimin' to hit this valley."

"Never been here before?"

"Never have, Sheriff. Nice little town you've got here."

" 'Sall right, Hartley. Goin' to be here awhile?"

"Couple days, prob'ly. We're just lookin' around."

"Fine. Make my office your headquarters while you're in town, will you?"

"Thanks."

The sheriff went away, and they headed for a restaurant.

"It strikes me that your sheriff is full of questions," grinned Hashknife.

"Oh, shore," laughed Grimes. "Pat's a question box. But he's all right. You'll like him fine. He's got a big Swede deputy, and they quarrel all the time. Both good men, but they don't think very fast."

"Pat is kinda touchy about the killin' of Dennig and this stage robbery. He don't know which way to turn, so he stands still. Mebby that's the best thing to do, after all."

They ate their meal and wandered around the town. The stage came in, and with the driver was an angular person, with a black mustache and a large nose. Hashknife, Sleepy and Grimes walked past the stage, while Windy was taking off the mail, and spoke to the black mustached passenger.

"Hello, Alex. How's everythin' in Wallgate?"

"All right, Eddie. How's everythin' at the ranch?"

"Same as ever. I quit today."

"The hell you did! What's the matter?"

"Too much foreman."

The man laughed, as he climbed down from the stage.

"I don't blame you," he said seriously.

"How's your brother, Alex?"

"Gettin' along fine, Eddie—thanks."

They strolled along and Grimes told them that this was Alex McLean, one of the TD cowboys, whose brother had been very sick at Wallgate, twenty miles south of Garnet; and McLean had been down to see him.

"Alex is a good man," declared Grimes. "About the first time Shorty tries to ride him, he'll bust Shorty wide open."

McLean watched the three men walk down the street, and turned to the post-office, where he met the sheriff.

"Hello, Alex," grinned the sheriff. "How's your brother?"

"Gettin' along fine, Pat. Wasn't as bad as they thought he was. Kinda hard to kill a McLean. Do you know who them two strange cowboys are with Eddie Grimes?"

"Oh, I met 'em awhile ago, Alex. Hartley and Stevens. They came in from Piney Lake. Came over the divide and follered Lobo Creek to the TD."

"Yea-a-ah?" Alex lifted his black brows slightly, shut one eye and appeared to be thinking deeply.

"Piney Lake, eh? They told you that, Pat?"

"Sure."

"Hm-m-m-m. Piney Lake, eh? By golly, they shore cut one big circle. I seen 'em in Wallgate three days ago."

"In Wallgate, three days—you shore about that, Alex?"

"They ain't a pair to mistake very easy, Pat."

"Three days ago, eh? And they rode in from Piney Lake. If they left Wallgate three days ago, they couldn't have got

to Piney Lake short of tv o days, even if they went over Lobo Pass, and that's the way they came back."

"That's right, Pat."

"Mm-m-m-m. Alex, do me a favor, will you? Don't say nothin' about this to anybody? You heard about the stage bein' stuck up for three thousand dollars, didn't you?"

"I did."

"Well, don't say anythin'."

"That's an order with me, Pat. I'm headin' for the ranch right away, and if you want me, I'm there. *Sabe?*"

"Thank you, Alex."

ALEX was not very reliable. He had a number of drinks at the Stormy River Saloon and took a quart of liquor with him when he went to the livery stable after his horse. Several of the boys were at the TD, when he arrived, and they all went to the bunkhouse with Alex, who was just drunk enough to be talkative.

"I seen Eddie in town," he told Shorty, who felt of his tender jaw and took a deep drink. "Said he quit."

"I fired him," declared Shorty. "Wasn't worth a hoot. He ain't got no nerve."

"Throwed in with a couple strangers," said Alex.

"Thasso?" Shorty did not mention the fact that he had seen the two strangers.

"Did you bring that bottle specially for Shorty?" asked Bud Severn.

"Take it," growled Shorty, passing it to Bud, who took a drink and passed the bottle to Matt Sturgis.

"Who were the strangers?" asked Bud.

"I dunno," grinned Alex. "Couple awful liars, Bud. Said they come over the hill from Piney Lake. That's a two day trip."

"You're drunk," grunted Bud. "Or did they tell you they made it in a day?"

"They didn't tell me nothin'; but they told the sheriff they come over the hump from Piney Lake."

"Better cache that bottle," advised Bud.

"Think I'm drunk, do you?" grinned Alex. "Well, listen t' me, will you? I seen them two jiggers in Wallgate three days ago. If they came here from Piney Lake, they shore flew. My gee-og-ri-fee may not be the best there is in the world, but—"

"They couldn't do it," declared Shorty.

"That's what the sheriff thinks."

"Ain't none of his business, if a man wants to lie," said Bud. "Gimme back that bottle, Matt."

"Mebby he'll make it his business," grinned Alex. "You must remember that two men held up the stage two days ago, and it's only twenty miles from Wallgate to Garnet."

"Well, that's different," grunted Bud, wiping off the neck of the bottle on his sleeve.

"But why in hell would they come back here?" queried Alex. "That beats me."

"Mebby they thought there was more easy money in this valley," laughed Shorty. "Is the sheriff goin' to jail 'em?"

"I dunno. He told me to keep it under my hat, so I ain't told nobody outside of my own gang."

"You're a lot like the feller who said he had confided his secret to only one party, the Republican party," laughed Bud.

"Well, I know it won't go no further," said Alex, trying to get the cork in the empty bottle.

"You better lay down and sleep it off," advised Shorty.

IN THE meantime the sheriff was undecided what to do. Hashknife and Sleepy came down to his office and made themselves at home, talking intelligently about his office and its duties; so much so, in fact, that he was just a little suspicious that they were pumping him.

They did not mention any of the things that had been worrying him, and finally they went away, promising to come again. He went to Heffner's office and laid the facts, as he had them from McLean, before the prosecuting attorney, who sucked on the butt of a cheap cigar, his feet on the desk top.

"No evidence there," decided Heffner. "Man has a perfect right to lie, Pat. At least that seems to be the general opinion in a cow country. Do they lool like suspicious characters?"

"No, they don't, Mort. The tall one looks plumb through you, and the other one laughs at you. But it strikes me that if they wanted to rob a stage, all hell wouldn't stop that stage from bein' robbed. I saw the brands on their horses and looked 'em up in the registry, but they ain't from this State. They'regoin' to be here a few days, so they told me."

"Well, just keep an eye on 'em, Pat. If they start gambling, watch their money. That three thousand was mostly in twenty dollar gold certificates."

"I'll watch out for that. Have you been doin' any thinkin' about Buck Dennig's money, Mort. Somebody around here has that money; and the man who has it is the man who killed poor old Buck. But I can't think of anythin' to do."

Heffner shook his head slowly.

"Not an idea, Pat. I wish we had a detective. I don't mean one like Sears."

"He wouldn't stand a chance—no more than Sears did."

"Not if he was known. Sears was a fool to tell who he was."

"What else could he do? He was a stranger here."

"That's true, Pat. I suppose we'll have to go along in our dumb way, leaving it unsolved."

But Pat didn't agree with him. Heffner was too much inclined to let things slip along. The sheriff had very little detective ability, usually thinking in a single track way, but he had known and admired Buck Dennig for a long time, and he wanted to convict the man who had murdered him. And he had also done considerable speculating over those tracks he had found beside the road, where the stage had been robbed. For some reason he thought that Marion Evans and Mrs. Cooper knew something.

Hashknife and Sleepy wandered around and finally entered Hootie Cooper's store, where they purchased some tobacco. Hashknife eyed Hootie closely. He had noted the name on the store sign, and now he said:

"You don't happen to be any relation toJimCooper, whorunsa store in Mizpah, Arizona, do you?"

Hootie's eyes opened wide and his face broke into a wide smile.

"Jim Cooper of Mizpah is my brother. You know him?"

"Bought tobacco from him all last winter," laughed Hashknife. "My name's Hartley, Mr. Cooper."

They shook hands warmly, and Sleepy was introduced.

"I thought you two looked alike," said Hashknife.

"Well, I'll be darned!" exploded Hootie. "And you know old Jim, eh? Older 'n me. Ain't seen him for five year. How was he?"

"Fine, the last time we seen him."

"Well, gosh! Say! I'm shore glad to meetcha. Didja just arrive here?"

"Today."

"Stayin' at the hotel?"

"Goin' to," smiled Hashknife.

"Good. You're both comin' over to my house and have supper with us tonight. I'll tell Ma right away. No, you can't lie out of it. We've got to talk. I shut up this shebang at six o'clock, and you meet me here. Nobody there, except Ma and the schoolma'am. Mighty nice girl, too. She's folks."

"Well, that's shore nice of you," smiled Hashknife.

"Shucks! Ma'll be glad to see you. She likes Jim. She was jist sayin' the other day that I ought to write a letter to Jim, but he's owed me one for four year. We ain't much on letter writin'. You meet me here at six, or I'll shore comb this town for you."

They promised to meet him at that time, and went to the hotel to shave and clean up a little.

"Gotta look smooth to greet the schoolma'am," laughed Sleepy.

"Yeah, and you'll prob'ly fall in love with her," grinned Hashknife, emptying

his war bag in search of a clean shirt. "You mostly always do, Sleepy."

"Not with schoolma'ams, cowboy. There's where I draw the line."

Sleep began industriously stropping at his razor, whistling unmusically.

"How do you like the looks of this place, Sleepy?" asked Hashknife.

"Cow town and no trimmin's. Some nice folks. Say! I was just wonderin' about this Jim Cooper of Mizpah. I don't remember him, Hashknife."

"You remember Mizpah, don'tcha?"

"Well, we was there that one day, Hashknife."

"Sure. Remember the windstorm that day?"

"Yea-a-ah. Say, I forgot that. Wasn't it a dinger? That was the time the sign blowed off the store and almost landed on us, wasn't it?"

"That's the time."

"But I don't remember no Jim Cooper."

"His name was on that sign."

Sleepy chuckled softly and began lathering his face.

"You shore got a memory, Hashknife," he said.

"Well," grinned Hashknife, "I seen them two words, painted in big letters, Jim Cooper, sailin' right straight for my head, so I ought to remember him. Meby we didn't meet Jim Cooper, but we shore met a signboard by that name."

"And now, you've got to talk all evenin' about Jim Cooper."

"Not necessarily. We can change the subject. You can get in a corner and talk to the teacher."

"Any time I do! I may be a lady's man, but I'm no teacher's pet. You can have her."

"Is that a promise?" laughed Hashknife.

"Yeah, and a gift, cowboy."

THEY met Hootie at the store at six o'clock and went home with him. He had told Mrs. Cooper about them, and she welcomed them pleasantly.

"Small world, ain't it?" she laughed. "Funny how you just happened to mention Jim to Hootie. Lotsa Coopers, you know."

"Yeah, I know it," smiled Hashknife, "but Jim Cooper had the biggest sign I ever seen. Letters two feet high."

"He would have," chuckled Hootie. "Prob'ly spent a lot of time across the street, lookin' at that sign."

"Gents, I want you to meet Miss Evans," said Mrs. Cooper. "Miss Evans is the schoolteacher. Mr. Hartley and Mr. Stevens."

"Oh, I am pleased to meet both of you," said Marion.

"So'm I," said Sleepy foolishly.

Hashknife caught his eye and said softly—

"And a gift, Sleepy; remember."

Marion excused herself to help Mrs. Cooper, and Sleepy whistled softly.

"Mamma mine, what a looker!"

"Ain't she nice?" said Hootie softly. "Jist as nice as she looks, too."

"How do you keep the cowboys away?" asked Hashknife.

"They're scared of her. She's too pretty, Hartley."

"Mm-m-m-m. That's a new way of gettin' rid of 'em."

"Oh, they're shyin' around. Do you know—" Hootie dropped his voice and moved in closer— "wimmin' are queer? She could prob'ly pick any man in this valley, and I'll be darned if I don't think she's stuck on Tex Blanco."

"Not knowin' Tex Blanco, I don't *sabe* your remark," smiled Hashknife.

"Oh, that's right." Hootie rubbed his nose thoughtfully. "I dunno how I come to mention it to you, anyway, bein' as you're a stranger. Anyway, this Tex Blanco is supposed to be a pretty bad *hombre.* Lotsa folks think he killed Dennig. I don't know a thing about it, but he ain't thought much of around here. Owns the B Arrow ranch, you know."

"Beauty and the beast, eh?" smiled Hashknife.

"Well, I dunno about that. But ain't it funny that she would pick *him?*"

"It probably isn't a bit funny to her."

"No, that's right."

Mrs. Cooper called them in to eat supper. She seated Sleepy beside Marion. It ruined Sleepy's meal. The talk was general, but Sleepy said nothing. Hootie talked with Hashknife about Jim Cooper, and Hashknife bravely kept up his end of the conversation, even if he didn't know Jim. Ma Cooper believed in the stuffing process, and both cowboys did their best to please her.

Marion helped Ma Cooper clear away the dishes, leaving the three men at the table, enjoying a smoke. Sleepy's face was still damp with perspiration and he felt like a man who had just been dragged from a watery grave. The women had gone into the living room, while the three men were in a deep discussion. They heard a man's voice.

The discussion stopped quickly. Hootie listened for a moment.

"The sheriff," he said softly, but made no effort to get up from the table.

The sheriff was saying:

"I thought I'd just drop in for a minute, Mrs. Cooper. There's somethin' that's been botherin' me. It's about that stage robbery the other day. You was the only folks over the road jist after the robbery, you know.

"Well, me and Oscar went right out there. You remember we met you at the ford. Well, we found where the stage had been robbed, and we found where you had swung off the road a little in your buckboard. And one of you, I reckon it was Miss Evans, got out of the buckboard, walked about ten feet off to one side and then came back to the buckboard. Anyway, I reckon it was Miss Evans, because she's the only woman in this country that wears them sharp pointed, high heels. Now, Miss Evans, jist what did you find out there?"

The three men strained their ears for her answer.

"I—I don't know what you mean," she faltered.

"Certainly not!" snapped Ma Cooper. "Of all things! You got a lot of nerve, Pat Lynch."

"I just wanted an answer," said the sheriff mildly.

"Well, you've got it, ain't you?"

"Nope."

Marion started to say something, but Ma Cooper stopped her.

"You let me talk to him."

"Well, you tell it, Mrs. Cooper," said the sheriff.

"There's nothin' to tell. You're crazy."

"Mebby. But the tracks are there. Mebby you forgot about tracks."

"Mebby," said Mrs. Cooper shortly.

"All I'm tryin' to do is to find out what Miss Evans picked up. The tracks show—"

"Since when did you start bein' a trailer?" asked Mrs. Cooper. "Readin' tracks—the idea!"

"Oh, I could read 'em plain enough."

Hootie got to his feet, and the two cowboys followed him through the doorway. The sheriff was standing beside the door, and he reddened slightly at sight of the three men.

"You ain't tryin' to pin somethin' on the wimmin, are you, Pat?" grinned Hootie.

The sheriff shifted his feet nervously.

"I just came to ask a question, Hootie."

"I heard you say that before, Pat. Well, you got your answer, didn't you?"

"I got a kind of an answer."

"That's all anybody ever gets from a woman."

The sheriff sighed.

"I reckon so," he said.

He twisted his hat in his hands for a moment, before looking at Ma Cooper.

"I wish you'd think it over, Mrs. Cooper," he said. "You know there's a law against destroyin' evidence. Compoundin' a felony, they call it. Think it over, will you? Good night."

He opened the door and stepped outside, closing the door behind him. Hashknife was watching Marion closely, and he knew she was frightened. She looked appealingly at Mrs. Cooper, caught Hashknife's steady gaze and turned her head away.

"WHAT'S it all about, Ma?" asked Hootie.

"You heard what he said, didn't you? That's all I know. C'mon, Marion. Gee, he sure settled my supper. I thought we was goin' to be arrested."

Marion followed her into the kitchen, and they shut the door between that and the dining room. Hootie filled his pipe thoughtfully, frowning to himself. Finally he grinned at Hashknife and shook his head.

"Wimmin' are funny, Hartley."

"I suppose they are—most of 'em."

"That sheriff had his nerve—accusin' women," declared Sleepy warmly.

"Well, he won't get anythin' out of Ma," chuckled Hootie. "That woman can keep a secret."

"Do you think she's got one to keep?" smiled Hashknife.

"If she ain't, I don't know her. Any time Ma gets mad and talks real fast, she's coverin' up somethin'. But it ain't nothin' bad. Nossir. Compoundin' a felony! Mebby he thinks Ma and Marion held up the stage. Tonight I'm goin' to ask Ma for my split of the three thousand, or I'll squeal on both of 'em."

Hootie laughed and dropped his pipe on the carpet.

"Set down, boys. I dunno what we're all standin' up here for, when there's plenty chairs. I'll bet Pat Lynch forgot that I told him you was goin' to eat supper with us. I told him you was a old friend of my brother Jim, down in Mizpah, Arizona. He don't know Jim."

"Pretty good sheriff, ain't he?"

"Fills the office. Never caught nobody that I ever heard about, but we ain't had much crime. Yeah, I reckon Pat is as good as the average."

Ma Cooper and Marion stayed in the kitchen long enough to regain their composure before coming back to the living room, but it was easy to see that Marion was disturbed.

"Did you ever hear a more ridiculous thing?" asked Ma Cooper. "The nerve of Pat Lynch! Why he acted as though we held up the old stage."

She turned to Hashknife.

"I don't know what you boys will think of us," she said.

"I think you're mighty good cooks," smiled Hashknife. "As far as the sheriff is concerned, let's forget him."

"Aw, he wouldn't know a woman's track from a buggy track," said Sleepy. "Hoppin' on a woman thataway! And even if you did make tracks in his old sand, and if you did pick up somethin', and if you did—did—"

"Now, you're all tied up in a string," laughed Hashknife. "He means well, folks."

"Well, you know what I mean," said Sleepy lamely.

They stayed about an hour after supper, and went back to their hotel.

"Ain't she a dinger?" asked Sleepy, sprawling on the bed. "Mamma mine, ain't she a peach, Hashknife?"

Hashknife slumped down in a chair, his shoulders even with his ears, as he puffed on a cigaret, his eyes half closed.

"What do you suppose she picked up, Hashknife?"

But Hashknife did not reply to Sleepy's question. And Sleepy would have been greatly surprised if he had, because Hashknife was not strong for suppositions.

"Jist my luck," mused Sleepy, staring at the ceiling. "Here I am, a honest, industrious, clean minded cowboy, with a big heart and a soul filled with lovin' kindness, comin' in jist too late. Mopped out of a chance of matrimony by a danged outlaw. Virtue is its own reward, I suppose."

"Then you think she picked this Tex Blanco, because it was sort of a last resort, do you?" asked Hashknife.

"I never thought about that. Are you goin' to bed?"

"I sure am, Sleepy. I can hear them blankets callin' to me right now."

"Yeah, and you hear somethin' else callin' to you."

Hashknife smiled softly, as he drew off his high heeled boots.

"We're a queer pair of birdies, Sleepy,"

he said. "Always goin' some place and never gettin' there."

"'And we pray to the god of the trails untrod,'" quoted Sleepy.

"That's it, cowboy, the trails untrod, the other side of the hill. I'm gettin' gray hairs and I like to set down and talk about the old bunch. That's a sign of age, they tell me."

"Shore is," said Sleepy, tugging at a boot. "Old age! that's somethin' I hate to look forward to. We can't afford to grow old, Hashknife. You must have been forty your last birthday."

"Forty-one. And you'll be forty pretty soon. The span of a man's life is three score years and ten, they say."

"A peaceable life," grunted Sleepy. "Not our kind."

"A peaceable life. Must be great to just drift along from one day to the next, puttin' up money for old age; no dangers, nobody shootin' at you—just peace every day."

"Suppose we try it some day."

"Some day, sure. Get in; I'll blow out the lamp."

They had been together a long time, these two. Drifting up and down the open lands of the West, from the Alberta ranges to the Mexican border, always on the move, never content to stay long in any place.

Hashknife was originally from the Milk River country in Montana, while Sleepy was from Idaho. Fate drew David Stevens to the Hashknife ranch, where he met Henry Hartley, who was nicknamed after that brand, and together they started out to see what was on the other side of the hill.

Because of the fact that he seemed always awake, Dave was nicknamed Sleepy. They were intensely human, those two, and their sense of humor had carried them over many hard bumps. They had gambled with fate and had won so many times that they were confirmed fatalists.

Hashknife was the leader. Born with a keen mind, he had developed it through observation, and studying human nature, especially human failings, to a point where the mere mention of a mystery would cause him to abandon any other plans he might have, to solve it.

But Hashknife was not a manhunter. He had no interest in reward notices, no extreme dislike for a criminal. To him crime was just one of the things that happen in the world, according to the pendulum of fate.

Together they would solve a mystery—and ride on. They asked no reward. Sometimes they would work for a cattle outfit for awhile, gathering a few dollars before riding on. Their partnership had not been remunerative. In fact, they were poorer in pocket than they were the day they rode away together. But they did not care. They realized that they were pawns of fate, moving hither and thither around the board, doing their little bit to help to make the world better.

"We've never been in a place where they wouldn't welcome us back, Sleepy," said Hashknife. "Mebby, when we're old, we'll swing back, goin' over the hill from the other direction."

THE FOLLOWING day was a trial for Marion. It was one of those days when every one in the school seemed to be on edge. Two of the larger boys started a fight in the yard, and she sent them both home with notes to their parents. Marion did not feel physically able to whip them, as they were nearly as big as she.

And to cap the climax, at noon came Mrs. Beebee and Mrs. Hall, wives of the trustees. Mrs. Hall was as large as Mrs. Cooper—a great, grim faced woman, dressed in black, with a small hat, which she had trimmed herself. The hat was a weird and wonderful creation of artificial wheat, red cherries and a single ostrich plume, the whole balanced precariously on the back of her head.

Mrs. Hall was a thin, scrawny little woman, dressed in rusty black, with a parrotlike voice and a hooked nose. They nodded grimly to Marion and sat down at a vacant seat at the rear of the room.

"Visitin'," said Mrs. Beebee severely.

"Oh, I am glad you came," said Marion, trying to be pleasant.

"Mm-m-m-m," said Mrs. Hall dryly and dubiously.

And there they sat all the afternoon, saying nothing, listening closely to everything. The children seemed to sense the strain, too, and went bad accordingly. Marion had always had trouble with Joe and Mary Beebee, but today they seemed doubly possessed of demons.

Everything went wrong. Even Ella Hall, the school tattletale, who was usually letter perfect, failed utterly, and tried to excuse herself by openly telling the teacher she had given her too much work.

Marion was too miserable to reprimand her, so Ella went back to her seat, her tongue in her cheek, while the black clad judges in the rear seat looked at each other understandingly. After three hours of this, Marion was ready to scream.

She dismissed school at the regular time, expecting that her visitors would stay long enough at least to express an opinion; but they trailed out with the children. She watched them from the window, going stiffly down the street, bobbing their heads, as they talked it over, while Ella, Joe and Mary stayed close to them, apparently getting an earful of what was being said.

Marion sighed and looked down at little Jimmy Hastings, who was waiting for his father. Jimmy's face seemed flushed and he rested his chin on his folded arms.

"Don't you feel well, Jimmy?" she asked.

"Not very, ma'am. My head kinda aches. And I'm mad, too."

He sat up in his seat, fumbling with his books.

"You must never get mad, Jimmy," she said.

"'At's all right. I heard 'em talkin' at recess. Mary Beebee said she'd bet that it won't be long before we have a new teacher. She said her ma and Mrs. Hall came up here to see if you was doin' your work right."

Marion's heart sank just a little. She realized that these two women would be able to influence their husbands enough to cause them to make a change. She had no contract with the Pineville school board. And if they did, she would not have enough money even to take her back to Cheyenne.

"And Ella Hall said her mother wasn't satisfied with what you'd done to Ella," said Jimmy slowly. "Gee, I don't want you to go away."

"Well, I don't want to go away, Jimmy; but I think it will all turn out right."

"Mebby. Uncle Tex thinks you're a dinger. Sometimes he talks with me about you. He says I'm learnin' awful fast. You ain't seen him for quite awhile, have you? He ain't been to town. Somebody—" Jimmy's eyes grew wide and round—"hit him on the head, don'tcha know it?"

"Somebody hit him on the head, Jimmy?"

"Yes'm. Had a big lump on the side of his head. He never told nobody how he got it. I heard Frank Judd and Tommy Corbett talkin' about it. It was the day the stage was held up. I asked him what happened, but he wouldn't tell me."

"I didn't know anything about it," said Marion.

"And he ain't got that pretty gun no more," said Jimmy. "Gee, 'at was a pretty gun. And Tex liked it an awful lot," said Jimmy; and after a few moments of reflection he said, "He likes pretty things."

"Is your Uncle Tex a good singer, Jimmy?"

"Y'betcha, when he feels like it. He used to sing to me, when he was bringin' me to school. Most always it was somethin' about Mother Mac—somethin'."

"Mother Machree, Jimmy?"

"That's her. He said it was the Irish croppin' out. What did he mean by that, Miss Evans?"

"Isn't he part Irish, Jimmy?"

"I dunno." Jimmy yawned widely.

"Here comes your father," said Marion, glancing through the window.

Jimmy met him at the doorway, and they went away together on the horse. Marion closed the schoolhouse and went home. She found Ma Cooper on the porch, dressed in a voluminous wrapper, reading a cook book. Marion sat down on the steps and took off her hat.

"You had company today, didn't you?" asked Ma.

Marion sighed deeply and placed her hat on the steps.

"Yes," she said sadly, "Mrs. Beebee and Mrs. Hall."

"Came to pick you to pieces, eh?"

"Oh, I suppose. And there were plenty of opportunities. The children were possessed today, Ma."

"They would be, with those two there. I took one look at the two old buzzards and said to myself that you was in for a pleasant afternoon, unless I missed my guess. Some day I'm goin' to tell 'em both what I think of 'em. Poor old Beebee. He'll have about as much chance to be a trustee as I will. Same with old Sam Hall. It'll be Mrs. Beebee and Mrs. Hall against old Henry Goff, and he won't count. I'm glad Hootie's off the board. Old Henry ought to git off, too; he ain't got no kids."

"If Mrs. Beebee and Mrs. Hall decided to—to make a change in teachers, could they let me go?" asked Marion.

"Well, I wouldn't think of such a thing, Marion. It's been a hard job to get any teacher in Pineville. Don't you worry about it for a minute."

"I don't know. There is a lot of talk among the pupils, instigated of course, by Mary and Joe Beebee and Ella Hall. Where there is so much smoke, there must be a little fire. And I can't afford to lose this position, Ma Cooper."

"Oh, you won't lose it. Quit worryin'. Change your clothes and come back here where it's cool."

THAT evening Hashknife saw Tex Blanco for the first time. Tex had ridden in with Frank Judd and Tommy Corbett, who had met Eddie Grimes and Sleepy, while Hashknife had been visiting with the sheriff.

Tex was in a restaurant eating his supper when Hashknife and the sheriff came in. He spoke pleasantly to the sheriff, gave Hashknife a sharp glance and continued eating. Hashknife was rather impressed with Tex's appearance. There was nothing of the ignorant gunman type about Tex.

They sat down at the rear of the room and ordered their supper. Hashknife had a feeling that the sheriff had been trying to find out more about him, and he wondered just why the sheriff was curious about him. He had asked Hashknife about the places he and Sleepy had worked, and his eyes expressed disbelief, when Hashknife began enumerating more brands than the average cowboy ever dreamed of seeing.

"You must have kept movin' pretty reg'lar," said the sheriff dryly.

"Did."

"What was the idea of movin' so often, Hartley?"

"The hill that was just ahead."

"The hill that was—I don't get what you mean."

"We wanted to see the other side."

"Oh, yeah. Kinda tramps, eh?"

"Mebby. I don't just like that word."

"Mebby not. How long are you goin' to stay here?"

"*Quien sabe?* Mebby pretty soon we'll see a hill ahead."

Tex left the restaurant and, in a few minutes, Shorty Gallup, Bud Severn and Alex McLean came in. They had been drinking and were in a boisterous mood.

"Hyah, Sheriff!" yelled Shorty.

When he opened his mouth one noticed two teeth missing in front.

"Hello, Shorty," said the sheriff.

Shorty looked at Hashknife closely, said something to Alex McLean, and they all sat down at a table near the front of the room.

The sheriff was a little nervous and hurried through his supper. He didn't like the idea of the TD and the B Arrow gangs meeting in Pineville. After they

left the restaurant the sheriff confided this to Hashknife.

"Oscar is in Garnet," he told Hashknife. "Ought to be back pretty soon. He knows how to handle 'em better than I do. Your pardner is with the B Arrow gang and Eddie Grimes, and if I was you I'd get him away from 'em. Shorty Gallup got whipped by Frank Judd, and Eddie got fired by Shorty, so there might be some fireworks, if they get a few more drinks."

"Sleepy can take care of himself," smiled Hashknife.

"I s'pose he can."

The sheriff went back to his office, and Hashknife sauntered over to Cooper's store, where he stood on the sidewalk for awhile. He saw Oscar Johnson ride in and go to the office. It was dark. After smoking a cigaret, Hashknife strolled down the street and went up to his room, where he sat down and tried to get interested in an old magazine, but without any success.

Then he decided to go down and talk with Ma Cooper and Marion. He didn't want to mix with the men in the Stormy River Saloon, because he didn't want to have any trouble with Shorty, who very likely had not forgotten what had taken place at the TD corral.

But he did not find any one at home at the Cooper house; so he sprawled in a deep porch chair to wait for them to return. He decided that they had gone up to the store and would return in a short time.

He smoked a cigaret and went to sleep, stretched out in the big chair. Suddenly he awoke, staring at the ceiling of the porch, wondering where he was. There were voices close to him—the voices of a man and a woman. He could not see them, because they were on the other side of the porch railing, but he could hear them plainly. It was Marion, talking to Tex Blanco.

Hashknife did not want to listen, but after a few words he decided to stay where he was. Marion was saying—

"You shouldn't have walked down here with me."

"I suppose not, Marion. Yes, I'm goin' to call you Marion. I call you that to myself all the time. I heard a preacher say it is just as bad to think profanity as it is to speak it; so if I think Marion I'll say Marion."

"That part is all right," she said slowly.

"That's fine. Gee, it's been a tough week for me—havin' to give up takin' Jimmy to school."

"It was the best thing to do, Mr. Blanco."

"Won't you call me Tex? My right name is Bryan. They even mixed my names—Irish and Spanish. Nobody ever calls me Bryan, not even my mother, and she named me. I wish you could meet her. We talk about you a lot."

"I—I don't know why you should, Tex."

"Why? Lord love you, Marion, why shouldn't we? Don't go in the house, please. Stay here and talk to me."

"Oh, I don't know," faltered Marion. "You know how they feel about you, Tex. If any one knew I was here with you, I'd lose my school. I may lose it anyway. It isn't I; it's just the way things are, don't you see?"

"What does the school amount to, if you say it isn't you? Marion, you've got to listen to me. I've got to tell you right now. The rest of the world can go hang. I—"

"Don't, Tex! Oh, can't you see it is no use?"

"No, I can't," said Tex slowly. "I can't see, unless you believe what folks have told you, Marion. They have been my judges for a long time. They must be without sin, because they throw rocks all the time.

"I'm no saint. Oh, I know what they say about me. They have probably told you I killed Buck Dennig, because he accused me of cheating; and they can't arrest me, because there's no evidence. They've put a lot of their crimes on me. And it never made much difference, until you came along.

"I ought to understand how you feel, Marion. But I guess I'm kinda dumb.

I couldn't expect you to marry a man of my reputation, unless you knew it wasn't true. I can't prove my innocence. They can't prove me guilty, and I can't prove my innocence."

"Tex," said Marion softly, "would you swear to me that you are innocent of any crime?"

"Of any crime they accuse me—yes, Marion."

"Even of holding up that stage the other day?"

Marion's voice was pitched so low that Hashknife had to strain his ears to hear her.

Tex laughed softly.

"Bless your heart, of course, I swear it!"

"Oh, I'm sorry, Tex, so sorry I don't know what to say."

"Sorry? Because I denied doin' it, Marion?"

"Because that day—oh, don't you understand? Ma Cooper and I saw that holdup. We were on the mesa. And after it was all over, I—I found your revolver, the one with the pearl handle."

"You found it?" Tex's voice was hoarse.

"It's in my trunk, Tex. Ma Cooper knows. We'll never tell anybody, Tex. Goodby."

SHE CAME slowly up the steps and went into the house, passing within six feet of Hashknife, who hunched lower in the big chair, thankful he was overlooked. He heard Tex walking slowly away, his spurs rasping on the sidewalk. Hashknife got to his feet and stepped off the porch. He decided not to wait for Mrs. Cooper to come back, but he met her just outside the gate.

"This is Hartley, Mrs. Cooper," he said. "Dropped in to see you, didn't find anybody at home and went to sleep on the porch."

Mrs. Cooper laughed shortly.

"Wasn't Miss Evans at home?"

"She came a few minutes ago."

"I see. Hootie said for me to tell you to run in and see him, if I seen you."

"All right. Good night, Mrs. Cooper."

Hashknife walked up to the store, where he found Hootie waiting on some customers. As soon as Hootie was at liberty, he motioned for Hashknife to meet him at the rear of the store.

"I just wanted to let you know that the sheriff sent a telegram yesterday to my brother in Mizpah, Arizona, askin' him what he knew about you, Hartley."

"Yea-a-ah?" drawled Hashknife, not knowing what else to say.

"And Oscar, his deputy, brought back a wire from Jim this evenin'. It said—

"Never knew anybody by the name of Hashknife Hartley in my life."

"Well," said Hashknife, after a short pause, "that's kinda queer, don'tcha think, Mr. Cooper?"

"I thought it was. That's why I told you."

He moved away to wait on another customer, and Hashknife sauntered outside.

"Next time I start lyin', I'll pick a town that ain't on no map," he told himself, grinning in spite of the fact that he had been caught in the lie. "But just why would the sheriff go to all that trouble and expense. Mebby I better go down and see him."

Hashknife went to the office, where he found Oscar Johnson sprawled in a chair. The tall, sad faced deputy looked at Hashknife with a funereal expression, a cigaret hanging loosely from the corner of his mouth.

"Got a letter for you, Hartley," he said, waving one limp hand toward the sheriff's desk. "'S over there."

Hashknife picked up the letter and glanced at the postmark. It had been posted in Garnet and sent to him in care of the sheriff's office. He tore one end off of the envelope and drew out the enclosure. It read:

We will give you eight hours to leave this valley. —THE BUNCH.

It was identical with the letter Sears, the detective, had received. Hashknife glanced sharply at Oscar, who was looking at him quizzically. The sheriff came

in, stopped short and looked at Hashknife, who smiled and held out the warning for his inspection.

The sheriff scowled at the message for a moment and went to his desk, where he secured the note that had been sent to Sears and compared the writing. It was identical.

"Just alike, eh?" asked Hashknife.

"Exactly."

"But what does it mean? Who is The Bunch?"

"That's what Sears wondered."

"Why do they want me out of the valley?"

The sheriff walked over and closed the door, as if he did not want anybody else to hear what he was going to say. He came back to his desk and faced Hashknife.

"I dunno why they want you out, Hartley," he said. "You two fellers have had me kinda guessin', don'tcha know it? I'm goin' to put my cards on the table. You told folks that you came over the divide from Piney Lake, didn't you?

"Well, you didn't, Hartley. Alex McLean saw you leave Wallgate, and you couldn't have made the trip to Piney Lake and back here in that length of time. You told Hootie Cooper that you knowed Jim Cooper in Mizpah, Arizona. Just to find out a few things, I wired Jim Cooper. And—" he reached in his pocket and drew out a telegram— "this is his reply."

"I've heard it," said Hashknife calmly. "Hootie told me about it."

"Jim Cooper never met you in his life."

"Not to my knowledge, Sheriff."

"Then why didja—"

"Lie?" Hashknife smiled. "Oh I dunno. Force of habit, I suppose. Any other charges?"

"No-o-o, I don't reckon so."

"All right, I'm guilty on both counts. What's the penalty for lyin' in this county?"

The sheriff put the telegram in his pocket. For all his trouble he was no better off than before.

"I reckon there ain't no penalty," he said slowly. "But it kinda makes a feller lose faith in you."

"Oh, yea-a-ah" drawled Hashknife. "As a matter of fact, you didn't have no faith in me to start with, Sheriff. If you had, you'd have swallered my lies instead of provin' me a liar. Now that you've proved it, what are you goin' to do about it?"

The sheriff rubbed his nose thoughtfully.

"Nothin', I guess."

He sat down in his desk chair and filled an old pipe. Oscar grinned softly and winked at Hashknife.

"You don't need to wink at anybody," said the sheriff. "It was your idea—this investigation, Oscar."

"Well, I sink along with you, don't I? I'm not howlin' about it. As a detective, I'm a good night herder. I reckon Hartley ain't the first puncher that ever told a lie, and I ain't lost no faith in him. He didn't hedge none, did he? Admitted that we had the goods on him, Pat. He could have sworn that he had a different name, when he knowed Jim Cooper, and he could have sworn that Alex McLean was a liar, which he is most of the time."

"I thought of both," said Hashknife, "but what's the use? I never knew Jim Cooper. The sign on his store came blowing down one afternoon and almost crowned me. And we did not come from Piney Lake."

"Why didja say you came from Piney Lake?" asked the sheriff.

"Thought it might be a good place to be from."

"I reckon that's a good answer, Hartley, if that's your name."

"You'd have a hell of a time provin' it isn't."

HASHKNIFE walked over to the door, opened it and stood there, looking up the street. Over at the Stormy River Saloon hitchrack a cowboy was singing at the top of his voice. Came the rasp of shod hoofs against the hard street,

a shrill yell, a fusillade of revolver shots, sparking upward.

The sheriff came quickly to the doorway.

"Happy punchers goin' home," laughed Hashknife.

"Damn fools!" snorted the sheriff. "Liable to hurt somebody, shootin' wild thataway."

Some one was coming down the sidewalk toward the office. It was Sleepy, grinning widely.

"Well, they all got away without hurtin' anybody," he said. "Them last two was Shorty Gallup and Matt Sturgis, boiled drunk."

Sleepy leaned against the wall and rolled a cigaret.

"Thought for awhile there was goin' to be trouble. The TD gang wanted to act bad. Gallup sent word to Judd, of the B Arrow, that he was goin' to get him. Severn and McLean tried to talk him out of it, but he wouldn't listen. McLean and Severn went home. Judd was all set to swap lead with Shorty, but Grimes and Corbett talked him out of the notion. I helped a little, I suppose. Anyway, the B Arrow gang pulled out, and when Shorty heard about it he sang a song, piled on his bronc and shot a few holes in the sky."

"I'll bet he was glad Judd pulled out," said Oscar. "Pat wanted me to go over and ride herd on 'em, but I told him I wouldn't do it. Let 'em fight it out. If they've got it in their system, let 'em fight."

"You was scared to go over," growled Pat.

"You didn't go, didja?" queried Oscar. "When I refused, why didn't you do it. Don't talk to me about bein' scared."

"They didn't start nothin' with you, did they, Sleepy?" asked Hashknife.

"Nothin' but talk. This McLean person came up to me in the Stormy River, and he's pretty well loaded, and he stuck his face into mine, and he says, 'I know somethin' about you.' I kicked his feet out from under him, and he sets down on the bar rail like a ton of bricks. I reckon it was quite a shock, because when he got to his feet again, he's kinda puckered up, and I asks him what he knows. But he didn't say. He went out of there kinda bent in the shape of a chair; but I guess he got straightened out to ride a horse."

Oscar laughed immoderately, but the sheriff was serious. He knew what McLean meant.

"We've been exposed," smiled Hashknife. "They all know we didn't come from Piney Lake, and they know I never met Jim Cooper."

Sleepy's mouth sagged for a moment, as he hooked his thumbs over the waistband of his pants, staring at the sheriff and the deputy.

"Well," he said softly, "what's the next thing to do, Hashknife?"

"Go to bed, I suppose," grinned Hashknife. "Good night, officers."

They went up the street together and entered the hotel room, where Hashknife told Sleepy all about their exposure as liars of the first vintage and also showed him the warning note. Sleepy whistled through his teeth and essayed a clumsy clog in the middle of the floor.

"Must please you, don't it?" asked Hashknife.

"Gives me a talkin' point, any old time you accuse me of stretchin' things," laughed Sleepy.

"What do you think of the note?"

"Scares me to death."

"It's serious, Sleepy."

"So am I. In the mornin' I'm goin' down and make my peace with Ma Cooper and Miss Evans. If I have to, I'll tell 'em I met you after you was in Mizpah. You see, I never pretended to know Jim Cooper."

Sleepy laughed gleefully.

"And I saw Tex Blanco tonight. They can say what they want to about him, he can take care of himself. I was almost tempted to shoot him and steal his shirt. Man, what a garment! I wonder if Miss Evans is goin' to marry him."

"I don't think so, Sleepy."

"You don't think so? Is that an official count of all the votes, Hashknife?"

Hashknife shook his head slowly.

"There may be a few counties to hear from yet, Sleepy. We better hit the hay, because we've only got eight hours left."

"When do we run, Hashknife?"

Hashknife considered his two boots thoughtfully.

"Just as soon as we find somebody to run after."

MRS. BLANCO, Tex's mother, was a little old Irish woman, not over sixty years of age, but looking much older. Her hair was as white as snow, her face deeply lined and tanned. Her name had been Mary Bryan before she married Enrique Blanco, down on the Rio Grande, and in her voice was still the brogue of old Wexford.

This early morning she stood in the kitchen door at the B Arrow, an anxious expression in her blue eyes. Leaning against the wall beside her was Andy Hastings, his hands shoved deeply in his pockets, hair uncombed, a stubble of whiskers on his lean jaw.

"You think he's sick bad?" asked Andy.

"Aye, he's bad, Andy. High fever. Well, ye saw the lad. Tex is in there with him now. I think ye better saddle and get the doctor, Andy."

"Sure, I'll do that."

Andy went striding down to the stable, and in a few moments Tex came out and stood beside his mother.

"Sleepin'," he said softly. "Is Andy goin' for the doctor, mother?"

"Aye."

"He's a sick boy," said Tex slowly. "He didn't know me."

"It's the fever. Children get it bad. And they get over it quick. They can stand more than a grown-up."

"He was talkin' about the school, mother, askin' for Miss Evans, wantin' to fight the Beebee boy. I thought he looked kinda bad when Andy brought him home last night."

"Aye, it was growin' on him then, Tex. But mebby it is only an upset stummick after all. Children get those things."

Andy Hastings led his horse from the stable, mounted and rode out through the big gate, forgetting to wear a hat.

"He thinks a world of the lad," said Mrs. Blanco.

"We all do, mother. I'd rather lose my right hand than—"

Tex turned and went back in the house. The old lady nodded her head slowly.

Kit Carson, Tommy Corbett and Frank Judd were coming up from the bunkhouse, ready for breakfast, and she told them about little Jimmy's illness.

"Gee, that's tough," said Judd. "Andy went after a doctor, didn't he?"

"Why didn't he send one of us?" asked Tommy. "He should have stayed with Jimmy. Where's Tex?"

"He's in there with Jimmy. Ye'll have to wait awhile for breakfast, boys; I haven't started it yet."

"That's all right, Mother Blanco," said Judd quickly. "You jist take your time. There's nothin' we've got to do early this mornin', anyway. Can we do anythin' for Jimmy?"

"Not a thing, Frank. I'll get breakfast now."

Andy Hastings did not spare his horse, and it was still early morning when he rode up to the doctor's house in Pineville. Old Doctor Brent answered his summons and promised to start for the ranch, as soon as he could dress and get his horse and buggy.

Andy rode back up the street and went to Cooper's home, where he found them at breakfast.

"I jist wanted to see Miss Evans," said Andy to Ma Cooper. Marion came to the door and Andy told her about Jimmy.

"I jist wanted you to know why he didn't show up at the school," he told her.

"Is he very sick?" asked Marion anxiously.

"Yes'm, I reckon he's pretty bad. Mother Blanco and Tex was up with him 'most all night. They didn't tell me until this mornin', so I came right away for the

doctor. He's kinda out of his head, you see."

Andy squinted painfully.

"He didn't know me; didn't know Tex either. Jist talked about the school and you, ma'am. And he wanted to fight the Beebee boy." Andy turned his head away. "He's quite a fighter, ma'am, Jimmy is. He thinks you're pretty fine. He talked about you goin' away."

Andy turned and looked at Marion.

"You ain't goin' away, are you?"

"I hope not, Mr. Hastings."

"I hope not m'self. Jimmy's learnin' so fast. Well, I've got to git back to the ranch."

"Is there anythin' we can do, Andy?" asked Ma Cooper.

"Not a thing, thank you, Mrs. Cooper."

"Will he be nursed all right out there?" asked Marion.

"Oh, shore. Mother Blanco is fine thataway. I'll let you know how he comes along."

Andy rode back to the main street, where he met the doctor, and they went to the ranch together.

Marion had been greatly worried ever since Mrs. Cooper had told her of meeting Hashknife at the gate and that Hashknife said he had been asleep on the porch. Marion remembered that she and Tex had stood near the porch and she was afraid that Hashknife had heard what she told Tex about finding that gun. Marion did not tell Ma Cooper that she had told Tex.

HASHKNIFE cautioned Sleepy that morning. He did not know just how much of that note was pure bluff and, even if it were part bluff, they were taking a big chance in staying around Pineville.

They met the sheriff after breakfast, and he seemed a little surprised to meet them.

"Your eight hours are up," he told Hashknife.

"We realize that," smiled Hashknife. "But it's daylight, and that bunch don't work in daylight."

"You're just guessin' ain'tcha?"

Hashknife studied the sheriff seriously.

"You ain't tryin' to run usout, are you, Sheriff?"

"No, I'm not. I don't *sabe* you, though."

"You don't need to. What you don't know won't hurt you."

"Mm-m-m. Well, go ahead and get killed, if you feel thataway."

"No, that ain't the idea, Sheriff. Don't go off half cocked. You've been tryin' to put the deadwood on us ever since we came here. You proved me a liar, didn't you? Oh, that's all right. Let's drop it and be friends."

Pat Lynch looked quizzically at Hashknife.

"I reckon I might as well, Hartley. Me and Oscar argued a lot about you two fellers, and he stuck up for you. I swear I don't know a thing about you, except that you lied, and admitted it like a gentleman."

"Well, that's settled," grinned Hashknife, taking the note from his pocket. "Who wrote that, Sheriff?"

"I don't know," declared the sheriff. "It's the same writin' as was on the other note."

"Can you get hold of a sample of Tex Blanco's writin'?"

The sheriff blinked quickly and shifted his eyes toward the bank building across the street.

"Why do you want a sample of his writin', Hartley?"

"You wouldn't have to be very bright to answer that yourself, Sheriff."

"Uh-huh."

The sheriff shifted uneasily for a moment; then:

"Hartley, I don't want this to go any farther, because Heffner says it don't prove nothin'; but we compared the other note with Blanco's signature at the bank, and the B in Bunch is the same as the B in Blanco."

"Why does Heffner say it doesn't prove anythin'?"

"Says it would take an expert to prove it. And even at that a cow jury prob'ly

wouldn't believe it. But the B is the same, Hartley. It's got the curlicue at the bottom and one at the top. I'm no expert, but I could see that. But don't say anythin', Hartley."

"I'm not sayin' anythin', Sheriff; but I'd like to see that signature."

"I'll get it for you, as soon as the bank opens."

The sheriff glanced at his watch.

"Tex Blanco quarreled with Buck Dennig the night Dennig was killed, didn't he?" asked Hashknife.

"Dennig accused him of cheatin' at poker," said the sheriff, "but that ain't evidence. Somebody stole the ten thousand off Buck that night, but we've no trace of that. Buck cashed a check for it that afternoon. Nobody knows what he was goin' to do with the money. Might as well go over to the bank and get that signature; it's ten o'clock."

They went over and started into the bank, but found the door locked. The sheriff looked at his watch again.

"My watch must be fast," he said, winding it slowly.

Hashknife looked at his watch; it showed ten minutes after ten.

"Shearer's late," decided the sheriff, and they sat down on the edge of the high sidewalk to wait.

They saw Tex Blanco ride in and go to the little drug store down the street. He came out in a few moments, mounted and rode swiftly out of town. Hootie Cooper came along, tried the bank door, and came out to the edge of the sidewalk.

"Shearer must have overslept," he said.

But Guy Shearer, the cashier, did not come. Several other people tried to get into the bank. It was after ten-thirty, when old John Rice, president of the bank, came along. He and Shearer were the only employees of the bank, and Rice was not in the habit of coming very early. Rice was a small, gray haired man, slightly crippled, an old-timer in the Stormy River country. He seemed greatly surprised to find the bank still closed.

"Perhaps Guy is sick," he said, as he unlocked the front door. "He was all right yesterday. Come right in, gentlemen."

They followed him in. He carefully blocked the door open, before doing anything else. The Pineville Bank was a small institution, the room being about twenty by thirty feet in size, less than a third of it used for office space.

Rice led the way to the low railing that separated the office desks from the rest of the building, swung open the gate and stepped inside. At the rear of this was the front of the vault, which was little more than a large safe, set into the wall. Rice placed his hat on a desk and started to turn back to the men, when he stopped and leaned forward, both hands on the desk.

"My God!" he exclaimed loudly. "What has been done here?"

Hashknife had halted near the gate, and now he flung it open and stepped inside, with the sheriff close behind him.

Stretched out on the floor, half under the desk, was Guy Shearer, the cashier, his head in a pool of blood. On the floor near him was a length of lariat rope. Hashknife took one look at Shearer and decided he was dead. Quickly the sheriff and Rice dropped on their knees beside him, while Hootie and Sleepy leaned across the railing and watched them turn the man over on his back.

Hashknife picked up the rope, looked it over quickly. It was an ordinary spot cord rope, which had been used quite a lot. He quickly inspected both ends of the rope. One end had been wrapped tightly with a fine copper wire, while the other end, frayed slightly, showed a fresh cut.

Hashknife moved around the room, glancing sharply from one corner to another, holding the rope in one hand. The men were too interested in the dead cashier to pay any attention to Hashknife. Suddenly he stooped and picked up an object from near the leg of a desk, concealing it in his hand for a few moments while he played idly with the rope, and then slipped it into his pocket.

"There's no use goin' for the doctor," Hootie was saying. "He's gone out to the B Arrow to see Hastings' kid."

John Rice's face was very white and his lips trembled as he leaned against the railing and looked at the dead cashier.

"You better set down, John," advised the sheriff. "There ain't no use of you standin' up. Nothin' you can do. He's as dead as a salt herrin'."

"But why—who killed him, Pat? The door was locked."

The old banker looked around the room, and his gaze came back to the vault door.

"Those windows won't open," he said slowly. "Will some of you lock the front door? We can't have folks coming in here now."

Sleepy walked over and closed the door.

"IF I WERE in your place," said Hashknife, "I'd open the vault and have a look inside."

"But the vault is locked," said Rice. "Nobody could—"

"Folks don't usually break into a bank just to kill the cashier, you know."

"Mebby you better, John," said the sheriff.

The old man went over to the vault and slowly worked the combination. None of the men went near him. He swung the door open and, after a moment of inspection, stepped back.

"It—it has been cleaned out," he said painfully.

Hashknife and the sheriff walked over beside him. The inside door was partly open. The sheriff swung it the rest of the way, disclosing an empty interior. That door opened with a key, and there was no key in the lock.

"Better close it up," said Hashknife. "No use tellin' everybody."

Rice closed the outer door and turned the combination.

"This is terrible," said Rice hoarsely. "What can we do?"

The sheriff shook his head helplessly, staring at the body of the cashier. Sleepy perched on the rail, smoking a cigaret, and kept an eye on Hashknife, who was idly swinging the rope in his hand. The sheriff took the rope and looked at it.

"This was on the floor, wasn't it, Hartley?"

"Yeah," said Hashknife. He turned to Rice. "Was the cashier in the habit of workin' in here at night?"

"Not very often. There wasn't enough work for that."

"Uh-huh. He had a key to the inside door of that vault?"

"Oh, certainly."

"Let's see if he's still got it. Shall I search him, or will you, Sheriff?"

"You do it," said the sheriff.

In a trouser pocket Hashknife found the key ring, and Rice identified the key.

"Did anybody, except you two, know the combination?"

"Just the two of us," said Rice wearily.

Hashknife and the sheriff walked around the place. There was no evidence that any one had been at work. The desks were orderly. Hashknife went back and examined the body. The blow had been struck from behind.

"What do you think, Hartley?" asked the sheriff.

"Hard to tell. Looks as though somebody had met this man, forced him here at the point of a gun, robbed the vault and then hit him over the head. They went through the front door, which is on a spring lock. Mebby they intended to just tie him up here, but somethin' happened and they killed him, and forgot their rope."

"That's my theory, too!" exclaimed the sheriff. "That's what they done. Prob'ly met Shearer on the street. Mebby he recognized them, and they had to kill him."

"That sounds reasonable," agreed Hashknife. He turned to Rice. "Did they get much from the vault?"

"At least twenty-five thousand dollars."

Hashknife whistled softly.

"I didn't know you kept that much cash in a bank of this size."

"Sometimes more than that. We won't know until a check is made of it."

"I hate to move that body until the coroner gets here," said the sheriff. "He ought to be back in a little while. I think I'll go down to Allen's place and see what they know about Shearer. Allen's place is where Shearer lived," he explained to Hashknife. "Want to walk down?"

"Yeah, I'll go with you."

"I'd like to have one of you stay here with me," said Rice quickly.

"I'll stay," said Sleepy. "I'm good company."

They walked down to the house and inquired of Mrs. Allen, but did not tell her that Shearer was dead until she said that Shearer did not show up for breakfast. She did not know whether he had left early or late the evening before, as he had a room on the lower floor, with an outside entrance.

She was greatly shocked to know that he was dead, and let them in to examine his room. The bed had not been disturbed. On the dresser was an enlargement from a snapshot picture, showing the front of the bank, Shearer, Buck Dennig, Cleve Tolman and John Rice.

"That picture was taken about the time Shearer went to work for the bank," said the sheriff. "He was with the Garnet Mercantile Company for quite awhile before he came here. That's Buck Dennig next to Shearer."

"Buck was a good lookin' feller," said Hashknife.

"And a nice feller, too. Well, I guess we'll have to go back and wait for Doc Brent to come back from the B Arrow. This will shore upset this town."

They went back up the street. Quite a crowd had collected in front of the bank and, as they drew near to the bank, old Doctor Brent drove in from the east side of the town. Some one told him about the trouble at the bank, and he stopped at the little hitchrack. The sheriff went in with him, but Hashknife stayed outside listening to the different opinions. Hootie was telling them all about the discovery of the murder.

Cleve Tolman rode in. He was a director in the bank and one of the heaviest depositors. Hashknife watched him enter. In a few minutes some of the men secured a narrow cot, which they used as a stretcher to carry the body down to the doctor's office. The bank closed its door for the day.

THE CROWD dispersed quickly, after the body had been taken away. Sleepy joined Hashknife and they sat on the edge of the sidewalk together.

"I suppose that's the work of The Bunch," said Sleepy.

"Looks thataway," nodded Hashknife.

Sleepy looked around and as he rolled a cigaret, edged a little closer to Hashknife and said—

"What did you find in there, Hashknife?"

"You saw me find it?"

"Yeah. Nobody else did, though."

Hashknife reached in his pocket and drew out a hondo, the loop on the end of a lariat, through which the rope runs. It was of metal, covered with leather, and in the leather had been burned the initial B and a crudely drawn arrow, the mark of the B Arrow ranch.

Sleepy examined it closely and gave it back to Hashknife.

"Cut it off the rope and then lost it, eh?"

Hashknife nodded slowly as he put the hondoo in his pocket.

"Looks thataway. They meant to tie Shearer, and didn't want that marked hondo to be found. Probably workin' in the dark and lost it. That hondo might hang somebody, Sleepy."

"Shore! Ain't you goin' to give it to the sheriff?"

"Not yet. There's several men at the B Arrow, and they didn't all kill Shearer."

"They must be The Bunch," said Sleepy quietly. "We'll have to keep an eye on 'em, cowboy. I hear they've been rustlin' TD beef for a long time. But I like Judd and Corbett. Carson don't say much. They tell me Judd is a

fighter. He whipped Shorty Gallup."

"So did Grimes," smiled Hashknife. "He had Shorty whipped that day we met him. It was Sturgis who knocked Grimes down, you remember—hit him from behind."

"Yeah, that's right. This killin' will make folks sore. This Shearer was well liked."

Oscar Johnson came along and sat down with them.

"Lotsa crime around here," he said. "I liked Shearer. Who do you suppose killed him, Hartley?"

"The same folks who sent us that note, Johnson."

"I s'pose. Pat was surprised that you fellers didn't pull out. Your eight hours are up long ago."

"I dunno," mused Hashknife. "Eight hours from when? They should have set a time, Oscar. How would they know when I got that note?"

"That's right. But you wouldn't go, anyway. I told Pat you had more nerve than Sears did. He shore high tailed quick. I never seen a cow detective yet that had any nerve. We've got a job on our hands, tryin' to clear all this up. Don't think we ever will. Takes brains, don'tcha know it. Me and Pat ain't got enough. He thinks he's smart, but I know him."

"Don't you even suspect anybody?" asked Sleepy.

"Shore," nodded Oscar solemnly, "but what's the use? You can't prove it. Look at the money they've got! Ten thousand from Buck Dennig, three thousand from that stage and now they get about twenty-five thousand more. Thirty-eight thousand dollars!"

"And two dead men," said Hashknife.

"Yeah, two dead men. That kind of money ought to burn a man, Hartley."

"It will."

"Mebby. If we don't never catch 'em, it won't."

"Who was sick at the B Arrow this mornin'?"

"Little Jimmy Hastings. Tex came in after medicine. Told me the doctor was scared the kid had typhoid. Tex thinks a lot of that kid. He's a queer feller, this Tex Blanco. You wasn't here the day the stage was held up, was you? No, that was before you came. Me and Pat went out to where the stage was robbed. Mrs. Cooper and Miss Evans had been to Garnet, and they must have been pretty close behind the stage.

"We found where the robbery had been pulled off, and we saw where Cooper's buckboard had pulled out of the road at the same spot. And we found a woman's tracks, where she left the buckboard and walked about four or five steps and then came back.

"But them women wouldn't admit that they seen the holdup, nor that they walked around at the spot. Pat's got an idea that they're keepin' somethin' quiet. Anyway, we came back past the B Arrow and talked with Andy Hastings. He said that Tex went to Garnet to the dance the night before.

"And while we was talkin' to Andy, Tex rode in. He shore looked tough. There was blood on his muffler and on his shirt, and he wore his hat tilted to one side, as though to hide somethin'. And another thing—he didn't have no gun in his holster. Jist nodded howdy to us and rode on. Acted as though he didn't want to talk with us. It shore looked queer to me."

"Why didn't you ask him where he'd been?" asked Hashknife.

"Yea-a-ah! In the first place, it wasn't none of our business."

"Wasn't Buck Dennig killed in the same way as Shearer?"

"Shore was. I never thought of that."

"And they tell me that Windy March, the stage driver, never saw the men who held him up."

"That's right, Hartley. Oh, they're clever all right. Poor Windy ain't over it yet. He sat there and looked the way they wanted him to look. I don't blame him m'self."

"Neither do I," said Hashknife seriously. "Did any of you check up on Tex, to see if he was at Garnet that night?"

"I don't guess anybody did, Hartley."

"And you don't know what Buck Dennig was goin' to do with that ten thousand?"

"Nope, never knew he had it until after he was killed."

"I guess we better go and eat, before you admit that you ain't done a thing."

"Hell, I can admit that on an empty stummick—but I'll eat with you."

"Ro-o-ho-oll on, silv'ry moo-hoon—
Light the trav'ler on his way-ha-a-ay—
O, la-lay-hee-e-e! O, la-lay-he-hoo-o-o-o-!"

AS A YODLER, Luke Jones, cook for the TD outfit, was terrible. In fact it was a series of broken notes, wails and hoots, sent forth at the top of his voice, as he leaned against the side of the kitchen door. In his left hand he held a tin cup which contained some violet tinted liquid, while his right hand, concealed beneath his dirty apron, gripped a big single action Colt revolver.

Luke was very drunk, but very much awake. His bleared eyes caught sight of what appeared to be the brim of a sombrero, extending just out from the corner of the bunkhouse. He jerked his hand from beneath the apron and fired from his hip. The bullet smashed a window in the bunkhouse, three feet from the corner, and old Luke grinned, exposing a few crooked teeth. He drank from the cup, twisted his face in a scowl and yelled—

"C'mon out and git shot, you chuckwalla!"

But no one came out. Luke had been there for fifteen minutes, defying the whole TD outfit. Shorty Gallup had kicked on the breakfast, as well he might, because Luke was drunk when he cooked it—drunk on prune whisky which he had made himself. Luke was a periodical drunkard, but he had always gone to town to celebrate.

Luke had taken Shorty's kicks as personal insults. He wanted to show them who was boss of that kitchen, and he was doing it. He had Shorty, Matt Sturgis, Alex McLean and Bud Hough hiding out behind the bunkhouse. Tolman and Dobe Severn had left for town before Luke's outburst.

"I'm goin' to step out and kill that old fool," declared Shorty angrily. "He deserves it, I tell you. Aw, he couldn't hit me, even if he had a shotgun. My stars, there goes another window!"

Shorty drew his gun and stepped out quickly from the side of the bunkhouse. Came a sharp *whap!* Something went *pwee-e-e,* down toward the corral, and Shorty fell back against the wall, swearing softly.

"Look at that!" he wailed, indicating the right leg of his batwing chaps, where a bullet had torn away the leather and forcibly removed one of Shorty's silver rosettes. It was the rosette they heard *pweeing* its way down past the corral.

"Couldn't hit you without a shotgun," jeered Bud Hough.

"Accident—mebby," said MattSturgis.

"Mebby," said Shorty dryly. "Peek around there and see what he's doin', Alex."

"When I'm too old to be of any use," grinnedAlex. "Youdoyourownpeekin'."

They did not know that Luke had gone in the kitchen and filled his tin cup again, and was now sitting on the steps. The home-made liquor had made his legs unstable. He had two more shells in his gun, so he fired both of them at the door of the bunkhouse. One struck the roof of the stable and the other hit the ground halfway between Luke and the bunkhouse and ricocheted its way off across the hills.

But the boys behind the bunkhouse stayed where they were for about fifteen minutes more, before Shorty mustered up nerve enough to peek around the corner again. Only the soles of Luke's boots were visible, sticking through the kitchen doorway.

They surrounded the recumbent form of the old cook, took the gun from his unresisting hand and told him what they thought of him. But it was all right with old Luke Jones; he couldn't hear them.

"Hitch up the buckboard, Bud," ordered Shorty. "We're goin' to ship him

away from here right now. When he wakes up, he won't be the TD cook any longer.''

So they took old Luke to Pineville, along with all his possessions, and left him at the livery stable to sleep off his prune juice. McLean and Bud Hough, who had brought him to town, met Tolman and told him what Luke had done.

Tolman didn't like the idea of losing a cook, but he said nothing. Tolman was upset over the killing of Shearer and the robbery of the bank. Being a director and a heavy depositor, he was naturally much concerned.

HASHKNIFE and Sleepy were with Oscar Johnson, when the stage came in that afternoon, and they noticed that Windy had a passenger—a middle aged, thin faced man, who wore glasses and was dressed in a rusty black suit.

The passenger met Sam Hall and Old Man Beebee, and the three of them walked out to the schoolhouse. It was almost four o'clock when they came, so they waited until Marion dismissed school.

When the last pupil had left the room they walked in. Marion looked at them wonderingly, but she did not have to wait long for an explanation.

"Miss Evans, this here is Mr. Long," said Sam Hall, in his nasal drawl. "Mr. Long teached the school about a month last term when our reg'lar teacher quit. Now, we've been thinkin' it over and we come to the conclusion that this here ain't no job for a lady, so we've done hired Mr. Long to take over the school."

Marion gasped.

"You mean, to take my position?"

"Yes'm," said Beebee firmly. "That's the idea, ma'am. He will begin teachin' t'morrow mornin'."

"But such a thing is unheard of," protested Marion. "You told me I was to have the school for this term."

"Yeah, we did think so. But you—well, you ain't been so satisfactory, ma'am. A lot of the wimmin' ain't satisfied, you see."

"So the women run the school, instead of the trustees."

"We don't want no hard feelin's," said Sam Hall quickly.

In a dazed way Marion gathered up her belongings and left the schoolhouse, while Beebee, Hall and the new teacherwaited for her to go. She did not tell them goodby.

"Pers'nally," said Sam Hall, after Marion had gone, "I think she's so pretty that the wimmin got jealous."

"A paragon of pulchritude," said Long seriously.

"I been tryin' to think of that," said Beebee.

"You have, like hell!" snorted Sam Hall. "The only big word you know is asafœdita; and you only know that because you wear it in a bag, hanging around your neck to keep away disease."

Marion went straight home, heartsick over her dismissal, wondering what to do next. There was no one at home, so she dumped her books on the porch and sat down to adjust her thoughts. That noon she had heard of the bank robbery and murder of the cashier, but all that had faded to insignificance now.

She was so deep in her own thoughts that she did not see Andy Hastings ride up to the gate in the B Arrow buckboard and tie his team, nor did she look up until he was standing at the bottom of the steps, hat in hand.

"I came past the schoolhouse," he told her. "Old Man Beebee told me you wasn't there no more, so I came here to find you, ma'am."

Mrs. Cooper came to the gate, looked curiously at the team and came on up the walk. Andy glanced at her, but turned back to Marion.

"I didn't have much hopes," he confessed slowly, as Ma Cooper halted beside him, looking inquiringly at Marion. "I talked it over with Tex, and he said you wouldn't come. But jist the same I hitched up the buckboard."

"I don't understand," said Marion blankly.

"It's Jimmy, the little feller, ma'am.

He's got typhoid, the doctor says. He keeps callin' for you all the time. He don't know none of us, ma'am—jist wants you."

"That's your little boy, Andy?" asked Ma Cooper.

"Yes'm, my boy."

"But Marion can't go out there, Andy. She's got her school."

Marion lifted her eyes and looked at Ma Cooper.

"I've lost the school, Ma. A man, a Mr. Long, from Garnet, has been hired to take my place."

"Oh, you don't mean that, Marion."

"Old Beebee told me," said Andy.

"Yes, it's a fact," said Marion slowly. "They were not satisfied with my work."

Andy sighed and adjusted the band on his hat.

"I'm sorry you can't go, ma'am. Mebby he'll be all right. I jist thought mebby you—thank you jist the same."

He started away, but Marion stopped him.

"I guess I'll go," she said. "It—it don't make so much difference now."

"That's the stuff!" exclaimed Ma Cooper. "You jist go. If a lot of these Pineville fork tongues want to talk—let 'em talk. Wait'll I meet Old Lady Beebee and Hall. You jist go, honey. If you want to stay all night, you stay. I'll come out tomorrow myself. You jist grab a nightgown and go."

Ma Cooper fairly "shooed" her out to the buckboard and helped her climb in. Andy was so excited that he almost upset the buckboard.

"Don't go the back way!" yelled Ma Cooper. "Go down the main street. Give 'em all a chance to talk."

And they did go down the main street, with the roan team on the run and Marion clinging to her hat with one hand and the seat with the other. They almost ran over Old Man Beebee and Sam Hall, who were a bit slow at getting out of the'road.

"Looks to me as though Andy Hastings was a-runnin' away with her!" panted Beebee, wiping the dust and gravel out of his face.

"Looks t' me as though that damn team was runnin' away with both of 'em," grunted Sam Hall. "I felt sorry for her. I never done a dirty trick like that before, and if it hadn't been for your wife—"

"Your wife was as bad as mine, Sam."

"Worse. Old Hennery Goff won't speak to either one of us now, 'cause we outvoted him. Well, I hope them wimmin will be satisfied."

"Mine won't be," wailed Beebee. "She showed her stren'th. Next time she opens her mouth about the school, I'll resign. I'm jist as ashamed as you are, Sam, mebby more."

"You're pretty low in your own estimation, if you are."

THE KILLING of Shearer and robbery of the bank awoke Pineville to the realization that some very bad actors were in their midst and, as a result, quite a crowd of men met at Hootie's store that night in a sort of indignation meeting.

Their criticism of the sheriff's office was rather more destructive than constructive, because none of them had any ideas worth working on. Mort Heffner was called in to give his opinion, and admitted that there was nothing his office could do.

"We hired a detective," he told them. "The cattle association sent us a man, who was warned out of the country, before he had a chance to do much. You men know how much chance a detective would have around here. The sheriff wants to stop these killings and robberies as much as you do, but he can't do a thing."

"Ain't nobody safe," complained Lester Cline.

"Not if they've got money," added Beebee.

"Well," declared Sam Hall angrily, "if the law don't do somethin' pretty soon, we'll take the law in our own hands."

Heffner laughed shortly.

"You probably heard somebody say that, Sam. But go ahead and take the

law in your own hands. It is your privilege to apprehend criminals. Don't let me stop you, gentlemen. In fact, I wish you would do something."

Hashknife and Sleepy were rather amused at the expressed opinions of those present, but left the meeting before it broke up and went to the Stormy River Saloon, where they found old Luke Jones at the bar, telling the wide world that he had not been treated right by the TD outfit.

His prune whisky jag had left him in a bitter frame of mind. His shirt and overalls were bespecked with hay from the livery stable and one lock of his thin hair stuck straight out from his forehead, like an accusing finger.

"Fired because I sung," he declared. "Tha'sall I done; jist sung m'self out of a job."

"There's different grades of songs," said the bartender.

"Mine's top hand," declared Luke. "I'm a natcheral singer. No sense in firin' a natcheral singer, is there? We're few and far between. And I'm a cook, too. You ask Tolman. And you jist wait till he hears about me bein' fired by that squirt of a Shorty Gallup. Gimme liquor, that my gorge may not rise and suffy-cate me."

"You've been with the TD a long time, ain't you, Luke?"

"Long? My Lord! When I came here, Stormy River was jist a little spring."

Luke leered around, as if challenging anybody to dispute that statement. He fixed his eyes on Hashknife and a smile twisted his lips.

"C'm'ere and have a drink. I 'member you, tall feller. You 'member me? I was the cook at the TD the mornin' Grimes quit out there. I shore 'member you. C'mon and have drink."

"I remember you," grinned Hashknife.

He didn't want the drink, but he did want to get acquainted with Luke Jones.

"Invite your pardner," said Luke. "Put out the glasses, bartender; we're havin' comp'ny. Say!" He turned to Hashknife. "I'm fired. They can all go to hell, as far as I'm concerned. I jist had two good friends on that ranch. One was Buck Dennig and the other was Grimes. One's gone to a better land and the other stayed around here."

"They tell me Buck Dennig was a fine feller," said Hashknife.

"You didn't know him? Pardner, he was a *man*."

"That's what I've heard."

"Beloved by everybody." Luke tried to keep back the tears.

"That's what I've heard. But they never found out who killed him."

"Never." Luke wiped the tears away with the back of his hand. "And they never will."

"You think they won't?" asked Hashknife softly.

Luke was not too drunk. He looked sharply at Hashknife.

"What do you know?" he asked.

"Nothin'." Hashknife toyed with his glass. "But murder will always out, you know, Jones."

"Tha'sall right."

"What do you know, Jones?"

Luke paused with the glass at his lips. He placed it on the bar and squinted at himself in the mirror.

"I don't know nothin'—much."

Some other men came in, and Luke shifted his interest to them. Hashknife knew there was nothing more to be learned from Luke Jones at present, but he had a feeling that the former TD cook knew something.

That night as they went to bed Sleepy asked—

"Have you got anythin' to work on at all?"

"Two murders and three robberies," smiled Hashknife, "not to mention the fact that we're still here and our eight hours were up a long time ago."

"They were bluffin', Hashknife."

"Mebby."

"Well, they ain't made good."

Hashknife smiled.

"The note didn't say they'd kill us five minutes after our time was up. Give 'em time, cowboy."

TEX BLANCO stopped short in the center of the living room at the B Arrow and looked at Marion. Tex had been working late and was still clad in his wide, batwing chaps, his features streaked with dust. He had left the ranch about the time Andy Hastings had gone to Pineville and did not know Marion had come back with him.

"I didn't think you'd come," he said. "I told Andy I didn't think you would, but he said he'd try."

"I guess I just came," said Marion simply.

Tex shook his head slowly.

"I—we all wanted you to come, Marion, but I think we did wrong in askin' you to come out here."

It doesn't make any difference, now. You see, I've lost my school."

"You've lost your school?" He came toward her. "I don't know what you mean, Marion."

She shrugged her shoulders wearily.

"Just lost it. They hired a man to take my place."

"They hired a man—but why?"

"Oh, it doesn't matter. They said I wasn't satisfactory."

Tex stared at her for a moment.

"They know that wasn't true," he said firmly, "and you know it, too, Marion. It was my fault. Oh, I know; it was because I came there. I'm to blame for you losin' that job."

Marion shook her head.

"No, that wasn't it."

"Oh, I know. I—I guess I contaminated the kids."

He turned away and flung his sombrero on a chair.

"Jimmy told me what the children said. And they don't talk, unless they hear things at home. How is he, Marion?"

"Sleeping. The doctor promised to come out tonight. You heard what happened in Pineville?"

"Judd told me."

Mrs. Blanco came in from the kitchen and Tex went to her, bending down to kiss the little old lady.

"Ye are a little late," she said, "but I've kept the supper warm. And were ye surprised to see the lady with us? Ah, it was fine of her to come. Do ye know it, the boy went fast asleep when she talked to him, Tex?"

"It was mighty fine of her to come; Jimmy will get well now."

"He will, thanks to a most unselfish young lady. Ah, ye are unselfish, though."

Mrs. Blanco put her arms around Marion's waist, patting her on the arm.

"Do ye know, my dear, you are the first woman to come in this house in years?"

"I don't understand what you mean," smiled Marion.

"They'd know in Pineville. Folks avoid this place as though it had a plague. 'Tis a bad reputation the B Arrow has. Aye, that's a fact. They say that the old lady smokes a pipe. And she does. She may put unclean things in her mouth, but—but never mind. Tex, I'll set ye a supper."

She patted Marion on the arm and hurried away to get the supper for Tex.

"I think she's wonderful," said Marion.

Tex nodded slowly.

"You don't know half of it, Marion. She's my silver linin'. I'd have left this country a long time ago, but for her. The Spanish half of me gets mad and wants to run away, but the Irish half listens to her, and I stay. What pleasure can she get out of life? No women ever come here. You don't know what it means to be shunned. When I take her to Pineville the women avoid her. They all avoid me, too. But that doesn't hurt me.

"That's what a reputation will do, Marion. I've killed men in fair fights. They had an even break. But they call me a killer. I'm not a killer. God knows, I'm not. And then some dirty voiced liar hinted that we stole cattle. It don't take long for such things to get around. Killers and cow thieves! No wonder they leave us alone. They say I killed Buck Dennig—"

Tex laughed bitterly. He started to

say something about the stage robbery, but checked himself in time. Mrs. Blanco called him from the kitchen, and he went out to her.

Marion sat down on a couch covered with a gaudy blanket. It was quite cool, and one of the boys had built a fire in the big fireplace. The flames crackled merrily, and a little yellow canary in a homemade cage began singing softly.

Old Doctor Brent came before Tex finished supper. Jimmy was still asleep, and the doctor was well satisfied. Mrs. Blanco told him the effect Marion had had on Jimmy, and the old doctor thanked her for coming.

"I don't blame Jimmy." He smiled, looking closely at Marion, as they were introduced. "Don't blame him in the least. Fact of the matter is, I envy Jimmy."

He chuckled to himself, as he gave them orders. As he left he put a hand on Marion's shoulder.

"Mrs. Cooper told me about the school," he said. "Don't worry about it. I hope you can stay here until the boy is out of danger."

"Oh, I don't think I can stay here very long, Doctor."

"I don't expect him to be sick *very* long."

That night the cowboys all sat around the living room, telling stories. Little Jimmy was worse and babbled incessantly about the school. No one went to bed. The cowboys drowsed heavily, awoke to roll cigarets and drowsed some more. They were all fond of Jimmy.

Morning came. Jimmy went to sleep and the cowboys dragged out to breakfast. It was about nine o'clock when Mrs. Cooper came. It was the first time she had ever been on the ranch, but Mrs. Blanco greeted her warmly. Marion was asleep on a couch in the living room, but awoke at sound of Mrs. Cooper's voice.

Ma Cooper fairly hugged her.

"I met Mrs. Beebee this mornin'," chuckled Ma Cooper. "She tried to avoid me, but I cornered her, and what I told her would take the polish off a mahogany table. Whoo-ee-e-e! Oh, we had it hot and heavy. She swears you eloped with Andy Hastings. Ha-ha-ha-ha! Well, how's the little boy?"

"He's asleep, Ma Cooper. Had a bad night, though. The doctor wants me to stay here until Jimmy is better."

Mrs. Cooper lifted her brows quickly, a smile in her eyes.

"The doctor does, eh? Well, always obey the doctor, honey."

Marion flushed quickly, as she added—

"But I can't very well do that, Ma Cooper."

"Why not? Bless your heart, of course you can, if you want to. I'll send your trunk out. And when you get all through with the doctor's orders, come back and live with us. Hootie says he misses you. That's quite an honor. He never misses me."

THE THREE women sat down and talked for an hour. Mrs. Blanco seemed to grow younger every minute. Tex came in and stood against the dining room entrance, listening to the chatter, a smile on his lips.

He tiptoed through the hall and went to the bedroom, where Andy was sitting beside the bed. Jimmy was awake, but his little face looked pinched and drawn and his blue eyes clouded. He knew Tex and smiled.

"Hello, little pardner," said Tex softly.

"He asked for you, Tex," said Andy, "asked me to have you sing to him."

"Sing to him? Jimmy do you want me to sing to you?"

"About the rose, Uncle Tex," weakly.

Tex looked queerly at Andy. A strange request for a sick boy. But Tex turned to a corner and picked up an old guitar that he had not played for a long time. Softly he tuned it, while the little fellow watched him wearily.

He began singing softly, in a crooning tenor, and little Jimmy closed his eyes, listening. Andy rested his chin on his hands, tears in his eyes. Out in the living

room the three women stopped talking and listened.

"He's singing to the lad," whispered Mrs. Blanco. "It's the song he likes best. Listen—"

"You may search everywhere, but none can compare,
With my wild Irish Rose."

"He calls it his rose song."

". . . and some day for my sake, they mayletme take
The bloom from my wild Irish Rose."

The voice crooned the end of the song. Ma Cooper held out her hand to Mrs. Blanco.

"I'm goin' now," she said softly. "I'm glad I heard the song, Mrs. Blanco. I'll come again. When you come to Pineville, come and see me, will you. Marion, I'll send out your trunk."

She hurried out to the buckboard and rode away, leaving Marion and Mrs. Blanco in the doorway, looking after her.

"That song made her cry," said Mrs. Blanco softly.

"It almost made me cry, too," confessed Marion.

Tex came out, closing the door softly behind him.

"He's asleep again," said Tex. "He was awake and knew me and Andy. Can you imagine it, he asked me to sing."

"I—I don't blame him," said Marion. "We heard you."

"Pshaw! I was just singin' for Jimmy."

Ma Cooper sent the team spinning over the road to Pineville. She was glad she had visited the B Arrow, and she decided to go again. As strange as it may seem, she had never before exchanged a dozen words with Mrs. Blanco. She had found her a delightful old Irish lady.

"Got a lot more class than some of these Pineville holier-than-thous," she declared to herself. "And everybody said she was an ignorant old pipe smoker! Ignorant! If some of 'em had half her brains, they'd die from headache."

She drove up in front of Hootie's store and found Oscar Johnson, who seemed to have nothing better to do than to brace up one of the porch posts.

"Are you awful busy, Oscar?" she asked.

"Not right now, Mrs. Cooper."

"I was just wonderin' if you'd do me a big favor."

"Wouldn't be a bit surprised," he grinned.

"Well, I've got to get somebody to take this team and haul Miss Evans' trunk out to the B Arrow ranch."

"Out to the B Arrow ranch? Oh, yeah, shore. Is she goin' to stay out there?"

"Long enough to need her trunk."

"Uh-huh. Want me to go right away, Mrs. Cooper?"

"If you'll do it, Oscar."

"Ain't a bit busy."

"Well, get in and we'll load up at the house."

Oscar carried the trunk down to the buckboard. The back of the vehicle was hardly large enough to accommodate the trunk, and Oscar had no ropes to tie it on.

"But I reckon it'll ride there," he told her, as he climbed in. "I'll take it easy."

He drove out of town, holding the team in check. The last time he had driven a buggy team he had smashed the buggy, and he was going to be more careful this time. Everything went well until the crossing of Stormy River, and he swung a little too far down the stream, where some big boulders blocked a wheel, almost upset the buckboard and threw the trunk into the river.

Oscar yelled like an Indian, whipped the team to the shore, where he tied them to a snag, and then went galloping down the stream after the trunk, which had wedged on a sand bar twenty feet below where it had gone into the water.

"If I ever do anythin' right, I'll die next minute," declared Oscar, sloshing out of the river with the trunk in his arms, the water running a stream from one of the corners.

He placed the trunk on the sand and surveyed it sadly.

"Wetter 'n hell!"

He sat down on it, removed his boots and poured out the water, while the team watched him, possibly wondering what it was all about. It suddenly occurred to him that he might be able to dry out the things, so he opened the trunk, which was not locked.

It was fairly well filled with feminine attire, the top things being dry. He dumped them out on the sand, grunting disgustedly when he found the things sodden in the bottom of the trunk.

"Well, f'r heaven's sake!" he grunted, and lifted a big, pearl handled Colt forty-five from the bottom of the trunk. It was fully loaded.

Ignoring the rest of the things, Oscar sat down, with his back against the trunk and examined the gun. Oscar was not very quick minded, but something seemed to tell him that a schoolteacher, under ordinary conditions, would not own a new gun of that size and description.

He removed the cartridges and amused himself for a while by snapping it at different objects. He liked the trigger pull and the balance of the weapon. The pearl flashed in the sun like an opal as Oscar polished it with a none too clean handkerchief.

He took out his own gun and compared them. They were the same model, same caliber. But Oscar's gun was shiny in spots, nicked, the trigger pull altogether too heavy for accurate work. In fact, Oscar's gun was old. Suddenly a bright idea occurred to Oscar.

He took his pocket knife, unscrewed the handles of both guns and changed handles, putting the pearl ones on his own gun. Now he had a new gun with old handles, while his old gun, resplendent in mother of pearl, went into the bottom of the trunk, along with the sodden clothes.

"What in hell would a schoolma'am want of a new gun, anyway?" he asked himself. "A gun's a gun. It ain't stealin', if you put back as good as you take."

Thereupon Oscar loaded the things back in the trunk, put it back on the buckboard and headed for the B Arrow. Marion was asleep, much to Oscar's relief, and Mrs. Blanco told him to leave the trunk on the porch. Oscar left it in a sunny place, hoping it would dry out a little, at least.

HE DROVE back, stabled the horses in Cooper's barn and went back to the office, well satisfied with himself The inquest over the body of Guy Shearer was held that afternoon. Hashknife and Sleepy attended, but were not called as witnesses. The usual verdict was rendered by the jury.

The sheriff had heard a number of remarks reflecting on his ability as a peace officer, and he was not in a good frame of mind when he went back to his office with Oscar.

"What do they expect me to do?" he asked plaintively. "I never had no trainin' at this here job. To hear some of them whippoorwills talkin', you'd think I ought to have an X-ray eye. I'm sick of the whole danged job."

"Same here," agreed Oscar. "I took this job to help you out, Pat, and you don't need no help, not for what you've done."

"We're a awful mess, Oscar."

"Speak for yourself. I'm all right for what I'm intended. A deputy ain't supposed to have any brains."

Oscar took off his heavy belt and gun and placed them on the desk, after which he sighed deeply and stretched out on a cot. The sheriff stared sad eyed at the belt and gun, thinking over the woes of his position. His fingers picked absently at the cartridges in the belt loops.

He ran his fingers over the butt of the gun, not because he wanted to feel of the gun, but because of something to do. Then he shut one eye and looked at the exposed breech of the gun. After a moment's scrutiny, he drew the gun from the holster and looked at it closely.

"Where'd you git the new gun, Oscar?" he asked.

Oscar sat up like a mechanical toy, quick and jerky.

"Wh-what gun?"

"This here one."

The sheriff held it up.

"Oh, that one."

Oscar swore inwardly at himself for leaving that gun on the desk.

"New gun, ain't it, Oscar?"

"Pretty new." Oscar sank down again.

"Pretty damn new, it looks to me. You never had it before."

"No," said Oscar. "It's almost new, Pat."

"Where'd you get it?"

"Where'd I get it?"

"Yeah, where'd you get it?"

"Oh, I dunno."

"You dunno?"

"Well, my stars!" Oscar sat up and glowered at the sheriff. "What's the difference where I got it? When you start harpin' on anythin', you never know when to quit."

"I ain't harpin'; I just asked you where you got it."

"Where I got it, eh? Ain't that harpin'?"

"Well, I just asked you. You're my deputy. Ain't I got a right to ask you where you got a new gun?"

"Got a right, yes."

"Well, where didja get it, Oscar?"

"You mean, who did I get it *from?*"

"If that's the answer, yes."

"I didn't get it from nobody."

"Didja find it?"

Oscar got off the cot and hitched up his pants. He was mad enough to tell where and how he got it—and he did.

The sheriff listened, open mouthed, while Oscar described how he lost the schoolteacher's trunk in Stormy River, how he recovered it and wanted to dry out the clothes, and where he found the new gun.

"And that answers your question, Pat," he finished. "Now forgit it, will you?"

"And you took the pearl handles off it and put 'em on your old smoke wagon, eh? You traded guns—Oscar Johnson, you damn fool!"

The sheriff got to his feet and advanced on the cot, half choking, as he tried to talk.

"O-o-oh, you damn fool!" he wailed. "Who had a new six-gun with pearl handles? Who did? Tex Blanco! He lost it at that holdup. That's what them wimmin stopped and picked up. That teacher got it. She's stuck on Tex, Oscar. She put the gun in her trunk, and you—you traded—oh, my soul! Oscar you've ruined the evidence!"

Oscar sat up, rubbing his nose. Then he got to his feet and hitched up his pants. He looked at the sheriff sadly and shook his head.

"Well, you kept on harpin' until you got an answer, didn't you. Curiosity killed the cat, and it made you pretty sick. Now what'll we do?"

"Keep our mouths shut!" snapped the sheriff. "If we ever let this get out, they'll laugh us out of the valley."

"Well, I'm not goin' to tell it. Didn't I try to even keep it from you?"

"You jist the same as stole that gun."

"I traded," said Oscar firmly. "Mine had a heavy pull on the trigger, and it throwed me off. Some day I might accidently kill somebody."

The sheriff stumped around the office, while Oscar laid down again and began rolling a cigaret. Finally the sheriff sat down again, holding his head in his hands.

"If I had knowed about that gun—" said Oscar slowly. "But I never once thought about the schoolma'am havin' Tex's gun in her trunk. Why should I? I never even remembered that Tex had a pearl handle six-gun. I remember it now."

"It's too late now. It's an old gun that's got the pearl handles on it now. Tex could laugh at us."

"Unless you might make that girl admit findin' it, Pat. If you caught her before she found that gun in the trunk. Even at that, she might not see that the gun was different."

"You mean we might bluff her into admittin' that her and Mrs. Cooper found the gun there?"

"Why not? If we could get the gun, without Tex seein' it, we can change the handles back again."

"Yeah, we might do that."

THE SHERIFF sighed and lifted his head. It was worth a try. He started to suggest something more, but stopped short. Hashknife Hartley was standing in the doorway, leaning against the door frame, slowly rolling a cigaret, his face very grave.

"We might bluff her," said Oscar, "but she's got to be talked to before she empties that trunk, Pat. She'll see it's been tampered with, and she'll get scared and give Tex back his gun."

Hashknife looked at Oscar, who was lying on his back, staring at the ceiling, all oblivious to Hashknife's presence. The sheriff cleared his throat harshly, glared at Oscar murderously.

"It won't be any job to change the handles," said Oscar.

"Are you goin' to keep runnin' off at the mouth?" asked the sheriff explosively.

Oscar sat up, took one look at Hashknife and sank back.

"He's got the hoof-and-mouth disease," said the sheriff wearily. "Every time he opens his mouth he gets his foot in it."

"The inquest didn't amount to much," said Hashknife.

"Not much. How could it?"

"Did Shearer have any relatives, Sheriff?"

"In Chicago, I think. Rice sent some telegrams, and we'll wait to hear what they want done with the body."

"None around here, eh?"

"Matt Sturgis is a forty-second cousin, or somethin' like that."

"Sturgis of the TD outfit?"

"Yeah. Shearer worked over at Garnet quite a while. Nice sort of a feller."

"What kind of a person was Buck Dennig?"

"Wild as a hawk, but square as a die."

"Get along well with Tolman?"

"Oh, shore."

"Like hell!" snorted Oscar. "They used to quarrel a lot. You must remember I worked for 'em."

"Quarrel over what?" asked the sheriff. "I never heard it."

"Over money. Cleve Tolman gambled on the stock markets, and he got stuck a couple times pretty hard. Buck was a gambler, too, but not on the markets. I heard 'em hot and heavy one night a year or so ago. I reckon Cleve had used some of the partnership money. Anyway, they decided to each bank their share after that."

"I found out after Buck's death that they had separate bank accounts," said the sheriff, "but I never knowed why."

"Well, that was why," said Oscar. "Buck shore was mad, and he gave Tolman hell. I couldn't help hearin' it. I thought it was all off with the partnership, but next day they was all right again. But outside of their quarrels, they was good enough friends, I reckon."

Hashknife left the office in a few minutes. He had heard enough to know that in some way Oscar Johnson had found the gun in Marion's trunk and had left his gun in its place. And he had also heard enough to know that the sheriff intended getting a confession, if possible, and recovering the evidence.

But both the sheriff and deputy were afraid that Hashknife had heard too much.

"I don't *sabe* that feller," declared Oscar. "You don't know whether he's for you or against you."

"Well," said the sheriff sadly, "he prob'ly knows that it ain't Tex's gun in that trunk. He kinda antagonizes me."

"You don't suppose he's in cahoots with Tex, do you?"

"You git some real bright ideas, Oscar. Nossir, Tex Blanco held up that stage, as sure as shootin'. Mebby him and Judd. Anyway, there was more than one man. We won't do nothin' now, Oscar. We'll wait until dark, and then go out to the B Arrow. We've got to take a chance that she ain't found that gun. And even if she has, she wouldn't rec'nize it."

"That's a good idea," applauded Oscar. "But I hope Tex ain't there.

Anyway, he don't know about that gun, so we're safe, as far as that's concerned."

Hashknife found Sleepy at the Stormy River bar talking with Frank Shell, the owner of the saloon, and Dobe Severn. Matt Sturgis, Shorty Gallup and Alex McLean were playing pool at the rear of the room.

"What became of old Luke Jones?" asked Hashknife.

"He went to Garnet this mornin'," said Dobe. "Sobered up and pulled out, I guess. He'll probably get drunk in Garnet. He shore raised hell at the TD. Got drunk on prune whisky and pot-shotted everythin' around the place."

Hashknife wanted a chance to talk seriously with the old cook. Luke Jones had admitted that he knew something, and Hashknife wanted to know what that something might be. Sleepy went with him from the saloon, and they crossed the street to the bank, which was closed. Hashknife knew where John Rice lived. They found the old banker at home.

"I'll tell you what I want to see," explained Hashknife. "Buck Dennig cashed a check for ten thousand dollars the afternoon of the night he was killed, and I want to see that canceled check, if it still exists."

"Why, I suppose it still exists," said Rice. "But what is the idea of you wanting to see it?"

"Curiosity, I reckon, Mr. Rice."

"I'm sorry, but I—"

"Do you think Buck Dennig committed suicide?"

"That would have been impossible, Hartley."

"And you don't think he buried that ten thousand before he died, do you?"

"Buried it? Why would he bury it?"

"All right, he was murdered and robbed. If it isn't too much trouble, I'd like to see that check."

The old banker's mild blue eyes wavered under the steady stare of the gray ones, and he turned slowly on his heel.

"Wait until I get my hat," he said. "I—I suppose there would be no harm in it, Hartley."

They walked back to the bank, where Rice unlocked it, and they went inside. It did not take Rice long to find the check, along with Buck Dennig's statement and several other smaller checks, drawn by Buck. Hashknife spread them all out on the counter and examined them closely. He was not an expert on handwriting, but his eyes were keen. Finally he took out the warning note he had received and examined it again.

The old banker did not seem interested. The canceled checks meant nothing to Sleepy, who talked with Rice about the murder and robbery. It seemed that there was a difference in the opinions of the several directors of the bank, and no final decision had been made as to how soon the bank would resume operations.

"I suppose Cleve Tolman has taken over the TD ranch, ain't he?" asked Hashknife.

"Yes," nodded the banker. "I believe he has a court order to that effect. Buck Dennig died intestate and, as far as any one knows, he has no relatives. Naturally the ranch and all of Dennig's personal goods belong to Tolman."

Hashknife folded up the statement and checks, handing them back to Rice.

"Thank you, Mr. Rice," he said. "Keep those where we can get at 'em, in case we need 'em again."

"Yes, certainly. Are you a—a detective, Mr. Hartley?"

"Under the circumstances," smiled Hashknife.

"What was the queer idea of lookin' at them checks?" asked Sleepy, after they left the bank.

"Just playin' a hunch, Sleepy. After supper we're ridin' to Garnet to have a talk with Luke Jones. I hope he's sober enough to come clean, or drunk enough to talk."

"Have you hit the trail, cowboy?"

"I dunno. Anyway, I've got a couple blazes in sight."

MARION did not discover that her trunk had been soaked in the river. Mrs. Blanco had ordered one of the cowboys to move it into the room Marion

was occupying, and she had had no cause to open it. Little Jimmy was so sick that both women spent most of their time in the room with him.

Tex came in from work about five o'clock. The doctor had not been there since morning, so Tex sent Corbett after him. Tex was pleased to find that Marion's trunk had been brought to the ranch. Neither Tex nor Marion had mentioned that gun again, and Tex did not know that Marion suspected Hashknife of overhearing what she had told Tex that night about finding his gun at the scene of the holdup.

Tex had offered no explanation, no alibi. Marion did not want to believe that Tex robbed that stage, but the evidence was all against him.

The doctor did not get there until after supper and he decided to stay awhile and watch the patient. Mrs. Blanco sat in the bedroom with the doctor and Andy Hastings, while Tex and Marion sat in front of the fireplace in the living room.

"It's funny how things break," said Tex. "Who would ever have bet on any kind of odds that you would ever be stayin' here at the B Arrow, Marion?"

"I suppose not."

"But I'm glad you are. I'm sorry for little Jimmy, but his sickness brought me luck. It gave me a chance to see you for more than a minute at a time."

Marion stared in the flames, her chin resting in her palm.

"I know what you're thinkin'," he said slowly. "I'm no fool. You're thinkin' how much better it would be if I was a respectable citizen, instead of a man under suspicion of bein' a murderer, stage robber and a lot of other crimes."

"I wasn't thinking of that, Tex," she said quickly.

"But I am, you know."

"I don't know it, Tex."

They sat there together for a long time, saying nothing, while the flames crackled in the old fireplace. Finally Tex walked over to a table, picked up an old photograph album and brought it over to Marion.

"Some of the old Blanco family," he said, opening the old book. "Oh, they were respectable enough, I suppose. I'm the black sheep of the family. Some of those tintypes are rather good. There's my father, when he was twenty. I reckon he was a gay young blade of Seville. Always wanted to be a bull fighter, he said. Came to California to pick up gold on the streets."

Tex laughed shortly.

"Didn't find the gold, so he went into the cattle business—and found it. That next one is an uncle of mine. He was a bull fighter in Mexico City, until he found a bull that was color blind. Saw the man instead of the red cloth."

Mrs. Blanco came from the bedroom.

"The doctor is still there," she said. "He thinks the lad is gettin' along well."

"I was just showing Marion some old pictures," said Tex smiling.

"Aye, and they're old, too," smiled Mrs. Blanco.

Some kodak pictures had been left between the leaves of the album and, as Tex started to gather them up, Marion stopped him and took one of the pictures. It was a very good snapshot of Tex and another man, standing close together, holding their big hats in their hands, with a corner of a corral fence for a background. The faces were well lighted.

Marion stared at the picture for several moments, and her face was white as she looked up at Tex.

"Who is that—that man with you, Tex?" she asked.

"That?" Tex laughed shortly. "That's Buck Dennig."

"Buck Dennig? The man who was—who was killed?"

"Yes, Marion. Go ahead and say it."

"Buck Dennig?"

"It was taken about five years ago, Marion."

"Did you know anything about him, Tex?"

"Why, what's the matter?" asked Mrs. Blanco. "Your face is all white, lass."

Marion shook her head, and her hands trembled, as she examined the picture

again, staring down at the smiling face of Buck Dennig.

"Nobody knew much about him," said Tex. "He had no relatives, I guess. He never spoke about his past. I don't—"

Came a sharp knock on the front door. Tex walked over and opened the door, admitting the sheriff and deputy. They did not stop to wait for an invitation to enter. Oscar stopped at the doorway, while the sheriff advanced toward Marion and Mrs. Blanco. Tex still had his hand on the door.

"I've been talkin' to Mrs. Cooper," said the sheriff, addressing Marion. "She didn't want to get in bad with the law, so she talked quite a lot. Now, it's your turn. I want that pearl handled six-shooter you've got in your trunk."

Marion's face was whiter now, as she looked up at the grim faced sheriff, her mind trying to conceive that Ma Cooper had divulged their secret.

"What pearl handled six-shooter are you talkin' about?" demanded Tex.

The sheriff did not turn his head, as he replied:

"That's my business with this young lady. You keep out of it."

"That's what I say," growled Oscar, trying to keep his nerve.

"Mrs. Cooper told you?" Marion's voice was a whisper.

"Shore thing. Now, you dig up that gun. I could put you in jail for doin' a thing like that. Hurry up."

"What did she tell you?" asked Marion weakly.

"About you findin' that gun at the holdup. We know whose gun it is, and we're goin'—"

Tex acted quickly. In fact he acted so quickly that Oscar Johnson's feet went from under him and he fell along the wall, clawing for support, his holster dangling empty. When the sheriff turned, Oscar crashed down on the floor, and they heard the porch railing creak, as Tex vaulted it.

The sheriff sprang toward the doorway, while Oscar swore bitterly and got back to his feet, feeling for his gun, which Tex had taken away.

"Let him go!" snapped the sheriff "We'llgethim,Oscar. Whatwewantright now is that six-gun. Where's the trunk?"

But before Marion could tell him, from somewhere out in the darkness came the thudding report of a revolver shot. In another moment came a spatter of shots, as if several guns were discharged close together. In possibly five seconds there were three more shots, spaced about two seconds apart.

The sheriff and deputy seemed rooted to the spot, unable to understand what it was all about. Outside, somebody was shouting questions; a man swore wonderingly. Frank Judd ran up the steps to the front door and stepped inside, staring at the sheriff and deputy.

"What in hell is goin' on around here?" he demanded.

"God knows, I don't," said the sheriff.

SOME one came in to the kitchen, and they all went into the dining room. It was Hashknife Hartley, half carrying, half dragging Sleepy Stevens. Hashknife's face was white in the lamplight. The doctor had stepped out from the bedroom, and now he went straight to Hashknife.

"In here," said Mrs. Blanco, "on the couch. Don't lay him on the floor."

Judd grasped Sleepy's feet, and they carried him in to the living room couch.

"For God's sake, what happened?" asked the sheriff.

He had forgotten all about the trunk.

Hashknife shook his head, his lips shut tightly, while the doctor cut away Sleepy's vest and shirt, trying to determine the extent of his injuries. So interested were they that they did not see Tex Blanco return.

Marion was first to see him. He was standing in the doorway, leaning weakly against the wall, while the left shoulder of his pale blue silk shirt was gradually assuming a scarlet cast. The blood seemed to have drained from his face, and his brown eyes were filled with pain.

"Tex!" whispered Marion. "Oh, Tex, you're hurt!"

"It's all right," he said weakly. "I'm all right."

Hashknife stepped over and helped Tex to a chair, where he slumped wearily. Hashknife tore away the shirt and began mopping away the blood. Tex had been shot rather high up through the shoulder. From the way he carried his arm, Hashknife felt sure that no bones were broken.

"In the name of God, what happened?" demanded the sheriff. "Who done all the shootin', anyway, Hartley?"

Hashknife shook his head and watched the doctor.

"Nasty wound," said the doctor. "Rib probably saved his life. Broke the rib, but turned the bullet. Went all the way through, but turned aside enough to give him a mighty good chance. Mrs. Blanco, will you get me plenty of hot water and cloths?"

He got up from the floor and walked over to Tex, who was gritting his teeth to keep upright.

"Lucky all around," muttered the doctor. "Clean through and never touched the bone. Miss Evans, you can help me, if you will."

He had noticed that Marion was on the verge of keeling over in a faint, so he used these means of bracing her nerve.

"Go out and help Mrs. Blanco fix the water. Nobody is going to die, my dear. Regular hospital, we've got here. Sheriff, if you can't think of anything else to do, try closing your mouth. It has been open for five minutes."

"Well!" snorted the sheriff. "Won't nobody tell me what happened? Two wounded men, and no explanation."

"I don't know, Sheriff," said Hashknife, looking down at Sleepy. "We rode in here, down by the gate, and somebody shot Sleepy. I didn't know he was hit until he fell off near the back door out there. I was shootin' at the flashes."

"I shot at somebody," muttered Tex, "but they shot me first. There was a lot of shootin', I think."

"Plenty," said Hashknife grimly.

"Why did you come out here, Hartley?" asked the sheriff.

"Why did you come out here?" retorted Hashknife.

"I guess you knew why. I came out here to get that gun, and I'm goin' to get it. You keep your nose out of my business, will you? I've got the goods on Tex Blanco, and I'll put that girl in jail with him for tryin' to destroy evidence. I don't know what your game is, but you better not monkey with the law."

"I'm not monkeyin' with the law," said Hashknife.

He looked at Frank Judd, who had been shifting around nervously.

"Go and get Miss Evans' trunk and bring it here, Judd."

"You never mind!" snapped the sheriff. "I'll get that there trunk and—"

"Aw, quit bluffin'," said Hashknife. "Get the trunk, Judd."

Judd brought the trunk and placed it in the center of the room.

"Open it up and find a six-shooter in it, will you?" requested Hashknife.

The sheriff swore impotently, as Judd dug deeply in the trunk. Mrs. Blanco and Marion came in, bringing the hot water and cloths. Marion stopped short at the sight of Frank Judd digging in her trunk. Finally he straightened up, holding the pearl handled gun in his hand.

Hashknife took it from him and showed it to Marion.

"Is that the gun you found at the place of the holdup?"

"Yes," she whispered.

"Fine," smiled Hashknife.

He walked over to Tex and held it before him.

"Is that your gun, Tex?" he asked.

Tex stared at it for a moment and looked up at Hashknife blankly.

"That's not my gun," he said evenly. "My gun was new."

"That's what I thought," said Hashknife seriously.

He turned the gun over in his hands, looking at it closely.

"There's two initials scratched on the

bottom of the trigger guard," he said slowly. "Looks like O. J."

Hashknife looked keenly at Oscar Johnson, but the deputy was not interested enough to look at him. Hashknife stepped over and handed the gun to the sheriff.

"There's your evidence, Sheriff."

The sheriff's face was a study in mixed emotions. He knew that the evidence was ruined now. His idea was to have secured the gun, switched the handles again, and to swear that the new gun was the one found in the trunk. He looked at Oscar and longed to bend the gun over his thick head. But all he could do was to accept defeat gracefully.

"All right, Hartley," he said thickly. "You'll hear more of this later. I'm not through with you—yet."

"Well, that's fine, Sheriff."

OSCAR followed the sheriff away from the ranch, glad to be out of the house, while Hashknife and Judd helped the doctor. Sleepy was still unconscious when they put him to bed. Hashknife wanted to take him to town, but the doctor would not listen to him.

"Right here he stays, Hartley, and right here I stay."

Tex refused to go to bed, but stretched out on the couch. He had lost considerable blood, and the heavy bullet had shocked him badly, but he felt better now. There were too many things to talk about for him to think of going to sleep.

He wanted to know how Oscar Johnson's revolver happened to be in Marion's trunk. He listened in amazement to what Hashknife told him. Of course, Hashknife did not hear all the story, but he had heard the sheriff and deputy say enough for him to build up the rest of the story.

"And you knew they would come after that gun tonight?" asked Marion.

"Wasn't sure, but I knew they intended to come and get it. They didn't want Tex to see that gun, until after they had switched handles again."

"You saved my bacon, Hartley," said Tex wearily. "They've got the goods on me, I guess. But I want you to know that I'm mighty grateful for what you've done for me."

"How grateful, Blanco?"

"I don't know what you mean, Hartley."

"Grateful enough to tell me about that holdup?"

"To tell you what about it?"

"How your pearl handled gun happened to be there."

"Looks as though I lost it, don't it?"

"Let's stop sparrin' around, Blanco. Where was you when that stage was robbed?"

Tex turned his head and stared at the fire several minutes, while they waited for him to speak.

"I didn't try to prove any alibi," he said slowly. "I'm not a good liar, and this sounds like a lie. Nobody would believe it, so I kept still. The night before the holdup I was goin' to Garnet to the dance.

"I left the house and went down to the stable to get my horse. As I stepped into the stable, somethin' hit me on the head, and I didn't know anythin' for quite a while. When I woke up I was tied tight, gagged and blindfolded. I had an awful headache and a thirst. You've read about men gettin' loose from ropes? Well, I couldn't. I reckon I rubbed all the skin off my wrists.

"I don't know how long it was before somebody came. I knew it was daylight, because I had felt the sun for a long time. They unfastened my legs and helped me to my feet, but didn't say a word. It was hard for me to stand up, even when I braced my legs.

"Then a man spoke to me and said he was goin' to cut my hands loose. He told me to leave the bandage on my eyes until I could count a hundred, before I took it off. He warned me that he was counting, too, and if I took it off too quick, he'd kill me. Then he cut my hands loose.

"My gun was gone. I felt for it first.

I counted a hundred before I took off that blindfold and gag. Then I found myself in a little clearing in the brush, about two miles from here. My horse was there, tied to a snag. My head was so sore I had to wear my hat on one side of my head, and I was so thirsty I couldn't talk. So I came home. I told mother, because she would believe."

"Sounds reasonable," said Hashknife seriously.

"Don't say that," replied Tex. "It sounds like a badly told lie."

"And somebody stole your gun, trying to make them think you robbed the stage!" exclaimed Marion.

"If you believe my story," sighed Tex. "I can't hardly believe it myself."

"Oh, I'm glad I found that gun. Suppose the sheriff had found it, Tex."

"I'd be in jail, I suppose. But, Marion, just before the sheriff came in tonight, you were looking at Buck Dennig's picture. What was it all about?"

Marion went to her trunk and, after a few moments, she came back and handed Tex a picture of a man.

"Why, that's Buck!" he said. "Buck Dennig."

"My brother," said Marion softly. "Blaine Evans."

"It's Buck Dennig all right," said Judd. "Little younger, but it's Buck, just the same, Miss Evans."

"Then Buck Dennig was my brother."

The doctor examined the picture, nodding slowly.

"That is the man we knew as Buck Dennig, Miss Evans."

"That's somethin' to shock Cleve Tolman," grinned Judd.

"They say I killed Buck Dennig," said Tex bitterly. "And I haven't even a good lie to use as an alibi. We quarreled that night. I reckon I would have killed him, because he called me a thief."

"I don't believe you killed him," said Marion.

"Well, I can't prove it, Marion. I suppose they are sayin' that I killed Guy Shearer and robbed the bank."

Hashknife reached in his pocket and drew out the hondo, which bore the brand of the B Arrow, and held it down in front of Tex.

"Who owns that hondo, Tex?" he asked.

Tex stared at it for a moment and took it in his good hand.

"That's mine," he said. "Where did you get it, Hartley?"

"On the floor of the bank, when we found Shearer. The rope was there, too, but the hondo had been cut off."

Tex stared at the hondo, turning it over in his hand.

"You found that on the floor—my rope and hondo?"

"The sheriff has the rope, I reckon. You can't identify a rope."

"Does he know you've got this hondo?"

"Nope, I sneaked it off the floor."

Tex lay back on his pillow and closed his eyes wearily.

"And I've got no lie to tell about that," he said. "I don't know who nor what you are, Hartley, but you've sure been a friend to me. That evidence would hang me."

"I suppose it would. Did you lose the rope?"

"I don't know. Never missed it if I did."

"Any of your boys carry a marked hondo?"

"I don't think so. Do you know any, Frank?"

Judd shook his head quickly.

"I guess not, Tex."

Hashknife put the hondo on the mantel.

"I'm goin' to Garnet," he told them. "Take good care of Sleepy, will you? He means more to me than anythin' on earth. I don't like to run away, when he's bogged down thataway, but he knows me and he'll understand why I went."

And without another word he went out to his horse and mounted in the dark.

"We better get you into a bed, Tex," suggested the doctor. "You probably don't realize that you are badly hurt."

"Yeah, I realize it, Doc," said Tex.

"but I'm all right, except that I don't know what it is all about. Who shot Stevens and me, I wonder? What was it all about, anyway?"

"I wish I knew," said Judd. "Andy is asleep in the bunkhouse, and Tommy and Kit are in Pineville. I ran out of the bunkhouse, when the shootin' started, but I couldn't see anybody. Who would want to shoot 'em, Tex?"

"Search me. I think the sheriff was mad enough to shoot somebody, but he's no bushwhacker. Who are these two men, I wonder? Nobody seems to know much about 'em."

"They seem all right," said Marion softly.

"They *are* all right," declared Tex. "They've proved it to me. How badly is Stevens hurt, Doc?"

"Bad enough to lay him up for awhile."

The doctor went back to where Sleepy was lying. Little Jimmy had decided to sleep through it all, and the doctor was satisfied with his condition.

IT WAS nearly midnight when Hashknife reached Garnet. He tied his horse at a hitchrack near the Overland Saloon, the big gambling house of the town, and went in. The place was fairly well filled and a number of games were running full blast.

Hashknife went along to the bar, where he stopped and looked over the room, which was hazy with tobacco smoke. He wanted to find Luke Jones, and he expected to find the hardboiled old TD cook where the drinks came fast.

The room buzzed with conversation, the click of chips, the droning voices of the dealers, while glasses clicked at the bar and spurs rasped along the metal bar rail.

No one paid any attention to the tall cowboy who leaned against the bar, smoking a cigaret. At the rear of the room were a number of tables, where drinks were served. The three piece orchestra struck up a dance, and several of the chap-clad gentry tramped around the small dance space with the girls, having a boisterous time.

Suddenly a girl screamed, and her scream was punctuated by the thudding jar of a revolver shot. The room was in an uproar in a moment. The girls scattered like a bevy of frightened quail. Hashknife shoved his way through the crowd and found himself against a table which had been upset by some one who stood not upon their manner of going.

A man was lying flat on his back on the floor and, against the wall, standing alone, gun in hand, was Cleve Tolman, owner of the TD outfit. Some men were moving in closer to him and he eyed them with evident hostility.

"Keep away from me," warned Tolman. "I shot in self defense, that's all."

"That's right," said a cowboy, who had evidently seen the shooting. "The other feller went for his gun."

"Thank you," said Tolman coldly.

He looked around and saw Hashknife, looking at him across the table.

"Somebody ought to get a doctor for him," he said, and several men left the saloon.

Tolman slowly replaced the gun in his holster.

Hashknife stepped in close and looked at the man on the floor. It was old Luke Jones, ex-cook of the TD. Another man knelt down and lifted the old man's head and shoulders. But old Luke wasn't dead. He groaned a couple of times and opened his eyes. It seemed as if he had some difficulty in realizing what had happened.

"Been drinkin' quite a lot," said one of the men.

Luke looked at him, but shifted his eyes to Hashknife.

"Where's Tolman?" he asked hoarsely. "Didn't I git him?"

"I guess you didn't," said Hashknife. "Never mind. Just take it easy, old-timer; the doctor will get here in a few minutes."

"Aw, to hell with the doctor! I've got mine, I guess. So he beat me to it, eh? First time that's ever happened, too. He wouldn't pay me to keep my mouth shut, Tolman wouldn't. All I wanted

was a thousand dollars. That ain't much." He blinked around at the faces and added, "To keep yore mouth shut."

"Shut about what?" asked Hashknife softly.

"About Buck Dennig. I told him to give me the money or I'll talk. He called me a dirty black somethin', and I went for my gun. Where is he, the dirty sidewinder? Buck was my friend. I knowed more about Buck than anybody. Buck's got relatives. He's got a mother and a sister. Tolman didn't know it until tonight. He called me a dirty liar, and then killed me to keep me from tellin' it."

"You ain't dead yet," said one of the men.

"No, but I'm close to it. And this here Western country loses a good man when I cash in. Where's that doctor? Where's Tolman?"

"Who killed Buck Dennig?" asked Hashkinfe.

"I dunno. Think I'd let him live, if I knowed. You're Hartley, ain't you? I 'member you. Are you a damned detective?"

"Do I look like one?" smiled Hashknife.

"Why don'tcha go and arrest Tex Blanco if you are?"

"Did Tex Blanco kill him, Luke?"

"I dunno. Gimme a drink, can'tcha? How bad does a man have to be hurt before he gets a drink. Where's that doctor? I'm bleedin' to death, I tell you."

"Listen to me, Luke," said Hashknife seriously. "What do you know about the killin' of Buck Dennig? What do you know about that ten thousand they stole from him?"

Luke blinked painfully.

"I think Tolman knew," he said hoarsely. "They quarreled the mornin' Buck drawed that money. I heard some of it. Tolman gambled for big money. Buck tried to stop him. I didn't hear it all, but I know Tolman said, 'We split here, Buck. I'll buy or sell. Ten thousand down and the rest on time.' That's what I heard that mornin'. Tolman knows, damn his dirty hide!"

The doctor came elbowing his way through the crowd, and Hashknife got to his feet. That end of the room was packed solid with interested humanity, but Tolman had vanished. Hashknife did not wait to hear the doctor's verdict, but went back to his horse.

He was no nearer a solution than he was before. But he knew now that Cleve Tolman and Buck Dennig had quarreled, and that Tolman knew Buck was to draw that money. Evidently Buck had decided to buy out Tolman's interest in the TD, and had drawn the money to make the initial payment.

And it was also evident that old Luke Jones had tried to blackmail Tolman out of a thousand dollars, knowing that his evidence might convict Tolman. As far as the shooting was concerned, Tolman would have little trouble in proving self defense, but he might have trouble in explaining away what old Luke had told about him.

But there were other things that Hashknife had discovered, little things which no one else had considered. He rode back to the B Arrow and found only Mrs. Blanco and the doctor awake. The doctor assured Hashknife that all the patients were doing as well as might be expected; so Hashknife rode on to Pineville, knowing that all the beds were filled at the ranch.

There was a light in the sheriff's office. Hashknife tied his horse and knocked on the door. The sheriff, half dressed, came to the door and glared icily at Hashknife.

"F'r God's sake, what are you doin' around here?" he demanded. "I hoped you wouldn't never come back."

"I saw a light," grinned Hashknife. "The rest of Pineville is fast asleep. You're up late, ain't you?"

"Aw, hell! C'mon in. I think I'd like to talk with you."

HASHKNIFE followed him in and the sheriff shut the door. Oscar, the deputy, was stretched out on a cot, snoring. The sheriff sat down at his desk and motioned Hashknife to a chair near him.

"Set down," he growled. "I swore to myself that I'd curry you with a six-gun if you ever came in here again."

"Oh, you never want to feel thataway about anybody, Sheriff."

"You made me so damn mad. What are you tryin' to do, anyway? Goin' down to the B Arrow and—"

"Keepin' you from gettin' Oscar's gun?"

"The big jug-head!"

"How does it come you're up so late—or early?"

"You don't know, eh? Well, I'll tell you why. Fifteen minutes ago Cleve Tolman left here. He was here for half an hour, and he told me about havin' to shoot Luke Jones."

"Yeah?" Hashknife smiled. "Tell you why he shot him?"

"Old Luke had been drinkin'; kindagot loco and opined to kill Cleve, didn't he?"

"Did Tolman tell you I was there, Sheriff?"

"He said you was. You didn't see the shootin', didja?"

"Nope. Oh, I reckon he shot in self defense."

"He said he did. Hartley—" the sheriff stretched wearily—"who shot your pardner at the B Arrow?"

"Who knows?"

"Was it Tex Blanco?"

"I never thought of that."

"Did you shoot Tex Blanco?"

"I hope not."

"Mm-m-m-m. Was Luke Jones dead when you left Garnet?"

"Nope. I don't know how badly he was hurt."

"Why did you go from the B Arrow to Garnet?"

"Exercisin' my bronc."

"Oh, I see. I suppose you were just exercisin' your bronc, when you went out to the B Arrow."

"No, I went out there to keep you from makin' a fool of yourself."

"To keep me? You're crazy. Hartley, sometimes I like you. Yes, sir, I think you're fine, when you mind your own business; but right here and now I want to tell you to keep your long nose out of my business. I can run my office."

"Then you don't need any help a-tall?"

"You're damn right, I don't!"

"You can catch'm all by yourself, eh?"

"All the catchin' I need, yes."

"You ought to run Scotland Yard."

"What's that?"

"Oh, a little corral they've got in London."

"I dunno anythin' about that, but I do *sabe* my own job."

"You must be a great help to the county."

The sheriff glowered at his sock-clad feet and wiggled the big toe of his left foot, which protruded through a hole in the wool.

"I reckon I can get along without your help," he said wearily.

"That's fine. Did Tolman tell you why he had to shoot Luke Jones?"

"He said Luke was loco and imagined things. Wanted Cleve to pay him a thousand dollars or he'd tell somethin'. Cleve said he didn't know what it was he was goin' to tell."

"Tolman didn't wait to see if Luke died."

"That don't mean anythin'. He shot in self defense."

"I suppose you'd like it fine if I'd go away and let you sleep, wouldn't you, Sheriff?"

"I sure would."

The sheriff didn't tell him goodby, but he did slam the door rather hard, after Hashknife was outside. Hashknife laughed to himself and went to the hotel.

DOCTOR BRENT did not leave the B Arrow until morning. All of his patients were doing well, due to the fact that he had been on the spot to handle their wounds at once. Sleepy was in worse shape than Tex, but told the doctor that if he saw Hashknife he should tell him that everything was fine.

The doctor met Hashknife in front of the hotel and delivered the message. By this time nearly every one in Pineville

knew of the shooting at the B Arrow, and many had heard of the shooting of Luke Jones at Garnet.

Hashknife was passing the post office, when Henry Goff, the postmaster, accosted him from the doorway.

"I've got a letter for you, Hartley," he said. "Sent to you in care of the sheriff, but he don't call for his mail until after the stage gets in this afternoon, and I thought it might be important."

Hashknife thanked him and went in to get the letter. It was in a plain envelope, slightly soiled, and the penciled line inside read:

> We got one of you and you're next.
>
> —THE BUNCH.

Hashknife compared it with the other letter he had from The Bunch, and it did not require a practised eye to see that the messages had not been written by the same person. In fact they were not alike in any detail. Hashknife smiled to himself and went down to the sheriff's office, where he found Oscar Johnson.

"Pat's gone out to the B Arrow," he told Hashknife. "The things that happened out there last night has got him kinda pawin' his head. He knowed you wasn't out there, so he went out. Said he might git at the bottom of things if you wasn't around to horn in and spoil the deal. My stars, but he was madabout that six-shooter deal!"

Hashknife showed Oscar the warning.

"By golly, they mean business, don't they?" exclaimed Oscar. "So it was The Bunch who shot Stevens and Tex. That lets Tex out, unless Tex—"

"Unless Tex what?"

"Well," said Oscar slowly, "Tex was out there and got mixed up in the shootin'."

"Did he do any shootin'?"

"I'll be darned if I know. He had my gun, you know, and I forgot to take it away from him when he came back in."

"So there's no way of connectin' Tex with the shootin'."

"Not a bit," wailed Oscar. "There's a lot of things happenin' around here, and always there ain't no clue. Somethin' wipes out the evidence. Me and Pat are jist about disgusted."

"Were you awake when Cleve Tolman came here last night—or rather this mornin'?"

"Shore, partly. He shot Luke Jones in Garnet."

"I know all about that part of it. I was there."

"Oh, yeah, I think Pat mentioned it. He wondered what you was doin' there. Tolman said that old Luke was loco from too much drink. Demanded a thousand dollars from Tolman and started to draw a gun on Tolman, when Tolman wouldn't give him the money. Old Luke has been makin' his own liquor at the TD, and that kinda stuff will make you crazy."

Hashknife did not tell Oscar what Luke Jones had said. He knew that the story would circulate fast enough, anyway. It was nearly noon when the sheriff came back from the B Arrow, and he was not in a pleasant frame of mind. Hashknife came down to his office and inquired about the sick and injured at the ranch.

"I didn't see 'em," growled the sheriff. "Old lady Blanco wouldn't let me in the house. Said the doctor gave her orders to not let anybody in to see 'em. But I saw Miss Evans and I shore told her about that gun. She sent one of the punchers to Mrs. Cooper, with a note, askin' her why she told me what she did. And now, by God, I've got to apologize to Mrs. Cooper."

"She didn't confess, eh?"

"Hell, no! I lied to get a confession."

"Lyin' seems to be a popular pastime around here."

"Oh, go to hell!"

Hashknife laughed softly.

"Pat Lynch, who do you think killed Buck Dennig?"

"I dunno. My Lord, if I knowed—"

"Who robbed that stage?"

"Tex Blanco."

"Who killed Shearer and robbed the bank?"

"I dunno."

"The only thing you're sure of is that Tex Blanco robbed the stage, eh?"

"That's all."

"All right. Just for the sake of an argument, how often is money carried on that stage?"

The sheriff looked sharply at Hashknife.

"Not very often, I'd say."

"Would Tex know enough about it to pick the right day?"

"Not unless he was told."

"Who could tell him—Windy March?"

"By God, I'll bet he could."

"If the money was sent to Windy, he might."

"What are you drivin' at? Are you protectin' Tex Blanco? And what's all this talk about? What's all this to you? It seems to me that you're takin' a lot of interest in all this stuff. Tex lost his gun after he held up that stage, and them women found it. If it hadn't been for Oscar, the Swede jughead, we'd have Tex in jail. And if it hadn't been for you, we'd have had him, anyway. I could jail you for what you done."

"Yeah? And I could have made Stormy River County laugh you out of the state of Wyoming. Anyway—" seriously—"you always want to look before you leap, Sheriff. Look at this."

He let the sheriff read his latest warning.

"Tex never posted that," declared Hashknife. "He hasn't written a line since Sleepy got shot, and he couldn't have known that The Bunch was goin' to get one of us."

"You ought to be a detective, Hartley. Still, you wouldn't be much use, because you're always goin' around provin' that everybody is innocent. Heffner's yellin' his head off for a chance to convict somebody. The county commissioners are ridin' him, and he's ridin' me. I'm ready to quit."

"You hadn't ought to do that, Sheriff. There's worse sheriffs than you are."

"Where?" asked Lynch bluntly.

"Well, I just can't answer you offhand."

"That's supposed to be funny, ain't it?"

"It's all in your point of view, Sheriff,"

When the stage arrived that afternoon, Windy March brought the information that Luke Jones wasn't dead and wasn't liable to die until his appointed time.

"Danged old wood-rat wasn't hurt much," laughed Windy. "Swore he was dyin', they tell me. Had a pint of whisky in the inside pocket of his coat, and the bullet smashed it all to hell, cracked one of Luke's rib's and tunneled under the skin plumb around to his back.

"The doctor dug the bullet out, tied a few yards of bandage around Luke and let him go. Luke was plenty sick, but he went back to the Overland Saloon and celebrated his resurrection by gettin' as drunk as a boiled owl. I seen him this mornin', settin' on the sidewalk, runnin' a rag through his six-gun and singin' to himself."

As Windy was telling them about Luke Jones, Bud Hough drove through town in a buckboard, accompanied by a short, heavy set man, dressed in black. Bud waved at the men around the stage, but the other man merely nodded.

"I wondered what Bud was doin' in Garnet," said Windy. "Must have been there to git that feller. I seen him git off the train."

"Prob'ly somebody visitin' Tolman," said Oscar.

HASHKNIFE rode out to the B Arrow that afternoon and found Sleepy getting along fine. Tex was around the house, bandaged, and wearing his left arm in a sling. Little Jimmy's fever had been broken, and their greatest concern was to keep him quiet.

Sleepy didn't remember getting hit. He had heard one shot fired and remembered reaching for his gun. The rest of it was a complete blank. He was anxious to know what Hashknife had accomplished, but Hashknife was unable to tell him anything, except about the gun fight between Tolman and Luke Jones.

Hashknife did not tell him about the

last warning, because it would only serve to worry Sleepy. He met Marion on the front porch, as he was leaving, and she told him that Mrs. Cooper had denied telling the sheriff about finding that gun.

"The sheriff told me," laughed Hashknife. "It was one way of gettin' you to confess, you see. It's been done many times. What are you goin' to do about provin' that Buck Dennig was your brother?"

"I don't know. But that can wait. I asked the doctor to not mention it to any one, and I wish you would do the same."

"Shore, it's all right with me."

Marion stood with her hands on the rail, staring off across the hills.

"Just to think that Blaine came away out here, hiding from the world, and made a success. And that fate sent me out here, too—but too late to find him. Do you believe in fate, Mr. Hartley?"

"Yes'm."

"Did fate send you here to help us—me, I mean?"

"You might say she did, Miss Evans—fate and necessity."

"Necessity?"

"We needed the money, I reckon."

"But why would anybody wish to kill you and Mr. Stevens?"

"Well," smiled Hashknife, "I reckon they believe in fate, too; and they're afraid the cards might fall wrong, with us in the game."

"Do you believe Tex Blanco robbed that stage?"

"Do you, Miss Evans?"

"I did."

"So did I."

"The sheriff believes he did, Mr. Hartley. Oh, I suppose many other folks believe he did; and how in the world can he ever prove his innocence?"

"They can't prove his guilt, Miss Evans."

"Would you want to go through life that way?"

"It is kinda tough. I can see his point of view. No jury on earth would believe his story of what happened to him the night before the robbery. I believe him, even if it does sound fishy. I shore hope that some day—Miss Evans, you kinda like Tex Blanco, don'tcha?"

Marion turned away and walked to the end of the porch.

"Aw, shucks!" grunted Hashknife. "I wasn't tryin' to act smart and pry into your affairs. I'm no blind man. And love ain't nothin' to make fun about. Don't get sore about it and put ground glass in Sleepy's mush."

Marion was laughing, and Hashknife crossed the porch to her.

"You ain't sore at me? Gee, that's great. Are you goin' to marry Tex Blanco?"

Marion shook her head slowly.

"Gee, that's great!"

Marion turned quickly and she was not laughing now.

"What is great about it?"

"To think that a pretty girl really has sense. I shore was scared you was goin' to marry him."

"What is that to you?" she asked, her eyes snapping.

"Nothin' to me, of course, except that I don't like to see a pretty girl throw herself away on a man with a reputation like he's got. Tex is virtually an outlaw. He's just out of jail, because they can't put the deadwood on him. They all know he's guilty, but they can't prove it. You couldn't marry a man like him, Miss Evans. You'd ruin your life. When they told me you was liable to marry him, I didn't believe it. I got one look at you and I said you had too many brains for a thing like that. I'm glad I'm right. It ain't often I'm mistaken in human nature."

"Thank you," she said icily, turning to the door. "I'm inclined to agree with the sheriff, when he says that you have a nasty habit of meddling in affairs which do not belong to you."

She closed the door behind her, leaving Hashknife alone on the porch. He leaned against a porch post, a twinkle in his gray eyes, the corner of his wide mouth twisting to a grin. He went slowly down to

the ground and walked around to his horse.

Tex came striding out through the kitchen and halted Hashknife. It was not difficult for Hashknife to see that Tex was mad. He came up to Hashknife, who was standing beside his gray horse.

"What did you say to Miss Evans, Hartley?" he demanded.

"Why, I dunno," he answered innocently. "What did she say?"

"She didn't say anythin', but I know you did, because she was cryin'. Lemme tell you somethin', Hartley; you—"

"You didn't ask her if she was mad, didja?"

"She was cryin', I tell you."

"Sometimes folks cry when they're glad, Blanco."

Tex glanced back toward the house.

"Glad?" He turned and looked at Hashknife. "What has she got to be glad over?"

"I dunno, I'm sure. You might ask her?"

"Yeah, I might."

"Does your shoulder hurt, Blanco?"

"Not very much. I can stand the pain all right. You didn't hurt her feelin's, did you?"

"I tried to be easy. Blanco, did you ask her to marry you?"

"I did not," firmly.

"Why don'tcha?"

"I'm no fool, Hartley. How could a man in my position ask a girl to marry him? She'd be a fool to marry me."

"That's what I told her—and she got mad at me."

"You—uh—" Tex opened and shut his mouth several times, while Hashknife swung easily to his saddle.

"You'd be a fool to ask her, and she'd be a fool to accept," said Hashknife, gathering up his reins, "but go ahead. If men and women didn't marry because they knew they were fools, we'd run out of population in a little while."

"Well," said Tex slowly, "you—I don't *sabe* you. This is none of your business."

"I know it; but if I minded my own business, you'd have a lot of misery ahead of you."

Hashknife reined his horse around and galloped down through the big gate, leaving Tex to wonder what he meant. He watched Hashknife ride away and wandered around to the front porch, where he found Marion alone. She was seated in an old rocker, a magazine in her lap.

He sat down on the top step of the porch.

"Has Mr. Hartley gone?" asked Marion.

"Yeah, he's gone," said Tex. "What did he say that made you cry, Marion?"

She did not answer him and he finally turned to look at her.

"He said you'd be a fool to marry me, didn't he, Marion?"

Marion looked down at the magazine.

"Yes," she said softly.

"He told me he did," said Tex.

"He told you? What did you say, Tex?"

"I agreed with him."

"Oh."

"What else could I do, Marion?"

"I—I didn't know that the question had ever come up," she said slowly. "It made me mad to have some one suggest that I would be a fool to do something I had never really considered doing."

"That's what made me mad, too," said Tex. "I—I knew you would never be able to marry me. Gosh, I'm no fool. Mebby I was a fool awhile ago; but I didn't stop to think. I wish Hartley would stay away and mind his own business."

"I do, too, Tex."

"Well, if you say so, I'll see that he does."

"I suppose he'll have to come out here to see his partner."

"We'll have him moved to town."

"The doctor says he must stay here until that heals."

Tex hammered his heel savagely against the step.

"Well, there's nothin' to be done.

Anyway, we can keep away from him while he's here."

"Certainly. Still, that is poor thanks for what he did, Tex. If it hadn't been for him, you would be in jail now."

"That's true," said Tex grudgingly. "Why did he do it, Marion?"

Marion shook her head.

"I asked Sleepy, and he said it was because Hashknife couldn't help doing things like that. He says that Hashknife never did any one a wrong in his life. I don't know what Sleepy's idea of right and wrong amounts to, of course. I reminded him that Hashknife lied to Hootie Cooper about knowing Hootie's brother, and he said, 'Miss Evans, you can find lies in the Bible, if you look close enough; and Hashknife's lie didn't hurt anybody!'"

"No, I don't reckon it did, Marion. Well, here comes the doctor. He's shore a faithful person."

THE NEXT two days were uneventful. Hashknife made daily trips to the B Arrow, but he did not travel the road. The doctor said that Sleepy would be able to ride in about another week. Tex's wound was healing nicely, and Jimmy Hastings was out of danger. Hashknife had a long talk with John Rice, the banker, regarding Buck Dennig. The bank had opened its doors again, but Rice told Hashknife that Tolman had resigned as a director.

Old Luke Jones came back to Pineville, still half drunk and more grouchy than ever. He refused to talk with Hashknife about the things he had blurted out in Garnet, when he thought he was bleeding to death. A few stitches in his side gave him a great deal of pain, but outside of that he was as good as new.

Hashknife had not seen Tolman since the shooting at Garnet, but the rest of the outfit had been to town. He had talked with Shorty Gallup about Buck Dennig, and had mentioned the things old Luke had spoken about.

"Old Luke better look out for Tolman," said Shorty.

"He talked as though Tolman knew somethin' about the killin' of Dennig," said Hashknife.

"I dunno," said Shorty vaguely. "I think he's crazy, about Buck havin' any relatives. Still, you never can tell. Luke and Buck were good friends, and Buck might have told him more than he told us."

"What's your honest opinion of who killed Dennig?"

"I wouldn't even make a guess."

"It must have been somebody that knew Buck had that ten thousand dollars, don't you think?"

"Mebby. Buck always carried quite a roll. Somebody might have killed him for what he carried, picked up that big roll and didn't wait to grab that hundred and sixty he had in another pocket."

"Yeah, that's true. Probably the same gang robbed the stage."

"Looks thataway. What a cinch they had. That sheriff and deputy couldn't foller a load of hay in the snow. What we need is a good detective."

"Had one, didn't they?"

"I reckon so. Didn't last long. Any detective is a fool to come in openly on a case like this, don'tcha know it?"

"I suppose you're right, Gallup. What do you think about Tex Blanco?"

"Oh, Tex is all right, I reckon. Anyway, he's slick; I'll say that much for him."

"Slick?"

"Shore. They can't pin anythin' on him, can they? I'll say they can't. How's your pardner gettin' along?"

"Be out in a week."

"Got any idea who shot him?"

"Yeah," said Hashknife seriously.

Shorty eyed him closely.

"Do you mean that, Hartley?"

"I think I know."

"That sounds interestin'. Why don'tcha do somethin'?"

"Can't do a thing until I'm sure."

"Why did they shoot him?"

Hashknife laughed softly.

"They thought poor old Sleepy was a detective. He don't know yet why they shot him, and I don't want to tell him,

'cause he might pull out some of his stitches laughin'."

"Oh," said Shorty dryly, "that's why they shot him, eh?"

"Sure. We've been warned to get out of the country."

"You did? Well, I'll be darned. That detective was warned, too, wasn't he? Can you imagine that. They think you're workin' for the cattle association, eh?"

"They didn't say who we was workin' for. I dunno where they got the idea, I'm sure."

"Well, ain't you scared to stay around here, Hartley?"

"I'm still here, ain't I? Sure I'm scared. When men shoot at you in the dark, it pays to be scared."

"You're danged right. Well, I've got to be headin' for the ranch. See you later, Hartley."

"So long, Gallup."

The following morning Hashknife went to the B Arrow with the doctor, feeling sure that no one would molest them together. Sleepy wanted to get out of bed, but the doctor warned him against it.

After the doctor had gone back to town, Tex asked Hashknife if he would stay at the ranch for awhile. Marion wanted to go to town, it seemed, and Tex also wanted to go. But Tex was unable to handle the team with one hand; so Frank Judd was elected to drive. Tex didn't want to leave his mother alone with the two patients; so Hashknife agreed to stay.

It was about an hour later, while Hashknife was enjoying a siesta on the front porch, that Bud Hough and Dobe Severn, from the TD outfit, came past, heading toward Garnet. Hashknife waved at them and they drew up at the gate, while he walked down to them.

He noticed that both men had war bags fastened to their saddles, and this meant that they were traveling away.

"Pullin' out?" he asked.

"Goin' down to the XOX outfit, south of Wallgate," said Bud. "Change of pasture makes fat calves, you know. Same man owns both ranches."

"You mean the same man owns the XOX and the TD?"

"Shore. Name's Billings, Ed Billings."

"I thought Tolman owned the TD."

"Sellin' out today."

"Is that so?" Hashknife was thinking swiftly. "Today, eh? Kinda quick sale, ain't it?"

"Billings has been out there with us for two or three days. They been dickerin' for a week or so. Heffner, the lawyer, is handlin' the deal."

"Is he goin' to keep the rest of the crew?"

"I think all but Shorty and Sturgis. They might stay, but Matt said they might go with Tolman. Well, we'll drift on. If you want a job, you better strike Billings right away."

Hashknife hurried back to the house and met Mrs. Blanco at the steps.

"I've got to go," he told her, and ran for his horse.

In town old Luke Jones, like a sore headed bear, was looking for trouble. Everybody ignored him, because he was dangerous, and being ignored was something old Luke hated.

"You better cool off," advised the sheriff. "Somebody is liable to bust your earthly envelope, if you don't look out, Jones. You ain't sober enough to make a fight."

"Zasso?" Old Luke shoved out his lean jaw at Pat Lynch.

"Show me somebody that wants to choose me, Pat. I'm here to be selected by anybody on earth—pre—pref-er-bly Cleve Tolman. He's my meat, the dirty sidewinder."

"Aw, go sleep it off," advised the sheriff, and walked away.

He had tried to start an argument with Bud Hough and Dobe Severn, but they had ridden along, ignoring him. Shorty, Matt and Alex dodged him for half an hour, with Alex arguing all the time with Shorty, to keep him from going back and accepting Luke's challenge.

Fortunately Luke did not see Tolman and Billings arrive and go to the court house. Heffner was busy with a civil

case, and they were obliged to wait until he finished; so they waited in his office.

TEX, MARION and Judd arrived, tied their horses in front of Hootie Cooper's store and went in to see him. Mrs. Cooper was there, and she chuckled with glee over Marion.

"The school teacher was a frost," Mrs. Cooper declared. "He whipped both of the Beebee kids the second day, and sent Ella Hall home with a note, askin' her folks to teach her to not carry tales. Oh, he's still there, 'cause they've got to have a teacher, but old Sam and Beebee asked me how soon you was comin' back."

Marion laughed, but shook her head.

"I don't think I could take the school again, Ma Cooper."

Mrs. Cooper looked sidewise at Tex and nodded sagely.

"You've had an awful time out there, ain't you, Marion?"

"But I've enjoyed it."

"You would. Oh, don't hop me. I don't blame you. I shore was surprised at your note about that gun. Pat Lynch shore lied, didn't he. And he's dodged me ever since. But he told Hootie what happened. You ought to love Hashknife Hartley, even if he is a liar. C'mon over to the house and let's talk."

"All right, Ma."

Marion walked over to Tex and told him she was going home with Mrs. Cooper for a few minutes.

"That's fine," he told her. "Don't hurry."

They had just opened the door, when Hashknife's tall gray fairly spiked his tail against the sidewalk, throwing gravel all over them. He was off the horse and up to them before they recovered from their surprise.

"C'mon with me, Miss Evans!" he panted. "Don't ask questions, 'cause we might be too late."

Tex and Frank Judd ran out of the store, wondering what it was all about, and they saw Hashknife hurrying down thesidewalk, holding Marion by the elbow.

"What's the idea?" asked Tex.

"That's what I want to know," said Mrs. Cooper. "That tall cowboy is shore sudden. They're goin' into the court house."

"Well, I'm goin' to find out," growled Tex, and hurried down the street with Judd.

Hashknife did not bother to tell Marion what it was all about, as he rushed her up the one flight of stairs and down the hall to Heffner's office. He opened the door and shoved her in ahead of him.

Tolman and Billings were seated at a table, while Heffner was standing up, enumerating something from a legal paper. All three men turned quickly at the interruption.

"I am engaged just at present," said Heffner quickly. "If you will wait a few minutes, I will be at your service."

"I reckon this is the right time," said Hashknife.

He was out of breath and snapped his words sharply.

Tolman started to his feet, a scowl on his face, as Hashknife came closer to the table.

"Ain't been no deed signed yet, has there?" asked Hashknife.

"Why—*not yet?*" faltered Heffner. "I don't see—"

"Then there won't be none signed, folks. I understand that Mr. Tolman is sellin' the TD, all of the TD, and it just happens that this lady is Miss Marion Evans, sister to Blaine Evans, deceased, who was known to you as Buck Dennig."

For a moment there was silence, as all three men stared at Marion. Then Tolman laughed shortly.

"What kind of a holdup game is this?" he asked harshly.

"Not any holdup, Tolman. Miss Evans can prove it. You've no right to sell all the ranch. In fact, I don't reckon you've got any right to sell any of it, until an accountin's been made."

"Why, that claim is ridiculous."

"Ask Luke Jones, Tolman."

"That damn' drunken old liar!"

"You shot him, you know."

"I shot him because he tried to shoot me."

"Why did he want to shoot you, Tolman?"

"He's crazy."

"That's a weak answer. Anyway, there won't be no sale—not now, Heffner."

"I guess not," replied the attorney. "If you had been ten minutes later, it would have required a lot of legal red tape to settle the matter."

Tolman jerked his hat down over his eyes and walked from the room.

Tex and Judd had stopped just outside the doorway, listening to what was being said, but Tolman did not look at them as he went past.

"I'm sorry about this," said Billings. "Of course, you understand I knew nothing about it."

"You couldn't know, Mr. Billings," agreed Heffner warmly.

"I suppose it saves me a lot of time and money, as long as it had to happen. Miss Evans—" he held out his hand to Marion—"if you ever want to sell your half of the TD, just write me in care of the XOX ranch, at Wallgate."

"Thank you," said Marion weakly. "I—I don't know what it is all about yet myself."

Hashknife grinned at her.

"Go ahead and bawl me out for not mindin' my own business."

"But how did you know?" asked Tex. "How on earth did you know this sale was being made here?"

"Couple little birds rode past and told me, Tex. You can talk it over with Mr. Heffner, or—" Hashknife pointed toward the open door—"down the hall a couple doors is where they issue marriage licenses."

He laughed and walked from the room.

TOLMAN had halted at the sidewalk, seething with anger. He knew Marion was Buck's sister, knew it before anybody else did. But he took a chance on disposing of the TD, hoping to get away before anybody discovered the fact, if they ever did. He blamed old Luke Jones, although he wondered how old Luke found out who Marion was. Tolman knew that Marion and Buck looked alike. He had seen that the first time he met her, and wondered why others didn't see it, too.

Tolman didn't want to make an accounting of what he had done with Buck's share of the ranch, and he stood there on the edge of the sidewalk, trying to figure out his next move.

Suddenly old Luke Jones lurched out of the Stormy River Saloon and started across the street. Tolman forgot his troubles, when he saw his old ex-cook. He stepped into the street and started toward old Luke, who stopped short.

"Go back to your hole, you dirty old badger!" rasped Tolman.

Old Luke laughed. Hashknife stepped out to the sidewalk and saw them walking toward each other. Old Luke had both hands in the pockets of his frayed coat, and he did not take them out. He was not wearing a holstered gun. Hashknife stepped out of line with them. Some one was running up the sidewalk, and Hashknife turned to see the sheriff.

"Stop it, Tolman!" he yelled.

But Tolman didn't stop. They were not over ten feet apart when Tolman jerked out his gun, and at the same instant the side of Luke's coat seemed to erupt a cloud of smoke.

Tolman jerked sidewise, half turned, tried to recover his balance, but couldn't do it. He staggered back on his heels and went sprawling in the street, still clutching his big Colt gun.

"Oh, hell!" panted the sheriff. "Got him cold."

Old Luke pounded the fire out of his coat, as he looked at Tolman, flat on his back in the street. Men were running from every direction. Shorty Gallup was the first to reach old Luke. He flung both arms around him.

"Somebody git a rope!" yelled Shorty. "Git a rope!"

"No you don't!" snorted the sheriff.

"I saw it myself. I don't like old Luke no better than you do, but give the devil his dues. Luke shot in self defense."

"Lemme alone!" growled Luke. "Git your paws off me, Gallup, or I'll pistol whip you."

Hashknife looked back toward the entrance to the court house. Tex and Judd were coming across the street, while Marion had joined Mrs. Cooper and several people in front of the store.

The sheriff and Hashknife made a quick examination of Tolman. It did not require a lengthy examination. The sheriff got to his feet and looked at old Luke.

"You made a complete job of it, Luke," he said coldly.

"He had it comin', Pat!" Old Luke looked around at the crowd that had gathered in the street. "I'll bet you ten dollars that Cleve Tolman killed Buck Dennig. Anybody want to take that bet?"

"If I take your bet, can you prove it?" asked Hashknife.

Luke shut one eye and looked at Hashknife.

"I can come nearer provin' that Tolman killed him than anybody else that Tex Blanco killed him."

The eyes of the crowd shifted to Tex. Oscar had joined the crowd and was standing beside the sheriff. Old Luke laughed gratingly and began talking again. Hashknife whispered softly to the sheriff:

"Back my play, Pat. It'll come quick now. Tell Oscar."

The sheriff drew a quick breath, shot a quick glance at Hashknife, but spoke softly to Oscar, who looked at him blankly.

"I tell you, I'll bet ten dollars," reiterated Luke.

"Somebody bet him," laughed Hashknife and stepped over beside Shorty Gallup. "You bet him, Shorty."

"Why should I bet him?" growled Shorty.

"Mebby your pardner, Sturgis, will take the bet?"

Sturgis shot a quick glance at Hashknife.

"I ain't got no money to bet," growled Matt Sturgis.

"What didja do with all you got?" asked Hashknife, and his voice fairly snapped.

"Damn you, what do you mean?" Sturgis whirled, facing Hashknife. "What's all this about? What money?"

Sturgis swung his hand over the butt of his gun, eyes snapping.

Hashknife was covered by the body of Shorty Gallup, so he had little fear of Matt's gun. Shorty did not seem able to move. Hashknife glanced at the sheriff, who had his gun in his hand, a queer expression in his face, as he tried to puzzle things out.

"Shorty," said Hashknife, "which one of you two are goin' to confess first?"

That sentence was like an electric shock to Shorty. He ducked sidewise, jerking at his gun, but it was not there, because Hashknife had deftly plucked it out with his left hand, just before Shorty ducked.

Matt Sturgis did not shoot, did not even draw a gun. He started to back away, thinking to escape, but the sheriff and deputy had him covered. He backed about six steps, before he threw up both hands in token of surrender.

"I quit," he choked. "My God! I'll talk," he blubbered, as the sheriff stepped over and took his gun.

"Talk, you dirty quitter!" rasped Shorty.

He had both hands above his shoulders and was looking at the muzzle of Hashknife's gun.

"Go ahead and talk yourself into a rope."

"You two killed Buck Dennig, robbed the stage and killed Guy Shearer," said Hashknife.

"Shorty killed Buck," declared Matt.

He was almost crying.

"Gimme a gun," begged Shorty. "Lemme kill him, won't you? I swear to give it back as soon as I kill him. He's yaller as mustard."

"Sturgis, stop blubberin'!" ordered

Hashknife. "Shearer forged that ten thousand dollar check, didn't he?"

"Uh-huh. Buck and Tolman quarreled and Shorty heard 'em. We framed with Shearer for a three way split, and he forged Buck's signature. Shorty killed Buck, and we hid the money."

"Yes, and you killed Shearer!" roared Shorty.

Sturgis was on the verge of collapse.

"Better lock 'em up, Sheriff," said Hashknife. "They've told enough."

Both men went willingly, and some of the crowd carried Tolman's body into the saloon. Heffner had reached there in time to hear part of the confession. Tex seemed dazed, unable to comprehend what it was all about. Hashknife slapped him on the shoulder, and Tex jerked out of his trance.

"That clears you, Tex," he said softly. "If I was you I'd go across the street and talk to a certain lady. She might want to know about it, don'tcha think?"

Tex blinked at Hashknife, turned and walked slowly toward the crowd on the opposite sidewalk, where Judd was telling them what it was all about.

Hashknife and Heffner walked into the saloon, where most of the crowd were gathered and, in a few moments, the sheriff came in. McLean was the only one left of the TD outfit, and he looked frightened to death. He came straight to Hashknife.

"I—I didn't have anythin' to do with it, Hartley," he said.

"I had you on my list for awhile," grinned Hashknife.

"My God, I'm glad you marked me off."

Hashknife laughed.

"It was lucky for me that Shorty and Sturgis caved in. I wasn't sure of Sturgis, but I had a big hunch, because they were together a lot, and Sturgis was related to Shearer. I knew Shearer was in on it, as soon as I studied that check. The signature was clever, but he didn't follow it out in writing all the check.

"The warnin' they sent to Sears, the detective, was written by Shearer. He also wrote the first one to me and my pardner. But the last one I got was written by some one else, because Shearer was dead. I think they were goin' to rob the bank vault, with the help of Shearer, and intended merely ropin' him up to make it look good, but they got greedy and killed him, for fear he'd talk, or to make their shares bigger.

"They stole a rope from the B Arrow, cut the hondo off and left it on the floor to convict Tex Blanco. But the key that unlocked the inside door of that vault was on Shearer's key ring in Shearer's pocket, and the door had been locked after the money was taken. If they had forced him to unlock that door, they'd never have bothered to lock the inside door again, and put the key in Shearer's pocket.

"Shearer told 'em about the money comin' on the stage. I ain't sure just what their idea was, but I figure they went to the B Arrow to pick up somethin' to incriminate Tex Blanco, and got a chance that night to knock out Tex and kidnap him. Anyway, they left his gun at the scene of the holdup, and Miss Evans and Mrs. Cooper found it."

"That's shore the truth," agreed the sheriff warmly. "Oscar dumped Miss Evans' trunk in the river and, when he tried to dry out the things, he found the gun. Like a darn jughead, he traded handles, and killed the evidence."

The crowd laughed.

"And Tex knew that no jury would believe his story, so he never told it," said Hashknife. "I talked with Shorty yesterday, and he told me what he thought about the killin' of Buck Dennig. He said that somebody must have killed Buck for what little money he had, but found the big roll and overlooked the rest of it. Shorty and Matt tried hard to kill me and my pardner, and they almost got my pardner. I reckon that's all the story, unless Shorty and Matt know more than I do."

"I'll be jiggered!" snorted the sheriff. "And I thought you was just a nosey puncher, who wasn't able to mind your own business."

"What is your business, Hartley?" asked Heffner.

"Me?" Hashknife laughed softly. "I'm the detective you sent for to the cattle association."

"You are? But Sears said—"

"Sears is a clerk. He had his orders to run at the first sign of trouble—and he did. I'll bet he's scared yet."

"And that's why you lied about where you come from!" exclaimed McLean.

"Yeah, and you come near gettin' me killed off by makin' me out a liar," laughed Hashknife. "You folks wasn't near as wise as Shorty was. But you didn't have a guilty conscience."

HASHKNIFE left the saloon and went back to his horse. Marion, Tex, Mrs. Cooper, Hootie and Judd were there, waiting for him. They had managed to understand what it was all about. He looked at them and his face wrinkled to a grin.

"Well, it was a nice afternoon, wasn't it?" he queried.

Mrs. Cooper came up to him, her fat face grinnning with delight, and held out her hand to him.

"I want to be the first to shake hands with you," she said. "The rest of them just stand around and say, 'My God!' Tex Blanco has said it a dozen times already, and Hootie ain't far behind him. Marion ain't said much, but I'll bet she's thought a lot. Didja ever realize that she owns the TD outfit right now? Tolman ain't got a livin' relative."

Hashknife looked at Marion. Her face was white, and she was clinging to Tex's good arm, as if afraid he might get away from her.

Slowly Hashknife untied his horse and climbed into the saddle.

"It's funny what changes you can bring into the lives of folks, when you don't mind your own business," he said slowly. "Sometimes I'm glad I'm nosey thataway. Well, I've got to get back and help Ma Blanco take care of the sick folks. Gotta get my pardner back on his feet, you see. There ain't nobody's business around here that looks worth my time mindin' it now. I'll see you later, folks."

He started to ride away, but stopped and called to Frank Judd. They talked for a moment. and then Hashknife rode on down the street.

Judd came back, a half smile on his lips. They were watching Hashknife going down the street, sitting very straight in his saddle.

Tex sighed deeply.

"Well, he must think I'm a fool. Honest to gosh, I couldn't talk to him. I wonder if he realizes what this means to me? Why, I've got the weight of the world off my neck."

"Cleared with one swipe," said Hootie. "The long legged son of a gun! I don't give a damn if he never was in Mizpah, Arizona, or never heard of my brother. Whooee-e-e! Well, Ma—" he turned to Mrs. Cooper—"I reckon I better turn merchant again."

Old man Beebee was hurrying up the street and caught sight of the group near the store. He came over to them, chewing violently.

"I jist heard about it!" he panted. "Missed it, of course. Always miss the fun of anythin', 'cause I had to wash the danged dishes. Oh, hello, Miss Evans. Sa-a-ay! I reckon you can have that school any time you want it. Ma and Mrs. Hall have hauled in their horns, and the menfolks are runnin' things again."

"She's all through teachin' school," said Tex.

"Oh! Well, I don't blame her. Awful job. Sorry."

He turned and headed for the Stormy River Saloon.

Tex turned to Marion.

"I guess we better go home, Marion."

"Yes," she said softly.

"You tell Mrs. Blanco I'll be out in a day or two," said Mrs. Cooper. "Mebby tomorrow."

"That will please her," said Marion. "We'll look for you, Ma."

They were halfway to the buckboard,

when they met Oscar, grinning widely, coming from the jail.

"Sturgis told the whole works," he said. "The money is all hid at the TD. They never spent a cent. Can you imagine it? I seen Hartley goin' down the street, but I didn't have no chance to stop him. Jist to think that Shorty and Matt was the two tough jiggers of Stormy River. Well, I've got to find the sheriff. He's prob'ly around some'ers, with his mouth wide open."

Oscar trotted across the street, while they went on to the buckboard. Judd untied the team and handed the lines to Tex.

"I'm not goin' back with you, Tex," he said.

"You're not?"

"Aw, you can drive with one hand, Tex."

Tex looked at Marion and back at Judd.

"Just why ain't you goin' back with us, Frank?"

"Well, if you want to know so bad, Hashknife told me if I didn't let you two come home alone, he'd whip hell out of me when we got there. And that meddlin' jigger means what he says."

"Oh, yeah," replied Tex rather blankly. "Well, under them circumstances, I'll forgive you, Frank. Giddap, broncs!"

"They'll walk, if you'll let 'em," was Judd's parting shot.

Tex nodded with complete understanding, and they went out on the winding road toward home.

MOUNTAIN STREAM

by Noel Stearn

LEAP down the mountain side turbulent and gay.
Flash white laughter at the peaks, grim-jawed.
Tall strength, strong strength can join with you in play
But the spruce stands silent, and the moose stands awed.

Gray waters, green waters, skirling silver spray
Tumble toward the valley where the old streams plod.
Wear your glinting halo for this one fierce day
For youth is strong, and truth is strong, and strength is God.

Through China's black blight to face the greater fear at Singapore

Heavenly Flowers

By JAMES W. BENNETT

Author of "The Manchu Cloud" and "The Yellow Corsair"

THE CHINESE coolie, after panting in my wake for half a block, grasped my suitcase with a beatific smile which said plainly:

"This is luck! I'll carry the foreign barbarian's bag aboard ship. He will pay me more than I could earn by loading rice a whole day."

How could he foresee that I would give one look at him, and shout:

"Boy! Drop my bag! Let go, I tell you! *Let go!*"

But not without a struggle would he abandon the prize. He smiled at me placatingly—and held on. I lifted my malacca stick. In China, the threat of physical violence never fails. His smile dimmed; fear was mirrored in his bloodshot eyes. His fingers slowly uncurved from the handle of the suitcase.

"Now—you!" I indicated another coolie on the dock. "You catchem; takee shipside."

However, into the palm of him who had almost won the bag, I dropped a shining stream of small coin, taking care, as I did so, not to touch the shaking, outstretched hand. His naked torso was covered with pustules, his forehead brick red with fever. He was attempting to carry on in habitual Chinese fashion, after he had been stricken with the disease regarded by his fellows as "lucky". "Heavenly Flowers," China calls it. We of the West name it black smallpox.

To my satisfaction, I was ushered into a cabin without other occupants. One never knows what queer bunkmates one may draw in the Shanghai to Singapore run. I remember the charming mannered Belgian on a previous trip who had made his ablutions solely by means of a

spray and eight different perfumes. I recalled the Englishman who had snarled at me without warning, then announced that Americans gave him the sanguinary hump!

Ours was a French steamer and Saigon the first port of call. After a day ashore of torrid heat, it was with a sigh of relief that I read on the bulletin board, "Depart at Midnight for Singapore." I went to the cabin and pulled from my smallpox exposed suitcase several of Conrad's books. We were coming to his country. I proposed to reread passages that touched on Malaysia—"Almayer's Folly", and particularly "Lord Jim."

About eleven o'clock, my steward entered the cabin with several bags. They were new, shiny, unstenciled and of French make.

"Sorry, monsieur, but you are to have a companion-of-voyage."

"He's French, isn't he?" pointing at the bags.

"But English, I believe, monsieur. Yet not English. Nor, like yourself, *Americain*. Nor yet like the English who inhabit Hongkong. I am an observer of the English, I. Certainly he is not as are the British of Rangoon." The steward drew a deep breath. "Without a doubt, he is not Dutch, from Java—"

"All right, *garçon!* All right! All right! I shall find out soon enough. Tell my cabin mate to enter quietly. I'm turning in."

The next morning, half aroused, I sensed that some one was walking about the stateroom. My eyes opened. A man, bare to the waist, had begun shaving before the mirror. His back was toward me. Along every inch of its surface were great red blossoms.

"Almighty God!" I whispered. "Smallpox!"

He wheeled with a smile, his mouth slitting grotesquely through the white lather.

"'Ello, bunkie! Haow's tricks, as you Yankees say it?"

I half rose in my berth, heart suddenly racing.

"Damn you, get out of this cabin! Quick! What the devil do you mean by coming here in that condition! Go to the ship's doctor!"

His smile slid quickly into a laugh.

"I must 'ave given you a start, I must! But keep your top hair on! I'm just discharged from the 'ospital. I can safely prowl again among my fellow men. But it was touch an' go, it was! The doc' told me that he'd pulled through only seven other foreigners in his whole career. He was as proud of me as a 'en with one chick. Black smallpox! The Chinks always live through it; and when I crashed down I said, 'What any bleeding Chink can do, *I* can!' Strike me peculiarly ruddy, but it was a job, though!" A pause. His smile faded, then came back with a touch of bravado. "Ain't I a hell of a lookin' object?"

My cabin mate told me his name was Stanfield. Would I call him Stan? He had much of the Newfoundland puppy in his make-up. I grew weary of his antics, yet I was forced to like him for a boundless good nature.

His opportunities for being ubiquitous were many. There were only two other English-speaking men aboard our boat. The remainder were Colonial French, most of whom had gotten on at Saigon; all day long they crowded the smoking room, drinking brandy, speaking to no one.

Over me Stanfield must have felt that he had a prior claim because of that joint cabin. In addition, he had been cooped up for weeks in his Saigon hospital without a soul to talk to. His nurse had spoken no English and he confided to me that his French vocabulary he could put in his eye without feeling it. Naturally he effervesced like a shaken-up seltzer bottle.

Although his present home was Singapore, he was an Australian; hence the steward's puzzlement on the night of Stanfield's arrival. I soon learned his profession—representative in the Federated Malay States of a large Hollywood motion picture company.

Before reaching his present, dignified calling, he had been a sleight-of-hand man, a knockabout comedian in the Sydney and Melbourne music halls. He had even played leads in a stock company at Adelaide. A dozen times a day he would come to me and draw from his pocket a handkerchief, a pack of cards, a handful of coin. He would then perform silly but dexterous legerdemain until I drove him away.

OFF THE lower China Coast the heat became intense, without a stir of air. The two lone Anglo-Saxons and I began snapping at Stanfield. He gave us good cause. In the smoking room he never waited for us to stand treat; he wanted to sign all of the *chits*, and to keep on signing them. When we would not join him he drank alone. His whisky-sodas kept pace with the record of the cognac soaking French Colonials in our midst.

Once I said to him:

"Listen, old chap, none of my damn business, but aren't you having a devil of a lot of spots? This is no part of the world to *bathe* in whisky, you know! And, in spite of your illness, you look like a man who's always kept himself pretty fit."

He grinned in answer, his feelings unruffled by my officiousness.

"Oh, I'm laying off, after I get to Sin-*gap*-ore. I belong to a cricket team there. Now, well, I'm a little nervy, that's all. The wife and the kid meeting me, you see. I haven't laid eyes on either of them since I was taken ill. The missus was boilin' to come up to Saigon, but I wouldn't 'ave it. Think I was going to let 'er run the risk of that blinkin' germ biting 'er? No fear! 'Ere, wait 'alf a mo'; let me show you something."

He dived into the shiny French bag and drew forth a snapshot.

" 'The Whole Damn Family!' " he said with his usual devastating bromidium.

A lovely but somewhat theatrically garbed woman gazed out at me. Clutching her hand stood a clear eyed child. With an arm over her shoulder, lounged Stanfield. It was at his pictured face that I stared the longest. And from that to the man who stood before me. This hospital haircut, the blotched cheeks, already beginning to pit! Why, in the photograph, Stanfield was decidedly handsome! The lineaments smacked of the matinée idol. I could now understand how he had been able to play leading man in a stock company. Yet, on a closer scrutiny, came more of a resemblance to the Stanfield I knew, the eyes merry, the lips upward-tilted in the direction of ready laughter.

Shrewdly he seemed to divine my thoughts.

"Taken before I was ill, of course; in fact, just before I made the trip to Saigon and lost the complexion you love to touch. Yes, I used to get my share of mash notes. That was pree-vii-ous to the time I began selling celluloid. Selling sappy, silly celluloid!"

Again that boisterous laugh. A moment later, his expression changed.

"I'm a bit worried over the kid. The wife—of course, she'll realize that I'm not a thing of beautah any more. But the kid won't understand. I'm afraid 'e'll let out a squawk. That would—would kind of 'urt!"

But the comedy relief was never far distant with Stanfield. Before I could reply, his eyes lightened and he shouted:

"Ah, well, the aching 'eart! On with the dance; let joy be unrefined. 'Twas *there* that I met Senyo-ree-tah! Um-tee-tee! Um-tee-tee!"

He broke into an imitation of a Spanish dancer, rolling his hips wickedly. Grasping a toothbrush from the rack—mine—he stuck it in his teeth, like a rose, did the back twist and drew up gasping.

"Gawd, Jim, my strength ain't back yet!"

Long before this, he had begun to call me by my Christian name. In fact, he "Jim'd" me from morning till night.

"Come on deck and listen to the Frenchies jaw each other at bridge. They're as good as an act in vodveel.

You'd think they were going to kill each other, the very next moment."

I shook my head.

"No, it's cooler here in the cabin. Besides, I want to dip into this Conrad."

Stanfield picked up the book, "Lord Jim", unceremoniously from my hands, looked at it and yawned.

"Heavy reading, I'd say. Give *me* Ethel M. Dell and her Sheik stories!"

"Ethel M. Dell didn't write 'The Sheik,' did she?"

"Why be particular, Jim? I can't ever remember authors' names, anyway. Conrad? Don't know 'im. Has much of his stuff been filmed? Wait a mo'. Yes, I have heard of that bird, too! Several old Singapore hands, the Raffles Hotel crowd, were talking about him, last year. They told of some bad breaks the duffer made. I remember one—about China boys waiting on table in a Sourabaya Hotel. Gawd, I could 'ave told him that the Javanese servants' guild would have run the Chinks out of any hotel in Java. With a *kris! Snick—snack—snick!*"

Stanfield illustrated his words with dramatic fidelity.

I laughed.

"Well, even Shakespeare made his mistakes."

"I s'pose so! By the by, did I ever tell you that I played in Mr. Shakespeare's *shay-doo-ver*, once? Yus, in 'Hamlet.' When I was in stock. I was Ham. Was I good?" He vigorously pinched his nose. "I was not! I stole a bit of publicity out of it, however. The Adelaide newspapers got the wind up, because I inserted some business all my own, and some tried-and-true gags. I will say for myself that I speeded up the show. Maybe that was what this author here was tryin' to do —speed up *'is* show a bit?"

"Conrad may have a few surface blemishes," I answered a trifle curtly. "Most of us have, for that matter."

I opened the book.

Stanfield did not reply. He remained standing before me, so motionless that I looked up. Sudden, volatile tears were furrowing his pitted cheeks.

"Surface blemishes! Surface blemishes! Wonder if my kid'll realize that I'm the same old dad, underneath!"

He dashed away the tears with the back of a hand and scowled at me.

"Jim, that was a rotten break you just made! I know you 'ate the ship's whisky, but you'll damn' well come up with me now and have a spot! I'm not asking, I'm ordering! D'you hear?"

Meekly I dropped the adventures of *Tuan Jim* and obeyed.

TWO MORNINGS later, the ship plowed through the jeweled spray of the outer roadstead. Singapore on its low hills, came into view. Stanfield stood at the rail by my side. Nervously he punned about any and all topics that rose to the surface of his mind. He began stories and providentially failed to end them. After a few wretched moments of this, he muttered—

"My God, Jim, I want a spot!"

He disappeared at a dog-trot, to return bearing a strong odor of exceptionally bad ship's spirits, but with his nervousness unabated. We were drawing near the dock. A mass of humanity there in starched tropic whites began to wave violently at us.

Suddenly Stanfield caught my arm, pointed.

"There they are, Jim! My missus, see her? God, but she's pretty! And my kid! The kid's with her! Follow my arm! There! 'E's poking that Malay in the back with his little swagger stick! The young devil! 'E gets away with it today; but if I catch 'im playing the monkey after this, I'll paddle him!" Stanfield drew in his breath sharply. "'E's lookin' for 'is daddy now."

Stanfield leaned perilously over the rail and shouted in Malay. The eyes of the mother focused. Her face broke into a smile, wavered, then the expression became fixed, radiant.

"Good for the old 'oman!" I could hear him mutter. "I didn't feaze 'er!"

She was holding up the child and pointing. The wide young eyes swept the rail,

dropped upon Stanfield, then moved away—still searching.

He reeled against me.

"The kid don't know me! Oh, Christ! Jim, did you see? The kid don't know me!"

Then it was that I had a brain wave.

"Stanfield, a hunch! Come along with me! Come along, I say! We've a good half hour before they shoot out the gangplank."

I grasped his arm. Apathetically he allowed me to propel him across the deck and downstairs to the barber shop.

"Now, Stanfield! You say you've been an actor? Well, prove it! Here's cold cream. Make a foundation, you know how. Powder your face; rub on some rouge."

He gave me an ugly look.

"I'm damned if I will! What d'you think I am, a chorus man?"

My temper took wings. I had been under a strain, myself, watching that child's eyes come up to the mark—then pass it, so coolly.

"Oh, I know you're from the vast open spaces!" I rapped out. "But it's for that youngster of yours! Don't be a damn' fool! Get to work!"

He gave a laugh that was complete bravado.

"Idea for a song lyric, Jim— Tum-te-tum. Tum-te-tum. 'Where men are men, and the air is free. And the girls smoke pipes and go on a spree.' Ta-tum-te-*tum*. Ta-tum-ta-*teeeee!*" A pause. "All right, Jim, I'll do it! I'll turn myself into the thweetest thing! *All* the men'll want to kiss me!"

He whipped a handkerchief from his pocket, capered a few steps with the toes turned in, softly whistling Mendelssohn's "Spring Song." Then he stopped, dived into the pot and started to rub the cream methodically over his face.

I went outside. I knew he would work faster alone. Five minutes later came a stentorian bellow from him:

"Barber? Catchee garsong for me. Tell him, *une* spot! *Petite* whisky! Vee-skee! Do you savvy? You do? Well, thank God for that much intelligence!" An instant of silence followed by a mutter from Stanfield that positively reeked with fear, "I—I must have a spot! I've got to steady the old digits!"

Later, a rehabilitated young man in a pith helmet which he prudently refused to doff for the moment, a becoming color on cheeks that appeared only faintly scarred, was attacked viciously by a tiny whirlwind.

"Daddy! *Barra* daddy! I'm so glad to see you! Evvaybody come offa ship but *you!* An'—an' mummy wants us to hurry, too! We haven't had *chota hazri* yet—an' I'm hungry!"

"All right, old fellow! Give dad another hug and then you can put on the nosebag!"

Stanfield raised himself from his knees and kissed his wife exuberantly, passionately.

I turned away. A moment later, he was by my side.

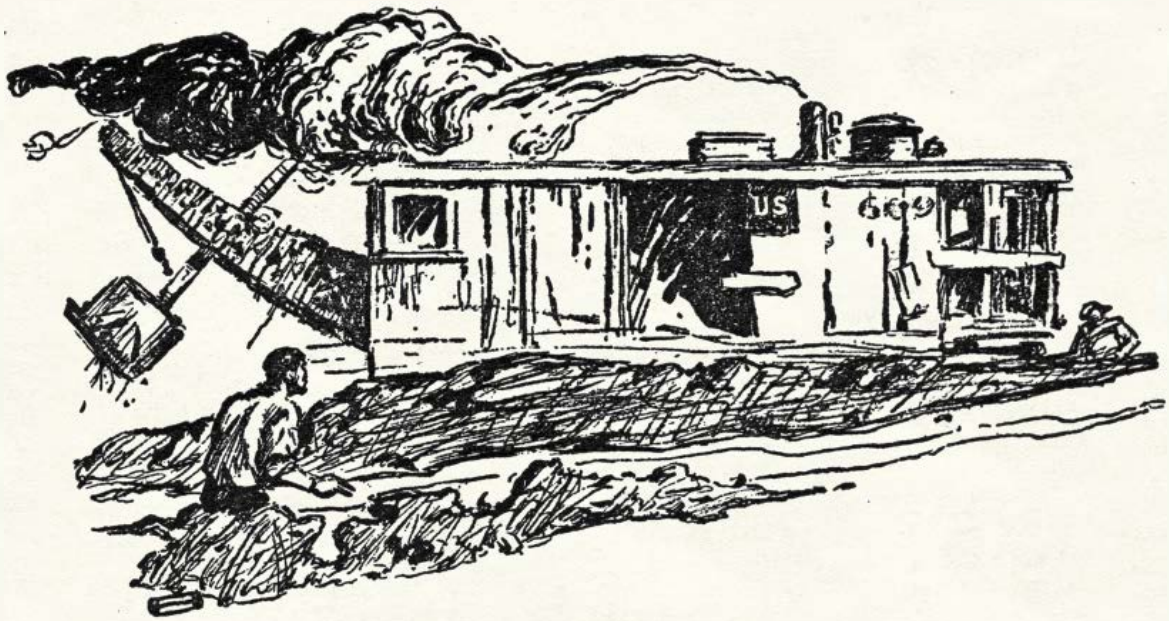
"C'm'ere, Jim. I want the best friend I have in the world—to meet my wife and my kid. Hey, sonny, leave that Malay boy alone."

He grasped the urchin firmly by a small, starched shoulder.

Whereupon a pair of cerulean blue eyes, guileless, very young, were lifted to mine. I bent very gravely and took a tiny hand.

"Listen, son," Stanfield went on, "this is the best friend I have in the world. This is Lord Jim. Do you savvy? Tuan Jim."

Shades of Conrad!



EDGAR YOUNG

himself one of the men who, with brawn and steel, made the Panama Canal possible, tells of the fierce days

In Gatun Gash

EIGHTY thousand men sweated and strainedon the Panama Canal. The time for opening the big ditch had long since passed. Three hundred million dollars had been spent. The papers in the States were howling. Senatorial committeeswere shooting hotcablestothe colonel.

We had been working in the rain for four months. Cucuracha slide had poured down into Culebra Cut fourteen million extra yards of dirt. The Chagres had been on a rampage and had washed out a network of I. C. C. tracks. A trainload of dynamite exploded and more had to be rushed from the States. Fever broke out and every hospital was jammed with sick men. Monkey Hill was dotted with newmade graves. It looked as if Uncle Sam had bitten off more than he could chew.

And we worked. We struggled and strained to carry on in the torrid heat. Wages were good, but there was more than wages in the thing. World records for steam shovels and cranes were broken, doubled, tripled and quadrupled. The Bucyrus Company has the score and it still stands. The crane and dredge people sell their machines today on the records made that year.

It was a killing pace. Men worked at a run. They stood bareheaded on the smoking decks of machines and worked until they reeled. West Indian and coolie caught the spirit that was in us and they too worked. White man and black man and yellow man did their best. Damn

the mud! Damn the heat! Damn the croakers at home! We will dig it or die!

Men said this in Culebra Cut. They growled it at Peter Miguel. They groaned it at the toe of Cucuracha slide. And they sobbed it down in the bottom of that awful gash at Gatun—that great red gash where the locks would sit. Five thousand feet long and deeper than a skyscraper was that gash. Hotter than hell it was down in the bottom of that cut.

The warm rain fell and sizzled on our roaring boilers, and hot steam veiled the shouting men. The sun beat down. A fool brought a thermometer from the commissary and stuck it up on a stake at the lower sump. A grimy man beat it to pieces with an end wrench and stamped it into the mud. It showed a hundred and forty at that time. It wouldn't do to know how hot it was down in there. Men were teetering toward madness, even as it was.

But we ripped and tore at the bottom of that gash with Bucyrus and Marion, with Brown hoist and with American locomotive crane. A track climbed up out of there on the right-hand side. The gage was five feet, the steel heavy and the grade unbelievably steep. It took five snub-nosed freight hogs, with throttles wide, to shove ten Lidgerwood dumps up the grade and back into a gorge to get rid of it. They crawled back down with sand pouring under the drivers, and we filled them up again.

Up and out. Up and out. The stinking hot mud of Gatun Cut. The walls caved, and we sent that dirt out, too. Fourteen men were under one slide. They were Greeks and Gallegos. We couldn't take time to sort them from the mud. So they went up and out and helped to fill the gorge. An army of them worked down in there with us. They threw the tracks over with bars and shimmed them up when they canted dangerously with the machines. They laid track ahead of us and put in switches.

We had big machines that traveled on rails like locomotives and whirled and swung at any angle under their own power. A locomotive is simple. There is a throttle and a reverse lever and a brake. Our machines had slewing and booming levers, butterfly throttles, a dozen levers at our hands and feet. They were big, complex, snub nosed, strong enough to pick a locomotive from the rails, quick as lightning to respond. And they chugged and belched sparks from their stubby stacks from morning until night.

We men were proud of them. They were good machines. And we were hairy chested men. Greasy, black as negroes, dripping with sweat.

Like ants we must have looked to tourists peering down from the top of the gash. Ants in groups and ants dashing madly about. Ants leaping from one hot lever to another, as the machines roared and strained. Yet to ourselves we were man-size and we knew one another by name, those of us who were on the "gold roll" and came from up in the States.

"Hey, you spig," and "You black nigger," were good enough for the yellows and the blacks. They knew how to step, when we bawled the word. And they were good men, and we liked them in a way.

But we dinky skinners and hoggers, shovel runners, craners and cranemen and the big Yankee foremen down in the mud with the gangs—all of us were pals. We knew where each man fitted in and whether he did his job. That was the thing—whether he did his work. Nothing else mattered much.

We had checked our morals in New York or New Orleans until we got back—if we did get back. And we worked like beasts by day and got roaring drunk in the saloons and brothels of Bottle Alley in Colon at night. No bunk shall go into this tale. We worked, but at night we drank and danced and gambled to keep our brains from addling in our heads. I remember meeting up with men of our bunch among the multitudes that poured into Colon.

"Hey, you Red! Seen your crane about to tip over yistiddy. Your nigger jumped but you stayed with her and righted her. Atta Red! Have a drink? Balboa rum

and she's good. Gargle it and swaller it down. Know a girl in the Navajo; let's go over. You going down in nigger row? O. K! S'long! See you on the job tomorrow."

And he'd be there if the fever hadn't got him. If it got him he would be in the fever ward or maybe in Monkey Hill. They call Monkey Hill by the name of Mount Hope now. Some Mount Hope, old Monkey Hill! There's thirty in a grave under that sod. Hope? Yes. Hope they ain't all burning in hell. They burned enough on the Zone. Lord, don't be too tough on 'em. They were good guys under the grease and sweat. And Fred Gartrell is planted up there. That guy don't deserve to burn in hell. He was rough as pig iron. He was tough and rowdy; he cursed by note. Fred Gartrell was a man!

I'LL TELL you about him. He came from Memphis, Tennessee. He'd worked on the river boats, firing, as a boy. Hard! They get hard on the old Mississip'. Have to be to keep the nigger roustabouts in their place. It's you, or it's them. Blackjack, end wrench, pick handle, anything, when they get bad. Hit and then argue. Talk hard. Maybe you'll be boss. Maybe you'll go over the side some dark night. They don't slap each other on the wrist on the river boats. And Fred fitted in on the Zone.

"Hey, you, Bajan, step! Git them clamps on that clamshell bucket! Want that cable to come loose and kill somebody? Come down on that wrench. I'll git down from here and peel your head with a ball and pean hammer. O. K! Git backout of the way!"

And Fred would look over at us and grin as he put the machine into gear.

"I'm papa on this crane," he would growl in a sort of aside that came to us in the roar.

And his men down around the machine and his fireman hit the ball. When he moved up, they chucked the blocks under the outriggers, as his brakes bit in, and the old 47 was ready to pop if he but halted for an instant. How that boy could handle a crane! Both hands, both feet going, the great machine swinging and reeling, traveling up and down, sparks streaming upward from the stack, big gobs of dripping mud splashing into the dumpcars. He set an awful pace for us at times. We were not to be outdone.

The line of cranes across the Cut, at the upper end of Gatun Cut, swung and reeled and sputtered along with his. There was a line of us a hundred feet long, right up against the coffer dam that held Gatun Lake out of the Cut. The locks should have been done, but we were still digging in the bottom of the Cut. That's how figures go wrong in the tropics, with the sun and the rain and the banks that cave. And the water in Gatun Lake now covered a hundred and seventy square miles and stood up over us a hundred and five feet deep, pressing against the flimsy coffer dam.

They'd added to the dam, time and again. They'd put shorings against it. But it had bellied out up above us and water was seeping under it at the bottom. It menaced, and men glanced up at it. But they said nothing. It wasn't polite to speak of that weak coffer dam down where we were. If the top lock could be put in, there would be a massive steel door to hold it back. The big mixers were ready to pour eight thousand cubic yards a day down into the floor and into the fifty-five foot walls.

The whole Panama Canal job was waiting on that line of cranes. We were far below the level, where the floor would rest. The sixteen foot culverts were to be underneath the floor and a foundation for them was below that. The waiting steel doors were tall as a four story building, but we were twice that deep down into the earth. A mile north, a coffer dam held the Caribbean back, but the Caribbean was far below the level of the lake. Ships would have to walk upward into the lake from the sea, when the three big locks were completed.

That was the way it was—two coffer dams, flimsy affairs, and us far below

them with our machines in the gash. Either one would get us if it broke; but if the upper one broke, the wall of rushing water would engulf Mindi, New Gatun, Cristobal and Colon. So we hoped and prayed that the upper lock would go in before the dam gave way. And every man on the canal hoped and prayed with us. The entire job was tied up, waiting for us.

The colonel's yellow car whizzed back and forth over the Panama Railroad between Culebra and Gatun. He climbed down into the cut and swung up to the cranes. He figured and calculated and craned his neck to peer upward at the bulging dam. He did not tell any man to hurry. We were working top tilt. We didn't even stop to talk to him. Too busy. He grinned and waved his hand as much as to say:

"Boys, you're doing mighty fine. Keep it up. We'll beat this thing yet. I'm with you. You know me."

So we bucked the dirt and we bucked one another. We found out who could run a crane and who could not. Fred Gartrel had a trifle the better of us. He was like lightning and those Mississippi boats had tempered him like steel. But his superiority was a mere shade; he couldn't have bragged about it and he never did. He grinned and eased up a bit now and then when he saw a man reel.

"What's the matter with Big Ben over there?" he would shout through the noise. "Too much Balboa rum, or maybe that new cabaret girl at the Panazone! Hey, you nigger, slash that fire, I've done told ye! You're shy ten pounds of steam on that needle!"

He would grin and ease down. No, he wasn't our boss. He was just one of us. You know how it is. Pride. He set us a gait and we worked neck and neck. A fellow who couldn't do his bit had no use being down in there to begin with.

And so it went along at this furious clip for about a month. I got to admire Fred Gartrell's way of working and his way of being a good guy in Colon. We made plenty of jack—twice as much as the white collared men in the offices, and I'm not knocking them, either. They were O. K. But we weren't thrown with them so much as we were with one another. You know how it is. You work with a guy and you meet up with him in town. Makes you feel friendly. You get into a scrap, and he's with you. Fred Gartrell walked in to save my bacon. I'd picked on a big blacksmith from Empire, and he rung a helper in on me besides. They were mauling me for fair when Fred took a hand.

"Hey what's this? Two of ye? Back up there! How'd that fist feel on the burr of your ear? Wade in! I'll make ye shake your head worse than that, you cinder eater! *Wham!* I'm papa, I'm telling ye!"

It's a fact. We cleaned up on the two of them. And we guzzled Balboa rum in celebration. Went down the line together. Fred made a hit singing for the girls. He taught me to sing "Frankie" that night. I remember it yet.

> Frankie was a good, good girl,
> As everybody knows;
> She paid a hundred dollar bill
> For the making of Albert's clothes,
> When he was her man—
> But he done her wrong.

THERE were several verses to it, and I learned them all. I learned "Casey Jones," "Steamboat Bill," "Roustabout" and "The Long Slim Woman" that same night. They got them all wrong when they set them to music. Fact. You ought to have heard Fred sing those songs. He crooned them; sang them like a black. I've seen tears standing in his eyes. Boozy? Sure. But when men are boozy you get to know them.

And now and again you saw a flicker of the spark that moved him on the job, that made him drive himself and drive us in competition with him.

"They say old Uncle Sam can't dig the canal! I'll tell the cock eyed world Uncle Sam *can* dig the canal! The frogs failed, didn't they? Old John Bull was afeared to tackle it. The papers say we've failed. We ain't failed! Teddy Roosevelt knows

we ain't failed. Old Man George Goethals knows we ain't failed. We ain't failed and we ain't goin' to fail! We're late. We had to dig a volcano out by the roots in Culebra. Who could foresee that mud in the bottom of Gatun gash? We are going to dig her. It's you and me that's got her to dig. She has got to be dug for old Uncle Sam!"

You couldn't call it patriotism. A patriot stands in the corner and mouths platitudes, or bawls out speeches to get the other fellow into line. He was too illiterate, too greasy, too rough and tough, too profance to be a patriot. But that was the way he felt. That was what he said, and I heard him say it. It seemed that I could understand a thing that happened a few days later a trifle better after I had heard him say those words. It was about nine o'clock in the morning when this thing occurred. If we hadn't known who was "jake" among us, we would have found it out then.

The Cristobal shops were seven miles away. We had I. C. C. tracks running out there, for it was the Colon end of the canal. The Panama Railroad had tracks running beside our own. We had West Indian boys stationed at our switches. They were stupid, barefoot plantation blacks from the islands. With great pains they had learned that trains coming up out of the cut were to be switched across to the dump and that engines from Cristobal were to be sent down into Gatun Cut. They had now learned it so well that it did not require a white employee standing with them to tell them each time. Having learned those two things, there was no more room in their heads. Thus we had West Indians at the switches and there were also West Indian helpers in the shops at Cristobal.

Down there a helper was told to start the fires in five dead engines that lay on a siding beside the shops. He went out with a sack of waste and some shavings and got the fires going. He shoveled in some coal and then went back into the shops. Boys had been playing around the dead engines and had yanked the throttle of each one wide open.

The helper did not even glance at the throttles. This would have required too much thought for a helper, especially a West Indian one. So the water gradually got warm and the hand on the steam gage mounted higher and higher. The engines began to move down the siding in the direction of Gatun. The dozing switchman at the end of the siding gave them the iron and let them move by, without noticing that they were unoccupied. They picked up speed and roared toward Mindi. The switchman there gave them the switch and headed them up along the gash.

They were tearing along at thirty miles an hour at that time. The boy at the top of the Cut saw them coming and gave them the switch that led diagonally down the wall of the Cut and ended in the fan of tracks upon which our cranes stood, at the bottom of the tall coffer dam that held Gatun Lake behind it.

I remember hearing the hoarse alarm from a yard engine, as they tipped over the brink. Tensed for danger at all times, we stretched to look. I remember wondering why the spotting engines were coming back light. Then I heard the hoarse choking bark from their stacks and knew they were working steam. My thoughts raced.

In a half minute they would tear into the row of cranes that faced them and hammer one of them into the coffer dam and loose the flood through the gash.

The switch was set for my track. I heard Fred Gartrell yell to the negro to throw it; and his big crane shot out upon the lead and raced up the incline, as the points flipped over. The boom swung behind, and the big boiler and counterweights were head on toward the racing locomotives.

A quarter way up the slope he met them. I have never in my life heard such a crash. It was deafening in the confined space of the Cut. The big crane bounced backward and the locomotives paused. They met again with a roar that shook the earth. The crane boiler had exploded.

The concussion threw the pony trucks of the head engine upon the ties. Men swarmed up into the engines and closed the throttles. My crane shot out to the lead and I set my rail clamps against the slowly moving mass. It came to a dead stop. Some one gave a cheer—I climbed over into Fred Gartrell's crane.

He was down in the gangway. I will never forget it. The crane had buckled and then flattened out. Below the waist, he was crushed to a pulp. The crowd swarmed up to see. His eyes flickered open and he saw me kneeling at his side. His eyes swept around the group of white faces. They paused as they met those of a friend and he tried to say something to them.

His hand gripped mine more fiercely. A paroxysm shook him. He closed his eyes.

"Tell my mammy—"

He couldn't finish it. He died right then with his hand gripping mine.

H. M. S. SOMERSET

by Leonard H. Nason

THE BRITISH frigate *Somerset* became famous by being mentioned by Longfellow in his poem, "The Ride of Paul Revere." It will be remembered that when Paul Revere rowed to the Charlestown shore he passed the *Somerset* at the mouth of the Mystic River. All spring the frigate lay in the harbor, threatening Boston with her guns, and during the battle of Bunker Hill, in June, she shelled the American trenches, and covered the landing of marines from other vessels in the fleet.

The officers and men that watched the fight that day from the decks of the *Somerset* would have been deeply stirred had they known that the very ship on which they stood was doomed to leave her bones on hostile soil, as well as those many dead on the slopes of Bunker Hill.

Three years later, in the latter part of October, the *Somerset* lay in Provincetown harbor. She had been scouting up and down the coast in search of a French squadron that was reported making for Boston. On the last day of the month she set sail, intending to run up the bay toward Boston, but instead encountered a northeast gale. Her captain first tried to beat to sea, but found the gale too strong, and turned to run into Provincetown again. Many a ship has made for that same haven, but few have found it.

The *Somerset* could not weather the end of the cape and was cast ashore on Peaked Hill bars, northeast of Provincetown. Her captain, Audrey, and a few sailors managed to get ashore, where the local militia made them prisoners, but the rest of the crew perished, and the wreckers soon removed every vestige of the gallant frigate.

A hobo brakeman and the bully of the S. & S.

BURNING BRAKES

By E. S. DELLINGER

THE BUM didn't have much prestige among the boys of the Western Division. They didn't have anything in particular against him. In fact, they didn't know a great deal about him. Rumor had it that he had ridden into Springfield on the blind of Number Five, one snowy night last winter, with Dad Hawkins. That made him a bum to begin with. Rumor had it also that Dad had taken him under his protection and persuaded Rayborne to give him a job braking. That gained him some measure of toleration among the men.

Still, as I said before, he didn't have much prestige, for if there is anything in the world a railroad man despises worse than a bum it's another bum a little dirtier. It may be that's the reason he got so many runs with Pig Iron Fisher, Horseface Harrison, Sluefoot Johnson and the rest of the hard-boiled eggs of the Western. It may be, even, that's the reason he caught the run out of Newberg on this particular night on a coal drag with Old Cal McClarey and thus made it possible for me to tell this story.

Now Old Cal was the meanest man that God and the trainmaster ever let run a train on the S. & S. According to the tales he told, one would think he had been born on top of a box-car with a lantern in his hand and the whole rule book in his head. Surely he had never been compelled to learn the tricks of the train service as other men do, else he could never have come to despise a student with all the venom that Old Cal showed toward the younger men of the division. But the hate was not all on one side, for hate, like smallpox, is contagious. The younger men all hated this old conductor with all the rancor that a sarcastic, bullying tongue, backed by two hundred and eighty pounds, can arouse in the heart of an American.

Curly, as the boys condescended to call the bum to his face, was scared stiff when he took the call to go out with the old bully. He was so nervous when he

backed the two big Mallets in on the string of loaded gondolas that it took him full two minutes to couple the air hose. When he finally managed to get the coupling made and the air cut in, he backed out from between the cars and picked up his lantern.

Old Cal was ready to explode.

"Takes you a hell of a long time to couple a air hose," he began.

Curly made no reply.

"It's damn funny to me," the conductor continued, "that they'd give a man two student brakemen, a student fireman an' a student engineer an' then aim fer him to git over the road in eight hours."

Curly's face flushed to the roots of his straw colored hair, showing red even in the dim light of the moon and the two railroad lanterns, but he still made no reply.

The old bully of the Western, mistaking silence for a sign of fear, raved on:

"I've been runnin' a train on this damned S. & S. ever since the '94 strike, an' there ain't a man on the division that's earned his pay check any better than I have, but if this is the way they aim fer me to railroad an' you're a specimen o' the kind o' sticks they aim fer me to take out on the job to herd box cars an' hot boxes, then Rayborne can have my job an' take it to hell with 'im fer all I care."

Giving his lantern a deft swing, the conductor perched it neatly in the crook of his elbow. Then tilting it so its rays fell full in the face of the young brakeman, he glared at the bum for a full minute.

"How do you turn in yer time?" he finally inquired savagely, reaching back into the hip pocket of his blue overalls for his trainbook.

"Huh?" grunted Curly from somewhere down in his intestinal region.

"What's yer name, damn it?"

"Akers," replied Curly in a tone scarcely audible above the droning of the steam in the boilers and the *chug-chug* of the air pumps, "A. G. Akers."

McClarey wrote the name carefully in his trainbook before he spoke again.

"Oh, yes! You're the bum that ol' fool Dad Hawkins picked—"

Old Cal never finished his sentence. Curly dropped the lantern from his right hand down on the cinders. His massive fists doubled up like the draw heads on a box car when it makes a coupling; his right shot out and caught the old bully under the chin. The conductor staggered over against a box car; his lantern fell to the cinders and was extinguished. The only light now left on the scene was the dim light cast by the moon among the shadows of the cars and the occasional flare as one of the firemen swung back the door to throw in a scoop of coal.

Old Cal's jaws squared. His great hairy arms were bared to the elbows. His fists were clenched as, head down like a charging bull, he came raging forward, cursing at every leap. He hurled himself at the brakeman, throwing the whole weight of his two hundred and eighty pounds behind the blow.

Curly, crouching like a young tiger, sidestepped as his adversary came, and delivered a blow that sent the conductor staggering again up against a loaded gondola. Old Cal was dumfounded. Never in his thirty years railroading had he met a man that could draw blood and make him reel twice in succession. Curly stood back and waited. The conductor came on again, slowly this time, measuring his opponent and watching his opportunity to strike a telling blow.

The four men from the engines hearing the commotion came down to watch the show. For the first time in years a man had come on the Western Division who had the intestinal fortitude to defy its old bully, and it made them happy through and through to see Old Cal get his. As the old man came on sparring, it looked for a moment as if Curly might remain too close to the gondolas to have room for a fight, but just as Billie Norton opened his mouth to warn him, he plunged out, struck down Cal's right guard with his own left, and though taking a light left hand blow from the conductor, delivered a powerful right hand cut that brought the blood in streams from the conductor's mouth and nose.

The old bully went wild. Sputtering, cursing, raging like a maniac, he came on to clinch. Curly started to sidestep again, but caught his foot in one of the lanterns and went tumbling backward into the cinders. Old Cal pounced on him like a mad bulldog before he had time to even turn over, but the four men looking on, determined to see fair play or no fight, grabbed the conductor and held him off till the brakeman could get on his feet.

A light bobbing up and down along the train alarmed Billie, who, fearing it might be the yardmaster, thought best that the warfare should at least be postponed.

"You two fellers better let this little matter rest till some other time," he advised. "I reckon you ain't got anything that can't be settled when we git back to Springfield. You'd better forget this little affair this trip. What you say, kid?"

"That ol' son of a gun there," drawled Curly, speaking for the first time since the beginning of the fight, "thinks he's licked about all the fellers on this division with little enough sense to fight 'im, an' I ain't sayin' he can't lick me. I know he'd 'a' licked me this time if you fellers hadn't 'a' been there. But believe me, when he goes to blackguardin' a feller that's done as much fer me as Dad Hawkins has, he's got 'er all to do. As fer goin' on with this fight, I ain't goin' to start nothin', not as long as he'll leave me alone."

"What about you, Cal?" inquired the engineer. "Willin' to let it rest till this trip's over?"

The conductor, still spitting and sputtering, nodded in assent. The enginemen released him, and the two men groped about in the semidarkness for their lanterns. It was tactically understood, of course, that the fight was not at an end. The whole crew knew that the truce could not last long, because Old Cal would never be satisfied until he had found who was the better man. That wasn't his style.

Curly found his lantern first, fingered in his pocket, found a match, swiped it up the leg of his overalls, inserted the blazing stick in the open top until the wick blazed, tossed the burned out match aside and snapped down the top. Before he had finished, Old Cal, who finally gained sufficient self control to talk coherently, spluttered:

"I'm—I'm—I'm goin' straight up to the office an' turn you in an' tell 'em to git me another brakeman. I ain't never took out no brakeman yet that's ever disputed my authority an' got by with it, not in my whole life railroadin', an' I ain't goin' to begin this late in the day!"

"Stop!" commanded Curly. "You'll take me out on this here train tonight or you won't be able to go yourself. I ain't done nothin' to you but what you deserved; an' if you make one step towards that there office, I'm goin' to see jist how fur I can sink this lantern, globe, frame an' all, right down into your ol' hard head. That ain't all either, Mr. McClarey; don't you never say nothin' about this little affair here tonight, fer if you do, before I pull my freight out o' Springfield, I'm goin' to give you one lickin' that you'll remember as long as you live. I'll pay you up in one ten minutes fer all the lickin's you've ever give the other fellers on this here division in thirty years, includin' the scar you left on Dad Hawkins when you tried to brain him with that skeleton frame lantern ten or fifteen years ago. Don't you never turn me in fer somethin' I ain't done."

It required all the tact of the four peacemakers to prevent the immediate renewal of the combat, but finally the conductor was persuaded to let the matter rest. Old Cal searched around for the pencil and the train book which he had dropped down on the cinders when Curly struck him. While he was putting them back into the hip pocket of his overalls, he turned toward the brakeman and stormed out:

"You jist better watch yer step, Mister Akers. No student brakeman never made a run in all his life but what he done somethin' he could be fired fer. You jist watch yer step, fer I aim to git even with you fer this night's work before I'm through with you."

The conductor glowered at Curly for a minute, turned his back on the group of

men and went stamping off up the yard toward the caboose, muttering and swearing to the individual box cars as he passed them by. Curly ensconced himself on the pilot of the helper engine; the whistle sounded; a white light rose and fell in a "high sign" away back toward the rear end; the two Cyclopean monsters went staggering forward, picking up speed with every turn of the drivers.

The iron platform on which Curly sat quivered and throbbed as the drivers, slipping on the dew dampened rails, spun around and around or, catching the sand as it trickled from the pipes in front of them and grinding it to powder, gripped the rails and gave momentum to the train of loaded gondolas behind. Down past the coal chute and the water tank, on past the green yard lights filing by faster and faster and out by the shivering red disk of the main line switch the train moved.

FOUR miles from Newberg the tracks cross the bridge over the Gasconade River and, after following the river bottom for a mile, swing sharply to the left around a limestone bluff and out on a sweeping curve a mile in length, whence they go writhing in and out for nine miles on a four per cent. grade through deep cuts in the flint hills and over trestles built across the Ozark ravines.

It is a sharp curve on this hill that the veteran of the throttle or the club points out reminiscently as the place where "Old Pat turned Number Eight over in 1900 and burned 'er up, all but the scrap iron." Now, at the foot of the grade down by the limestone bluff, at the center of the mile-long curve above the bluff and from there on up the hill at irregular intervals where convenience or peculiar danger demands, electric block signals stand, grim and silent sentinels on this waste of rocky hill and scrubby tree, guarding against mechanical defect and human imperfection.

With unerring certainty these hermit watchmen stand, lifting by day protecting arms ahead of and behind the shining polished Pullman and the crude, ungainly freight as they pound their way up and glide slowly down the sinuous lines of steel. Shining forth by night, their twinkling disks of green or yellow or red tell the watchful men who read their language of "safety," the need for "caution," or of "danger" just ahead.

On this August night Curly's train came pounding its way up the hill and around the curves, changing disk after disk of the block signals from green to yellow and from yellow to red. The moon, a few days before its full, floated in and out among light, scurrying clouds down in the west. Curly sat out on the pilot of the Fifty-four, leaning against the boiler brace and sleepily watching the scrubby oaks and pines and hickories go creeping by.

Barking turn about and then in unison, dragging behind them their three thousand ton load of coal, the two mighty Mallets fought their way up Dixon Hill through the sultry midnight. The vicious bark of the exhaust, the low wail of imprisoned steam and the creak of rubbing rail joints mingled with the dry rattle of shifting ballast came filtering up through the bars of the pilot to the ears of the brakeman.

The train was approaching the hard pull just about the middle of the hill. The exhaust became slower and slower as Billie Norton and Smiley Smith each dropped his reverse, notch by notch, toward the corner and kept opening the throttle with irregular, uneasy jerks. Curly straightened up and, moving forward, allowed his feet to dangle over the coupling lever and hit against the pilot. Inexperienced as he was, he knew they would have to double the hill tonight—that the long string of heavily laden cars would have to be cut into two strings, which would be taken up the hill separately—and lantern in hand he slid down to the pilot step, whence, as they passed a level spot, he leaped clear of the track and stood watching the cars crawl by.

Slower and slower became the *c-h-u-g—c-h-u-g—c-h-u-g* of the exhaust from the two great awkward Mallets, slower, longer

and louder until it finally ended in one long-drawn, blaring roar as the coal train stopped dead still. The siren whistle rang out its *t-o-o-o-t—toot-toot-toot,* and all was still but the wailing steam in the boilers.

Curly looked first toward the engine and then back toward the rear of the train. Nothing being visible but the rugged outlines of eight or ten gondolas, he turned and walked back several car-lengths until; looking back toward the head end, he could just see the light in the top of the cab of the rear engine. There he stood boring the toe of his shoe into the gravel and whistling "It Ain't Goin' to Rain No More" until a red light and a white one came in sight from the rear, bobbing rapidly up and down alongside the train, and the business of cutting the train into two sections began.

The lights stopped and disappeared between the cars. A moment later came the sound of brakes going into emergency and the blow of escaping air. Soon the white light whipped out, swinging in a little circle, calling for the slack. Curly passed the signal on to the engineers, and the cars eased back down the hill inch by inch until the light ceased its circular swing and moved with quick, short horizontal strokes. The cars stopped with the rattle and jar of brake-rigging and the clang of drawheads. The uncoupling accomplished, the light spoke again, this time in a long vertical swing. Curly passed the signal; the two engines barked in unison and again alternately, and half the train moved off up the hill toward Dixon.

Catching the last car as it came rattling by, Curly scrambled up on the coal. Old Cal was standing there watching the red light which he had hung up on the head car of the rear half of the train, which was being left behind. Before the brakeman had hardly found footing among the lumps of coal, the conductor began gruffly:

"Well, what the hell you doin' away back down here? Ain't you learned yet that the head brakeman's place is over on the engine when we're doublin' Dixon Hill? It looks like it was time you was learnin' somethin' if you ever aim to. Go on over to that head end and be ready to head in with this string as soon as they stop. You can try out that crossover switch down there by the depot, an' if it ain't spiked, head out there an' come back down here after the rest o' this train. An' say, when you git down here, don't wait fer Red to let them brakes off. You'll find a club stickin' behind the bumper on the head car. Grab it an' git busy. I told him to set all the brakes on that rear end an' then go back down to that first block, so's Dad Hawkins wouldn't start out flaggin'. Now move, fer we're on short time ahead o' Five aready."

Curly stood still.

"Well, why don't you go on an' do what I told you?" snapped the conductor.

Curly cleared his throat and, kicking a chunk of coal with his left foot, asked—rather timidly, considering the bold attitude he had taken in Newberg—

"Ain't—ain't we got an order not to use that crossover at Dixon, Mr. McClarey?"

Old Cal swelled up like a poisoned mule and, after staring at Curly for a full minute, finally managed to sputter out:

"You—you damned blockhead you! You go on over there an' do what I told you. I ain't lettin' no student brakeman fresh from hittin' back doors tell me how to read my orders. Of course we've got an order not to use that switch, but I ain't been workin' here on this pike thirty years without learnin' that if they don't want a switch used they spike it. Git out o' here an' go on over there where you belong before I kick you off this train an' let you walk in."

Curly ground his teeth. His big fists clenched and opened on the bale of his lantern, but he finally turned without another word and went scrambling over the coal, jumping from car to car across the three-foot gaps where a slip of the foot meant death beneath the grinding, grumbling wheels of the loaded gondolas.

Clambering down into the cab of the Thirty-eight, he told Billie Norton what Old Cal's instructions were.

"Why, what does that old crazy nut mean?" growled Billie. "We've got an

order not to use the crossover switch at Dixon."

"That's what I told him," replied the brakeman, "but he said if the switch wasn't spiked to use it anyhow. Said they always spiked a switch on this pike when they didn't want it used."

Billie laughed and swore, but offered no further protest.

As soon as the cars were stopped in the clear, Curly cut off the engines and, running up the track to the green light twinkling in the darkness, examined the switch. It was not spiked. Jerking the lever over and slipping it into its socket, he gave the signal for the engines to come ahead. Smiley Smith whistled, "Stop."

Curly turned and, running quickly back to the head engine, told Smith what the conductor's orders were. After the brakeman had finished, the engineer removed the cigar from his mouth, flicked the ashes off the end with his little finger, and replied coolly:

"Jist keep your shirt on, kid. I'm goin' to let Ol' Cal tell me to use that switch. We'll stay right here where we are till he gits over."

The moon had gone down. Dark clouds were rising out of the northwest. Yellow lightning flickered and flared low down over the tops of the oak trees. Not a breath of air was stirring in the hot August midnight.

Old Cal came panting and cursing up to where Curly stood by the head engine

"Why didn't you do what I told you to?" he roared out. "You—"

Calmly interrupting his tirade, Smiley remarked:

"I've got an order not to use that crossover, an' I ain't goin' to use it till the order's changed."

"Then, by God," stormed the conductor, "you'll not go the rest o' the way in on this train! Kid—" turning to Curly—"you go on up there an' open that main line switch; an' damn you, Smith, you better move when I give you the signal."

Curly stepped briskly across the main line and ran on straight up to the switch which opens from the crossover to the main, paying no attention to that part of the crossover lying between the two tracks. The conductor walked up to the switch opening from the passing track to the crossover, which Curly had left already open. Raising his lanterns high above his head, he looked as far up the track as its rays lighted up the rails. It appeared to be in perfect condition. Curly threw the main line switch and signalled, "Ahead." The conductor's lantern spoke in answer to the signal. Still, the engines did not move.

Roaring swear words that a pirate crew would have dared only whisper, mixing them with something about student brakemen, student engineers and switches that's been run through by the worthless male pups, the conductor came stamping back toward the engines. Just as he passed the pilot of the Fifty-four, Smiley opened the throttle. She leaped forward, dragging the Thirty-eight behind her. When she was halfway between the two switches there came a loud thumping and the crunching of timbers. The exhaust ceased. The brakes went into emergency. The two engines stopped.

The Fifty-four had hit a place between the switches from which rails and ties had all been taken out for repair work. There she stood now, pony truck and two drivers on the ground, her nose buried in the gray earth, the main line blocked, the passing track blocked, both engines tied up, half a coal train on the hill in charge of a boomer brakeman and Number Five due in fifteen minutes with Number Seven only ten minutes behind her.

Old Cal stood there by the derailed engine, talking in terms that wouldn't look well in print about the "luck" that ever put him in such a predicament. The other five men were sauntering around the wreck, Billie and Smiley each with a lighted torch above his head, the two firemen with hands in pockets, and Curly with his lantern in his hand, watching the others. Finally Billie yelled out to the conductor so that all the others could hear:

"Oh, Cal! You don't need to worry. This track's all right. When they don't want a switch used on this railroad, they always spike it."

The conductor snorted and spun around twice like a chicken with its head shot off. Then, after stopping long enough to give Billie one wilting, withering, blighting look in the light of the torches, and to pour forth a few of his choicest railroad adjectives, he went rushing into the telegraph office to report the accident to the train despatcher and get a protecting order against the west so that he could use all his men in the task of rerailing the derailed locomotive, as helpless here as a whale in the desert.

With the aid of ties carried from a nearby pile and two big jacks from the engines the crews finally managed to build a platform under the Fifty-four. As soon as the platform was built, Billie, spinning the drivers of the Thirty-eight until they threw out streams of sparks like water from a grindstone, at last pulled the derailed engine back to the ends of the rails.

By this time the storm was upon them. Jagged lines of lightning shot up out of the north, dividing the sky into two irregular halves of ink black cloud. Crashing thunder drowned the wailing of steam in the boilers and the roar of the exhaust. Tall oaks across the track bent until their tops almost swept the ground.

Still with frog and jack and bar the six men labored on, now grunting and straining under the derailed locomotive to adjust the frogs, now standing back in the torrents of falling water to watch while Billie gently opened the throttle of the Thirty-eight and pulled the Fifty-four up on the frogs.

At last the task was done. The two engines, again ready for service, went puffing back out of Dixon to bring up the cars left on the hill two hours before. Old Cal went into the office, leaving Curly to ride the rear end of the tender down through the night and the rain.

The first fury of the summer storm had spent itself. Rain came now in a steady downpour. Streams of water ran off Curly's yellow oilskin hat and down his yellow jacket; more water coursed down from the grab-iron over his hand; and more water, still, formed in shifting pools in the steel step around his feet as the engine swayed from side to side to the steady *clack-clack, clack-clack* of the wheels hitting rail joints.

When the two engines clanked out past the green lights of the switch and the block signal, they carried their crews into a world of soaked, murky, dripping darkness, over two bands of glistening steel singing their dead monotonous song. But often into such nights do life and duty lead the men who guide the traffic of a nation across unchanging stretches of treeless prairie, through dark, dismal, silence haunted woodlands, and over mountain passes burned with the scorching sun of summer, or blocked with snow drifted in by the shifting winds of winter. Strong, intelligent, self reliant these men must be. The train service has no place for the weakling either mentally, morally or physically, for in this work, a single figure wrongly read or remembered, the simple act of forgetting to open the cut-out valve in the air-brake line or, perchance, some brakes negligently left unset on a steep grade may dash dozens to their death.

On thundered Curly and crew past the yellow signal on Horseshoe Curve, down the steep grade following the winding road-bed over fill and trestle and through deep cuts in the flint hills. The exhaust of the engine had ceased, and in its stead came the whistle of escaping air and the squeal of rubbing brakeshoes when the engineers applied their brakes to check their speed on the steep grade. Soon they went clacking by the last semaphore above the train with its disk of light shining out blood red and threatening through the rain. The engines slowed down to ten miles an hour. Curly stared back through the infinity of darkness looking for the red light on the head car of the half of the train that had been left behind.

When at last it came into view, he

swung his lantern out with a long, slow movement. The brake-rigging rattled and clattered; the wheels slipped on the wet rails; the engines slowed down and came to a stop ten feet from the red light.

Trotting back to the head car, Curly removed the lantern and signalled, "Easy, back." The engines came on to make the coupling. So softly did they come against the car that they would hardly have crushed an egg between the drawheads. But nevertheless, at the instant the engines stopped, the cars began to move. The gap between engine and cars widened.

The pin in the coupler had failed to fall!

Leaving the red light by the track and seizing the club from the draft timber, Curly scrambled up the ladder of the gondola and tried the brake. It was not set.

Awkwardly he inserted the club in the spokes of the brakewheel and began turning. It was slow work, for the brakeman of today seldom has occasion to use the club, even on the hill divisions. The brake came tight. Curly's strength made up for his lack of skill. He threw the whole weight of his powerful body on the end of the brake-club. The brake-rigging rattled and clanged as the brake tightened. But the speed increased at a sickening rate.

Running over a car of wet slack, the brakeman leaped the gap between cars to the next brake. He whirled the wheel. The brake did not catch. The chain was broken. On to the next car he ran, and to the next and the next, over cars filled with big lumps of engine coal, over cars filled with nut coal, and over cars filled with slack, setting brake after brake. The footing was slippery and treacherous, the darkness impenetrable. The cars now went plunging around curves and thundering over trestles leaping and swaying with the speed they had attained.

At thirty-five miles an hour a signal block rushed toward him. The light was yellow! "Caution!" As he went thundering past it, a voice came up out of the darkness at the foot of the semaphore. It was the boomer brakeman screaming out like mad at the swaying light that was six cars ahead of the caboose on the loaded gondola.

"Jump, you fool! you'll git killed! You can't stop them runaway loads on Dixon Hill with hand brakes."

His voice was drowned in the rattle and roar as car after car went whizzing by. Curly surged at the rusty wheels, tightening every brake to the last notch. But a coal train is difficult to hold on a four per cent. grade.

It was just a mile, now, to the next semaphore, the signal behind whose protecting arm Dad Hawkins with Number Five should be waiting for the block to clear.

As Curly, glancing back, caught a glimpse of the boomer's white light up by the semaphore and realized who it was, he flung out muttered curses, emphasizing every imprecation with a surge on the club:

"Damn that boomer! Too infernal lazy to set these here brakes, an' now we're goin' to smash back into Number Five an' kill poor ol' Dad Hawkins right down here at this next block."

As he kicked the dog in place behind one more set brake he snatched off his oilskin hat and threw it away. He was panting now with the excitement and exertion; and the raindrops, as they coursed down through the coal dust streaking his face with white, carried with them great drops of perspiration. But his good brakes were beginning to tell. The speed of the runaway was decreasing.

He set another brake—two more. His breath was coming in gasps. It was only three more car lengths to the caboose. He started for the next car, stumbled, fell. When he came up, his lantern was gone. Only the faint glow from the green markers on the caboose was now left to give him light. He stumbled forward, still holding his club, felt cautiously with his foot for the end of the gondola and, finding it, poised an instant to get his balance before he leaped. As soon as he could scramble to his feet, he turned quickly to grasp the brake-wheel.

This brake was set!

Inserting his club, he sought to twist it tighter. His club slipped on the spoke; he lost his balance and stumbled off into the darkness.

HALF a mile away, behind the signal block on the long curve above the cliff, Number Five stood waiting for the block to clear. The bright cone of light from the headlight of her engine bored its way into the forest of oaks on the hillside. Dim lights shone from the windows of the eight Pullmans behind. A white light and a red one were bobbing up and down a few car lengths behind the train, and a uniformed colored flagman with a white light and a red one passed the pilot of the engine and went walking rapidly up the track. Ten car lengths from the engine he stopped, turned his head up the track and listened for the time of ten heartbeats. Then, whirling, he sped down the track, yelling at the top of his voice as he ran.

Dad Hawkins, his torch held high above his head, paused in the act of slipping the long spout of his oil can between the two drivers and looked. A pair of blood red markers, burning in the darkness, came swimming toward him out through the cut at the upper end of the curve. Dropping oil can and torch where he stood, he leaped for the gangway. Old though he was, he moved with the agility of sixteen. One hand reached for the brake-lever. Air purred out as the brakes released. The other hand slid back the air reverse. Quickly he opened the throttle, and the train went gliding back down the hill.

Dad watched the markers. Closer and closer they came. The fireman jumped from the gangway as the cars gathered speed; but Dad stayed at his post, watching ahead and then back, his old, wrinkled face twitching with excitement in the dim light of the quivering cab.

As the speed indicator eased around to twenty miles an hour, the gap between engine and cars began to widen. Dad kept looking back. Little by little he eased the throttle and set the airbrake. The train of Pullmans slowed down ever so little. The two red lights just ahead came nearer. Three car lengths—two—one. Dad looked back along the train. The green marker and the white light on the rear platform disappeared around the curve at the cliff. The two red ones ahead of him came nearer. The left one disappeared behind the front end of the engine. He opened the throttle and released the air. A tremor ran through his train. The caboose had coupled into his pilot.

As he closed his throttle and reached for the lever to set the air, the brakes went into emergency, set from the rear. Number Seven was standing just behind the semaphore by the cliff.

A few minutes later, while Clayborne, who happened to be coming up from Newberg on Number Five, and the crew of the passenger train were standing by the head car of the runaway coal train, speculating as to what might have happened, a light came out of the cut and, following the light, the two freight engines backing up. When they had backed in against the cars and the boomer was making the coupling, Billie Norton climbed down out of the cab wiping his sooty, sweaty face with a big blue handkerchief. His first question came haltingly.

"Have—have you seen anything of that—that damn student?"

Then the last words came softly. Billie choked for a moment and then continued:

"It's—it's that—that kid you picked up an' put to work last winter, Dad. We had to double tonight, an' got the engine on the ground up at Dixon. Red, here, didn't set but three or four brakes on the rear end, figurin' on the air holdin' 'em till we got back after 'em or else till you come up behind 'em so they couldn't get away. The air all leaked off while we was gone, an' then when we tied into 'em an' failed to make the couplin', they got away. The last Red seen of 'em up by the last block the kid was settin' brakes tryin' to stop 'em. I reckon if it hadn't been for him, you an' Number Five would 'ave been piled up somewhere down about

the bluff instead o' standin' herewonderin' what's become o' him. I—I'm afraid he's done for. He don't seem to be nowhere about the train."

As the engineer ceased speaking, the trainmaster turned first to Dad, who was blowing his nose into a red bandana, and again to Billie.

"Billie," he ordered, "you back the rest of your train in the clear down at Jerome and then bring Five on up the hill. Red, you cut off the Fifty-four for us and then stay here at Jerome and see if you can keep this outfit from gettin' away from you on level ground. Come on, Dad, let's go find that kid."

With the trainmaster on the left step of the pilot and Dad on the right, the Fifty-four crept off up the hill. Searching the track to right and left, they proceeded to the first block. Not a sign of the missing brakeman did they find. Leaving the engine there, the two men came back down the track searching among the grass and bushes along the right of way, each carrying a torch from the engine.

Just as the gray dawn came creeping over the tops of the oaks on the eastern hillside, Clayborne found him lying at the foot of a steep embankment where he had fallen clear of the track. His face was scratched and swollen almost beyond recognition, there was a long, ugly cut over his right eye, and his right arm was broken. The trainmaster tore open the yellow oilskin coat so that he might feel the brakeman's left side. His heart was still beating.

SOMETIME later while Old Cal was serving his thirty days off duty for disobedience of orders and while Curly was slowly recovering from his injuries, Dad, the trainmaster and the conductor went out to the hospital to sit with the injured man for an hour. Although he was taking his afternoon nap, the nurse admitted them to his ward. The three men stood by his bed looking down at him.

ThenClaybornestoopedoverandlooked into the bruised face where it showed below the bandage. Straightening up and turning to the engineer he said in a low tone:

"You're right, Dad. Some bums is worth givin' a trial. It all depends on the bum."

"He ain't no bum, gentlemen," whispered Old Cal, "he's a real man."

A story of apprentice youths on a hunger ship

By the author of
"Fenceless Meadows"

Pay As You Go

By BILL ADAMS

THERE were gay ports and dull ports, ports popular and ports unpopular with sea apprentices. Thanks to six-penny teas and to girls both good looking and partial to sailors, Sydney and Melbourne were among the most popular. And at Newcastle, N. S. W., there was always a welcome for any apprentice up at Mother Hall's place. Frisco was a good port, too. A dime would take one to Golden Gate Park and back, and Sunday afternoon could be pleasantly passed there. And there was the Missions to Seamen, down on Stuart Street. At the Mission a dime would buy a sailor a liberal quantity of cakes and coffee; and the chaplain never went in for any praying over a fellow.

Then, too, in the big ports there was always the chance of being invited up to the homes of shore people who came down to visit the ships. Sometimes it happened that an apprentice would be invited to sleep ashore over Saturday night; to roll into bed between linen sheets was luxury indeed. It was always odd to wake up on Sunday morning and see no cockroaches running up and down the walls; queer to feel bed springs beneath one instead of hard bunk boards under the old mouldy straw mattress of a sailor. And there'd be a good breakfast, eaten from white crockery set on a clean tablecloth, instead of hardtack eaten from an old wood bench and skilly drunk from pannikins from which most of the enamel had long ago been chipped off.

Of the less popular ports there were the nitrate ports of the West Coast—Iquique, Taltal, Antofagasta, and so forth. The

ships lay offshore, at anchor, in the West Coast ports and discharged their coal cargoes into lighters. Coal was about the only cargo that went to those places. The nitrates that the ships loaded there came off in lighters too. So an apprentice scarcely set foot ashore on the West Coast. There was nothing to see if he did; only the barren foreshore, with the Andes rising to the sky behind it. No grass. No trees. No one to talk a fellow's lingo. Yet, desolate though they were, the nitrate ports had an attraction all their own. There were always plenty of other ships. A hundred square-riggers at a time was common in Iquique. There would be ship visiting. And as ship by ship stood out to sea for the long passage home, all the other ships would cheer her away. There was the beating of the bells and much singing of old sea songs. Many an old gray whiskered steamer skipper remembers the West Coast today and wishes he were an apprentice again.

PADDY CARROLL and Jim Pearson and the six other apprentices of the fast bark *Silverwing* stood gazing gloomily ashore. It was Sunday evening. In ballast from Portland, the *Silverwing* was towing into the mouth of the Fraser, to load canned salmon for Liverpool. The river was still and gray. The sky was still and gray. It was the fall of the year. Ahead of the *Silverwing*, hiding the scattered ramshackle settlement behind them, stood the canneries, built upon piles driven into the river mud. Seated on a wharf a solitary Chinese stolidly watched the ship's approach.

There was no other ship at the wharves. Dead and injured salmon floated on the sluggish stream. It was high water. The heaps of rotting fish heads that lay beneath the cannery floors were submerged, invisible, but the place reeked of fish. The south shore of the river was hidden in mist. The flat lands beyond the village stretched away into the mist. At the outskirts of the village rose the steeple of a small wooden church. Here and there in the misty distance was a farmhouse half hidden in trees.

"What a Godforsaken hole!" grumbled Jim Pearson.

Two or three longshoremen appeared, to help tie the ship up. By the time she was moored the mists lay low and thick above the Fraser. It was almost dark. The tug that had brought her from Portland cast off, came alongside, took the men who had been engaged for the brief ballast passage and steamed away for Vancouver without so much as a toot of her whistle by way of farewell greeting.

"Let's go ashore and see what's to be seen," said Paddy Carroll.

There was nothing to be seen. Behind the cannery a narrow boardwalk led to the muddy main street of the village. Oil lights winked dimly from the windows of small wooden shacks. A few fishermen drinking in a corner saloon turned disinterestedly as the eight apprentices filed by. Not one of the apprentices had so much as a nickel.

When they presently made their way back to the ship the mist was on their brass buttoned jackets, on their gilt braided caps. They were glum and disconsolate. The ship was silent and dark; her spars and braces dripped. The two mates were already turned in. The cook and carpenter were turned in. A wrinkled old sailor who had come about the Horn with her sat puffing his pipe in the galley, indifferent, content with his job as night watchman. The rest of the outward bound crew had deserted her in Portland.

She was a starvation packet. Known among hungry ships as a hungry one. A crew never stayed more than one passage with the *Silverwing*.

It was different with an apprentice. He couldn't desert. He was indentured, under bond. A young man in training to become an officer by and by. If he deserted he forfeited his bond, his "premium money." A few did so—swallowed the anchor, as it was called. They were the weak kneed, the chicken livered—the few who couldn't stand the gaff. Pride

rather than any care for losing the premium money held the others through four hard years of apprenticeship.

"How's the girls?" asked the night watchman as the apprentices passed by the galley door.

"There ain't any girls. It's the last port God made," said Paddy Carroll.

BEFORE dawn the eight apprentices were roused out to wash the decks down. The morning was cold and gray. As they went to their breakfast of skilly and hardtack the stevedores came aboard to open her hatches and commence loading. Their breakfast done, they were set to work by the second mate, doing whatever trifling jobs the second could find to keep them busy. Polishing the brass work. Wiping off the paint work with swabs wrung out in cold salt water. Unnecessary jobs. Anything at all to keep an apprentice from being idle. The same system always, whether in port or at sea.

The chief mate came from his room and called to Jim Pearson and Paddy Carroll.

"Get a hammer and nails and get below there! If any of them cases come down broken, nail 'em up!"

Hammers in their hands, nails in their jumper pockets, the two eldest apprentices went down the hold. The skipper was gone to Vancouver. The mate went ashore, into the cannery. But the second mate was about, to keep an eye on the apprentices; to see that they kept at work; to curse them when they tried to sneak away to the half-deck or under the forecastlehead for a whiff of tobacco. Watching the cases of salmon come down the loading chute, Jim Pearson and Paddy Carroll looked up to see that he was not at the hatch above them. Taking an unbroken case with him, Paddy Carroll stepped back, out of sight of any one looking down from the deck. They pried the case open, took out a couple of cans and nailed it up again. They opened the cans with their sheath knives and devoured their contents.

"You fellers must be hungry," called a grinning stevedore.

"She's a starvation packet," answered Jim Pearson, as the two of them tossed the emptied cans behind the stringers.

Thereafter they loafed in the hold till noon, nailing a broken case once in a while.

When the eight apprentices gathered in the half-deck for dinner there was in addition to the customary kid of tough and nameless meat a kid full of green vegetables. They were amazed. Nothing of the sort had ever before been seen in the *Silverwing's* half-deck. Wondering at the skipper's sudden generosity, they returned to their jobs.

The day dragged on. Evening came rainy. Having supped on the remnants of the noon meal, they turned into their bunks. There was nothing to be seen, nowhere to go, in such a Godforsaken port.

A week passed so. Noon and night they ate fresh vegetables so surprisingly provided by the skipper. Another week, and they would be at sea once more—homeward bound!

After supper on Saturday evening the apprentices got into their shore-going clothes and waited for the second mate to appear and order them aft for the customary small sum that the skipper doled out for spending money. A dollar apiece to apprentices—a dollar taken from the premium money, to be deducted from the quarter of that premium money that was returned to every apprentice at the close of each twelve months of his four year apprenticeship. The second mate did not appear.

"The old blackguard's forgotten us," said Jim Pearson. "I'm going aft to remind him."

The skipper opened the cabin door at the apprentice's rap.

"What d'ye want?" he asked.

"Saturday evening, sir," said Jim Pearson. "How about some spending money, sir?"

"You don't need any money here. There's nothing to spend it on," replied the skipper, and shut the door in the apprentice's face.

Curses were long and loud in the half-deck.

"I'll go to Liverpool barefoot before I'll spend a nickel in the old blackguard's slop chest," said one.

Their oilskins, worn through weeks of hurricane weather off the Horn, were threadbare. Their sea boots leaked. They were short of all sea clothing. Their underwear was ragged. The skipper had ample store of all such things in his slop chest. One could always buy from the skipper while at sea, the money to be deducted from the purchaser's account; from his wages if he was a foremast hand, from his returned premium money if he was an apprentice. They'd see the skipper in hell! They'd freeze along the road to Liverpool; they'd shiver the full fourteen thousand miles and more before they'd buy from him! They went ashore, cursing him still.

Because it was Saturday night the one big general store of the place was open late. A sign swung above it—"Everything from a needle to an anchor". They stopped under the sign and looked in through the wide door.

"Come in and puy, poys," beamed the wrinkled old skull-capped Jew who kept the place. "Make yourselfs at home, poys. Dere iss everyt'ing dot is der best dot is, an all sheep. Valk in! Valk in!"

Oilskins and sea boots hung on the walls. Fishermen's clothing lay outspread on a long counter. Mackinaw shirts and trousers and suits of stout dungaree. Hats, caps and sou'westers. Mittens—warm woolen mittens; just the things for the man at the wheel of a ship in cold dry weather. Heavy wool mufflers; just the thing to wind round the neck of a man going to the wheel or up to tramp the dreary two hour lookout, with drift ice clinking in a winter sea. There were sheath knives and belts, tobacco, dubbin, and needles and thread. Pots, pans, shovels and axes—all manner of wares for the use of the shore people. There were bins of dried apples and prunes. Barrels and boxes of crackers. Butter and cheese in a big glass fronted case. And away on a corner counter were mouth organs, alarm clocks and concertinas.

The apprentices entered and wandered about with the old Jew at their heels. Paddy Carroll picked up a concertina and swung himself to a seat on the corner counter. A fisherman came in, a stevedore, a couple of cannery hands. The village policeman, a big good natured looking man with a large metal star on his coat, entered. The storekeeper beamed.

The fishermen, the stevedores, the cannery hands and the policeman gathered round as Paddy Carroll played. An apprentice sang. A sea song. The shore-goers applauded as the chorus died.

"Give us another, boys," said the big policeman.

They sang again, the eight of them rousing a swinging chantey chorus.

"Now, poys, vot vill you vish to puy?" asked the old Jew, rubbing his skinny brown hands.

"Buy hell! There ain't a nickel in the eight of us," said Paddy Carroll.

One of the apprentices picked up a handful of dried apples, another fingered the crackers. A third asked to sample the cheese.

"If you got not der money vott is der use?" whined the storekeeper.

"Vee gets der money by an' by maybe," laughed one.

Standing a little apart, the big policeman was talking with Paddy Carroll and Jim Pearson.

"Sure an' we can pull that off easy enough," said Paddy Carroll, "but where'd it be? There ain't any place on the ship."

The policeman led them out to the street, and around a corner.

"See there," said he, and pointed to a sign that swung over the board walk at one end of a long high, unpainted wooden barn. Jim Pearson spelled the words out.

"Opera House," he laughed. "An opera house in this dump! Some opera, I'd say."

"We'll go see the judge," said the village policeman and, having walked on, a few doors past the many-windowed barn, rapped at the door of a little shack.

"What have them sailors been up to?" asked a ruddy faced plump little man who flung the door wide.

"They ain't been up to anything yet, Judge. We just come round to pay you a bit of a visit," answered the policeman.

The justice of the peace of the fishing village bade them enter, and brought out cigars, a bottle and glasses. They sat on his table, on his floor and on his window ledges. While the policeman told of the plan in mind they smoked the judge's cigars and sipped his liquor. When the policeman was done, he opened a cupboard and fetched out a fiddle.

"Let's see you fellows jig," said he. "Come on, now! Shake a leg!"

Paddy Carroll and Jim Pearson stepped to the judge's fiddle. The floor boards creaked. The windows rattled. Till far into the night they danced and sang, with a drink now and then.

The night was dark when they started back to the *Silverwing*. Accompanying them, lest they lose their way and stumble into the roadside dykes, the policeman laughed at their tales of hunger.

"What makes you boys go to sea, anyway?" he asked as he parted from them at the gangway.

"God knows," Jim Pearson called back to him. "God knows, and *He* won't tell."

"It ain't your skipper furnishes them green things," said the policeman. "That's Old Man MacTavish. He always sends down stuff from his garden when a ship comes in."

"Who the devil's Old MacTavish?" asked one.

"The preacher over at the little church," replied the policeman.

"If he don't get coming down to the ship and praying over us we'll give him a free ticket to our show," called Paddy Carroll.

They turned into their bunks. Next Saturday night they'd give a sing-song at the opera house, charge a two-bit admission and rake in a little pot of money. The judge and the policeman would spread the news around for them during the week.

MORNING broke bright and clear. Dressing ship for Sunday, they hoisted the flags—the long blue crimson bordered pennant with *Silverwing* upon it in white letters at the fore; the house flag at the main. They ran the ensign up, to greet, and flutter in, the morning sun. The morning sun shone on the *Silverwing*, flashed on her burnished brass and teak work, on spotless paint and on long curved snowy decks. A well kept ship. A smart ship, in ports where smart ships were well known. "A hard old hungry hooker" the apprentices called her.

While the boys were at breakfast the stevedores came aboard to open the hatches and go on with the loading. The apprentices swore at that. Even a sea apprentice expects his Sundays free while in port. But for as long as the stevedores worked they must stay aboard. The stevedores worked till noon. Then having slammed the hatches into place having flung the ship's food to the gulls and dined on stolen salmon and green things from the skypilot's garden, they changed into shore-going clothes and made haste ashore. They would go to the judge's shack and hold a rehearsal.

But the judge was out. The village was deserted. The big policeman was nowhere to be seen. They wandered away and headed toward the open country. The fall sun was warm, the afternoon drowsy. For a time they hunted the muskrats that darted along the dyke banks. But soon, giving up the useless sport, they lay in the grass, their faces to the sky, and talked of such things as sea apprentices talk of—food, girls, ships, ports, big blows, master's certificates—"*A man's a fool to go to sea!*"

Beyond the village, at the river side, graceful, symmetrical, touched with a splendor, with a mystery no curse could

dispel, the masts of the *Silverwing* towered above the roofs of the canneries. The sun gleamed on her lofty, gilded trucks, on her bright spars, on her shining teak blocks, on the varnish of her top hamper.

Presently Paddy Carroll and Jim Pearson rose and wandered away together. They walked aimlessly and in silence, paying no heed to the muskrats that scampered or to the snakes that slid into the roadside grasses; to grazing cattle that lifted their heads to stare. Their step was light. Their shoulders were square. Of what they were thinking none but their Creator knew. Perhaps none other would have understood. They themselves did not understand. "A dog's life"—that alone they knew.

The two had walked far when Jim Pearson pointed to a house half hidden in trees, a couple of hundred yards from the roadside.

"Apple trees," said Paddy Carroll. "Let's go get some apples."

The farmer opened at their rap.

"Will you give us some apples, sir?" asked Jim Pearson. In six months neither of them had tasted fruit of any sort.

The farmer looked at them curiously, suspiciously; disappeared and, returning in a moment, handed an apple to each of them and closed his door.

The row of young apple trees that stood before the house was laden, down-weighted, with round rosy fruit.

"Both of 'em wormy," laughed Jim Pearson.

They flung the wormy apples away and walked on. The sun was low, the mists were creeping in, the masts of their ship were thin threads in the far distance when they turned to retrace their steps. In deep dusk, at the outskirts of the village, they fell in with their comrades. On the way back to the ship the eight apprentices paused in lamplight shining from an open door. They looked into a dimly illuminated building, at the far end of which a few women sat on low benches. A solitary man sat near the open door. Four or five children passed by the apprentices, looked up at them curiously and went in. At the other end of the building a side door opened noiselessly. An old man entered, an old gray-headed man garbed in a worn black suit. The congregation rose as he entered. The place was very still.

Jim Pearson tiptoed into the building. Paddy Carroll tiptoed after him. The others followed, while the children stared.

By neither word nor glance did the old gray headed man show that he was aware of the presence of the sailors. They rose when the members of the little congregation rose and knelt when they knelt. When a woman moved to the piano that stood beneath the pulpit and the congregation raised their voices to an ineffectual hymn, the apprentices were silent.

The oil lamps wavered in the chill night air. The children stirred restlessly. As the preacher announced a closing hymn the eight apprentices rose.

The woman at the piano turned her head. The congregation fell silent as the boys of the *Silverwing* broke into song. Face upraised, the old gray headed man seemed to look beyond the roof.

> "Eternal Father, strong to save,
> Whose arm hath bound the restless wave,
> Who bidst the mighty ocean deep
> Its own appointed limits keep,
> Oh, hear us when we carry to Thee
> For those in peril on the sea."

The hymn died away. The congregation bowed their heads. As the old man spoke the closing blessing the apprentices of the *Silverwing* slipped silently out to the night.

"Tomorrow we'll have to start rehearsing for our show," said Paddy Carroll as they plodded along the road to the ship. They'd rake in a pot of money—enough to buy good oilskins and stout sea boots for the long voyage eastward round the Horn.

As soon as Monday's work was done and supper eaten they hurried to the judge's shack. The policeman and the judge were awaiting them. Till long past midnight they sang and danced. Sea

songs and chanteys. Dances to the judge's fiddle.

DAY BY day, throughout a week, the *Silverwing* apprentices ate green things sent from the old sky-pilot's garden. Night by night they sang and danced, rehearsing in the judge's shack. Day by day the judge and the policeman spread the news about. When Saturday night came they hurried over supper, made haste into shore-going clothes and headed for the opera house. The rows of oil lights along the walls of the wide barn were already lighted. The benches were in place. On the platform at the far end of the building they saw and recognized the one piano of the settlement.

"You lads'll have to pack the piano back when your show's over," the judge told them.

They'd do that. And they'd give the old sky-pilot a free ticket, of course.

"No. The old chap's tied in a knot with rheumatism tonight." The judge told them that too. He led them forward, and behind the curtain. The village policeman took his station at the open door.

Their high boots shuffling on the floor boards, fishermen began to enter in twos and threes. Stevedores and cannery hands came in. Women who held small children by the hand whispered to one another. Older children slid along the wooden benches. Seats grew scarce. A murmur of subdued conversation filled the fishing village opera house.

The curtain rose. The policeman sat down and thumped his boots on the floor. Fishermen thumped theirs. Stevedores and cannery workers clapped strong, work hardened palms. The judge announced the first number.

"Oh, its Sinbad the sailor, and Robinson Crusoe!
I left my native country a-roving for to go.
I started out a sailor, and I come back, as you see,
A mixture of an Indian, a Turk and a Japanee."

An outburst of clapping, a peal of laughter, a thumping of heavy boots broke out as the song ceased. Children stared, open mouthed.

As Jim Pearson and Paddy Carroll faced each other, as the judge picked up his fiddle, fishermen, women, cannery hands, stevedores and children leaned eagerly forward. Faster and faster went the feet of the dancers. An uproar of cheering greeted the close of the number.

Another of the apprentices stepped forward.

"Call all hands to man the capstan,
Seethe cables areall clear,
For today we'll weigh the anchor
And for distant shores we'll steer."

Settlers from far countries sat with the home-hunger in their faces as the eight of them lifted the homeward-bounder's swinging chantey chorus:

"Rolling home, rolling home,
Rolling home across thesea."

Song gave way to dance, and dance to song. The village opera house shook as to the thunder of the sea winds, as to the lash of wind-flung waters.

The judge announced the closing number. The last song died. The audience swarmed out to the night. The judge turned out the lights. The big policeman thrust a small canvas bag into Paddy Carroll's hand. As the eight apprentices shouldered the piano, to bear it back to its accustomed place, the judge called—

"We'll be waiting for you at the store, lads!"

Talking in low voices, Paddy Carroll and Jim Pearson seeming to urge something, the others hesitant at first, the boys of the *Silverwing* tramped along the boardwalk.

The church was empty, lighted by one feeble lamp. They bore their burden to its place and set it down. The others watched while Paddy Carroll emptied the canvas bag upon it and counted out their gains.

"It's a go?" asked Paddy Carroll when the coins were counted.

The crucifix above the tiny altar glittered in the weak lamplight. The night was very still. His shipmates answering with acquiescent nods, Paddy Carroll gathered up a dollar and slipped it into his pocket. The rest of the coins he replaced in the canvas bag. His comrades biding his return, he stepped to the altar and laid the bag upon it.

"Come on! Let's go," said he, as he returned to his fellows.

Talking in low voices, Paddy Carroll and Jim Pearson seeming to urge something, the others instantly acquiescent, they tramped the boardwalk toward the village. Judge and policeman welcomed them when they entered the old Jew's store. The old Jew beamed.

"Puy vot you vish, poys, an' make youselfs at home," said he. While Paddy Carroll flung a dollar on the counter Jim Pearson drew judge and policeman aside.

"We'll take it all in' baccy, Solomon," said Paddy Carroll. "Come on now! Shake a leg! She's going to sea in the morning."

Closing his store, the old Jew mumbled surlily. Judge and policeman called after the boys of the *Silverwing*, "Good-by! Good-luck, lads!" They called back, "So long— Fair winds!" and hurried to their ship.

They shared up the small store of tobacco, took each a large gunny sack and filed over the gangway to the shore again.

SHIP, sky and shore were still. Stars glinted. Muskrats splashed in the dykes as the eight boys strode by. Grazing cattle lifted their heads to stare after invisible forms. The village lay far behind them when the two oldest apprentices stopped.

"A couple of hundred yards back from the road," whispered Paddy Carroll.

Soundlessly, each working alone, one to a tree, they went to filling their gunny sacks with round, rosy fruit.

By the first light of dawn the *Silverwing* apprentices returned over her gangway, their shoulders stooped to the weight of their booty. A whistle tooted from the misty river—the tugboat from Vancouver with the homeward bound crew aboard. Lights gleamed from the rooms of the mate and second mate.

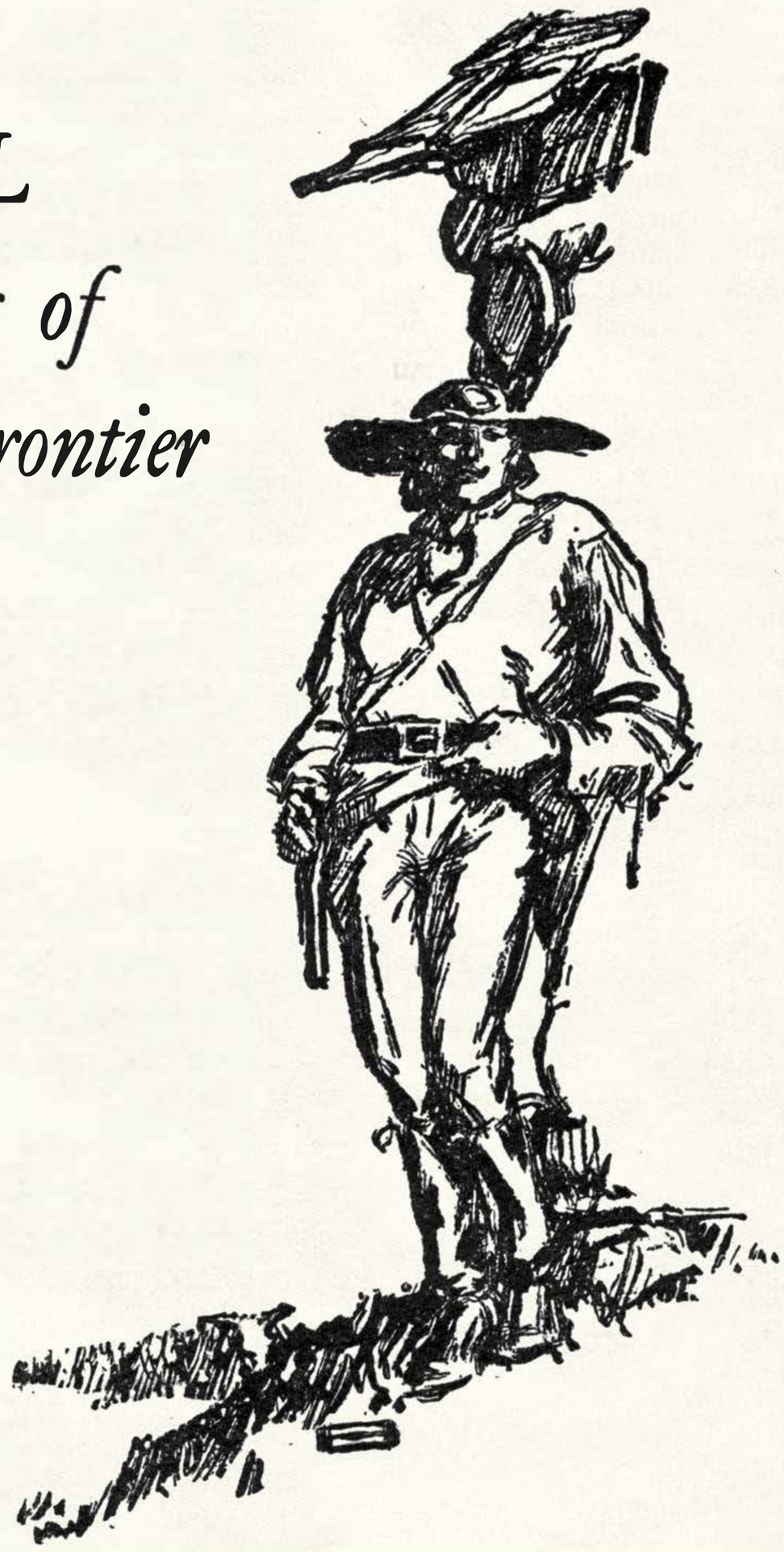
The apprentices bore their spoils to the half-deck, made a swift change into dungarees and hurried back to the deck.

Presently a sailors' chorus rolled over the river, over the sleeping village, away to the mist hidden flat lands beyond.

"Good-by, fare you well!
Good-by, fare you well!
Hurrah, my lads, we're homeward bound!"

Continuing

A NOVEL of the pioneers of the Nebraska Frontier



THE SUN

EARLY in the Fifties when Nebraska was opened to homesteaders the temporary towns along the Missouri River were filled with restless pioneers who had followed the setting sun, some to press onward to the Rockies and some to halt by the grassy hills and fertile valleys they had found. There were land sharks and rascals, too, but they were constantly on the go.

Old Bird of Freedom, a breezy speculator in wildcat banknotes, was enough within the law to linger and search for his lost land, a plot of which he had sold to the chronically westward moving Bracket family. George Hancey's father was dropped into the river and never seen again after he refused to move from his quarter section at the request of the Land Claim Club. Hancey's neighbor, Roscoe Strong, bought his hundred and sixty acres from Dixel, a speculator, and with his son and daughter, Sam and Ruth, he began in earnest to develop a farm. All the while they were building a house, travelers and homesteaders enjoyed their shelter and their provisions. Old Bird of Freedom became quite friendly, and his grandniece prepared to spend the winter with the Strongs.

The first blizzard came so suddenly that the Strong household was snowbound without provisions. Plattsmouth was twenty miles away.

"I'll go," said Sam Strong. "I tramped in snow back in Maine."

"But Nancy Freedom and Ruth will object—a boy like you to go in this weather, in a strange country."

ON THE contrary the girls heartily approved; and it was with much difficulty that Nancy also was dissuaded from making the trip. In the morning the sky was overcast as it had been since the first storm. Strong was uneasy and regretted his lack of firmness. Nancy laughed derisively and insisted:

"What's that trip to a man with strong legs? Trouble with you Yankees is that you treat your grown up children like they were seven years old. Get along with you, son. Don't travel after dark.

"Land hunger, gold fever and the human tides"

CHASERS

by HUGH PENDEXTER

You'll find stopping places alongtheway."

With the threat of the storm over him, Sam started along the ridge of snow that covered the road five feet deep. Had he been back in Maine he would have thought nothing of the venture, but this new country was capable of any surprise, any treachery. There were no forests and mountains to shelter one. Nebraska Territory stretched to the crest of the Rockies. A storm, starting at the mountains, found no obstacle in its rush to the Missouri.

Smoke from houses, snowed in to the eaves, now and then marked the course of the road. The walking was not difficult, and the light toboggan required little exertion to haul it along; but every minute he expected a smothering white deluge. The wind pressed against his back and helped him along, and he was continually walking in a stream of loose snow blowing over the hard packed ridge.

At the end of ten miles of steady walking he met a man with a small hand-sled loaded with pork and meal. The man was about to turn off south of the road, where a distant smoke showed faintly against gray sky, but he waited to exchange greetings. In answer to Sam's anxious query he replied:

"Some grub is still there, but if the folks get to coming in, it'll run out mighty quick. You can get a full load, if you have money to pay for it. If this weather keeps up there'll be terrible suffering. The northwest looks like more snow before morning. You're more'n welcome to come along and stay with me tonight, but if you can stand it, you'd better push right through. It'll be lots harder on the return trip."

Sam studied the sky, a low, gray roof, slanting down to the end of the snowfields. The unbroken cloud formation hemmed him in, like the tightly drawn flaps of a gigantic tent. He remembered how easily he had lost himself between the house and the shed. Caution urged him to go with the man and make sure of shelter, before another storm broke.

"My wife and children are hungry. I'll have to be going," said the man. "Come along."

"I'll make it," he decided. "I feel fresh. But I may stop with you coming back. Mustn't eat up your food till I have to."

The man insisted, but Sam was determined. He started on, walking rapidly. He did not glance back until the man was a dark dot far south of the road. After that he often glanced over his shoulder at the brooding sky, more often than suited his peace of mind. He spoke aloud to himself and reminded himself that he could gage the weather by glancing at the sky ahead, but he could not rid his mind of the notion of a venomous personality in the low hanging clouds.

This engendered the idea of an attack by stealth, or from behind. He was interested in what the heavens were doing behind him. He felt he was being pursued. Once, when he switched his gaze back to the foreshortened sky line, he involuntarily exclaimed:

"Following me mighty sly! You'd trick me if you could!"

When he was within a mile of Plattsmouth the snow began sifting down, and the wind came rushing after him ferociously. He forced himself into an awkward run and held to it until shapes of buildings could be glimpsed through the screen. The snow was driving heavily and blurring the houses when he entered the outskirts of the town. He pushed on to the Old Barracks at the foot of Main Street and saw a few bowed figures hurrying to shelter. The store was on the ground floor of the log barracks.

When Sam opened the door and entered, followed by a gust of snow, the group of men, smoking and talking, gave him no heed until he had shaken off the snow and stood revealed as a stranger. Then came many questions as to conditions back from the river.

He soon exhausted his slim budget of news and took his turn at listening. One man said wolves were chasing deer through the streets of Nebraska City. Another told of men lost in the first three days of the storm. Sam listened, too weary, too comfortable in his relaxation, to ask for details. A yellow blob of light marked the house nearest the store, but aside from this, the early night was opaque.

Sam dozed off and was aroused by the proprietor shaking him by the shoulder. He wearily opened his eyes and discovered that the men had departed. The storekeeper told him:

"You've had a mighty hard trip, young man. And of course you're keen to be going back. But you must wait till this cussed weather's finished. You can sleep here on the counter, or under it. There's a pile of blankets. I've fixed the fire so there'll be coals in the morning. Throw on some wood if you're up before I return. There's cheese and hardtack and a jug of whisky at the end of the counter. You're welcome. Tomorrow you shall go home and eat with me and get some honest victuals."

"You're mighty neighborly and I'm dead tired," mumbled Sam. "I brought a lunch and ate it on the way. I'm not hungry. Just beat out. I'll turn in. In the morning I hope you can sell me a sled load of supplies."

"I can outfit you. Getting a little low on flour, but can let you have a bag or two. Plenty of bacon, beans and sugar. Some hunters brought in frozen elk meat this morning. They told of a man who killed seventy elk with an ax in one day. Caught the whole herd helpless in the snow."

Sam was awakened in the morning by the storekeeper putting wood in the stove. He was at once told:

"Come along to a hot breakfast. Not so much snow last night as I'd expected, but it looks threatening Never see such weather in all my born days. You'll have to wait for fair weather."

The storekeeper led the way, wading knee deep, to a small house, built of Iowa logs, where the trader's wife made him feel entirely welcome. The breakfast was soon finished and the proffer of pay

was indignantly refused. Returning to the store, Sam quickly made his purchases and proceeded to lash the load on the toboggan.

The storekeeper remarked:

"That can wait. You can't start back till it shows signs of clearing."

"I'm thinking it won't clear off till spring," replied Sam.

He paused to study the threatening sky.

"I've got to get back. Folks will be worrying their heads off. I'll make part of the distance today."

The storekeeper tried to dissuade him, but Sam persisted, saying:

"Looks like it will snow all winter. Grows worse and worse."

The storekeeper smiled at this bit of exaggeration, yet, as a fact, the great storm of 1856–57 kept up for three months, with occasional cessations, but with the sun in hiding for two months. Despite the storekeeper's remonstrance, Sam looped the cord over his shoulder and started on his homeward journey. The wind was in his face, and he kept his head bowed. By the time he had cleared the town, he knew the return trip was to be more arduous than any he had ever made.

Always ahead was the sullen wall of clouds. As far as the eye reached was the immense snowfield. All hollows had disappeared and even deep ravines were filled. He felt that he was alone on the top of a snow filled world, as he struggled on against the steady pressure of the wind. The night's snow had not packed, and it blew along the hard surface in an endless shallow river and quickly obliterated all signs of travel. Hampered by the wind and the loaded toboggan, he was reminded of his academy days in Maine—the Latinclass and the descent toAvernus—and he realized the return was indeed labor.

THREE miles from town he found himself near a house and traveling almost on a level with the eaves. An attempt to keep a twelve foot strip shoveled in front of the house had brought the owner forth to combat the drifting terror once more. Beholding the traveler, the man cried out—

"Where you going?"

"Down the road for nearly twenty miles."

"Like hell! You're aiming north and for the Platte. You're half a mile from the road."

He clambered up beside Sam and pointed to the northwest and directed:

"That's theway to get back to the road, if you're crazy enough to try it. But I won't risk even trying to walk into Plattsmouth. We lost a neighbor. Disappeared first night of the storm. Won't find him till spring. When you reach the road you ought to see the smoke of the Perkins house in the south. Check up at every smoke you see, or you'll be missing and become wolf bait."

Sam changed his course, took the long diagonal and was rewarded by a smoke. Halting before the half buried log structure he called until a woman came to the door. She told him he had crossed the road some ten rods back and that if he could keep to it he would see smokes on each side, quite near together, for the next ten miles.

"And by that time if not before, you'll be ready to call it a day's work. Unless you're crazy, you'll stay here. My husband went to Plattsmouth early this morning, and I'm mortal scared he'll get lost."

Sam turned back to where he believed the road ran and picked up his journey. He had determined to stick to his task, until it commenced snowing, when he would make to the nearest house. Nor was the thrill of danger altogether unpleasant.

Passing a half buried house, he wondered if he could sight another before the blinding veil was drawn around him. When the houses were far apart, he would begin to fear he had wandered from the road, and he would vow to stop when he sighted another house. The excitement,and, at times, the wild exhilaration of the dangerous game caused him to forget food until midafternoon, when

he suddenly realized that he was very weary and a bit hungry.

Darkness was near. It was rushing upon him so rapidly he wondered he had not noticed the declining light. He deeply regretted that he had not halted at the last house, but he had advanced too far to turn back. As the darkness closed in, he knew he would see no more smokes. All day he had gambled on beating the storm in his slow race from dwelling to dwelling. It was much colder now, and he decided he must resort to digging himself deep into the snow to escape freezing.

Then, miraculously enough, a vague light showed nearby, only to vanish. Sam made toward the spot and found himself rolling down a ten foot slope. Gaining his feet, he bumped into a wall. He shouted, and the light reappeared; a man was standing in the doorway. He staggered into the warm room and collapsed on a stool. He recognized the man as the one he had talked to the day before.

There were several children eying the white-crusted figure with surprise. Sam identified himself and was made heartily welcome. Now the wind started howling, as perhaps the wolves howled, chasing deer through the streets of Nebraska City.

"Drag my sled in and we'll eat some of the elk meat," he told his host.

"You don't have to furnish your supper," cried the woman, "but it may be better not to leave elk meat outside. We haven't seen any wolves round here yet, but they're powerful keen to know where meat is."

Sam insisted that some of the meat be cooked for supper, as the couple would have enough to do to feed the children, without donating any of their supplies to wayfarers. Drowsy from exhaustion, the food and the warmth of the room, Sam was soon asleep. The last he remembered was when his host stepped to the door to look at the weather and quickly stepped back to declare proudly:

"It's a ringtail snorter this time. No country on earth can beat us for real snow and real blow."

The snow had ceased by morning, but there were fresh drifts around the cabin. As the housewife prepared more elk meat for breakfast, she lamented:

"Seems if it was an age since I walked on bare ground. I wish the wind would let up its screeching. I'm glad you're going to stay with us. We won't be so lonely."

Sam stared at the sullen clouds and decided—

"I'm pushing on."

The couple urged him to stay, but he had made up his mind. Then the man told him:

"If you're fool enough to start, don't try to do more'n a few miles. Don't travel a foot, if it starts snowing, except to get under shelter. If you hold to the road, you'll be lucky."

When he set forth the woman wiped her eyes and turned away from the door. It was plain that she considered him as one doomed to perish. It set Sam's nerves to jangling to discover that the house was not close by the road but some distance back, and that had he failed to happen upon it he would have continued south, at right angles from the road. It heightened his fear and increased his respect for the elements.

THE WIND had blown itself out for the time being, and for nearly two hours he pursued his journey without discomfort. By the time he had covered five miles and was debating whether to pass a smoke on his right, the wind pounced upon him with such fury as to make progress almost impossible. The loose snow was blown in clouds, to blind his eyes, but he had no difficulty in making the house. He found the tenant was an old man, living alone. He had several wonderful shelves of books. The two sat up until nearly midnight, talking books. Sam was in an exuberant frame of mind. He was almost home.

He was later than usual in waking, and the old man was cooking bacon and beans, when Sam opened his eyes.

"How's the weather?" he asked anxiously.

"More snow coming. I've been outside and could taste it and smell it. This time it'll be a real storm. Been practising for days, and now it's all ready to give a fine performance. Heard wolves howling somewhere last night."

"Probably the wind. Wolves will stick to the timber, where they can find game."

"Wolves. Not wind. We don't care. This is a good place to stay."

Sam went outside and found no difference in the sky, except that the clouds, if anything, were hanging lower. There was a suggestion of dampness in the air. He finished his breakfast and pulled out his purse.

"Put that up!" sharply commanded his host. "This isn't a tavern. And what are you thinking of, anyway?"

"I'm going through. It isn't far, and I can beat the storm."

"Then you're a fool. Still, I suppose it's human that you should want to see your folks. I never had any folks. Only child. Orphan at ten. I've fared soft and easy, as worldly things go. But there's nothing in the world to make up for lack of folks and knowing that you don't belong to some family. If we ever have bare ground again, come and see me, and I'll lend you some books. I'd do it now, if there wasn't a chance of your getting lost."

After adjusting the line around his shoulders and gaining the buried highway, Sam was pleased to find that the temperature had risen. The wind, too, had dropped to a breeze. But the clouds were lower and gave every indication of more snow. However, the storm could never catch him now. He was too near home. He was wildly elated. The wind increased, but he didn't mind it. His gaze was continually searching for a sight of the house on the rise at the right of the road. The wind began making drifts from the top snow. He fancied that it was a malevolent agency, trying to stop him by piling the snow across his course.

Not until he had walked for two hours, did he realize it was time he should be sighting the house. Yet he was positive he had not passed it. The wind was blowing against his left side, blowing now from the south, and yet it was growing colder. He was lost. He could not even pick out the course of his back trail, for the wind had smoothed away or buried all signs.

Far on his left he fancied he saw a smoke, but the snow was blowing so high that he could not be sure. He made for it, whipped on by a terrible fear. He kept telling himself that he must not lose his nerve—that he could dig a deep hole and keep from freezing. The old man was positive he had heard wolves. The woman, some ten miles back, had said they could smell meat from a great distance.

He floundered along with the wind on his right. He deduced from this that he was making back toward Plattsmouth and that the smoke, if it were a smoke, came from the booklover's cabin. When he saw that it really was a smoke, he gave a feeble cheer and endeavored to increase his speed, before the wind hid the cabin. Long diagonals of falling snow swept across the bleak world. As he vainly searched for the smoke, he was whimsically reminded of a dress his sister wore, one with big white dots.

The storm was smothering, and he could see nothing beyond a few rods. He was startled when a horse whinnied nearby. The next moment he was tumbling down a snowbank and was colliding with some sort of shelter. The door flew open, and his father, an ax in one hand and a lantern in the other, stood before him.

"A man! I thought it might be a timber wolf!" he cried, as he beheld the white figure. "Come up to the house."

Then he saw the toboggan and seized his son by the shoulders and gasped:

"You, Sam! Thank God! I've sweat blood!"

"I fetched the grub!" faintly boasted Sam. "Don't tell the girls, but I was lost. I left the road far back and was passing north of the house, when I glimpsed the smoke. I've been miles out of my way."

His father clamped his hands on the sagging shoulders and said nothing for a minute. Then he quietly directed—

"Walk in front of me and see if you can follow the lane through the snow to the house."

THE DEEP snows blocked the Salt Lake and California mail coach line, and the route was shifted south, passing through Arizona. Spring freshets caused much suffering, the Missouri surpassing all records within the memories of white men, flooding the lowlands from the bluffs of Iowa, deep into the Territory. Settlers in river bottoms were washed out, and several drowned. Nebraska was hungry, and Iowa had no abundance of foodstuffs to sell.

In March, a man, called Stigely, stopped for a free meal at the Strongs. Before leaving, he seemed anxious to look at the land. After watching Strong and his son start ploughing the forty-odd acres of fall breaking—the matted sod being very stubborn—he halted the plough, produced a large roll of wildcat banknotes and said:

"This piece ought to be good for sod corn. I'm always taking chances. I'll give you eight dollars an acre for your claim and pay you five hundred dollars down."

"I hope to live to see this land worth fifty dollars an acre," answered Strong. "If you'd gone through what we did the past winter, you'd refuse a hundred."

"No, sir! I'd sell for anything I could get, if the last four months are a sample of Nebraska winters. What with weather trouble, political trouble and Indian trouble, I believe you'd be wise to sell."

Sam gravely asked—

"With all those troubles, don't you think we'd be doing wrong to unload on you?"

"We're holding our land," quietly added Strong.

"Just as well for me. I'd be taking the chance of having the title questioned."

Strong stared in amazement and demanded:

"Just what do you mean about the title being questioned? I paid for this land. I'm a member of the Claim Club."

"Didn't mean anything beyond the fact there seems to be quite a mixup as to land titles in this Territory. It'll be several years before a homesteader can be sure of his title."

"Yet you'd risk it and buy," derided Strong.

"I'd take a chance on holding it long enough to sell for ten dollars an acre."

"And I'm holding it for my home."

Stigely went his way, and the Strongs resumed their ploughing. Sam's attempts at conversation failed. His father worked in silence; and, when the sun was halfway down the afternoon sky, he suddenly announced:

"I'm off to Omaha to enter our land in the land office. Do what you can with the ploughing."

"Let me go with you, and we'll leave the girls at Plattsmouth," Sam eagerly suggested.

"You stay here and attend to your knitting."

"At least, wait awhile. With high water and ice, it's much as a man's life is worth to make Omaha."

"I'm not a child, nor crazy. I shall run no risks. I'm starting for Plattsmouth inside of thirty minutes."

When he went to the house to prepare for the trip, Nancy Freedom decided to accompany him.

"I've had my visit out," she said. "All of you have been lovely to me. But Uncle should be working up the river by this time; and he's a bad boy and needs much watching. He's been free to do as he wants to all winter, and the good Lord only knows what mischief he's been up to!"

Nancy Freedom seemed to know every one in Plattsmouth. Leaving her with friends, Strong lost no time in undertaking the Omaha trip. He was uneasy about his land, but could think of no immediate reason for worry. He had done everything except enter the land. Failure to do this promptly could not invalidate the

title. Yet his mind would not be at peace until he had gone through the formality.

Although avoiding all unnecessary risk from water and ice, he was compelled to take chances that never would be told to his children. Arriving in the town, he left his carpetbag at the Douglas House on Harney and Eighteenth Streets and hastened to the land office. He was compelled to wait several hours before he could receive his duplicate of the entry. With a great load off his mind, he returned to the hotel and hugely enjoyed the bustle and confusion. Many Easterners were coming in, looking for investments. The town's population was estimated to be two thousand. Eastern capital and wildcat notes furnished plenty of money.

Timber would arrive from St. Joseph on lumber boats, but not enough to meet the needs. Men were eagerly buying common rough boards and studding, which had not yet arrived. The price for this material was bid up to seventy-five dollars a thousand, while weatherboarding brought a hundred, and flooring soared to a hundred and twenty.

What he heard and saw that one evening in the Douglas House convinced Strong that squatters north of the Platte were claiming everything in sight and selling the same without pretending to give a legal title. Claims were being jumped, newcomers complained. From the reckless trading and selling, Strong was also convinced that the only title that would hold good was a loaded rifle and a day and night guard.

There were other subjects discussed, besides the crazy real estate market. There was the belated news of the terrible suffering of a handcart train near Bean River, where the Salt Lake mail party found fifteen dead in the snow. A man from Brownville was inviting trouble by denouncing Governor Izard for vetoing the removal bill. This speaker loudly insisted that the capital should be removed to Nebraska City, inasmuch as a majority of the settlers lived south of the Platte. Another was declaring that the free soilers outnumbered the pro-slavery men in Kansas by fifteen to one, and he declared that the St. Joseph ferry boats would be taxed to capacity in crossing the season's emigrants.

Refreshed mentally and physically, Strong started for Plattsmouth next morning. The down trip was not arduous. With his mind at rest he decided to take time to call on Nancy. He was doubly repaid by finding her uncle with her. He had arrived from Nebraska City the day Strong started for the land office. He was as exultant as a schoolboy with a long vacation ahead. He believed he had discovered his lost Thermopylæ, and he proposed to visit it, once the water went down and the bottoms dried out.

"Nancy will go with me," he added. "My town is somewhere north of the Platte and near the head of the south fork of the Loup. I don't know whether to take the old Mormon road north of the Platte or follow the Oregon road on this side."

"It sounds rather vague. Better leave Nancy with us, until you know just where the town's located. Better still, don't make the trip. That's unknown country, and you may run into unfriendly Indians," advised Strong.

"I sold Thermopylæ lots to the Brackets, and I'm going to find that town. Nancy can do as she pleases. No danger in the trip," replied Freedom.

"I must go along to look after him. I can't trust him that far alone," Nancy explained. Darting a suspicious glance at her uncle she accused, "See here, you know this is a wild goose chase you're planning."

"No, ma'am!" he indignantly replied. "And you mustn't talk that way to your elders."

"By your tell we'll have to travel nearly to the forks before striking north of the Platte. You know it can't be your lost town. There are no steamboats up there."

"That's what has bothered me, but I've cleared it all up," triumphantly declared Freedom. "The cusses who drew

the plat threw in the boats to make it look more important. There's the waterfront, just as pictured, but no sidewheelers yet. But they'll come."

"Nancy, you surely won't start out on any such a trip," Strong was saying when he was interrupted by a loud rap on the door.

"Come in! Door ain't locked!" bellowed Freedom.

The door opened and a man bowed to Nancy, but did not enter. Staring at Strong he inquired—

"You are Roscoe Strong?"

With strange misgiving Strong bowed his head.

"We heard you were in town. You're wanted at the Claim Club at once."

"Why?"

"A member complains of you. He says he holds a prior claim to your land. We are prepared to hold a meeting and settle the matter."

"Settle? There's nothing to settle. I paid for the land and have my Omaha entry in my pocket!" exploded Strong.

"I'm acting as messenger. I know nothing about it. Mr. Stigely has filed his complaint and the club considers it serious enough to be inquired into at once."

"Stigely! The scoundrel! Why, he was out to my place a few days ago and wanted to buy!"

"No use talking here, Strong. We'll go to the club. They can't come any game on you when Bird of Freedom is on hand. We'll make that snake hunt cover."

STRONG followed him and the messenger. He felt dazed. He tried to explain to the messenger how Stigely had partaken of his hospitality and had offered to buy the land. The messenger impatiently told him:

"You're wasting your breath. I'm simply doing an errand for the club. But I will say Mr. Stigely is thought highly of."

"He ought to be!" roared Strong. "The skunk ought to be hung!"

"Higher'n Haman, ding bust him!" added Freedom. "We'll show the rat up! My friend is a member of the club."

The messenger's brows went up.

"A member of the club? From the talk of the members I got the notion he isn't a member."

"You'll be saying he isn't himself next," jeered Freedom.

For a moment Strong was nonplused; then he recovered some of his composure. He told his friend:

"The record book which I signed will quickly prove I'm a member. This silly business will end quicker'n it began."

They entered the club room on the second floor of the Old Barracks and found it well filled with members. The men were grave, and acknowledged Strong's presence with slight nods. Some affected not to see him. The chairman called the meeting to order and stated that Stigely had the floor to air his grievance. Stigely, seated in a corner, rose and claimed club justice as a member. He explained that he had bought the land of Dixel for five hundred dollars. It was obvious from the close attention paid to the claimant that the majority, if not all, present were speculators and in sympathy with Stigely.

Strong jumped to his feet and cried:

"That's all nonsense. I paid Mr. Dixel three hundred dollars for the land. Call him in here. He'll tell you the same."

The chairman gravely announced:

"Mr. Dixel returned to the East last fall. His affairs were somewhat involved, we understand."

"He was all tangled up," cried Stigely. "That's why he sold the land a second time."

Strong continued:

"I paid for the land and have entered it at the land office in Omaha. There's a witness to the purchase—my friend, Mr. Freedom, here at my side. He was present, when I paid over the money and paid my dues to this club and signed the book. Now let this rascal prove any prior purchase!"

"You'll be in order, sir!" sternly rebuked the chairman. "The chair does not want to hear any more abuse. Your

alleged payment to Dixel in no way vitiates any prior claim that Mr. Stigely establishes. Your claim of membership is a surprise to me and to these members."

"Fetch out your book. You'll find my name in it," passionately cried Strong. "As to abusing this scoundrel, he ate my food and offered me eight dollars an acre for the land, and I have witnesses to prove it."

"The chair will not permit such abusive language!"

"He doesn't dare deny offering to buy what he now claims has been his all the time," challenged Strong.

Stigely hopped to his feet and insisted:

"There is no proof that this man is a member of this club. He has no rights the club is bound to respect. I demand the club compel him to deed that land over to me."

"Well, damn your gall!" gasped Strong.

Bird of Freedom stood up, ruffled his white beard and loudly announced—

"I was with him in this room when he signed the book and paid Dixel for the land."

Mr. Freedom had many friends. He was a well known and much liked character. The chairman gently inquired—

"You were standing by his side when he signed the book?"

"I was within a dozen feet of him."

"And you'd swear on your oath it was the record book of this club he signed?"

"It had to be. What other would he be signing?"

"It might be a book Dixel carried around with him. Did you pick it up and examine it and satisfy yourself it was the club records?"

"That's all nonsense!" snarled Freedom. "There was no other book here for him to sign, and you know it. Dixel had no book with him, only his plat. Why don't you produce the records, instead of yapping?"

"And why doesn't this rascal deny offering me eight dollars an acre?" cried Strong.

Stigely jumped to his feet and explained:

"I offered him eight dollars an acre for the land he broke up last season. I made an offer to buy my land at that price. Only the ploughed ground and only on condition he peacefully give me possession. I knew Dixel had cheated him, and I wanted him to be paid for the work he actually had done."

"You're a liar!" thundered Strong. "Fetch out that book! At least, I can satisfy even this club that I'm a member."

The chair rapped sharply on the table and repeated the warning about abusive terms. He directed that the records be produced. A member, serving as clerk, rummaged in a small closet at the back of the room and finally reported that the records were missing.

Stigely came to his feet and insisted:

"This man has no rights the club is bound to respect. It appears very strange to me that the records should disappear shortly after he comes to town."

Strong tried to get at him but was held back by Freedom. There was much disorder for a few minutes. One member shouted that Strong had broken in and removed the records. But one man present, at least, was not in sympathy with the meeting and loudly accused:

"Stigely has claims on more than one thousand acres! He'll steal the whole Territory if you let him!"

When the chair secured a semblance of order he announced:

"This club is concerned only with the claim presented to it by Mr. Stigely. We have no evidence that Strong is a member of the club. His buying of Dixel is not disputed. If Mr. Freedom and Mr. Strong will retire for a few minutes the members will discuss the matter among themselves."

THE TWO men went to the narrow hall. After the door closed behind them, Strong muttered:

"By heavens, Freedom, they sent my neighbor to his death; but if they try that on me, it'll cost them dear. You go out and find me a pistol."

"Not yet," firmly refused Freedom. "When it comes to pistols, I'll fetch

more'n one. We'll wait and see how far these cusses have the nerve to go."

In a short time the door was opened and the two men were invited to enter. They were barely seated before the chairman announced:

"It is the vote of this club that the claimant receive a deed of the hundred and sixty acres in question. Mr. Strong is advised to seek his remedy in a suit against Dixel."

"I absolutely refuse to deed an inch of my land to that shark. I absolutely refuse to quit my property!" shouted Strong.

"You'll do as this club orders, sir, or you'll be put over the river!" thundered the chairman.

"And murdered as my father was murdered!" cried a voice from the door.

All heads turned, to behold the dark, reckless visage of young Hancey. And all noticed he was wearing two heavy revolvers in the waistband of his trousers. The young man continued—

"They sha'n't rob you, nor murder you, Mr. Strong."

"Put the cub over the river with the man!" advised a member.

"I hope to hell you'll try to put me over the river!" cried Hancey.

"This confusion must stop," ruled the chairman. "The young man must know he has no right here. The unfortunate affair of his father's death can be blamed in no way on to this club. That a ruffian committed murder is a matter this club could not foresee, nor prevent."

Hancey grinned wickedly and lifted a hand for silence.

"You talk smooth, mister. Now listen to my friends talking rough."

All heard it—a sudden shouting in the street below. Bird of Freedom stepped to an open window and called out—

"If any you folks down there are tired of being robbed by land wolves just run home and fetch your shooting irons."

"Thirty of us here have already fetched rifles and revolvers!" shouted a man.

Another yelled—

"We're going to put the whole club over the river!"

Hancey threw back his head and laughed wildly. Dubious glances were exchanged. Although the room was deathly quiet, the chairman nervously rapped for order. He said:

"It will be well to make another search for that book. We want to be absolutely sure we're not wronging Mr. Strong in any way."

Young Hancey leaned against the wall and laughed shrilly and taunted—

"Backing water a trifle, old fuss and feathers."

"You have no business here. You get out!" ordered the chairman.

"I'll go, if you insist, but I'll bring thirty men here inside of sixty seconds to clean this place out," replied Hancey.

The chairman ignored him. The clerk hunted about the back of the room. Hancey kept close by him, grinning viciously. The clerk ostentatiously went through the cupboard for the second time, then paused and frowned as if perplexed.

Hancey jeered:

"Better find it quick. I'm calling the boys in to help in about five seconds."

The man dived for a pile of newspapers on the floor and rose to his feet and exclaimed—

"Why, here are the records!"

Hancey continued laughing, but his face was hard and his eyes glassy, as he watched the situation work out to an anti-climax. The book was examined, and Strong's signature quickly found. The shouting in the street was growing more menacing. Bird of Freedom combed his fingers through his beard and smiled complacently. The chairman announced:

"It appears from our records that Mr. Strong is a brother member. There never was any doubt as to his good faith in his buying the land of Dixel. As both Mr. Strong and Mr. Stigely are members, I assume it is the wish of the club to drop the matter and leave Mr. Stigley to seek his remedy by appealing to the land office. If he is in the right, he can break the entry of the lands. It is not the province of this club to discriminate

between members. We all want peace and harmony. The chair will receive a motion to adjourn."

The members passed out quickly. Young Hancey, with his thumbs hooked in the top of his trousers, laughed continuously, as the members hurried by him. Stigely held back and was the last to leave. As he was sidling out, Hancey leaned forward and clamped a hand on the speculator's shoulder and swung him about and hissed:

"You dog! It was the like of you that sent my dad to a murderer!"

With a scream of fear, Stigely wrenched himself loose and fairly flung himself down the short flight of stairs.

CHAPTER IV

BANKS AND GRASSHOPPERS

GEORGE HANCEY returned with the Strongs for a brief visit, and was induced to stay for more than a month. Father and son worked early and late, putting in crops, but Hancey helped none. For the first few days he kept close to the house, and it was Ruth who guessed the cause of his uneasiness. She told him:

"Go over to the back claim, George, where you and your father worked. You know you want to go, but feel something is holding you back. Go over there and get used to thinking of what you and your father planned to do. It'll hurt, but you can't get away from it by hiding."

"I'm always thinking what we planned to do. Then came that crooked business!" he groaned.

"You must work into a different state of mind. There's lots of work to be done out here. Your father expects you to do your share. Be busy. It'll help you. Visit the claim; then come back and talk with father. He wants you to settle down and take land. His advice will be good. You are getting nowhere with all this riding to the river and back, and sailing up and down the river. Your father would never approve of that. He'd want you to be a builder."

"I'm miserable, Ruth, plumb miserable. Seems I must find those two men. Seems I can't rest till I find them. I don't care what happens to me, if I can only find them."

"They should be hung; but your hate is eating you up. When you meet them will be time enough to hand them over to the law."

"Law?" he bitterly cried. "Claim club law! When I find them I'll be the law!"

"You poor boy!" she commiserated. "But they probably are in California by this time. While you're waiting, why not pitch into hard work. It'll help you forget some of the bitterness."

"There's only one thing that'll ease the ache a bit," he muttered, his dark face twisted in pain, and his gaze averted that she might not see the tears.

That afternoon he went to the claim. Sam Strong, working near the north line, was startled by the heavy *boom, boom* of gun firing. His first thought was of Indians, but he knew the Indians were making no trouble. Rumors came that the Cheyennes were smoking for war on the heads of the Republican, and it was freely predicted that the summer would see them raiding Oregon and Utah trains west of Fort Kearny.

He waited, much puzzled, and never suspecting that his friend could be the cause of the shots. The sound of rapid firing came again. He quit his work, to investigate. From the top of a grassy rise he beheld Hancey standing erect and discharging his two revolvers. One arm, and then the other, rose and fell, and there came two reports blurred almost into one.

Advancing to join his friend Sam called out—

"Practising shooting a trifle?"

Hancey's eyes were glowing as he spun about. Beholding Sam, he frowned slightly, as if impatient at the interruption. He faced the target and resumed shooting. A small piece of cottonwood board nailed to a burr oak dissolved before Sam Strong's eyes. He gasped—

"Never knew you could shoot like that, George!"

"It's nothing. I'll shoot much better after awhile. Let's go back."

"You're getting ready to meet those murderers?"

"Just getting ready. I want to find the two together and shoot it out."

"But you'll have to be awful quick in starting," warned Sam.

"I've done but little except be quick since dad was murdered," Hancey curtly replied.

As he finished, he jerked the two guns from the waistband of his trousers and wheeled and fired them almost together. It dislodged the remaining fragment of the target. Drawing, wheeling and firing were all done so rapidly that Sam blinked in amazement and exclaimed:

"That beats all! Never believed a man could be as quick as that! I couldn't, if I practised a thousand years."

"Your father hasn't been murdered. Takes a murder to quicken you up. But I must do better. I must be able to place a shot where it's needed."

"Great Scott! You hit that board and knocked it to pieces every time you banged away at it," reminded Sam.

"A board target can't move. Targets I'm hunting will run—run at me and from me. I must get used to a moving target."

"Hold on, George. Just what do you mean? How can you practise on a moving target?"

"I can't, but I'll do the next thing. I'll practise shooting while I'm on the run. Nearest I can come to it. Don't tell Ruth, if she hasn't heard the guns."

After that day Hancey regularly went to the claim. The new owner did not put in an appearance. When his work permitted, Sam would steal away to witness his friend's practise. He had brought a large amount of ammunition from the river and used it lavishly. He greatly increased the range and seemed to shoot as easily with one hand as with the other. He shot from different positions. Some days he devoted all his time to shooting from horseback. He stuck up several posts, six feet tall, placing them irregularly. He would ride at these on a mad gallop, firing to left and right. One day Sam pronounced him to be the greatest revolver expert in the world.

Hancey smiled grimly, shook his head and reminded:

"Just target shooting. How'll I be when the target is shooting back? I won't be scared, as I don't care. But how will it affect my nerves? I must do better. I must get some of the new pocket Colts, .31 caliber. I must be used to any kind of a gun. I'm going to Plattsmouth tomorrow."

Sam's face lengthened. He believed it was useless to urge his friend to stay longer, yet he pleaded:

"Why not take father's advice and take up land near us? He'll arrange so the title will be simon pure and thief proof. Wait for those fellows to come along. You'll find them just as quick as if you go hunting for them."

Hancey shook his head impatiently.

"But you'll come back soon?" urged Sam.

"I'll call, if I travel up the Platte with Freedom. The old man insists his lost town is somewhere west of Kearny. He's crazy. Nancy's a mighty likely girl."

"Fine girl, but I wish she'd stop calling me son," sighed Sam. "How will it help you to go with Freedom on a wild goose chase?"

For a minute Hancey stared into the west without reply. Then he said:

"You'll think me as crazy as old Freedom, but something keeps telling me I'll find my men somewhere up the Platte. The Fort Kearny soldiers who told me they turned back to Nebraska City were either lying or mistaken. There was no trace of them in the river towns."

"They may have crossed the line into Kansas. They'd like the dirty work down there."

"Maybe, but I feel they are up the Oregon road. I'm going that way."

"Lordy! But I wish I could go along with you!" cried Sam, suddenly yearning for travel. "This farming on new land

isn't any joke. I'd like to see something of the western country and have some fun."

"You'd find no fun with me," discouraged Hancey. "You'd never like my kind of hunting. Stick along with your sister and dad, Sam."

He left them the next day, riding back to Plattsmouth to procure more ammunition and then to travel where his consuming hatred led him.

THE MONOTONOUS work on the claim continued, with a drought threatening, despite the high water of early spring. Travel over the Lancaster road increased, and the movers were continually stopping at Strong's to eat and sleep. Now and then a broken wagon challenged Strong's craftsmanship as a smith. Accustomed to doing his own ironwork in the East, he had put up a forge under a shed. Often he was called from his farming to repair a broken cart. He would take no pay for such service, although there were days when he worked almost entirely for others. To Sam's insistence that he should be compensated he would always reply:

"Time enough for that after the country's more settled and the newcomers are on their feet. Most of these people come out here to get a start and make new homes. Few of them are prosperous. We must be neighborly."

This amiable trait had characterized all his working years. Now, through a caprice of nature, he was to find himself unable to extend a helping hand. In the middle of July an entirely new kind of storm swept down upon the growing crops. It had its inception on the high plains and in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains. It came on light gray wings and brought a ferocious appetite.

Green and yellow grasshoppers and dusty quakers were familiar to several generations of Strongs back in Maine. This new breed was entirely different and was more disastrous to the country than a prairie fire. This voracious insect was capable of sustained flight and, when the moon was shining and the dark hours were warm, it would keep to the air throughout the night. Ordinarily, however, it started a day's migration in the morning and settled to feed late in the afternoon.

Strong and his son were at work near the wheat when the father lifted his head and studied the sky. The light was failing and there was a roaring sound that rapidly grew louder. Sam straightened and saw the dark cloud rolling in from the west. He yelled—

"It'll blow the house away!"

The two began running to the house, but, before they were halfway to the top of the rise, the air was thick with grasshoppers, and the roaring of their innumerable wings was deafening. The men bowed their heads and frantically clawed their faces clear of the nuisance. When they stumbled through the doorway, they found the long room thick with whirring insects. Ruth, bewildered, stood in a corner waving her hands before her face. Suddenly the roaring ceased and the outdoor air cleared.

"Good land! What is it?" gasped Sam.

"Billions and billions of grasshoppers," spluttered his father.

He seized a broom and attempted to sweep the pests through the doorway.

"Thanks be! They've gone as quick as they came."

Ruth ran to close the windows and halted in amazement.

"Oh, look! Look! What a sight!"

Standing behind her, her father and brother beheld the surface of the earth alive with a thick carpet of gray grasshoppers.

"They'll eat everything!" yelled Strong, as he darted from the house.

Sam followed, but once outdoors the two quickly realized their impotence to fight the evil. Every living thing, except a patch of sorghum cane had vanished from sight beneath the smothering deluge of the struggling insects. Ruth was the first to take the initiative, even if only to protect her few plants. She covered these with pieces of carpet and home-

made rugs. The two men ran about with crunching steps and glared helplessly at the unexpected destruction.

They saw the leaves and bark of trees disappear. The big garden patch was melting away before their eyes. The scanty corn was concealed by the gray blight, and was never seen again except for a few short stocks.

From the house Ruth screamed:

"Why! They're even eating through the rugs! They'll eat up my plants!"

The men were too dazed to heed her. Overhead was the blue sky. Underfoot was the endless, squirming carpet. There was no place to begin an attack on the repulsive visitors. They were everywhere. Myriads that were unable to get at the garden and crops were covering the wild grass.

Sam was the first to be possessed of an idea. He ran to the sheds and harnessed a horse to a rake. He hoped that by stirring up the mass he could prompt it to take to the air and move on. Later they were to learn that the invaders were attacking on a front that extended from the Minnesota frontier to the southern boundary of Kansas.

Drought had cut down the insects' food on the high western plains and hills. Billions of tiny mouths were demanding food in vain. So they had flown east and they had flown south. Rivers could not stop them. Nothing could stop them.

Sam learned a minor lesson the moment he attempted to drive the horse over the squirming surface. Clouds of grasshoppers flew up and struck the animal's head and caused it to flounder about madly and at last bolt back to the shed, upsetting the rake and hurling Sam to the ground.

Strong, now recovered from his stupor, began investigating with a hoe. After clearing a spot long enough for a brief inspection he ceased work and quietly announced:

"It's no use, son. Everything must go. They're following the vegetables down into the ground. Only thing they don't seem to care for is the broom corn and cane."

Hens and turkeys, acquired that spring, were now awake to the fact that here was a wonderful banquet. They contentedly took toll until they could eat no more. Sam morosely watched the destruction of the crops and heavily sighed:

"They'll leave soon. They'll have to. Or else starve."

Patches of the insects did take wing next morning, but the ground was covered with the dead. This mystery was explained at noon, when a man on horseback rode up to the claim and announced:

"My name's Pitkin. Just give my land away by a notice on the door of the shanty. No use to plant anything out here. They'll be a hundred times worse next year."

"They can't be worse," said Strong.

"Oh, yes they can." And in a sweeping gesture he indicated the crust of dead insects and explained, "Them's the mothers. Each one dug a hole in the ground and laid about a hundred eggs and then died. In the spring the eggs will hatch out, and there'll be more hoppers than ever."

Father and son stared at him and then at the ground blankly. Strong muttered—

"Well, if you are right, what's the use of trying to do anything out here?"

"Not a darned bit of use. This is the worst country I ever see. Freeze and starve in winter. Burn up each spring and fall. And be et alive during the summer. Sweep away them cusses and you'll find the ground as bare as the road. My woman is back in Missouri. Was to join me this fall. Now I'm going back and live with her and her folks. I've tried, like she said I must. But I'm licked. Goodby. If I don't hurry on, they'll be eating my hoss next." And with a kick of his heels he galloped up road.

It required several days for the Strongs to fully realize the extent of the disaster. Newly arrived travelers from the river stopped at the house for the usual accommodations. Strong advised all these to turn back. Some did, while others pressed on to secure land for a song, or for nothing. There came a stream of

wagons from the west, holding those who had been eaten out. At the end of the week Strong told his son and daughter:

"I think now we're ready to talk. Just got the last 'hopper out of my mind. It's too late to raise another crop. If the country's going to be filled with this vermin next spring there'll be no planting next year. I've decided we'd better go back to the river and find work. Carpentering and smithing. Next spring we'll see how things turn out. This fall we'll come here long enough to plough. Maybe the eggs will winter kill if we turn up the ground. But we won't go back East and say we're licked yet awhile."

This plan was eagerly endorsed by the children, who found a bit of a blessing mixed with the disaster. The blow to Strong was greater than his children suspected. With corn for Colonel Johnston's Utah Army bringing three dollars and ten cents a bushel on the Blue River, and with every prospect of the price continuing as good, or better, he had hoped to make an excellent profit from the next year's crop. Outwardly he was calm, and Sam and Ruth had no hint of the depth of his disappointment. It was quickly decided that the father should ride to Plattsmouth and secure a house and then return for his children and the household goods.

SAM AND Ruth put in a tedious ten days of waiting. There was no work to keep them busy. There was nothing in nature to make an appeal. The gray hordes from the West had made a clean sweep of all green vegetation. Strong was in a better frame of mind when he returned. There was plenty of work to be had. He had met Bird of Freedom and his niece, and Freedom's optimistic assurances had greatly cheered him. On this point he remarked—

"I can believe only a portion of what he says, and yet it sounds mighty comforting."

A heavy Mormon migration was in progress along the north side of the Platte. Men willing to work could keep busy at good wages in any of the river towns. There was unusual activity in Plattsmouth and Omaha.

The house was soon cleared and the goods loaded on the wagon. The poultry and two pigs were sold to a family bent on securing land while the disgusted owners would sell cheaply. After a year of loneliness, Plattsmouth impressed Sam and Ruth as being a very lively and quite pretentious place. Strong had hired a small log house on the edge of the growing town, and Freedom and his niece were waiting in it to welcome the family.

On the day after their arrival father and son obtained work as carpenters, and could see nothing but prosperity ahead. So favorable were the times that Strong bought the log house, convinced he could sell at a good profit. Nancy Freedom was often at the house. Her uncle dropped in frequently. He insisted that the grasshopper plague would not be repeated in a generation. He painted rosy pictures. His niece would smile at his exuberance, and yet she, to a certain extent, was under the spell of his prophecies. Strong declared that Freedom was the most comfortable neighbor a man could possibly have.

In September, the Ohio Life and Trust Company in Cincinnati failed. John Thompson, known from coast to coast as a famous broker, went to the wall in New York. Bird of Freedom was among the first in Plattsmouth to hear the news, and he lost no time in disposing of a considerable sum in Platte Valley banknotes at less than their face value. He did this despite the Omaha *Nebraskian's* editorial comparison of the West's sound financial condition with the Eastern failures.

"Our banks are sound as a hound's tooth," proudly boasted Freedom, as he sorted over his remaining wildcat paper.

Bird of Freedom had been most active in exchanging bank currency for any kind of physical property. In swapping notes of one bank for those of another that he believed most likely to weather the storm, he found himself caught with five thousand dollars in worthless paper issued

by the Omaha Bank. He optimistically insisted:

"I'm not going to take any licking on that. I can beat the news to Johnston's Army, Utah, if necessary, and swap it for something."

His niece and friends caught but glimpses of him. Nancy found him a constant source of enjoyment, when she could corner him long enough to hear a part of a day's experience. What amazed the Strong family was the effect of the spreading insolvency on the old man. He seemed to be filled with the wine of youth. Crashing banks, institutions going down like nine-pins, seemed to fill his nostrils with the breath of life.

Each new financial disaster spurred him to greater efforts to exchange, speculate and otherwise participate in the battle of survival of the keenest. The one sour note during these stormy days was the discovery that the Platte Valley Bank was redeeming its notes at par.

When Freedom indignantly told his niece how he had been cheated by this particular bank the girl laughed until she wept. Her uncle glared at her wrathfully and delivered a curt lecture on duty and respect. She could only pat his shoulder and sob—

"You'll never know how funny it is!"

"I should say not!" he violently replied. "No one else will see anything funny in it but you. Here I've been done, been given to believe that bank's paper's no good and, with almost a thousand dollars per man, woman and child of wildcat money afloat in the Territory, it has to be one of the three banks to take up its paper at par. And all you do is to laugh as if you was a crazy girl.

"Country's going to the dogs when a bank acts that way. How could I know which way the bank would jump, except to expect it would jump after t'others? I'm going to take that Omaha money out on the Oregon road and buy something with it. Movers coming back from Oregon ought to be glad to take it. I'll beat the news. And while I'm about it, I'll take possession of my land in Thermopylæ. No question now that town's located somewhere on the South Loup."

Financial conditions rapidly grew worse. Actual money was scarce, and specie went to a premium. Where there had been plenty of work, the Strongs were now finding it difficult to secure odd jobs. Strong was dismayed, although he kept his worry to himself. Sam was restless. He expressed a desire to go with a wagon train, if only as far as Fort Kearny. He talked of joining the Utah Army. The trouble with Utah eliminated the opportunity of hiring out with freight trains bound for Great Salt Lake. Brigham Young, territorial governor of the would-be "State of Deseret," had refused to surrender his office to Buchanan's appointee, Alfred Cumming.

Cumming, traveling with three carriages and six wagons, was about to start from Leavenworth under the escort of dragoons. Already the head of the Army was threatened by a Mormon force, and the Cheyennes had audaciously run off the expedition's cattle from under the nose of Fort Kearny. All that Strong senior heard or read prejudiced him against any Western trip. However, he realized Sam was a man grown and would make his own choice between remaining idle in Plattsmouth and risking the dangers of Western travel.

To quicken Sam's resolution came George Hancey, still wearing two guns and determined to ride up the Platte in the blind hope of finding his father's slayers. Bird of Freedom heard his talk and promptly declared:

"The three of us will go together. You young men can hire out for hard money with a train about to leave Omaha. It's going to pick up women and children of a Mormon colony near the mouth of the Loup. The train will be short of men. They'll need bull whackers and hunters. Strong can get what work he can here, and know I'm looking out for you. Nancy will stay and help Ruth keep house. I wish Florida Bracket was here to go along. Dropped out of sight. Probably in Oregon, or Rhode Island by this time."

CHAPTER V

BEN TISK AND OTHERS

THIRTY miles north of Brady's Island the rich tableland and cañons along the South Loup afforded a snug sanctuary for any who would withdraw from the world old hurry to catch up with the sun. Also, it was an ideal tarrying place for those gregarious by nature, but impelled by any reason to withdraw from society for a time. There was excellent grass and an abundance of water. Beaver and black tail deer were plenty. Wild horses raced over the table. The groves of cedar in the cañons afforded ample shelter for hunter and game in the severest of winters, but few were the hunters who visited the isolated region. Those who wandered north from the Platte usually were discouraged by the uninviting sand hills flanking the rich area.

In the summer of Fifty-seven a party of men sought seclusion there, having reached the table by accident rather than by design. The band, weary from hard riding, paused to rest their animals and had decided it was a hiding place well worth utilizing. It was within easy striking distance of the Oregon road and yet set entirely apart from the almost continuous stream of travel.

Ben Tisk, portly of build but moving with surprising agility, had led his lawless men there when an atrocious murder had necessitated flight from Kansas. His goal had been California when he rode up the road on the south side of the Platte. His grim pursuers pressed him so smartly, however, as to drive him from the great highway and into the hidden land. He was quick to appreciate the strategic importance of the region and had held his six followers with him and induced them to build two log cabins of cedar logs and a third structure, part dugout, part cabin. The thought of his pursuers riding madly up the Oregon road to overhaul him afforded him much grim amusement.

Tisk ruled by fear and never made the mistake of being familiar with his men. To stress his aloofness he occupied the dugout cabin upstream and had no companions. He had learned his trade under capable leaders in Missouri and Kansas, and never forgot that his outcasts were so many wolves and would be quick to fall upon a wounded leader. Did he drink, it was alone and behind a barred door. The downstream cabin housed the men and also served as cookhouse. The middle cabin was empty.

Those who were drawn to him at first by the seeming good humor of his round, fat face and because of the belief that he was a rollicking fellow and a lover of good cheer, soon learned that he was deadly and not to be crossed. Figure, face and a shrill voice might suggest insignificance to a stranger, but never to those who had felt the gaze of his dull, gray eyes. Hod Feley, his right hand man, once told his crony, a swarthy ruffian known as Blackie, that Tisk's eyes looked like gray glass, only they did not shine.

The men were lounging on the grass before the cook and bunk-house, smoking, playing euchre and wondering what the next move would be, when Blackie ended the various surmises by warning:

"Here he comes. He don't like to hear us trying to guess his plans. But I hope he's ready to get rid of the mules and turn a trick. I'm tired of loafing."

His companions puffed their pipes thoughtfully and in silence. Instantly Blackie feared his remarks, if repeated, might be construed as a criticism of their inaction. He glanced furtively at Drick, who looked the plainsman in his buckskin suit. For some reason that neither, probably, could explain, there was ill feeling between the two. They rode together and fought side by side and were teammates in looting, but in intervals of rest only the fear of the fat man with the puffy gray eyes kept their antipathy in check.

Blackie added:

"I'm mighty glad we don't have to bother with any planning. The boss does all our thinking, which is good for us."

The silence persisted. Drick, after his

habit of silent laughter, opened his mouth widely but made no sound. Blackie's small eyes, the heritage of crossed breeding, glittered savagely. Tisk came to a halt and stared down at the group. His gaze was expressionless and as impersonal as that of a blind man.

Yet he read, and with approval, the smoldering enmity between Blackie and Drick. With a man of his enterprise it was preferable that the outcasts should nurse certain grievances against one another. Six men of one mind were much more difficult to control than six men split into factions. It left him the balance of power.

Drick opened his wide mouth, as if laughing inwardly, and greeted—

"Boss, Blackie was just saying he's worried along of our doing so little work."

Blackie glared venomously at the speaker. The others watched the two expectantly. Blackie was friendly with Feley, Tisk's lieutenant. Because of this, some of the band believed he stood ahead of them when any preference was to be shown. Had Feley been present, Drick would have been slow to show his hand.

Tisk turned slightly, his head having the appearance of resting on his shoulders, and for a few moments he focused his gaze on Blackie. The latter squirmed and defended:

"Never said I was worried, boss. Just said we was lucky in having you do the thinking for us. Feley oughter be coming in soon."

In his thin, shrill voice Tisk remarked:

"Climate up here is bad for thinking promiscus. It's healthier to leave all thinking to me. It's for me to say when Feley oughter come in."

Drick was satisfied that he had scored and he slyly winked at a jaundice faced man known as Manners. Tisk surveyed the men steadily for a minute and announced:

"When I think Feley's staying overtime, I'll send a man south to look him up. With more'n five hundred quitting Johnston's Army along of fear the whole outfit will freeze to death in the mountains this winter, he oughter be finding one or two likely men mighty soon. Maybe it's timely now. Let's see. Blackie's always keen for work. Jump your hoss, Blackie and ride south for twenty miles. I hope the boys won't drink up all the rum while you're gone."

Drick's head bobbed in silent laughter. Tisk stared at him and warned:

"There's signs of unneighborliness among some of you fellers. Signs of little grudges cropping out. But I won't have it go only about so far. All of you put that in your pipes and smoke it. Drick, you're one of the first to smoke."

Drick's lips clamped together in an expression of gravity. The others furtively and fearfully eyed their chief. Experience had taught them that he could be most murderous when betraying the least sign of anger. There was a purple tinge to his ruddy complexion, suggestive of a drinking bout during the night. When the men went on a spree, he kept sober.

Blackie made haste to catch his horse and saddle it and was soon riding hard toward the Platte. Tisk paced back and forth for a few minutes, the silent men watching him narrowly. There was a general relaxation when he came to a halt and announced:

"We've got to make a sizable haul before snow flies. We've got to make a good haul and strike for Californy. We can stick here all winter and have plenty to eat, but spring would find most of you dead from fighting each other. Now that the Cheyennes are stealing beeves close to Kearny, we can do that and go them several better and leave them to take the blame."

"Dress and paint like 'em!" eagerly broke in one of the men.

Tisk stared at him for a moment and then gently warned:

"You talk too much, Jo. You don't have anything new to say when you open your yawp."

Jo hung his head and made no reply. To the others the leader explained:

"If I only had a likely man as lookout

at Kearny, I could learn when any money's going through to Johnston's Army. Then we could make a real haul and ride for it."

EVERY man came to attention. Brooding, suspicious eyes sparkled. Specie, not beeves, was what they wanted. Beeves must be successfully run off and tended until they could be driven back and sold to some contractor. Manners said:

"Any one of us will be keen to go to Kearny. Drick, in his hunter's clothes might be the most likely man."

"You fellers can't git out of the habit of trying to think for me," whined Tisk. "I want a man with a head at Kearny, not a hunter. Not one of you would be worth a damn at Kearny. Minute you showed up, you'd be hung on suspicion. What I want is a young feller—an innercent looking young hellion who loves the risk of spying and who can hang around Kearny without being caught and sidehobbled because he looks like a thief. He's got to be a man with fighting guts, but with head enough to keep from fighting. Such a man is mighty hard to find."

Tisk's hand dropped to his belt as Jo suddenly leaped to his feet. With both empty hands held before him Jo cried—

"Blackie's coming back, riding like hell!"

Tisk did not turn his head.

"Alone, or chased?" he shrilly asked.

"Alone!"

Tisk maintained his position, but his quick ears served as eyes and, as soon as he heard the quick tattoo of galloping hoofs, he glanced to the south. Blackie was skimming over the table and glancing behind him. Reining in close to the group, he flung himself to the ground and dramatically cried:

"Three men coming! None of them is Feley!"

Tisk instantly ordered:

"Gorling, you'n' Jo be playing euchre out here on the grass. Rest of you inside and keep the strangers covered."

Gorling, serious of face and seldom heard to speak, unless answering a question, began shuffling a deck of cards, while Jo squatted opposite him. The others rapidly withdrew into the house, to stand unseen and with guns ready. Tisk walked to one side, to be out of range of the small window and doorway and gave his attention to the horsemen now bobbing into view. They were coming along at an easy gallop and, as they drew nearer, Tisk noticed that one was an old man with a long white beard.

Over his shoulder he called out:

"Just wanderers. You in the house can come out when they ride up."

The three came steadily on, riding side by side, until within a hundred rods of the house, when two slowed down to a walk. The third held his pace and darted ahead of his companions and whooped a greeting. Tisk stood motionless as Hancey reined in and slipped to the ground. Then he said:

"Now you're here, what'n hell you come for?"

Hancey flashed his teeth in a smile, darted his gaze at the house and replied:

"Probably for the same reason you came here. We were tired of staying where we came from. Tell the men in the house they've no need to keep us covered. We're not fetching any fight."

Tisk made a gesture with his fat hand, and the men in the house filed out and dropped on the ground around the euchre players. To Hancey he said:

"You don't answer my question. This is private property. What do you want here? And where did you get that hoss?"

"To rest up. From a Mormon wagon train at Brady's Island. My name s George Hancey. What's yours?"

Hancey was beginning to feel annoyed by the fat man's bearing and was inclined to find something amusing in the thin falsetto voice.

"I'm called Ben Tisk. If you ever heard tell of me, young feller, you'll know I'm boss wherever I camp. If you don't want to lose your health, you'll speak mighty quiet and proper."

Hancey's teeth clicked together as his

wide staring eyes met and held Tisk's gaze. By this time Bird of Freedor and Strong had halted a short distance from the two, but had not dismounted. Tisk ignored them, to study the young man before him. Finally he remarked:

"You look sort of likely. Just this minute you're feeling sort of wolfish; but that's along of not knowing Ben Tisk. You're even wondering if you shouldn't fetch a fight to old Ben. See here, young feller, I can use you, or cut your throat, before you can stir out of your tracks. All depends."

At this threat Freedom and Strong drew closer. The men on the grass shifted their positions a bit and gave all their attention to the mounted men. Tisk stared at the two over Hancey's shoulder, but the latter never shifted his gaze from the round, creased face. Freedom dismounted and with a benevolent smile called out:

"Peace among brothers. Let's all be neighborly." He ruffled his beard, glanced at the men on the grass and surprised his two friends by announcing, "We don't belong to old Johnston's Army any longer."

Hancey started to speak, but caught himself in time. Tisk whined:

"If you're deserters, why didn't young hellfire here say so at the start? But you're too old, Old Whiskers, to belong to the Army."

"I'm spryer'n I look. Suppose we be friendly. I take it you folks ain't afraid of an old man and two young men."

"Nothing on two legs has scared us yet," idly replied Tisk, his attention now turned to Sam, who had not dismounted.

Sam was curiously observing the odd company on the grass. It was obvious that he had observed nothing in the portly leader to hold his attention. PerhapsTisk was quick to notice this indifference and resented it. His high voice suddenly demanded:

"Where's your manners, young stuck-up? Off that hoss and make your bow!"

Strong's face reddened. The man in buckskin was silently opening his mouth as if greatly amused. Sam decided he disliked Drick and his companions. From the first glimpse he had resented the fat man's appearance. It reminded him of grotesque pictures in his school books back East. He resented Tisk's insolence. The atmosphere of the place depressed him. He hesitated for a moment, then swung from the saddle and advanced and said—

"My name is Strong."

"But not strong enough for Army work and the chance of being snowed up in the mountains this winter!" shrilly commented Tisk.

His followers hoarsely laughed in appreciation. Tisk waited until they were quiet, then slowly passed his gaze over the three standing before him, and continued:

"You three strangers come here without being asked. May be you'll fit in; maybe you won't. But now you're here, here you stay. Drick, take their hosses."

Freedom rested a hand heavily on Hancey's shoulder and amiably declared:

"Stay? Of course we'll stay. We come on purpose to stay and are mighty glad to find such welcome company. It's neighborly of you to care for our horses. We're keen to get better acquainted with those men taking life so soft and easy."

Tisk studied him suspiciously and inquired—

"Come from Kansas?"

"If I did I'm never going back," shortly replied Freedom. "We've ridden far and hard to get up here where it's kind of lonesome. Let it go at that."

Tisk pursed his thick lips and, with an approving nod, said:

"That's fair enough for now. If you're deserters you'll find one or two of your kind. If you're wanted by the law you'll find all of us in the same fix. I'm more open than you are. But we'll let that go for now. Meet the boys."

WITH this invitation Tisk swung about and started as if to lead the newcomers to the grinning group. He took but a few steps, however, before he

had spun around on his heel with marvelous quickness and blocked Hancey's advance. Lifting his eyes he slowly remarked:

"No one but a young feller who thinks he's a simon pure bad man totes two heavy guns. I do believe they look better than mine." He darted out his hands to appropriate the weapons.

So quickly that none saw it done, Hancey's arm knocked the groping hands down and, at the same time, he pulled a Colt and smartly pressed the muzzle against Tisk's stomach. Not a man moved. Drick opened his mouth and forgot to close it. Blackie's small eyes glittered and he held his breath.

Hancey explained:

"The guns are better than yours, so I won't swap. And I am a bad man, a regular hellion. You're not insisting on swapping shooting irons?"

Instead of attempting to back away Tisk leaned heavily against the muzzle of the .38, his dull eyes never leaving the thin, hard face. After a dramatic pause, which seemed an age to Strong, the shrill voice was replying:

"No, not now. You've got spirit, young feller. But I wish you was a trifle older. You flare up mighty pert, but I can't tell just how much gumption you've got. If you can shoot as quick and straight as you can draw, you might do. Yet there's something else beside quick gunwork. Plains are full of quick gunslingers. What I'm looking for is a man that can shoot and still keep his head. I've got a man now. Good man as far as he goes. But Feley won't ever get beyond rough work. He don't do any thinking."

"Feley? Hod Feley!" muttered Hancey.

"Then you know him? S'pose you put up your iron. When I want it and t'other one, you'll give them over, handles first."

Hancey replaced his gun, but kept his thumbs hooked into the waist of his trousers. Tisk slowly backed away and asked—

"Where'd you know Feley?"

"Back on the river. He probably wouldn't remember me."

"You don't claim him as a friend?"

"Hardly know him well enough to call him that. He went with men older'n me. But I've seen him and I've heard much about him. Being from the river, I'm sort of curious to meet him."

"He'll be in any time now," remarked Tisk.

Then he whistled a bit of a tune and turned his head aside and seemed to be weighing some problem. His men watched him eagerly. Finally he announced:

"I turn up my cards. Feley's my right hand man, but he can't use his head. Best I've managed to get, but good only for rough work. If you was a trifle older, you'd fit in prime, I think. In my business I don't need rip roaring, snorting fellers, but just one man who can think for himself, when I ain't at his elbow to think for him."

"I don't know how much of a thinker you need, but my friends will tell you my wits are pretty keen," affably assured Hancey.

"Now maybe that's so," mused Tisk. "You might do right now. I'd have to try you on something not very important at first. And still, there's Feley. He's notional. He might make trouble."

He darted a quick glance at Hancey's dark face.

"I don't just understand."

"Then your head ain't working. I spoke plain enough. Feley might feel he's being put down, if I decided you're fit to act as my right hand man. Not being a friend of yours, he'd be pretty sure to make trouble."

"I'm sure my head's better than Feley's," insisted Hancey. "If he's sensitive and wants a fight, I'll be waiting. If he wins, it'll show he's a better man than I am and the man for the job he now holds. I'll be waiting for him." He swept a belligerent glance over the sprawling group of interested spectators and slowly added, "Of course, that goes for any other sensitive man here."

"Gently, quietly, George," murmured Freedom, patting his shoulder.

The men on the grass glared challenges. Tisk's thick lips twitched a bit and his voice was unusually shrill and piercing as he said:

"That ain't the talk to make up here on the South Loup, young feller. You don't show any headwork when you offer to bite off more'n you can chaw. Chances are I'll have to cut your throat, if I don't think I'm beginning to take a shine to you. However, we'll have to see how much is talk, and how much is fighting spirit."

Hancey laughed derisively and assured:

"You'll find I can do something besides talk. I'm good, and I know it."

Strong had never heard his friend indulge in braggadocio before, and he eyed him in amazement. For fully a minute Tisk stared at the boaster, then he slowly remarked:

"No great harm in a young feller thinking well of hisself—if he don't overdo it. Get acquainted with the boys. Names don't count up here. And you, boys, you've heard enough to know these strangers want to take on with us. I'll decide later if they fit in." To Hancey he said, "You three can bunk in the middle house. We all eat at this one."

He turned away and walked toward his own house, leaving the three to face the sullen group on the grass. Hancey advanced and dropped on the grass and bluntly inquired—

"When's this Feley man coming in?"

Drick's big mouth opened in a noiseless laugh. Blackie scowled and advised:

"Remember this, younker—the boss is the only one in this outfit that answers those kind of questions. You ain't getting nervous about Hod Feley's coming?"

"Not nervous," quietly replied Hancey. "Perhaps a bit anxious that he may not return. That's all."

Before Blackie could comment on this, the yellow faced man exclaimed—

"What's the old cuss up to?"

Bird of Freedom had remained standing apart from the group. Now he had produced and was examining the plat of lost Thermopylæ.

Strong spoke up, explaining:

"He bought town lots up here somewhere's. He thinks this is the place."

The men heard this with great amazement. Then came uproarious laughter. Tisk, on the way to his cabin, wheeled about but, detecting no signs of violence, he did not return. When the men recovered from their amusement Manners cried—

"Hope he won't be hard hearted and drive us from our happy homes."

This caused more laughter. Freedom gave no heed, but continued to compare his plat with the little bend in the river. To his friends he called out:

"No question about this being the place. Bend seems to fit in. But they lied about the steamboats and the county buildings."

The outcasts fairly writhed in mirth. Jo added to their delight by telling Freedom:

"The steamboats are hid in our cabin. The county buildings are buried under the boss' house."

HANCEY, sitting crosslegged, watched them stolidly. Strong remained standing, fearing that the mirthful mood might be followed by rough play. After the laughter had died down, the men renewed their somber examination of the two young men.

Suddenly Jo reached forward and grabbed Strong by the ankle and yelled—

"Squat, damn you!"

The violent tug upset Strong, who landed heavily, in a sitting posture. As he struck the ground, his free foot kicked out and caught the joker under the jaw and sent him on his back. With a scream of rage Jo yanked a Bowie knife from his belt and came up on his knees. Strong, resting on his elbows, stared at the enraged man, but made no move to defend himself.

Hancey's reaction was almost instantaneous. He came up on his knees, one hand hovering over his guns, his wild gaze

fixed on the ruffian's face. The latter, holding the knife for a deadly thrust, held his pose for a few seconds. Then he slowly slumped back, and replaced the knife, and hoarsely muttered—

"Why can't the fool take a joke?"

His mates jeered at him. Hancey relaxed and said:

"He did. He'll laugh his head off every time he thinks of it. The three of us are full of fun."

"No rough fooling, boys," gently cautioned Freedom, still busy with the plat.

The men became quiet, but not because of Freedom's amiable warning. Tisk was coming on a bouncing run. Hancey heard his sharp breathing behind him and turned to watch him. Panting with rage rather than from exertion Tisk waddled inside the circle and stood with his back to Hancey and stared down at the bully.

Then he complained:

"Damn you, Jo! What do you mean by starting something you can't finish? What kind of a man is that for Ben Tisk to have behind him, and thinking he can count on for help in a pinch?"

Jo made no reply but stared up into the puffy face. Nor did he attempt to dodge, as the leader slowly drew back his foot and kicked him. He fell over with a groan and clapped his hands to his mouth and the blood trickled through his fingers. His companions stared blankly, but showed no resentment. Strong was sickened by the gross brutality. Bird of Freedom had observed the assault over the top of his outspread plat, and his youthful blue eyes blazed as he watched the leader.

Tisk wheeled about and looked down at Hancey and asked—

"What do you think of that, young feller?"

"You've got them well trained, Cap'n. But my friend kicked him first."

"And would 'a' got his throat cut, if the poor fool hadn't been afraid of your guns."

"Jo used his head in being afraid of my guns," growled Hancey, "for he surely was a dead man the second he tried to use that knife. No sense in asking a man to use his head, and then to kick him in the face for doing it."

Tisk mopped his brow and did not speak for half a minute. His men tensely waited. In a scarcely audible voice the leader told Hancey:

"See here, young feller, you're hurting yourself by such brash talk. I've been thinking you might do for my right hand man. Now I'm wondering if you ain't too pert to have around."

Hancey appeared to be weighing the warning very carefully. Finally he replied:

"Tisk, try and get me right. I'm not pert with any man I tie to. I'm loyal to the man I stand beside. If I wasn't ready to pull a gun and save my friend from being murdered I wouldn't be ready to back you if I took on with your outfit. My friends will tell you I can be counted on. And get this right:

"You're boss of this outfit. I'd be crazy to bring a fight to you, or any of your men. But I've been through quite a bit of trouble. I don't care much whether I live or die. There have been times when I wished myself dead. Meeting you up here is an accident. But we've met. I'll treat you and your men politely, if you treat me and my friends decently. If it goes the other way I'll get myself killed trying to see how many I can take with me."

He paused and Tisk asked—

"Anything more?"

"Only this. Strong hasn't had the schooling I've had, but he'll learn fast. Once he's learned, he'll be a better fighting man than I'll ever be. This is his first taste of this kind of life. Once he gets used to it, it'll be easier to scare me than to scare him. If you folks want us to move on, we'll do that. There's plenty of room up here. If you want us to stay, there must be no more bad treatment—or, better still, my two friends can go and I'll stay and won't ask any favors."

Before Tisk could reply, Freedom was loudly announcing:

"I'm staying, no matter who goes. I own the land on this little bend. I've

been hunting all over the Territory for it. I've found it and I'm staying."

Tisk stared at him blankly and exclaimed:

"A damned speculator! We'll find them ahead of us and staking out corner lots in hell! Within an inch of death, he'll only think of land. Old man, no one owns land up here but Ben Tisk. After he's through with it, any one's welcome."

But Freedom was not to be intimidated. He stoutly retorted:

"This is my land. I quit Johnston's Army to find it. If I'm killed, it will belong to my grandniece. I've paid for it and I'll hold it. So far as you and your men squatting here I don't object. The improvements you've made entitle you to that. But just keep this bee buzzing in your bonnet—killing me won't take this land away from the Freedom family."

His vehemence and earnestness caused the leader's dull eyes to blink rapidly, and the thick lips twitched convulsively. Hancey looked for an explosion and was ready to go for his two guns, and then discovered that Tisk was trying to smother a laugh of genuine amusement. His men detected the unusual mood and grinned broadly.

"All right, old man," he finally said. "We'll call it your land if it makes you feel better. I'm allowing that, as you seem to have fighting guts. Claim all the Territory so far as we care, but you must stay here to hold it."

TISK was turning away, but Freedom followed him, his face beaming with an amiable expression. He detained Tisk by genially asking—

"Who owns those critters above your cabin?" And he pointed to twenty mules picketed west of Tisk's house.

"They don't go with the land and the improvements," ironically assured Tisk. "Please don't file a claim on 'em."

"I'll buy them," promptly offered Freedom. "They're no good to you, unless you risk taking them to the settlements. I'll give you twenty dollars apiece for them, and no questions asked."

The entire gathering of outcasts stared at him wolfishly. Tisk softly asked—

"You can pay on the nail?"

"Cash on the spot. Twenty dollars a head. No more," was the prompt reply.

"The mules are yours. Fork over the four hundred dollars."

Drick's big mouth yawned in an ecstasy of delight, as Freedom produced a huge roll of the defunct Omaha Bank's money and counted out the purchase price into Tisk's pudgy hand. Tisk's hand closed, but the dull gaze followed the wildcat currency Freedom was stuffing back in his pocket. The men waited eagerly. Tisk disappointed them. With a little sigh he said—

"Maybe we can trade some more."

With that he took his departure up the river bank. Drick turned his head to conceal his mirth. The others exchanged quick glances. They had hoped to see the old man robbed on the spot. Now they were reconciled to bide their time. For each was positive the money would pass to the band within a very short time. Blackie remarked—

"Mebbe you'd like to buy some jewelry, old man."

Drick promptly warned:

"Boss will want to do all the trading, Blackie. He won't like you trying to cut in."

"Damn you, Drick! Trying to make trouble atween me and the boss," hissed Blackie. "Some day you'll try that for the last time. If he buys jewelry, of course, he'll buy of the boss."

"Boss won't like any rowing," warned Manners.

"I don't buy no jewelry of anybody," spoke up Freedom. "I buy only what I can turn into money. No one to sell jewelry to out here; so you folks needn't argue. If you boys are ready, we'll go to our cabin."

Hancey came to his feet and said:

"We'll take our belongings. Drick, you took our horses somewhere. We want our blanket rolls. Will you kindly fetch them to the house?"

Drick stared at him malevolently and replied—

"Take me for a slave?"

"You took our blankets along with the horses. Show us where they are, or bring them to the cabin."

He made no offer to lead them to the horse hovel and Hancey led the way to the middle house. Strong told him—

"He won't fetch them, George."

"He'll fetch them," shortly replied Hancey. "You two listen. This is a very bad mess. If we allow any of these brutes to put upon us it will be worse. Freedom may have found his lost town. The three of us surely have found lots of trouble. If we weaken and let them bully us, it will be worse."

"I had that in mind when I was claiming the land," mildly put in Freedom.

Hancey nodded and continued:

"I'm the only one who's repaid for this trip. I stand a chance at last of facing Hod Feley. Now I want you two to take your horses and ride for it tonight. If necessary, I'll hold Tisk a hostage at the point of a gun until you get away."

"And then get yourself killed!" said Strong. "I'll never go and leave you alone."

"I feel lucky. There's proof."

He turned his head and glanced back. The lanky figure of Drick was following them, and he was carrying their blanket rolls.

They halted in front of the cabin and suspended talk, as Drick rapidly approached. He was laughing silently, as he came up and dropped the blankets on the ground. Freedom remarked—

"Tickled to think what's going to happen to us, eh?"

"I ain't saying a word, mister," Drick answered, grinning more widely, "but it ain't often folks come here without being asked."

"We go where we want to without asking," said Hancey.

"There's always a place where a man makes his last stay in," reminded Drick.

"You're talking smart. Maybe Tisk won't like it," said Freedom.

The loose lips formed a straight line. The fellow's eyes betrayed fear.

"Don't say nothing to the boss. He has ways that's disturbing, and I ain't lost any trouble."

"Don't try any games and you'll live longer," advised Freedom.

He hurried back toward the cookhouse. After he was out of hearing, Freedom began pleading:

"Now, listen to an old man, George. I'm supposed to be wise. No one can fight this outfit and get away with his hide. You tickled that fat man's fancy a bit, yet he'd just as lief cut your throat as to take a chew of tobacco. You've set the whole gang against you by your uppish ways. Every one of them is hankering to sink a knife into your back. I claimed my lots so's to make them think I'm set on staying here. I bought the mules for the same reason.

"They won't expect me to ride away and leave the mules. Of course, the lots are mine. Saw that at a glance. But I'd never fussed with the plat, and talked so big and wide and bought them stolen mules, if it wa'n't to make them think I was set on staying. But Sam has the right of it. The three of us must dig out tonight."

"I'm mighty sorry you two are along," sighed Hancey. "If it was anything less than catching up with my poor dad's murderer, I'd go with you in a second. But you two shall ride. After supper you can say you're riding down the river to look up more lots. Then you keep on riding."

"Of course, I'm staying till we all go," announced Sam. "What I've seen and heard makes me feel sick to the stomach. But after I've been abused some more, I'll probably get mad and get over it."

"You talk like two idiots," said Freedom savagely. "I can't ride away alone, or ride with just one of you. What would I tell Ruth and Nancy? I knew these rascals hadn't any news from the river. They don't know the banks are busted and the money's no good. That's why I showed the money. Unless we all clear

out tonight I've only stirred up more trouble by buying the mules."

"I can't go," insisted Hancey. "I've vowed at my dad's grave to get Feley and the other man if it's humanly possible. Now I've found his hiding place. I'll have to shoot it out with him. It's something I must do. But you two have nothing to do with it. Ride!"

Freedom combed his long fingers through his beard, rubbed his bald head and finally grumbled:

"I begin to feel my dander rising. Why should six or seven scum cause us any great trouble? That Tisk harps on using your head. I'm going to use mine. I've got a glimmer of a notion right now. It ought to reduce the odds against us. I remember when I was a little boy in Eastern Tennessee that a parcel of the town boys all wanted to lick me. I used my head. Each claimed the first chance. I said let them prove who was the best in a fight. And they fought it out till one boy was left, the best fighter of the lot. He'd used up so much strength proving he was best that I gave him the worst dressing down he ever had."

"I don't quite get the idea," puzzled Hancey.

George looked blank.

"It's simple. We ought to reduce the odds by turning them against each other. That's where my new notion comes in. We'll all stay, and I'll take my mules when I quit and sell them for four hundred dollars."

THEY proceeded to examine the house. It had been used but little and was clean. Six rude bunks evidenced a larger membership at some time. Hancey and Strong arranged the bunks. When they finished they found Freedom outdoors busily whittling claim stakes from pieces of a cedar log. He was using a big Bowie knife. Neither had seen it before and Strong asked—

"Where and when did you find that blade, Freedom?"

"Had it all along. Hanging in a sheath between my old shoulders. And I can use it, if I have to, besides for whittling."

George set to and helped with shaping the stakes. Hancey withdrew and somberly reviewed the situation. Ever since his father's death he had been driven on by one mania—to find his father's slayers and kill them. His ferocious rage and long brooding had hardened him. He counted no risk too great, could it lead him to the assassins. He had schooled himself for such a meeting and had perfected himself in the use of weapons. That he might be killed in the encounter affected his determination not at all.

At the outset of the trip from Omaha he had candidly reminded his companions that his only purpose in journeying up the north side of the Platte was to verify a rumor he had heard in Otoe City. This was a bit of riverside gossip about a community of rough characters living on the South Loup. He had come to the Loup on the chance some fugitives from the river towns were there and, on the further chance, that Feley might be among them. Now for the first time during his long quest he regretted that he had not waited until he could have investigated alone. At Brady's Island Sam had tried to hold him back from riding north. When in turn he had urged Sam to leave him and journey home his answer had been—

"Shucks!"

Now he was wishing he had gone down the river, at least as far as Fort Kearny. It was in vain that he endeavored to quiet his troubled mind by remembering that Freedom had planned from the first to visit the Loup. He walked to where the two were finishing the claim stakes and told them:

"I'm going down to the cookhouse to get better acquainted. I want to go alone. If I can learn where Feley is likely to be found all of us will pull out tonight, or tomorrow. It doesn't matter where I find him, so long as I do find him."

Whistling a lively tune he took to the river path. From the house upstream Tisk's shrill voice called after him—

"Where you think you're going, young fire?"

"Cookhouse. Feel neighborly."

"Don't you get into any rumpus with the boys. It won't do. If they bother you, you tell me. I'm the only one to teach manners up here."

Hancey waved his hand and kept going, his thumbs hooked into the top of his trousers.

Two men were cooking supper inside the house. The others were enjoying the sunlight on the grass before the door. The lazy talk halted, as Hancey came up. They eyed him coldly until Manners of the yellow face drawled—

"Just how much money is the old man toting around with him?"

"Just the amount he'll take away with him, unless he buys some more mules. Don't any of you boys get foolish about that money. He can tote it to hell and back and never singe a bill."

"Er-huh? Takes a good man to do that," remarked Drick.

Blackie reached forward to take one of Hancey's guns. Instantly his wrist was caught between two hands and, as Hancey began exerting a twisting pressure in opposite directions, he asked—

"Just where shall I break it?"

With much eagerness Drick waited, hoping to hear a bone crack. Manners, with a low laugh, observed—

"He's just chuckful of playfulness, Blackie."

"Close your yap, yaller face," savagely advised Blackie, snatching his hand back, as Hancey released his double grip. Then to Hancey he grimly said:

"You'll get your mother's son into lasting trouble some day. I was only wanting to see how many notches you're wearing on your guns. We don't know whether you're a onery killer, or a humdinger of a killer."

With the exception of Drick, who was disappointed, the men laughed loudly and Blackie lost some of his anger. Hancey laughed good naturedly. Manners urged—

"Just show the boys how quick you can draw, young feller."

"You boys are having some fun with me. It's all right, if you don't wade in over your ankles. Which of you came here with Feley?"

"You must be a sheriff man from the river," mocked Gorling.

"No sheriff looks handsome to me," assured Hancey.

Jo, his lips split and swollen from Tisk's kick, huskily requested—

"Tell your friend I still owe him for this face."

"Don't try to pay him till he's had a little practise. He has sand enough, but he needs a bit of polishing. I'm sort of playing his hand till he gets used to the cards. Where'd Feley go to? When's he coming back?"

"Can't make me believe this feller ain't a sheriff man," mocked Gorling.

The others did not find the queries humorous, and there was no banter in their gaze, as they stared at Hancey. Blackie broke the silence by warning:

"This is the best climate in the world for minding your own business. When any one wants to ask any questions they go to the boss."

"Of course. But I suppose you're still allowed to think, if you keep your thoughts to yourself."

Manners, between a smile and snarl, prophesied:

"Times are going to pick up along this stretch of the Loup, boys. I can smell some rare man taming coming."

"And here comes grandpap with a bundle of sticks!" cried Drick.

The old man, accompanied by Strong, approached at a businesslike gait and halted near the group. Without giving any heed to the curious onlookers, he produced his plat and studied it closely. The men were amused. Drick murmured—

"Hope he ain't going to make the boss move off his land."

Ignoring this and other sallies, Freedom drove a cedar stake into the ground and proceeded to pace off a long line parallel with the river. Halting, he drove a second stake.

Blackie asked Hancey—

"Just what is the old fool up to?"

"My friend is staking off the lots

he owns along the river at this bend."

Strong ran and stood by the second stake, while Freedom measured the distance to the river. The men continued jeering him, but he gave them no heed. Counting his paces, he moved up the bank until opposite the first stake, where Strong had returned and was waiting. He walked toward Strong, counting each stride under his breath. As he came by the men, Manners fell in beside him and caused a roar of laughter by his mimicry. Encouraged by this approval, he kept by the old man's side till they reached the stake, which he promptly pulled up and pretended to examine with great interest.

Waving the stake, he called to his mates:

"Damn' if the young war chief ain't right! Staking off this land. He's made a writing on it." And again he brandished the stake.

"He'll drive us all away from our happy home!" cried Blackie in mock terror.

Manners laughed loudly and fanned the end of Freedom's beard with the end of the stake. Freedom's hand went up over his shoulder, moving slowly. Manners held his arms before his face, pretending that he feared a blow. But the old man's hand came back, filled with the handle of his Bowie knife. Shooting out his left hand he snarled his fingers in Manners' long hair and presented the point of the knife close to the man's throat and growled:

"Respect property rights, damn you! Drive that stake where you found it, or I'll bury you in the corner of this lot."

He roughly shoved Manners into position. With oaths, Blackie and Gorling jumped to their feet and started to interfere, but found Hancey blocking their path, his thumbs hooked into his trousers and his white teeth grinding together, although his lips were parted in a smile. Strong gained Hancey's side, holding his .31 pocket revolver in both hands. Presenting the weapon close to Blackie's face, he inquired:

"Don't you think it needs a drop of oil? And have you any?"

No further move was made to relieve Manners from his embarrassment. Under Freedom's terse insistence he stamped the stake home with his heavy boot.

"Well, why don't you three line these tame dogs up and rob them?" shrilly inquired Ben Tisk, as he came to a halt a few yards from the group."

CHAPTER VI

HIC JACET

THE MEN were silent, while Tisk upbraided them. His words of contempt blistered and, when he had finished, they would have rushed upon the three newcomers, had he not stayed them with an uplifted, pudgy hand and capped his tongue lashing with the warning:

"Don't play hoss with these fellers any more. You may be taking orders from young hellfire here the next thing you know. Now dish up the grub."

Jo and Gorling brought a big kettle of deer meat from the house, as all preferred dining in the declining sunlight. Odds and ends of other provisions, suggestive of looted government wagons or emigrant trains, were spread on the grass. A jug of whisky was produced, but Tisk drank tea. Freedom drank the liquor from a tin dipper and caused Strong and Hancey to exchange worried glances because of the size of the drams. Tisk noticed the old man's thirst, and his bulbous lips writhed in a little smile. Hancey drank as one used to it, but the effect was to make him silent and somber. Tisk watched him closely and, after finishing his fifth dish of tea, remarked—

"Liquor makes you feel like a killer, young feller."

"I don't think so," quietly replied Hancey. "Just steadies my nerve a bit."

Freedom climbed to his feet, dipper in hand, and loudly announced:

"I'm going to drink to the prosperity of the coming capital of this Territory! To Thermopylæ! I see this noble stream crowded with steamboats, bringing to us

the commerce of the East and receiving from us the gold and furs of the West. Once the South Loup is well dredged, we'll have all water communication with Plattsmouth—and Omaha will die of dry rot."

Shouts of laughter greeted the toast.

Blackie cried—

"Have to pour a few more pails of water in the Platte, or have boats that don't draw more'n three inches."

Freedom paused, the dipper to his lips, and glared down on the mockers. Tisk came to his feet with the resilience of a rubber ball and shrilly commanded:

"Drink, damn you! It's a proper toast."

His dull eyes repeated the command as he scanned each face in the group. The men stifled their laughter and scrambled to their feet. With great gravity they swallowed their liquor.

When Freedom seated himself beside Strong the latter whispered—

"You've had enough."

"Never had enough," mumbled Freedom, "but Nancy has notions that keep my rum rations mighty short." Raising his voice he continued, "I drink to keep off fever 'n' ager. Used to be terribly shuck up. Shuck the roof off the house once. Shuck my boots off. Glad the girl ain't here to squelch me. Nowadays young folks don't know their place."

Strong was worried. Hancey's thin face grew more reckless, as he watched the outcasts, as if waiting for an excuse to quarrel. Tisk was quick to suspect the mood and frowned a warning that was instantly understood. His men drank more sparingly and were inclined to watch Hancey's hands. Suddenly Tisk announced—

"Now we've eaten and drank, and it's time to turn in."

"No law against any one setting up as late as he wants to, is there?" inquired Hancey.

"Not a bit, young squirt. Stay up all night if you want to, and if you don't spoil the men's sleep. But I'm turning in. I reckon the boys feel the same way."

"Never was so sleepy in my life," declared Drick with a wide yawn.

Hancey laughed, but none gave him any heed. Tisk's eyes had given the command to retire. As one the men rose, as if in haste to reach their blankets, although the sun had yet to lose its balance on the western skyline. Strong caught Tisk's eye and motioned for the jug to be removed. Tisk waited until the men were in the cookhouse; then he rose and announced:

"Going to my cabin. You fellers better go to yours. Take the jug along with you." And with never a backward glance he walked up the path.

Hancey stared after him malevolently and muttered:

"Why didn't some of them fetch a fight? If they'd come in the open I'd cleaned up the whole gang."

Freedom briskly rose and picked up the jug and announced—

"We'll wind up the evening at the shack. Come along, George."

Without waiting for Hancey to remonstrate, the old man started up the bank, singing an ancient song in a quavering voice. His companions trailed after him. Hancey showed no effect of the liquor, unless it was his deadly vicious mood. Strong had never seen him like that and was greatly troubled. He feared a violent outburst, when he warned him against drinking more. To his great relief Hancey did not take offense but playfully pushed his hat over his eyes and told him he was a milk and water child.

Freedom was waiting for them in the cabin and once they passed through the door he told them—

"No more drinking."

"What the hell! You're worse off than I am!" insisted Hancey.

"Just so much crick water to me," quietly assured Freedom. "I was just fooling at the cookhouse. I wanted them to think I was half b'iled. Tisk had them set out the jug, so he could see how we acted up after a few snorts. Just experimenting with us. He thinks it makes me foolish. He knows Sam don't care for it.

He learned it makes you ache to use a gun. And if a fight had started, the three of us would be dead by this time. Of course, we'd taken two or three with us. But they'd be poor company. Tisk didn't want it to come to that, so he broke up the sitting."

As he finished, he picked up a pail of water and poured it over Hancey's head.

"What the hell!" spluttered Hancey. "I'm sober. I didn't need that."

"Keep still, fire eater," sternly commanded Freedom. "If you're sober, you'll keep shut, even if I toss you into the Loup. If you're drunk, you'll make a fool of yourself. There! You oughter be wet and uncomfortable enough to forget gunplay for a bit. Now I'm going to sing a song, so they won't think we're sobering off."

He stood in the doorway and in a raucous voice roared several verses of a river song that Manuel Lisa's men had sung nearly two score years before. And as he sang, he emptied the jug outside the door.

Hancey shortly announced:

"I'm going to sleep. Won't dry out for a week."

Freedom turned back from the door and rapidly said:

"Your head's clear enough now, George. Remember this, Tisk never does anything without a purpose. Now he believes he has sized us up sober and half b'iled. That is, George and me. We're in a tough corner. There's just one way out that I can see. Bust up the gang by turning them against each other. Sam, let out a few general hoots!"

Strong yelled and Freedom beat a stick against an iron kettle. The old man continued:

"Have to do that every once in a while to make them think we're up and roaring. After it gits dark, I'm going to slip out and nose around a trifle. While I'm gone you fellers make a noise. Dance a bit; throw the kettle around."

It was dull work, simulating drunkenness, while waiting for night to cover the tableland. Finally Freedom kicked off his boots and whispered:

"Now I'm going. Don't one of you budge from this shack. Keep up a racket by spells. They'll think it's me and George."

The inside of the cabin was dark. The doorway was faintly outlined. Hancey yelled a mover's song and George beat the kettle. Freedom, on all fours, slid over the threshold and squirmed to one side against the logs.

"What's he up to?" whispered Strong.

"I don't know. Seems crazy," growled Hancey. "My head aches and I'm soaked to the skin. I want to turn in. Damn the rum!"

"We'll have to keep going till he comes back. Time to give them some more."

For twenty or thirty minutes they made the night hideous at intervals. They were greatly startled, when Freedom's voice at the doorway bawled forth a border song. Hancey repeated his desire to turn in, but Freedom insisted that the serenade must be continued for awhile longer. Under his direction the intervals were longer as the evening advanced and at last he was satisfied and announced that they would retire. He and Hancey dropped asleep almost at once. Strong was nervous and remained awake, thinking he heard prowlers. Finally he slept, and the sun was shining through the small east window when he opened his eyes.

FREEDOM was up and just entering with a pail of water. Hancey rolled from his blankets and proved to be in a contrite frame of mind. He voluntarily declared he would drink no more when danger threatened. He was in the mood to condemn himself and yet was quick to set up a defense. He explained to George how his search for Feley had taken him to river resorts, and how in order to be welcome there he had had to do as the company did. However he concluded by saying—

"But if Tisk can drink tea I can."

Strong was curious to know the reason for Freedom's nocturnal excursion. The old man shook his head, saying:

"Just a little backfire that may come in handy. We're in a bad mess. But if wolf tackles wolf, we'll fool them yet. What you don't know won't hurt you. Now, here comes Tisk and it must be time to eat."

The leader came down the path as Freedom stepped outside. He halted and eyed the three men closely and greeted—"How you fellers feeling this morning?"

Freedom leaped lightly into the air and cracked his heels together three times and replied:

"Fit as a fiddle. But if we'd had a trifle more whisky we'd be feeling a trifle more scrumptious."

He reached inside the door and produced the jug. Tisk's dull, gray eyes opened a bit wider and he shrilly asked—

"Don't mean to say the jug's empty?"

Freedom removed the stopper and inverted the jug and lamented:

"Had to give out just as we was feeling our best. Breakfast ready? We're hungry as bears."

Tisk stared at the jug and at the faces of Freedom and Hancey. Neither showed the ravages of a debauch. His own face was slightly swollen and suggested heavy drinking in the privacy of his cabin. He shortly remarked:

"If you two can stand grief as well as you can stand Kansas double rectified, you can lick old Johnston's Army. Breakfast is ready and, for one, I ain't hungry. Your racket kept me awake 'most all night."

"Just a bit of our fun," said Freedom, as Tisk walked down the path, carrying the jug.

The three friends trailed after him and arrived at the cookhouse, as he was handing the jug to Blackie and commanding:

"Don't waste no more liquor on these fellers. Might as well pour it on to a sandhill."

"They was certainly whooping it up, boss," said Blackie.

"Dish up the grub; then we'll have a business talk."

The men exchanged quick glances. To Freedom and his companions the announcement sounded ominous. The food was brought outdoors. The morning was perfect, one of the few remaining warm, mellow days of the autumn. The men ate hurriedly and in silence, their side glances betokening an eager anticipation.

As the few dishes were being cleared away, Hancey shifted his position to lean against the side of the house. With his hat pulled well forward he had the appearance of being half asleep. Strong, sensing a disagreeable if not tragic climax, watched Tisk. Freedom strolled to the corner stake near the house and examined it, as if suspecting it had been tampered with. When he walked back to the expectant group Tisk was sitting cross-legged, his hands resting on his pudgy knees. Freedom noticed that he had taken a position that permitted him to face Hancey. When the old man would have seated himself behind the leader he was told—

"Git 'round here where I can see you."

Freedom edged forward into the circle, and Tisk began:

"It's high time we was deciding what's to be done with these new men. They ain't against us and they ain't for us. We must know just how they stand. Old man, say something."

Freedom promptly replied:

"I own quite a stretch along this bank. You're welcome to stay here. You can't steal the land, and you don't want it if you could."

Drick laughed silently. Blackie harshly cried:

"That ain't saying anything. Just words. They're either with us or against us. Boss, let them pool in what they fetched with them, or be looked on as outsiders."

Murmurs of approval endorsed the suggestion. Tisk produced a small pocket-knife and whittled a sliver of cedar into a toothpick and used in thoughtfully. Then he said:

"What Blackie says goes without saying, of course. If you fellers want to take on with us, you must pool in what you fetched with you."

Hancey sleepily called out:

"I brought a horse and two guns with me. I won't share them with any one; but I'll join the gang and follow my leader."

Strong quickly added—

"I have nothing but a few dollars, my gun and my horse."

Tisk readily conceded:

"That kind of property's personal. Newcomers always keep their outfits. But your case is different, old man. You claim all this land. You're welcome to it after we quit it—and the houses on it. But you brought something that's to be divided. You've got money in your pockets. We've got to have a whack at that. It goes into the common pile. You'll get more'n that back, after we've made two or three hauls. The mules are yours as you paid for them."

"Mules oughter go in with the money," insisted Blackie.

Tisk's lips twitched, suggesting amusement. He shrilly qualified:

"As there's truth in what Blackie says, we'll rule it this way. The old man gets his four hundred dollars back after the mules have been sold on the Platte by Feley, or some other trusty man. I'm thinking he thought we didn't know what mules are fetching, when we sold them to him for twenty a head. The twenty of them are worth four thousand dollars to Johnston's Army. Getting his four hundred back wouldn't turn him any profit, but he shouldn't have any profit, as he didn't help steal the mules."

"What if I refuse?" asked Freedom.

"Then you lose the four hundred you paid and we keep the mules."

The men laughed. Even Hancey chuckled. Tisk heard him and cast him a suspicious glance and warned:

"Don't you get brash, young feller. Don't go thinking up any war game. I'm still thinking you're mighty good timber to build with; but you'll never be quite up to Ben Tisk."

Hancey grinned but kept silent. Freedom frowned, as if puzzled and said:

"I get back what I paid for the mules and share in whatever else we take in? Is that what you mean."

"That's the idea," agreed Tisk. "Now fork over the roll of money in your pocket. That must go in to be divided, and go in *now*."

Hancey moved slightly. Tisk cried—

"If you make a move for a gun, young feller, your two friends die where they're squatting."

To Freedom he hissed—

"Hand over that money!"

Freedom threw back his head and laughed loudly. The men leaned forward and glared at him wolfishly. Tisk's dull eyes were almost hidden between the rolls of fat. He said—

"Glad it makes you laugh; but hand over!"

Freedom twisted his fingers in his beard and grinned knowingly at Tisk and demanded:

"Mean to tell me you didn't give orders for me to be stripped clean last night while I was drunk? Mean to tell me you didn't have that in mind when you give us the jug of liquor?"

HANCEY started nervously. By a mighty effort Strong controlled his expression. The effect of the question on the members of the gang was startling. Some exhaled loudly. All stared in amazement at Freedom, then grew suspicious as they looked at each other and at Tisk. Tisk was nonplused. His thick lips remained parted, while he stared into Freedom's face. Before any one could speak, Freedom pulled his pockets inside out and repeated—

"Mean to say you didn't give orders for last night's job?"

Tisk found his tongue and in a squealing tone demanded—

"You telling me you've been robbed?"

"Clean as a hound's tooth. Wasn't that your reason for feeding us so much red liquor—to make us sleep sound?"

"Stand up! Manners, search him."

Freedom got on his feet, laughing cynically. The yellow faced man rapidly and expertly went through his clothes.

He produced a few pieces of hard money, the well worn plat and a pocketknife.

"Sit down!" ordered Tisk. "Off with those boots, Manners."

But search as thoroughly as he would, Manners could find no money. Manners turned to his leader and said:

"Easy answer, boss. One of the young fellers is carrying it."

"Search them!"

Strong rose and held his revolver above his head and invited—

"Go ahead with me."

Tisk nodded. Manners quickly finished his task, even to the boots; he reported failure. All eyes were turned on Hancey, who was laughing quietly.

Tisk hissed—

"You won't stand to be searched?"

"Not having anything to lose, I don't refuse," replied Hancey, coming to his feet. "But no one must touch my guns. Get to work, Manners."

He stood with his thumbs hooked into his trousers, while Manners went through his pockets. Without being requested, he seated himself and drew off his boots and socks.

Hancey and Strong now believed they understood Freedom's errand when he left them alone in the cabin. Strong's features were composed, but his heart was racing madly as he speculated on what the gang would do next. Hancey accepted it as a tremendous joke and continued laughing. Freedom combed his fingers slowly through his beard and turned his benevolent gaze on the men. He was quick to notice the suspicion showing in each pair of eyes.

Beneath Tisk's fat mask of a face he believed he could detect uneasiness. During the brief period in which each man furtively eyed his neighbor, Freedom added to the rage of each outcast by saying:

"If you, Tisk, didn't order me robbed, then some one of your men took the reins into his hands last night. I had the money on me when I went to the house. This morning it was gone. And there was nigh to five thousand dollars of it."

Exclamations of rage and dismay rose from the five men. Tisk's face was almost purple, as his thick lidded eyes bored into each countenance in turn. His voice was scarcely audible as he directed—

"Blackie, you and Drick overhaul that house and their belongings."

This selection of two men who heartily disliked each other was a bit of the leader's natural shrewdness. Tisk was worried by the growing conviction that one of his band had dared to rob Freedom. He firmly believed that Freedom and Hancey were helpless after they finished the jug of liquor. He turned to Strong and abruptly accused—

"But you was sober, young feller."

"Perfectly sober. But I slept sound. I did not know the money was gone until this morning. I have no idea where it went to."

"I found it was gone the minute I set up and shook the ache out of my head," broke in Freedom. "My young friends was sleeping like babies. When I told them what had happened, they was for coming to you and asking a showdown. But I cautioned them to wait."

"Why?" snapped Tisk. "Why wait?"

"I took it for granted I'd been robbed at your orders."

Tisk did not speak for several moments, but there was something in his lusterless eyes that caused his followers to crouch low in awful expectancy. Hancey was quick to catch the menace in the fat face, and his hands settled on the handles of his two guns. With a shake of his round shoulders, Tisk regained control of himself and in a high, wailing voice candidly said:

"Of course I intended for you to turn your pile to be divided among us. But not in the night-time. We're open and above board."

The men relaxed only to renew their tension when Freedom explained:

"Didn't know but what you was working a lone game, so I kept my trap shut till you started in telling me to shell out. You walked along with us last night and

give us some fine liquor. Your house was nearest and we was drunk. I didn't know but you thought the money would be safer in your keeping and that you paid us a little visit—

"If you finish that, I'll kill you!" screamed Tisk.

Freedom remained silent, his face picturing his bewilderment. He stared helplessly from the leader to the men.

"Our boss ain't that kind, old whiskers," spoke up Gorling.

His tone was lifeless and he stared at the ground as he spoke. Tisk glared at the men, and each pair of eyes avoided his gaze. He wet his lips and started to speak, but changed his mind. The silence was becoming nerve wracking, when Blackie and Drick trotted down the path. It was plain that they had been unsuccessful, as there had been no whoop of discovery.

"Found nothing, of course," muttered Tisk.

"Nothing," answered Drick, "but it's mighty queer. Money never took wings. It's along this stretch of the river."

"Nigh on to five thousand dollars!" groaned Freedom.

Tisk stood up with the whining note in his voice. It seemed to impress his men with a sense of impending danger.

"Some one took that money. Some one has hidden it. Some member of this outfit took it, mebbe. If that man will confess now we'll let it pass. We'll say he was drunk and didn't know what he was doing." He paused, but his followers watched him narrowly, silent; he continued, "Then one of these new fellers took it and hid it."

"We'd be likely to rob our friend!" indignantly cried Strong.

Hancey laughed derisively and did not take the bother to enter a denial. Freedom added fuel to the band's greed and anger by morosely repeating:

"There was nigh on to five thousand dollars in good, clean money in my clothes when I went to sleep. In the morning it was gone. Neither of my young friends would steal a penny from me. Even if they was thieves, they wouldn't do it as they know they're always welcome just by asking."

"Five thousand is a big pot!" hoarsely exclaimed Blackie. "I don't like it."

Tisk fixed his gaze on him and softly demanded—

"Think I like it, Blackie?"

"What I meant was, none of us like it," answered Blackie, and his voice was sharp for one addressing the chief.

Hancey jeered:

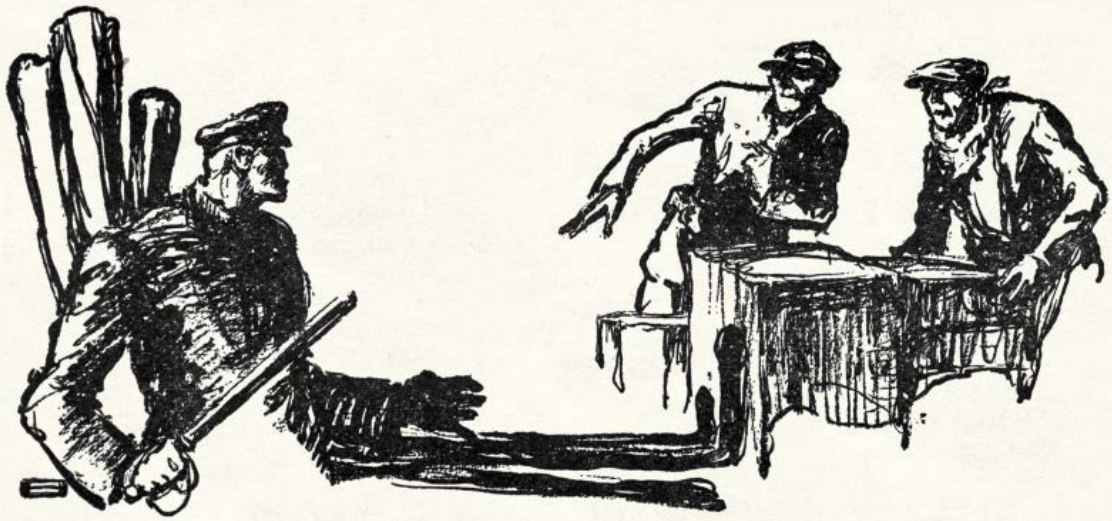
"Case of wolf rob wolf, Tisk. You waste time smoking up our trees. Some one took it, and you can safely bet your life against an old blanket, the thief is right in this circle now, and that none of us newcomers is the thief."

Tisk was fighting to subdue his rage. His round face filled with creases, then swelled out and almost hid his dull eyes. His gaze was feral. It rested on the laughing face of the young man. It was murderously speculative as it swept over the sullen, suspicious countenances of his followers. He knew his supremacy was ended if one of his own men had dared to play the thief independently of orders. He also knew that the pack would fall upon him, unless it was proved that he had not taken the money for his private purse. He wanted to be alone to direct his cunning mind to solving the problem.

"We won't talk about it any more just now," he finally announced. "I shall find the thief, and it'll be better for him he never was born. But that money isn't lost. It's just stolen. Whether the thief is one of the band, or one of these strangers, he couldn't be gone long enough to hide it in a cañon. Right now, it's on this tableland. By and by I'll tell you how we'll find out who took it and where it's hidden. Any man who tries to quit this place will name himself as the thief. You all keep mighty close till I've finished thinking."

With that he took to the path and walked to his cabin, suspecting each of the men, and suspected by each, in turn.

TO BE CONTINUED



The last fight of an old ex-pugilist

NIGHT WATCH

By EDWARD L. McKENNA

HE PACED along the string-piece and looked casually down at the dark water. A nice warm night for once, though a little misty. Now if the weather would only hold like this through October, it wouldn't be so bad. Good steady work for the month and next month, and then maybe there'd be a job firing a furnace through the bitter cold weather, a job where he could put a little by and pay the good woman in the lodging house the seven dollars he owed her. By that time, maybe, the luck would come back to him and he'd hit a long shot when the ponies were running at Havre de Grace again, and he'd buy himself a new outfit for the carnivals.

You could buy a barrel, with numbers on it, and it spun by hand—no current or anything. Something new, and he was the fellow could make it pay. Ah, then in the spring out to Norwich, or Bridgeport, and start all over.

The springtime. You never knew what it was like, till you were getting a bit along. Early May, when the men are out fixing the track up and there's a smell of earth and the horses walk along stretching their necks and sniffing; and the carnival people are painting the wagons and tinkering with their stuff and getting ready to start for Illinois or Kentucky.

Only this time he wouldn't be a fool, entirely. It was a fool he'd been all his life. Fifty-seven years old, and neither chick nor child. He'd never been the marrying kind. And the only one he ever wanted to marry, wasn't she married already?

He'd seen her, eyes blazing up at him from the ringside seats, the night he was fighting the Michigan Terror. Over at the old Sporting Club in Baltimore, and only the semi-final at that. And he'd thought to himself, "Of course she's like all the

rest of them that go to the fights," and he'd winked at her between rounds, twisting his mustache. Him and his long red mustache. It'd give the boys a good laugh now, to see a pug with a mustache.

But she was all right. A bookmaker's wife, married to Tommy Heffernan—that was how she came to be there; but she was crazy about the fights. Later on he met her at the Knights of Columbus ball, and after that he was mad about her, but it was no use. You could see she wasn't that kind. So he tried to forget about her.

Then one day he was crossing over the bridge in Chicago, and who should be coming along but herself? And how her eyes lighted up, but then she cast them down again, and a burning blush ran over her. He laughed and caught her arm.

"Don't, Michael," she muttered.

She'd called him Michael. And he stood there, in front of her, his hands opening and shutting, and a babble of foolish words sputtering in his mouth. She was looking at him, her eyes all blazing again, the way they had that first night.

"Michael—Michael—dear, I couldn't. There's the children. And Tom, Tom's as straight as a string, and I've got to be straight . . ."

He'd take her away, and the children, too. Plenty of money he had. Take her to Paris, to New York, to the old country—anywhere.

Why hadn't he swept her into his arms, she that was dying to come into them? Wasn't she his? Who was this Heffernan? A little weazened runt, looking like a teacher's pet up on his high stool in the betting ring!

"And so—ask you—to promise to go away. For your love of me, Michael, I'm asking it— Here. Take these. Little enough I've used them, but I've had them ever since I was a little girl."

And she had kissed the cross and handed them to him. A pair of rosary beads.

Well she knew what to give him. He'd taken them and put them in his pocket and walked away, without a word, like a drunken man, and never knew where he was till he found himself in Englewood.

He'd never seen her again.

OH, THERE'D been plenty of women after her, but that was the only time he'd ever been fool enough to go after a straight one. Fool enough—no, he didn't mean that.

And just afterward he had hit his stride. When the bell would ring, he'd be running out of his corner like Fin Mac Cool and belting them till they dropped. In between times he didn't train much. There were only three things that made him forget his troubles—and they were all bad for a fighter. And there were good men in those days; not like the divers you've got now. Men that would set themselves for your rush and give you as good as you sent. If he'd kept away from the whisky, it might have been different.

As it was, one year he'd been matched to meet the logical contender for the championship, and four years after that they were giving Michael a benefit up in the old Arena in South Boston. A benefit—for him! How did he ever sink that low, to take charity from them?

Anyhow, he had the decency to go away. Out to the wheatfields, with the crazy idea that he could come back. Come back—with that wild crowd of I. W. W.'s for company. They'd hardly get paid before somebody'd have a blanket out on the grass and the dice'd be rattling, and Michael'd be shoving and crowding, waiting for his turn.

Many's the time, when he lay there under the stars with a shock of wheat for a pillow and newspapers wrapped around him, he'd sworn he'd cut it out. Quit the gambling and live sober, and get into shape and fight again. Even if he couldn't be the champ, he could lick lots of them. He'd get a stake and go in the grocery business. That was a nice business, with the rows of little cans and the green vegetables, and anybody could run a grocery business.

Instead, he'd drifted to the carnivals. First, as a handy man with a circus, where one night he proved his handiness with a tent-stake so well against the merry villagers that they made up their minds that he'd make a good Arab. The next season he had his own little gambling game, harmless enough, and profitable, and he'd followed the street fairs for twenty-odd years since.

It had given him a mild prosperity—plenty to eat, a few flamboyant suits of clothes, a dollar or two to gamble on other men's games. His red hair and mustache had become less flaring, and then white, and he found the long jumps a little more stiffening than they used to be.

Then this last summer they'd had that fire and he was cleaned out. As best he could, he made his way to Chicago, where he got a job washing dishes. They wouldn't let him wait on the tables. A dump he wouldn't have eaten at in his young days, at that. New York was the place. Plenty of work in New York.

But there wasn't. It had been a rainy summer, and his friends at Rockaway and Coney Island were all crying about the season. He wasn't one to tell a friend of his own troubles.

So, this. The dark water, and the mossy jetties and the warehouses behind him. The city over there, going to bed. Little tugs still puffing up and down, and an occasional coal barge. The Fall River boat. Trolley cars rattling across the bridge. First time he ever crossed that bridge was to fight in the Pelican A. C. over in Brooklyn. Ah, if Terrible Terry ever got one look at these tramps nowadays, he'd laugh so he couldn't hit a lick.

Getting foggy now. The swirling water and the salty harbor smell that a lot of idiots think is the smell of the sea. Better be getting back now, around the warehouse again.

Good to feel the blackjack slapping against his leg. A dirty weapon, fit for a thug. But very handy. The silk thieves, they were always hollering about. Huh! A fool he was, entirely, to hock the gun and put the money on that dog in the third at Aqueduct. Ah, well, you never could tell, never could tell. If he'd stuck his nose under the wire, now . .

He pulled a red handkerchief out of his coat and blew his nose resoundingly. In putting the handkerchief back he touched a string of rosary beads and shook his wicked old head. Catherine—Gawd be good to her wherever she was! It was a great name. Kathleen na Houlihan. And her step was the step of a queen. Funny how the old stories and the old times kept going through your head on a job like this. It was his grandmother, Lord have mercy on her, told him about Kathleen na Houlihan. The funny little songs she used to sing. "Oh, the wonderful time at the party, there was McCarthy, ha-ale and hearty" and "Charlie is my darling, my darling, my da-arling, the young Che-va-lier."

A queer woman. The second sight, they said she had. She had said that Michael would be a famous man, and his name'd be as well known as Abraham Lincoln's or Owen Roe O'Neill's. Well, if he'd kept off the liquor that might have been so . . .

While he was pottering around among the storehouses, a motor boat was snubbing its nose against the pier he had just left. Four hard faced young men were quietly drawing themselves over the edge of the wharf.

"Ain't nowheres around."

"Lucky for him."

"Ah, poke the gat in his face. He'll be reasonable."

Back in the fog heavy footsteps.

"Sh-h, there he comes."

"What are yez up to?"

The gat in Michael's face.

"Now, Pop, don't get thick. Just throw your hands up. You stand quiet, and we'll tie youse up. 'Tain't none of your business— Ah, watch him, the cuckoo—

And Michael, with his teeth bared, ran forward, as he used to run forward, years ago, at the best middleweights in the world. Only now he was running forward to meet the springtime.

Facts An' Figgers On Cayuses

By

ALAN LeMAY

THE other day Dixie Kane was kind o' toppin' off Tenspot fer me, not so much because I wanted him topped off as because Dixie was honin' fer exercise; an' that new feller from over by Hogjaw says—

"It must be purty tough to git old an' stiff, an' have to have yore hoss topped off by some other guy."

I told him the best thing *he* could do would be find him a good-size rock an' pat hisself in the back o' the head with it, to kind o' prepare hisself fer somethin' worse that was thinkin' very ser'ously o' happenin' to him.

At that he kind o' shied off an' said he didn't mean me; an' 'lowed that far as *he* was concerned, he was free an' willin' to admit he didn't know the front end of a bronc from the hind end, comin' or goin', an' hadn't oughter be offerin' opinions.

O' course he thought he was lyin' when he said that. But I dunno if it would be any disgrace to him if it was a actchal fact. Jest last week, when I got on that Pinky colt that has to give every new feller a thorough goin' try-out soon's he gets on, I was free to admit *I* wasn't right shore which end was where. Seemed I couldn't get straight in my head was he facin' frontwards an' me back'ards, or was it the other way round.

An' what with the confusion o' the moment I expect he would 'a' throwed me, too—leastways give me every aid and encour'gement in fallin' off; but he was yankin' around so plumb restless it seemed like every time he lep out from under he lep right back again, so's to be there when I come down. An' the upshot of it was that when he pulled up an' quit an' stood there kind o' snufflin' through his nose, all sad an' discouraged to find out it was the same old story—why there was the same surprized bunch o' white whiskers decoratin' the top side of him. Surprized to be settin' there, I mean.

So I asked Squirty Wallace, that was settin' on the fence when he should 'a' ben workin', did me an' Pinky seem to be goin' the same way mostly or was it true that I was ridin' back'ards a good half o' the time? Because it ain't all the boys can set a twister back'ards, an' if I'd did it I wanted to know it fer shore, so's I could tell it around.

An' Squirty, he kind o' sucked at the wad o' tobaccy in the side o' his face an' looked at the ground, an' studied, an' spit some shootin' twist at a hoss-fly, an' hit it; an' fin'lly said he couldn't rightly tell, not fer certain; but it seemed like to him that we was both kind o' goin' round an' round.

That's the trouble with a fool colt like Pinky—he don't know where he's goin' his ownself. Most cayuses at least has a general idee; an' they bend their neck the way they're goin' to bounce next an' you notice it an' kind o' h'ist yoreself over that way, so's mebbe you'll land the same place he does—an' at practically the same time.

But if the fool hoss can't make up his mind, how're *you* goin' to know? He bends his neck one way an' jumps sideways the other; an' his hind legs jumps forward, an' his front legs jumps back, or cornerways or somewhere, until there ain't no more topside to him than there is to a onion, he's li'ble to light any which way. *He* don't give a whoop. A perfeck damn tumbleweed of a hoss.

I used to ride one bronc that could throw hisself on his back an' bounce right back on his feet again, all one move; so there wasn't a Chinaman's chance o' comin' up in the saddle again, not even s'posin' you was anxious to, which most fellers wasn't once they'd fell clear an' found theirselves livin' jest the same as before the disaster happened. His name was Wire Fence, you can ask the Old Man.

Speakin' o' fences, Homely Finnegan—his right name was Homer, I think, though mebbe he jest made that up, to seem more stylish—he claimed he rode a cayuse once that lit on his back, an' somersettled into a wire fence, an' sprung out again on to his feet, an' went right on kettlin', not noticin' that anythin' special had come up. It's a fright, the lies some o' these fellers will lay awake nights an' think up.

So this feller from Hogjaw thinks it's tough to have somebody top off a hoss fer yuh, does he? Well, jest let me tell *you* somethin'. If yuh had a swell job cut out fer yuh, where all yuh had to do was get blowed up with dynamite, an' come down on a picket fence, an' get yore teeth shook loose, an' have a feller swing a stirrup three times around his head an' let fly in yore eye, an' get bit in the knee by a alligator, an' beat with a log; an' jest about the time yuh begun bleedin' from the ears an' nozzle, why get flang out of a b'loon an' stomped on an' trompled out flat, an' from there kicked clean over the barn on to the rubbish heap, where yuh shore belong about then; an' jest as yuh was about to start in some feller steps up an' says—

"Aw, *leave me* ride him this once—whyncha give a feller a chanct?" I jest guess you'd bust right out cryin' you'd be so plumb disappointed; an' you'd tell that feller to get the hell out o' there, yo're insulted!

No sir. Havin' rode up'ards o' three million of 'em, by actchal count, these here nine-hundred-pound livin' sledge-hammers don't give me no new an' pleasin' sensations. Not any. Gettin' murdered one way ain't no more refreshin' than another; in the long run it gets downright tiresome. An' if I'm gettin' to look my age, so that some o' these new beginners kind o' feel it ain't no more than right to top off one fer me now an' then on a cold mornin', I don't mind—

Much.

Some new sidelights on the famous Nicaraguan filibuster

The Last of Walker's Men

By MEIGS O. FROST

DEEP in the mountains in the interior of Spanish Honduras today lives the last of the white men who followed the fortunes of William Walker, the world's greatest filibuster; one man of the hundreds on hundreds of Americans who in those days just before the Civil War fought under the command of the Man of Destiny in his fruitless effort to found the Empire of Central America; one man of the thirty-four who sailed in August, 1860, from Mobile in the little schooner *Clifton* on Walker's last expedition, that ended when William Walker was executed September 12, 1860, at Trujillo, Honduras. This man is the last of the band of hard-bitten American adventurers who followed an iridescent soap bubble dream of empire—and saw it burst. He was an eye witness of Walker's execution.

His name is Robert Atchinson. He is Irish. He is ninety years old. Since 1880 he has made his home in Honduras. For the past fifteen years his home has been in the little town of Cantarranas, thirty miles from Tegucigalpa, the capital. There he has nursed the memories of his days as a filibuster, a trooper under Mosby of the Confederacy in the Civil War, a cowboy and a horse herder in the far West.

It is only among the little group of white men he counts his friends that Robert Atchinson— "Old Bob," they call him—will talk of that last expedition. Not many men ride the sixty miles from Tegucigalpa to Cantarranas and back to hear a story. But that story is worth the ride. I heard it this summer in the course

of a trip to Honduras during which, through the courtesy of Walter Brown, manager of the Truxillo Division of the United Fruit Company, I was able to travel over the trail of the last march by William Walker and the little band of thirty-four Americans who in 1860 captured Truxillo and were forced to evacuate it when caught between overwhelming forces of Honduran soldiers and British sailors, and who were captured at last. That trail led from Truxillo down the Piedra Blanca Valley to the Black River where Walker, cornered, surrendered.

Let Robert Atchinson in his own words tell the story of that last heroic foray.

"Irish and proud of it!" He smiles as he sits beneath the shade of the banana fronds in his little patio. "But I'm an American too. I ought to be. I was born on the Fourth of July in 1836, at Armagh, in Ulster. I was twenty years old when first I came to Honduras in 1856 with an uncle of mine, Captain Robert Moore, retired from the British navy on account of wounds. He was living at Yuscaran, on the Pacific side. Six months with him, and I went to the United States, to return to Honduras in 1858 where I worked for the San Jancito Mining Company until early in 1860.

"About this time all you could hear anywhere in Central America was the story of the expedition William Walker was said to be organizing back in the United States. Walker was a heroic figure in Central America then. He had conquered Nicaragua, starting with a handful of men, and had been elected president. He had lost out when he was ganged by Costa Rica, the British navy, Cornelius Vanderbilt the First, who financed expeditions against him, and certain factions in Nicaragua.

"And now Walker was coming back. From what I heard of him he was the kind of a man any good Irishman would love to fight under. I went back to America to join him, found him in New Orleans and sailed with him from Mobile. The minute I saw him I knew he was all that men said he was—a gentleman and a fighting man.

"We sailed out of Mobile in August, 1860, on the little schooner *Clifton*. I've heard a lot of people say—and I've read it in histories—that there were from a hundred to two hundred of us on that expedition, and that we carried cannon. That is not true. There were only thirty-four men on that expedition. We had no cannon of any kind. We were armed with muzzle loading rifles, the best guns of that day, and pistols and knives, of course.

"Walker told us that the inhabitants of the Bay Islands, off the coast of Honduras, had complained to him of tyrannical treatment by the Honduran government, and that we were sailing to set them free. Thirty-four of us were to lick all Honduras. It didn't seem as foolish as it sounds, for Walker had started his conquest of Nicaragua with less than sixty men.

"For fifteen days we had a rough, weary trip on that little schooner. Then we reached Ruatan. We found the British flag flying over the island. We didn't have the ambition to lick England, so we steered for Honduras and landed at Trujillo. We took the town without any trouble. Next day, in sailed the British gunboat *Icarus* and anchored with her guns trained on the town. Captain Salmon, her commander, came ashore and called on Walker.

" 'I call on you to surrender,' I heard Captain Salmon tell Walker. 'You've got to evacuate Trujillo anyway, as the British government has a lien on all duties at the custom house on account of a debt Honduras owes Great Britain.'

" 'I'm not going to leave, and I'm going to make Trujillo a free port,' Walker told him.

" 'I'll bombard the town if you don't leave,' said Captain Salmon.

"They held several conferences. Then a couple of our scouts came in and reported that General Alvarez, commandant at Yoro, had assembled seven hundred men and was marching on us by land.

"Walker laughed. 'I've got some good

fighters,' he said, 'but I don't think we can lick seven hundred men and a British warship.'

"TRUJILLO is on a shelf near the base of a mountain nearly four thousand feet high, and was a perfect target for the *Icarus*. That night Walker evacuated the town and we started on a march south along the coast of Nicaragua. I'll never forget the way we stumbled along through the dark without showing any lights. We had to march about sixteen miles around the shore of the bay to straighten out and head south. The coastal country there is full of lagoons and big and little rivers. We had no boats. All the rivers were high. We had lots of trouble swimming them with our rifles slung on our shoulders and our powder tied to the top of our heads to keep it dry.

"We plowed along through the thick jungle, and ninety miles down the coast we came to the Black river—the big Rio Negro that is formed by the Rio Sico and the Rio Paulaya. That was too big for us to swim. There they caught us.

"Captain Salmon had taken General Alvarez and all the men he could pack on board the *Icarus*, and they had sailed down the coast after us. When we reached the Rio Negro, the *Icarus* lay in the river with guns trained on us, after she had landed Alvarez and a force that outnumbered us more than ten to one.

"Captain Salmon came ashore under a flag of truce.

" 'The best thing you can do is surrender,' he told Walker.

" 'I'll surrender to you as the captain of a British warship if you give me your pledge that we are not going to be handed over to Alvarez,' Walker told Captain Salmon. 'Otherwise we'll fight it out.' I was there. I heard him. And I heard Captain Salmon answer Walker, 'You have my assurance as a British naval officer that you are surrendering to Her Majesty's forces.'

"Walker turned to us all grouped around him with our guns in our hands, loaded and ready. We would have done whatever he said. I've always believed that most of us could have shot our way out through Alvarez and his men and escaped to the mountains. That was a grand bunch of fighting men, those thirty-four. But Walker said, 'We'll surrender to the British. You've heard Captain Salmon's pledge. He won't turn us over to Alvarez.'

"So we laid down our arms and went aboard the *Icarus*. Alvarez and his men came aboard too. Captain Salmon steered straight back to Trujillo—and the minute we reached port that damned hound turned us over to Alvarez and washed his hands of us."

The old blue eyes of Robert Atchinson still flash at that remembered treachery sixty-six years ago.

"There we were in the Trujillo *cuartel*," he continues. "All of us expected to be shot. Our jailers laughed at us and told us there wasn't any hope for any of us.

"But Melhado, the British consul at Trujillo, was a square man. He went to Alvarez and interceded for all of us, including Walker. I've read that Captain Salmon tried to get a pardon for all of us except Walker and an officer named Rudler, an Englishman. I've read, too, that Salmon offered to intercede for Walker if Walker would ask for mercy as an American citizen. But Walker always held himself a Nicaraguan after his election as president of Nicaragua.

"That may be history. But none of us there at that time knew anything about it. All we knew was that Salmon washed his hands of us after breaking his pledged word, and Consul Melhado saved all of us but Walker. Of course there was no hope for him from the moment Alvarez laid hands on him.

"They court-martialed Walker in the commandant's office on the morning of September 11, 1860. It was a farce of a drum head court martial. It took Alvarez less than half an hour to ask Walker a few questions and then tell him he would be shot next morning, Walker told me when they led him back to the *cuartel*. As far as the sentence of death, next morning

had any effect on him, you'd have thought William Walker had been invited to a party next day. He spent the last day of his life talking with us, joking now and then, and giving some of us messages to take back to people in the United States if we should ever get back there. That night I saw him kneel and say his prayers before he went to sleep—and he slept like a child.

"I saw him shot next morning. They took us out of the *cuartel* under guard to see the execution. It was about seven-thirty A.M. of a beautiful day that they marched him out. There was a little negro who brought him his meals. When the negro came around with the supper the night before, Walker laughed and told him not to bother to bring any breakfast—he wouldn't need it.

"Walker hadn't let them blindfold him or tie his arms. He walked out to his death like a man. Just as he stepped out of the cell with the guard surrounding him, his eye caught the eye of that little negro. The negro burst into tears. Walker asked his guards to stop a minute, beckoned the negro over to him, took his watch out of his pocket and handed it to the little fellow.

" 'If you feel as bad as that,' he said in Spanish, 'take this and keep it as a souvenir of me.'

"Then he walked straight out to the spot where they told him he was to stand when they shot him. He stood with his back against a high old *coquina* wall. It shut out the view of the bay and Cape Honduras and the Caribbean Sea. But from where he stood he could take one last look straight up to the crest of the Cordilleras. I can see him still as he stood there that morning.

"A captain marched the firing squad of four soldiers up to a point about thirty feet in front of him.

" 'Señor Walker,' the captain said, 'have you anything to say?'

" 'I am a Roman Catholic,' Walker said. 'This expedition was made at the instance of the citizens of Ruatan, and it was unjust. I ask the people to pardon me. I receive death with resignation. May it be for the welfare of society.'

"Then he opened his shirt and put his hand over his heart.

" 'Shoot there,' he told the firing squad in the same voice in which he would have given a command to his own men. He was calmer than they were. He was looking straight into the eyes of the men who were to kill him.

"Those were his last words. The soldiers leveled their rifles. The captain drew his sword and raised it. Then he slashed downward with the point. That was the signal to fire. They fired. Three bullets hit Walker. He shook from the shock but braced his shoulders and stood erect. One of the four soldiers walked up, put the muzzle of his gun close to Walker's head and blew out his brains. They buried him in the old cemetery on the hill at Trujillo.

"For two or three days they talked about shooting three more of us but British Consul Melhado interceded aggressively, and they didn't. They set us free at last. Most of Walker's men went back to the United States. I wanted to stay in Honduras. I learned that President Guardiola was at Comayagua, and I walked there over the mountains to see him. He took my promise to keep out of any more revolutions and granted me permission to stay in the country.

"But next year the Civil War started and I went back to the United States to fight. I was a trooper with Mosby's Partisan Rangers with the Confederates throughout the war, got shot off my horse, and then run over by a gun of a battery going into action. But I recovered in time to be with my command at the surrender.

"I went West after the war, worked as a cowboy for a while, helped catch large droves of wild horses, of which there were enormous quantities in the West at that time, and returned to Honduras in 1880. I have been here ever since.

"It is hard to explain the effect William Walker had on the men with whom he was associated. I believe I have seen

some great men in action. I have seen Robert E. Lee, Stonewall Jackson, our own beloved Mosby, and other great leaders of the Confederacy. But none of them gave you the feeling of inner power that you had with that little man, William Walker. He was between thirty-five and thirty-six when I joined him. He was slight of build, but muscular. His face was rather round. His eyes were light blue or grey. He was very quiet but not at all morose. He was always ready to laugh at a joke. We all worshiped him.

"Discipline! He never had trouble handling the hardest men. We would never have dreamed of disobeying an order of his. It was enough for him to express a wish in that quiet voice of his to have every one jumping to obey him. I never heard him use profanity. I never saw him get excited. The Confederacy lost a great soldier when he was killed in Honduras.

"Some of those thirty-four in his last expedition were wild fellows, rough customers, but they were good hearted and loyal to Walker to the end. They would never have surrendered unless he had given the word. Some had been with him in his earlier fighting in Nicaragua. For awhile there were two of us, but the other, Copeland, an Englishman, died in Siguatepeque about fifteen years ago. General Alvarez, who ordered Walker's death, died about 1888. He used to live in Minas de Oro. I talked with him a few years before he died.

" 'Walker was a brave man,' said General Alvarez then, 'but he was a menace to the peace of Central America. I had to have him shot.'

"I guess Alvarez was right from his point of view. But it was a pity Walker had to die so young. He was a great man."

THIS summer I stood in Trujillo, inside the old fortifications. A little block of concrete stands there beside the crumbling fragments of an ancient wall. In the top of that concrete block, scratched as with the point of a nail, you can read:

WILLIAM WALKER. 12
DE SEPTIEMBRE, 1860

Up in the little cemetery on the hill behind the ancient cathedral is an unmarked grave. The descendants of that same Melhado who fought fruitlessly for Walker's life will point it out to you as the spot where Walker sleeps.

Seven miles across the bay is the bustling new American city of Puerto Castilla, founded by the United Fruit Company to handle the banana cargoes that come up from the fifty thousand acres of banana plantations in the valleys of the Aguan, the Piedro Blanca and the Black Rivers. Modern wharves and ships and houses are there; the bustle of American business.

But over Trujillo, set between the bright blue waters of the bay and the towering green flanks of the Cordilleras under a tropical sky of cobalt blue, broods an air of peace.

Little peace William Walker knew in the thirty-six years in which he became surgeon, lawyer, journalist, soldier—the greatest filibuster of them all.

But perhaps the peace that broods over Trujillo where the little white houses drowse on the mountain side is the peace that the God to Whom he prayed on the last night of his life has accorded that great and restless spirit.

And in the peace of the mountains of Honduras, in the little forgotten village of Cantarranas, sits and dreams the last living man who looked into Walker's face. The last living man who saw him die.

Filibuster, trooper for the Stars and Bars, cowboy in the West when the West was wild, Robert Atchinson, like the man he followed, has qualified to sit in the circle around the Last Great Camp-Fire where gather the great adventurers of the world.

The Moharrem of Guiana

BY LEWIS J. RENDEL

TONIGHT, they tell me, will see the beginning of the Mohammedan festival. It seems strange to think of the worship of the prophet being pompously carried on in this South American swamp. In India the Moharrem is likely to be a time of riot between Moslem and Hindu, but here, in their common exile, the coolies of both religions join amicably enough.

For weeks the coolie quarters on the back canal have hummed with preparation. The main features are the *tajias*—towering edifices mounted on wagons, fashioned of latticed cane woven into domes, pinnacles and arabesques. Gradually these have blossomed in color and tinsel; silver, purple and gold, scarlet and white, and splashes of the sacred green. Now the whole estate, with hundreds of other coolies come over from San Sebastian, are standing by the big ditch, waiting for the coco palms to stand out black and sharp against the heralding radiance of the festival moon. Meanwhile a dozen overseers and managers of neighboring estates lounge on my veranda, drinking iceless "pegs" and hoping the affair will pass without too much disorder.

The moon is rising . . . A roll of drums, a crackle of firearms, a full throated roar of "Hosein-Hussein!" and a glare of bonfires spreading across the cane and stubble . . .

The palms hang dark and stately over the street, but below them is a thick glow of fire-reddened dust. Enormous negroes swagger with loud mouths; Hindus, slim and half nude, show torsos and limbs like copper statues. Their women are gay in draped muslins, their eyes brilliant with paint, their arms and ankles clinking with silver jewelry.

There is all the electric thrill of a festival. The towering *tajias* are drawn up in their carts and before them passes a file of Mohammedan men. They thump their chests in unison to the drums, their eyes film with fanaticism as they throw back their heads and growl out the names of the martyred sons of Mahomet. "Hosein-Hussein!"; those cries are the dominating note of the whole place.

Then a scattering of the crowd as a flying wedge of Hindu lads, uproarious, with boyhood, shove their way through, flinging handfuls of scarlet powder at the laughing, screaming women.

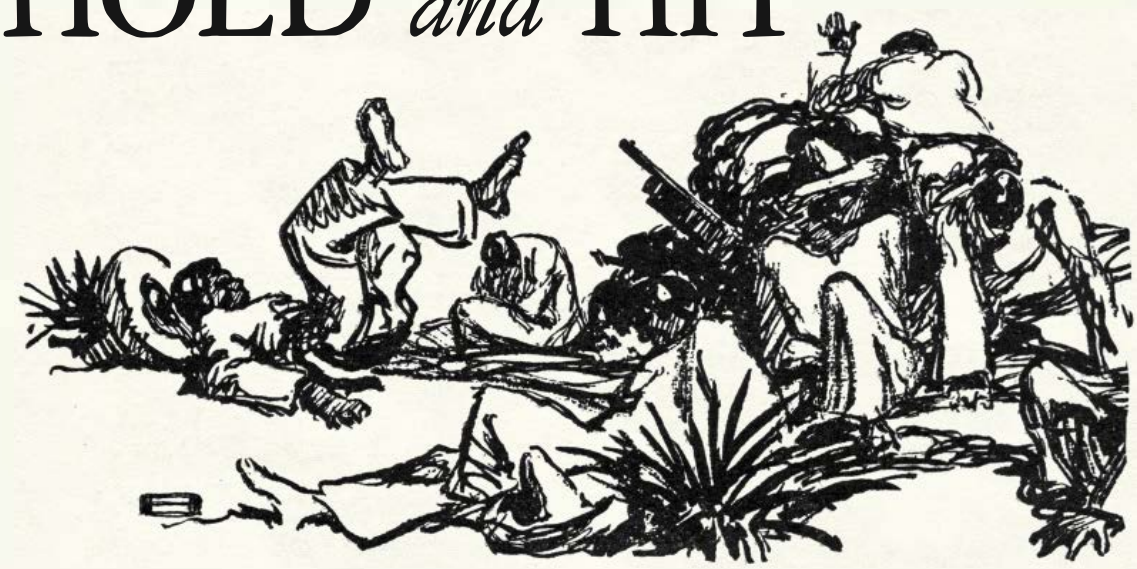
A deep toned conch shell announces that something Hindu is taking place. They have brought an image, six-armed and gilded men, from their cane and plaster temple. Ringed with colored lamps, it is set under an alien rubber tree, and the twitter and flutter heralds a nautch girl. She comes, with a clash of cymbals. A little bold creature in billowing skirts of white and gold. Eyes rimmed with black kohl, silver bells on wrists and ankles, a glitter of jewels, hands and slender feet red with henna.

The dance is slow, set to three thousand years of strict tradition, a trifle dull to Western eyes. The girl is graceful, though —then one notes a bulge of too much muscle at the shoulder; something familiar in the profile silhouetted against a lamp. It is that young demon, Soffrelli, one's own houseboy. He flings himself on his knees, writhing and twisting with bare waist and snaky arms. One licks a shilling, sticks it on his forehead, and his eyes snap back an impish grin.

They keep it up all night; the rolling thump of the tom toms gets into one's head like a too vehement pulse. The shouts of "Hussein-Hosein!", the counter yells of "Rahm-Rahm!" from the Hindus begin to go through one's head like sharp stabs. Not until the crows begin to croak in the palm branches and the torches and tinsel turn ghastly with dawn do they stop. They have got through the night without fighting, and in a few hours it will all be over.

How Beelzebub led the charge of the Border Cavalry Patrol

HOLD *and* HIT



THE THREE squadrons of the 'Steenth were going through the beautiful motions of cavalry drill in close order. There was not an order shouted nor a word spoken. Everything was done silently by signal, so that one had the impression of innumerable men and horses going smoothly through vastly intricate movements, as if actuated solely by thought transference.

"By Jiminy, that is pretty!" exclaimed Montgomery admiringly.

Major Davies stroked Beelzebub's smooth mane and studied the scene awhile before replying. After the silence—

"Yes," he admitted, "it is pretty." And he frowned slightly.

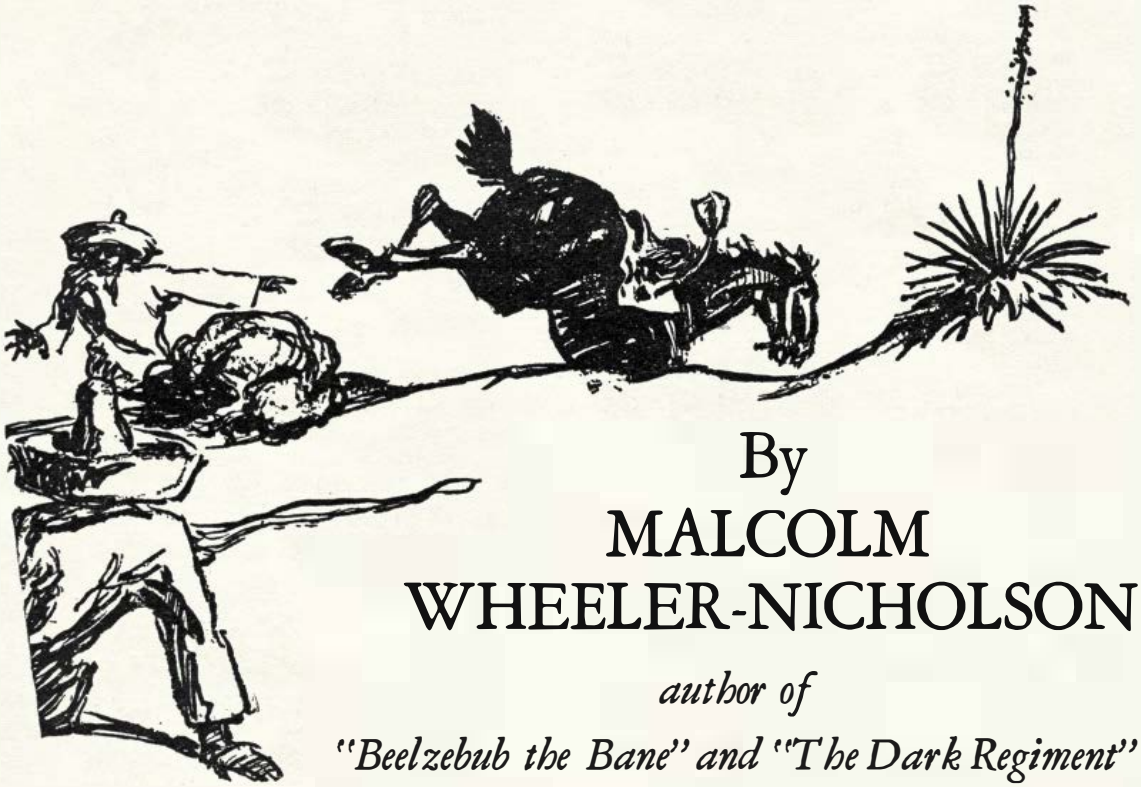
Something in his tone caused Captain Montgomery to look up, half puzzled.

"It's pretty," repeated the major in the same slighting tone, "but is it war?"

Montgomery looked still more puzzled. A question was on his lips. Before he could ask it, the major had picked up his reins and was streaking across the drill ground to the nearest squadron. As Beelzebub skimmed along over the dusty plain, Davies lifted his reins ever so slightly, and the mare checked in full career and stood immobile while he watched.

Captain Montgomery gazed after him, his forehead wrinkled. A strange man, the major. Never satisfied. Still, he had taken the outlaw mare, Beelzebub, the regimental hoodoo, and converted her into a mascot for the 'Steenth Cavalry. And in the doing of it he had quickened the discouraged officers and men into new life, so that the 'Steenth had tightened up into an irresistible machine and swept all before it in the brigade competition.

Yes, the quiet voiced major knew what he was about. Montgomery looked again to where Davies sat on the golden sorrel mare. There was a noticeable likeness about these two—the tall, lean, clean limbed man and the nervous, clean limbed



By
MALCOLM
WHEELER-NICHOLSON

author of

"Beelzebub the Bane" and "The Dark Regiment"

mare. And like the thoroughbred mare, Davies had that same trick of staring above and beyond, as if at far horizons.

But now he was studying the cavalry movements before him.

The drill was undeniably pretty, as the squadrons swept over the ground rapidly in long columns, as the columns spread out fan shaped and formed long heaving lines. The lines moved swiftly over the ground at the gallop and then broke into troops and platoons to shift and turn and wheel like swallows. The sun glittered on the drawn sabers, flashed scarlet on the silken guidons and made the horses look like molten metal. It was all very silent and very smooth and very beautiful, as the coordinated movement of large bodies is always beautiful.

But Davies, who had recently been handling machine guns and artillery, could think of nothing but the lamentable fact that, given an ignorant leader, a few yards of barbed wire and a handful of unsentimental machine gunners, he could make it look like a carelessly scrambled egg. It was a pity, reflected Davies as he watched, that cavalry was so sensitive to leadership.

The First Squadron came toward him in line of platoon columns. It slowed from the gallop to the trot and from the trot to the walk. The command to halt was given. A whistle blew; the squadron commander raised his hand, waving the palm upwards twice or thrice. A stir went through the small compact columns. They opened outward. Another whistle blast, and three hundred men dismounted as one man and stood to horse, stiffly at attention.

"Rest!" came the command.

Men relaxed, voices were raised, cigarets were lighted and a cheerful hum of conversation filled the air.

Davies dismounted in front of B Troop and turned over his reins to his orderly. Montgomery rode up and joined him.

They strode over to where Captain Smithers held forth with three or four of his sergeants.

"How come, Sergeant? You look as though you'd met up with Old Man Trouble himself."

Davies smiled at Sergeant Miller, whose face had all the appearance of a piece of freshly hammered beefsteak and whose right eye was closed and tinted a delicate shade of bluish black. Sergeant Miller looked exceedingly uncomfortable.

"Was it a private war, or did every one join in?" Davies went on remorselessly.

Miller reddened.

"There was quite a gang o' them," he admitted mildly, and began to back away unobtrusively, staring meanwhile at his badly chafed knuckles, with something like a gleam of satisfaction in his eyes.

SERGEANT HENDERSON looked after Miller, as the confused and battered warrior fled back among the nearest group of men and horses. On the grizzled old first sergeant's face there was a grin of comprehension. Davies caught his eye.

"What has Miller been up to? He bears all the earmarks of having had a fight with a buzz saw. I hope he hasn't been trying to break up a happy home."

"No, sir, Miller ain't breakin' up no happy homes, not with that face of his. But he did put up a first class scrap against a whole gang of greasers and got away with it pretty good."

"Yes?" encouraged the major.

"He goes over across the river to Juarez, and some big four flusher of a Mex gets off a nasty crack about the U. S. A. Miller up and lams him. Then this four card flush calls in his gang, and Miller goes into action, armed with a chair. So far as I kin gather, he cleans out the joint, winding up by wrapping the chair around the neck of the busted flush hisself." The old man's eyes gleamed appreciatively.

"Going to Juarez being against regulations in the first place," Davies remarked dryly.

The old man raised his hand to his mouth in sudden consternation; then, studying the face of the officer before him and the gleam of amusement he saw there, he smiled, reassured.

"But he brings back some purty good dope about what's doin' over there."

Sergeant Henderson looked faintly troubled.

"This guy he tangles up with is kind of a face card in the greaser deck."

"What was the name of this personage?"

"He goes by the name o' the 'Butcher'."

Montgomery leaned forward all attention. Davies caught the interest showing in the face of the lean adjutant.

"Why the Butcher?"

"Well, sir, I dunno exactly, but they say this guy goes around shootin' unarmed prisoners with his own pistol. He wears a ten gallon sombrero all loaded down with silver."

"He's the bold bad bandit in these parts, Major," Montgomery volunteered.

"The village cut-up, eh? Has he got any sort of a following?"

"Only about half the peons in Chihuahua and points south. I can't figure out what he's doing in Juarez, though. I thought those troops in Juarez would shoot him on sight. He's supposed to be an enemy of the Juarez crowd. But they take their bandits so damn casually in Mexico," reflected Montgomery impatiently. "It's the only outstanding fault in an otherwise estimable people."

"They're sayin' over the line—" Sergeant Henderson glanced across toward the Mexican plains—"that this Butcher fellow intends to capture Juarez. He don't like Americans. There'll likely be some shootin'."

The old man looked hopeful.

"Well, Sergeant Miller seems to have used his time to good advantage at any rate."

Davies studied the ground at his feet.

"Yes, sir," Sergeant Henderson said eagerly, "he's a pretty savvy lad, a little hot headed, but always on the job. He tells me that this Butcher fellow is the greaser who owned Beelzebub before she came gallopin' in on us."

"Wha-at!" Davies looked incredulous.

"Yes, sir, this Butcher was talkin' about a golden sorrel mare that had run away from him, after kickin' him into the hospital. The Butcher, who sashays around in a black velvet suit all decorated with silver buttons, swears the mare joined the gringoes. Miller says he boasted that he abused her pretty bad."

Montgomery listened blackly.

"If I meet up with that Butcher bird I'll jolt him with something more potent than a chair," he growled. "She surely was in horrible shape when she came galloping up to our picket lines the first time; she looked like a pack of wolves had been biting her."

Davies had been listening abstractedly.

"I only hope that particular pack of wolves doesn't begin howling around us before we're ready for them," he commented softly.

"Ready for them!"

Montgomery looked up startled; Sergeant Henderson was absolutely nonplused. "Why don't you think we're ready for them, Major? The 'Steenth is in fine shape, since we won that competition; everybody is on their toes and as proud as Lucifer."

"The more slippery the banana peel the harder the fall," Davies remarked cryptically.

The other two stared at him, wide eyed.

"I don't get you, Major." Montgomery was puzzled. "If you compare the regiment today with what it was a month ago, it seems to me it's in pretty fine shape."

Davies stared over their heads abstractedly.

"Yes, it's in pretty fine shape," he agreed. "It's in excellent shape."

"Well?" pressed Montgomery.

"There was once a man who set forth to look for a forest. He got so mixed up in the trees that he never did locate the forest," the major went on gently.

The puzzlement of the two deepened.

"I'm blamed if I get you, Major," admitted Montgomery.

"Well," continued Davies patiently, "the regiment is in excellent shape. What's it in shape for? What's the big idea of getting it in shape?"

"Wh—why, a fight—" Montgomery began to see light.

"Exactly. Battle. What does the regiment know, except drill and routine?"

Montgomery looked thoughtful for a space.

"In other words we've got a fine weapon, but we don't know how to use it?"

"Montgomery, at times you show almost human intelligence."

Davies looked at him in mock admiration.

"The forest and the trees," Montgomery repeated musingly. "I begin to get you. We've been so intent on sharpening the sword we forgot about learning to fight with it."

He looked very worried. Sergeant Henderson nodded slowly, as one on whom a great light has broken. Davies smiled.

"That, I might say, is the fault of most professional army men, so don't feel too badly about it. In this man's army, we have so many regulations to keep up with that we forget what it's all about."

The squadron was called to attention; the men sprang to the position of stand to horse. In a second they had swung into their saddles.

MAJOR DAVIES rode away with Montgomery.

"Yes," he went on, "remember this. Don't get so bluffed by the flood of orders and regulations that you forget what it's all about. War is the simplest game in the world. Trouble is with professional soldiers—we stew around in peace time, trying to look busy, and we complicate and obscure the whole thing, until finally we succeed in fooling ourselves. We go through a solemn lot of motions every day, that mean absolutely nothing when it comes to fighting.

"To see American soldiers go through the manual of arms is a case in point. The manual of arms, the handling of the rifle in unison and by number, is a relic of the

days of Frederick the Great, when the guns were single loaders. His three ranks of men had to do things by the numbers. The first rank fired, stepped back; the second rank stepped up, while the third rank was busy loading. Of course, they had to move by clockwork, or they got in each other's way. But what good is Frederick the Great's manual of arms in this day and time?"

"But doesn't it teach discipline?" Montgomery asked.

"Discipline? What is discipline?"

"Why, er-er—" Montgomery sought for a definition.

"Why, er-er," mimicked Davies, laughing, "that's just about as clear a definition as you'll get from most officers. Remember that negro song, 'Lota people talk about heaven ain't a-goin' there'? Lots of people talk about discipline and don't know what it is. Some officers think it's growling at everybody and, if they don't growl back, that's discipline. Others think it's having a lot of men snap to attention when they come around. Others think that courts martial and guardhouses are discipline. Ships have discipline; offices have discipline; shops have discipline; factories have discipline.

"If in the army it is necessary to have our own pet, particular, dyed in the wool brand of discipline, why in the name of all that's holy is it necessary to line up men for hours each day and make them go through a lot of antiquated motions prescribed by Frederick the Great for his peasant conscripts? Doesn't it occur to you that, if going through motions will make discipline, it would save a lot of time to go through motions that are useful in modern battle?"

Montgomery looked at Davies in astonishment. He had never heard this usually taciturn major speak at such great length.

"It certainly sounds reasonable," he admitted. "I've been so busy studying regulations, I never had much of a chance to think about the reasons behind it all. That reminds me I got in another big batch from Washington today. There were forty general orders and twenty-one special orders. I haven't had a chance to read them all yet, nor the batch I got in yesterday, nor those of the day before."

Davies smiled grimly.

"Typewriters are the curse of the army. They make it too easy to issue orders. In the old days, when everything had to be written out in longhand by the officers who issued the orders, they cut down their flow of words. In these days they talk at stenographers, and all their maunderings are preserved. They pay more attention to typewriters than they do to field guns. If wars were won by battalions of semicolons and regiments of commas, we'd have the finest army in the world."

They rode on in silence for a space.

"When things get too complicated for you, hark back to our little old friend, Napoleon Bonaparte," Davies went on. "He once chased a lot of Austrian generals off the map and then said to them, 'There are a lot of very fine generals in Europe. But they think of too many things at one time. I think of only one thing—finding the enemy and hitting him'. Then come down a little further and remember the philosophy of another quiet little Frenchman, one Field Marshal Ferdinand Foch. He says, in substance, that there is a lot of foolishness talked about war. The main thing, according to Foch, is to hold the enemy and hit him, and that's all there is to strategy and tactics. Hold and hit!"

BACK at the stable lines, Sergeant Henderson was pacing up and down with Miller, the stable sergeant.

"Believe me, Miller, I pretty near got you into hot water. But the major's a good guy. He won't do nothin' to you, bein' as I spilled the dope in confidence. He's a square shooter."

"What's the riot?"

Miller looked perturbed.

"Why about your bein' in Juarez without permission?"

Sergeant Miller laughed long and loudly.

"Why, hell! The major sent me over hisself, to find out what was doin' with the greasers!"

"The hell you say!" Sergeant Henderson looked astonished; then he grinned rather sheepishly. "If that don't beat all," he marveled. "But of course he would. Yep, that's just exactly what he would do. That baby ain't nobody's fool. Believe me, they'll never catch him asleep at the switch."

"He gets off some funny stuff once in a while, though. Blamed if I can get what he means." Sergeant Miller shook his head. "Only today, the colonel rides up when we're on the drill ground. 'Beautiful work the regiment's doin',' he booms out, wav'n to where the outfit is goin' through squadron drill.

"Then the major says, 'Yes, sir, Colonel,' he says, 'wouldn't it be lovely Colonel,' he says, 'if we could only be sure of always havin' battlefields as smooth and nice as this drill ground?' he says.

" 'That sure would be fine,' booms out the colonel. 'Go on with the squadron drill,' he bellows, ridin' away. Now that baby wasn't sayin' that to the colonel just to pass the time o' day. I could see, by the way he says it, that he means somethin'; but blamed if I could figger out what he's drivin' at."

Sergeant Henderson looked at him thoughtfully for a space.

"Sure you can't see it, Miller. I never would have expected you to see it, for the simple reason that that there head o' yourn ain't had much practise in anything, except havin' a hat hung on it. That bald spot up behind your ears didn't get there from overstrainin' your intellect, that's one thing sure, Miller."

Sergeant Henderson snorted in high dudgeon. He took a turn or two down the picket line, then returned.

"Why you poor hunk of tripe!" Henderson went on. "Don't you see what he's drivin' at? We're doin' too much close order drillin'."

Sergeant Miller looked nonplused.

"But drillin'—drillin', that's what an army is for, ain't it?" He was honestly worried.

The top sergeant took pity on him.

"That's what a lot o' lunkheads besides you think it's for. And worse luck, that's what most o' the staff think it's for. But occasionally there's a guy like this here major believes different. He's a surprisin' fellow, that there major. A lot of the tubby boys in swivel chairs are goin' to be horrified when they hear him sound off. Yes, sir, they're goin' to call for the smellin' salts *muy pronto*."

Miller continued to look uncertain and puzzled.

"Well, I'll bite," be grumbled, "what is an army for?"

"This major says it's for fightin', and I'm damned if I don't think he's right!"

That night Major Davies strolled out alone in the moonlight that bathed the cantonment. In spite of himself, his feet seemed to lead him over to the edge of the mesa, where one could look down below at the Rio Grande, winding in silver through the cottonwood trees, and over and beyond it, the plains of Mexico stretching silent in the pale cold light of the moon.

Coming back, he passed the officers' club. Some one had a guitar, and a chorus of voices shouted one of the many verses of Jimmy James' famous recruit song.

"Then they teach you this drilling business,
How to march and turn around;
They give you a gun, you put it on your shoulder—
One—two—three—and you put it on the ground!"

The next day, during a pause in the drill, he rode out again to the edge of the mesa and stared long and thoughtfully at the dry brown plains on the far side of the Rio Grande. The desolate, cactus covered bareness swept up, until it was lost in the distant blue haze of the mountains. Peering more closely, he noticed many low clouds of dust far out from Juarez. They looked strangely like the dust clouds raised by marching troops. He wondered curiously what they might portend and what might be brewing over in that unstable land.

He was astride the mare Beelzebub, whose head as usual was raised high as if she were looking at far horizons. Her golden coat was as smooth as a woman's

shoulder. She stood, immobile, except for the switching of her silky tail, an occasional stamp of her dainty hoof and the nervous twitching that made swift ripples in her satin coat.

Montgomery cantered up and drew rein.

"Things have been quiet over there a long time?" inquired Davies.

"Too long a time. They're about due an explosion soon. The longer they wait, the worse it is when they do kick off the lid."

Silent and thoughtful they both gazed below the mesa, where the plain stretched down to the Rio Grande's muddy ribbon, and across to Mexico on the other side, studying the scene long and intently through the shimmering heat.

"I've been thinking over what you said yesterday, Major," Montgomery finally spoke up. "Tell me how we can get straightened out, and I'll do anything you suggest."

Now Montgomery, in his capacity of regimental adjutant, had the colonel's ear and was closer to the commanding officer than any one else—that is, whenever the fire eating old fellow was on the job.

Davies stroked Beelzebub's neck thoughtfully.

"The colonel hates like sixty to make up these training schedules the brigade is always demanding. Now I—" a faint smile quirked his lips—"am one of the best schedule makers in captivity. I might say that my schedules give almost universal satisfaction wherever used. Of course," he added deliberately, "if my schedules were sent in by the colonel, it would be almost obligatory upon me to take charge of training laid down in them; but I'm perfectly willing to sacrifice myself upon the altar of my regiment's need."

He gazed blandly at Montgomery.

"I get you, Major," approved that lean youth, nodding. "After seeing the way you cleaned up the regiment and razzed them into winning that brigade competition, I'm strong for abetting you in further crime."

SCHEDULES of training are programs to be made out by each organization showing just exactly how it is going to spend its time and what it is going to do. They are supposed to include every minute of the working day and show every form of military activity. They are sent into higher headquarters, where usually they are solemnly filed away unread, unhonored and unsung.

The trick concealed in these things is the extraordinary mass of orders and regulations that have to be consulted in making them up. There are orders and regulations concerning every conceivable form of training for every conceivable eventuality, all seemingly designed to the end that no one shall have to do any thinking. Therefore, by the time the average officer completes the task of making up one of these schedules of training, he generally finds that making up the schedule has absorbed all the time and that there is no time left for the training.

Knowing the colonel to possess a lively and wholesome fear of these things, Davies banked on being delegated to the job. Therefore he departed for the stables, his plans laid.

It was while he was at stables that the colonel drove up in his ubiquitous buckboard, a great, red bearded, deep voiced man, whose harsh blue eyes stared out from under bushy eyebrows, like those of some ancient Viking.

"Ho, Davies!" he rumbled, while still ten yards away. "I've got a new job for you."

"Yes, Colonel?"

Davies managed to simulate the look of apprehension suitable to such an announcement in the Army.

"By the jumping Jehosaphat! Brigade headquarters is driving my gray hairs in sorrow to the grave. They're demanding schedules at all hours of the day and night. Between that and schools they've got me jumpin' sideways and snortin' at myown shadow. My sacred Aunt Maria! What's the Army comin' to?"

The Old Man pounded on his great chest with one hairy fist.

"School teachers and schedules and psychiatrists!"

The Old Man laughed suddenly, a laugh that could be heard halfway to El Paso.

"Never told you about the psychiatrists they sent down from Washington, did I? Yep, two woozy looking old fossils came blowing in here with orders to examine the regiment. They went around with rubber hammers, tappin' the ivory skulls of all the men. After two weeks of this they dragged two lunkheads up before me. 'These birds are nutty' they informed me, solemn as undertakers. 'Nutty!' says I 'Nutty? Why you are puttin' it too mild,' I says. 'Those two lunkheads are crazier than loons. And it took you two weeks to find that out?' I says. 'Why,' I says, 'I've been tryin' to get rid of that brace of squirrel food for the past two years,' I says. Psychiatrists!" the old man snorted. "Psychiatrists! My aunt's cat's whiskers!"

The men within earshot, as usual, stopped all activities to listen with keen delight to the colonel's purple passages. Their rapt attention was broken for a second, and they paused, curry combs and brushes in hands, to watch the struggles of two four line teams trying to pass each other on a narrow lane between the stable corrals.

The colonel suddenly shot bolt upright in the buckboard, every one of his red whiskers sticking straight out in indignation.

"What are you trying to do, run over that other blankety blank son of Belial?" he demanded of the nearest driver, in a voice that must assuredly have put to shame the Bull of Bashan.

The tangle straightened out, as if by magic, the colonel turned back, oblivious of the men's enjoyment of the neatness of his double abjuration, his eyes flashing and his hands twisting apart the points of his double red beard.

"There's only one thing more cussed than a blankety blank mule," he informed the world at large, "and that's a blankety blank, wooden headed, splay footed, guardhouse bum of a mule skinner. Why in the name of all that's holy, every jailbird that knocks down a guard and makes a getaway from the sheriff should end up sleepin' his life away on the driver's seat of an army escort wagon is one secret of inscrutable Providence that I've never been able to fathom!"

And the Old Man indignantly drilled a cactus plant with an accurate stream of tobacco juice, as if in disgust at the strange and unaccountable severity of a capricious fate.

"But we're gettin' away from our subject, as the bashful king said when the amorous old maid chased him into the duck pond. Being as you're young and tough and fit to stand hardship, I'm detailing you to keep brigade happy, by puttin' over a barrage of schedules that will keep every squint eyed, sour bellied, sneakin' son of Satan of a headquarters clerk busy for the next six months, figurin' out what it's all about.

"That, and runnin' officers' school, teachin' the young ideas how to shoot their faces, molding their plastic minds, squeezin' great hunks of wisdom into their empty heads and makin' their eyes shine with the intelligence fitting to their positions, if and when possible. You will start groomin' up the minds of these embryo Hannibals and Cæsars before curfew rings tonight, and I'll be there to assist, when the lowing herd comes winding o'er the lea.

"I hate to detail you to all this dirty work at the crossroads, for I think it's foolish, more foolish than Thompson's colt, who swam the river to get a drink.

"Further, you will make it your business to see that the daily trainin' and drills of the regiment come somewhere within a thousand miles of complyin' with the schedules. Your job, young fellow, is to keep a parochial, pestiferous and particularly peevish headquarters' gang from climbin' my bottle scarred old frame, and may God have mercy on your soul! Amen!"

Away went the buckboard, in a cloud of whitealkalidust,leavingDavieschuckling.

AS ORDERED, the first officers' school was held that afternoon. Brigade headquarters, in the fussy and annoying way of most headquarters, not only insisted upon the regiment's doing things, but prescribed how they should be done. In its infinite wisdom it decreed that exhaustive study should be made of the Manual Of Interior Guard Duty, a quaint little volume of regulations handed down from medieval times, when sentries paced castle walls with crossbows on their shoulders, and a clever man at arms could catapult a chunk of rock almost fifty feet.

Davies, with the respect befitting so venerable a relic, devoted almost five minutes to the subject, then smoothly swung into a discussion of the best utilization of the fire power of cavalry.

"As proved in Lord Allenby's campaign in Palestine, cavalry achieves its highest value in modern warfare when it is used as a highly mobile arm which can carry intense rifle and machine gun strength to aid threatened points in the defense, or to attack the enemy's flanks and rear, in the offense—"

There was the boom of a hearty voice outside; the door was flung open. The class of some twenty-five officers stood up. The colonel surveyed the gathering from the doorway.

"Sit down gentlemen, sit down," he ordered heartily, finding himself a chair.

"What are you teaching all these bright, intelligent young men about, Major?" he rumbled.

"I am trying to give them an idea of the value of cavalry fire power when properly used."

"Go right on with your lecture; go right on," the colonel waved expansively. "Cavalry fire power. Very interesting subject. Every officer ought to know all about cavalry fire power. The major is correct as hell. Speaking of cavalry fire power, that reminds me of the time we were chasing old Bald Eagle, and one of Bald Eagle's squaws shot Three Fingered Jack Murphy in the seat of the pants with a blazing arrow. I never knew a man to jump so quickly."

The colonel continued reflectively:

"Yes, sir, he hopped, skipped and pirouetted like a jack rabbit that had been bit by a rattlesnake! He was always kind of shy of women after that—claimed he didn't trust the sex. He finally died a crusty old bachelor," continued the colonel pensively. "Let me see, what year was that? I forget, only it was the same year that old Forty Mile Martin commanded C Troop of the Third down Fort Assiniboine way, and C Troop blame near mutinied on account of a red headed woman and a pet wild cat and a preacher. . ."

By the time the colonel had finished the bewildering and colorful tale of C Troop's adventures, the hour was long past and school was over for the day.

The next day the school listened again to a long and interesting recital of the early Indian fighting days, a recital far transcending in interest the study of the theory of cavalry in war. As a raconteur the colonel was unique, but as a school for teaching cavalry officers how to lead cavalry units in battle the daily sessions were useless. Davies gave up trying to accomplish anything in these seances.

Instead of close order drills on the parade ground, however, he had the regiment working out problems in attack and defense. The colonel watched these, while the troop movements were taking place—when outlined positions were established, when advance and rear guards were sent forth, when contact troops and squadrons were pushed forward, when positions were attacked or defended.

Everything would move up to the time of "the critique", the important end of every problem, where notes are compared and leaders criticized and the proper methods shown. Here the colonel, fingering his red beard, assumed charge again and continued his interesting reminiscences without a break.

Down on B Troop picket line Sergeant Henderson held counsel with the stable sergeant.

"That young fellow is tryin' hard to teach these here kid officers somethin' about fightin'," he confided to Sergeant

Miller, "but the Old Man don't let him get very far. Believe me, they'll take some teachin' at that. They don't know no more about fightin' than a pig knows about Friday. All they knows is 'draw saber' and 'charge', which the Old Man teaches them.

"That stuff don't go these days. Why, even the greasers has got repeatin' rifles and machine guns. Not that any greaser knows what a rear sight is for," he added judiciously, "but even a greaser can raise hell with a machine gun. And I heard down at El Paso last evening that the Butcher has raised an army of coffee colored patriots and is on the war path. He'll be sashayin' over here in the middle of some night, if we don't look out."

"I guess this here outfit can tell him where to get off at."

Sergeant Miller chewed comfortably on a timothy straw.

"Yeh?" Sergeant Henderson bent a cold eye upon him. "That's just the trouble with a lot of birds like you in this regiment."

The top sergeant strode away growling to himself.

UP ON the polo field there was a great cloud of dust that checked and halted and then zigzagged back and forth in a desultory and uncertain manner. From its murkiness proceeded shouts and much profanity and the wild crack of stick against ball or against a pony's legs. Riding despondently around the edges of it was Davies, mounted on Beelzebub. Finally, in high disgust he blew his whistle; the clamor ceased; the dust cloud began to settle, and the players drew to the sidelines and dismounted.

"I imagine you are all trying to play polo," he announced. "It might be criticized as having too much shouting and too little scoring to be really classed as polo. Every one seems to be ball crazy, and yet no one can hit the ball."

The group of officers looked glum.

"What is the matter with us, Major?" Montgomery spoke up. "We know we're rotten, but we don't know why."

"If you really know that, something is gained at any rate. I've been waiting around for a week, hoping that you'd volunteer that information, and we could get down to work."

He was picking up some pebbles as he spoke and arranging them carefully on the ground.

"Here are two teams lined up and fighting their way up the field, one defending and one attacking. This red pebble is the ball. Notice that there is only one man trying to score, and that the others are busy clearing the way for him?"

He pointed out the various positions and their duties, then went on:

"Trouble with your playing, there's no teamwork. And what's teamwork? It's helping the man nearest the ball hit the ball, by holding off opposition. In other words, some must hold so that others can hit. In polo, if Number Two has the ball, Number One in front of him should hold the enemy's defense. In battle, the first outfit that engages the enemy should hold him to permit the outfits in rear to get around to his flanks.

"If no one does any holding, there'll be no hitting. Hold and hit, hold and hit! Keep that in mind; it's the essence of all strategy and tactics. Hold, and let the other fellow hit, if you haven't the ball. If you have the ball, depend upon your teammates to hold off the opposition, and you concentrate on driving through to goal."

Davies brought Beelzebub back to the picket line himself and saw her unsaddled and rubbed down. Sergeant Henderson always supervised this job.

"She's making a fine polo mount, Sergeant," commented Davies. "I wonder how she'll stand long hikes under full pack."

"She'll make it fine, sir; she's got good stuff in her, that mare." Sergeant Henderson glanced sidewise at Davies' profile. "Does the major think there'll be some hiking soon?" he inquired casually.

Davies did not reply for a moment.

"Been noticing the dust clouds over yonder, Sergeant?" he asked.

"Yes, sir." Henderson was emphatic. "I been thinkin' about that dust. Seems to me it's been closin' in towards Juarez the last day or two."

"Well," volunteered Davies, "I'm keeping my saddle packed. And as all problems for the next days are going to be with packed saddles, the men might as well keep their saddle bags and rolls made up and ready."

He walked away, knowing full well the word would spread up and down the troop orderly rooms before half an hour.

The next day at officers' school the colonel was delayed a few minutes in putting in an appearance. Davies watched the door apprehensively and spoke swiftly.

"In this morning's problem, Captain Smithers' troop sighted the enemy and closed with him immediately. The other three troops galloped up and made a frontal attack with Smithers' troop. Will any one tell me what should have been done?"

Several spoke up, but Montgomery's voice rose above the eager replies.

"The four troops were just like the polo team—all trying to hit the ball at once. Smithers' troop should have held the enemy with rifle fire. The next troop should have remained in support. The other two troops should have driven through to the enemy flank. Hold them and hit them," Montgomery quoted with a grin.

The remainder of the officers acquiesced, nodding approval.

It was well that no words were wasted, for the colonel strode in just then.

"Sit down, gentlemen, sit down; go on with your lecture, Major. Pay attention to what the major says, gentlemen; you can learn a lot by keeping your mouths shut and your ears open, as old Michael Fogarty used to say. Mike Fogarty used to drink a quart of red liquor every day—claimed it helped his rheumatism. When he'd get good and pickled, he'd take out his glass eye and throw it at people. He threw it at an old buck Indian one day and scared the old fellow into a conniption fit. There was a wild eyed medicine man who lived near the fort—"

And so it went, until the school hour was finished and it was time for polo practise.

The polo game that day showed signs of improvement. The opposing teams fought more scientifically. There were many shouts of "Hold him!" and "Ride your man!", shouts which were heeded, judging by the greater score of goals.

BEFORE turning in that night, Sergeant Henderson strolled out to the edge of the mesa and studied the Mexican plain, white and sullen in the moonlight before him. He could see the lights of Juarez, and farther out, stretched along the plain, he could see pinpricks of reddish glow, scattered here and there over the ground, in some places strung out in long lines, in others bunched closely together.

"Camp-fires!" he reflected. "Must be a couple of thousand o' them greasers out there. Now I wonder when they're goin' to start gettin' busy?" He went thoughtfully to bed.

The next day Davies brought Beelzebub into the picket line, her eyes wild and her flanks heaving. Sergeant Henderson looked at her inquiringly.

"She went sort of loco coming in on the lower road. Tried to jump all over some poor devil driving a burro team," volunteered Davies, puzzlement in his voice.

"Was it a Mexican?"

"Yes, a peon."

Sergeant Henderson nodded quietly.

"She don't like Mexicans." He took the mare's reins and patted her. "They abused her pretty bad over there, and she ain't forgotten it. She come in here lookin' like they'd clawed her up with pitchforks."

Davies walked away, thinking of the sudden ferocity shown by the mare toward the frightened peon who had crawled screaming under his cart. He wondered about the vindictiveness of the golden sorrel mare. But there were other things to think of than the vagaries of Beelzebub.

An air of sullen expectancy had begun to settle over the border. From far down in Chihuahua came rumors of fighting. The Butcher was on the warpath, and tales of bloodshed had begun to trickle through. Across the bridge from Juarez came a steadily mounting stream of bewildered and profane Americans, driven out of the south.

Major Davies sweated the regiment through a course of battle problems. The heat was grueling, and the white dust clung to horse and man. In the pauses of their labor they could see the immense plains of Mexico, stretching silent and ominous to the southward and the mountains.

Tales of the Butcher filled the air. He was driving all before him. The stream of refugees grew greater day by day. Across the river the garrison of Juarez busied itself erecting defenses. Dark lines of trenches appeared on the surface of the mesa outside of the Mexican town. Far out on the plain the dust clouds grew greater, and one could see the occasional flash of sun on bayonet or rifle.

Out on the northern edge of the fort the the hills and hollows were filled with dusty troops and squadrons. Davies put them through problems of advance and retreat, of rear guard and advance guard, of mounted attack and dismounted attack, especially the latter.

Waves of alkali covered men swept through the sage brush and sand, flung themselves prone on the hot earth, sighted and fired and rose to advance again. Supports and reserves were coming in; officers were practiced at estimating ranges in the deceptive, clear, high air.

Colonel Jameson rode out one day and watched the activity, twisting his red beard.

"That new major is full of science," he commented to Montgomery, staring out over the scene. "I've seen 'em come and I've seen 'em go, but I never did believe much in all this foolishness of runnin' cavalrymen around on foot. Get at the head of your men and ride at the enemy—that's the way I like!"

He rode away, grumbling.

"Whew!" Sergeant Miller tied his horse on the picket line. "That new major has sure got my tongue hangin' out. I've run and walked a hundred miles, if I've stepped a yard today. What's his idea of makin' doughboys out o' this here good old cavalry outfit?"

"Don't you worry about that baby," Sergeant Henderson snorted. "He's sure cut his eye teeth. All he thinks about is fightin'. I wish there were more like him in this man's Army," he muttered to himself.

The mare Beelzebub, she who had originally been considered a hoodoo, took to polo as a duck to water. She flew down the field, skimming like a bird over the ground, holding true to the ball. She was responsive to the merest touch of rein or heel, and threw herself heart and soul into the game.

The three polo teams which Davies had organized began to show something like form. No longer was there the purposeless wild riding and excited following of the ball to the exclusion of teamwork.

"It begins to look like polo," announced Davies at the close of a hard fought struggle.

The dusty players grinned and gulped. They were commencing to have an inkling of what it was all about at last. Polo might look like a waste of time to some people. But Davies knew that it trained officers to think accurately and swiftly at the gallop, a very essential thing in cavalry fights.

HOW LONG Davies slept that night he did not know. He was awakened by a distant clamor. At first thought it sounded like the noise made by a multitude of switching engines in a busy terminal yard. As his brain cleared from sleep, the sounds assumed coherence. Suddenly he was wide awake and out in the center of the floor, slipping rapidly into his clothes. Some one was pounding at his door.

"There's hell popping in Juarez, Major," Montgomery's voice shouted.

"We're ordered out to protect El Paso immediately."

The strident blare of a trumpet broke on his ears, as he came out of his quarters. It was the high, keen, shrill note of call to arms, a note which was picked up and repeated throughout the camp. Men were tumbling out of their tents. The troop streets were filled with hurrying figures. Thank the Lord the saddles were packed and the regimental trains loaded and ready!

As he buckled on his pistol belt and slung his field glasses over his shoulder, he could plainly hear the noise from Juarez. It was compounded of the dull booming of field pieces, rising above a steadily mounting roar of rifles and machine guns.

It delighted him to see how swiftly and how silently the men were preparing, for the regiment was saddling up and moving into place with scarcely a word spoken.

Suddenly a booming voice broke on his ears. Turning, he saw the burly figure of the colonel waving his hands and shouting orders as fast as he could get the words out. The men within sound of his voice went on with their work. Montgomery finally went up to him and, waiting for a chance to speak, broke in—

"Sir, the regiment is ready to move out."

The colonel stared at him.

"Wha-at!" he gasped. "Saddles packed and with full field equipment?"

"Yes, sir, everything ready," responded Montgomery.

The colonel moved toward his horse, still unable to grasp the fact that the regiment was so swiftly prepared. Mounting, he moved to the head of the waiting column, still marveling.

"Montgomery!" he roared suddenly. "You'll take command of the first squadron. Major Davies, your place will be with me!"

Davies moved Beelzebub up on the colonel's left, none too pleased, but determined to make the best of it. If only he could command one of the squadrons, instead of trailing along uselessly with the colonel!

It was black as the bottom of a pit. Davies could barely see the colonel next him in the darkness. The clamor from Juarez was growing louder, with field pieces booming heavily, and the racket of rifles and machine guns mounting into steady, uninterrupted roar.

He could feel the might of the regiment, tense and alive in the darkness behind him. Suddenly at his side a bull throated roar split the air.

"Forward! Y-e-e-o-ow!" bellowed the colonel, in the immemorial, high throated yell of the cavalry command, a yell pitched in such a timbre as to make the thousand horses of a far flung regiment hear every syllable.

The immense mass behind him came to life; it stirred like a vast river in the darkness. The beat of thousands of hoofs fell simultaneously on the roadway. The regiment was in motion.

Again came the colonel's vibrant yell: "Trot! Y-e-e-o-ow!"

The trampling of the thousands of iron-shod hoofs deepened to a roar.

They were free of the fort and going down the hill. The regiment poured down the roadway like a mighty torrent. The trot surged into a gallop. Davies felt a wild exhilaration fill his heart, as the tireless Beelzebub swung into a smooth gallop beneath him and seemed to float through the blackness of the night, in tune with the rhythm of the galloping host behind.

He had a sense of riding on air, of being carried forward resistlessly in the womb of night, carried forward toward the glare that rose over Juarez and the steadily augmenting clamor of the battle.

In the darkness that precedes the dawn they came at last to the scattering lights of El Paso. They swept into the silent streets and woke them suddenly with the thunder of galloping hoofs. Davies caught a glimpse of white faces watching fearfully from windows. He swerved around corners. In the narrow streets the roar of the advance seemed deepened tenfold. All the sounds of cavalry at the gallop were blended into one overwhelming

note, the jingle of bit and spur, the creak of leather, the whipping of the wind in silken guidons and standards, the tattoo of hoofs. All blended into a steady chorus, powerful and triumphant.

In front of them the noise of battle had intensified to an overpowering clamor. It sounded as if all the fiends of hell were let loose, as they reached the river. Here they halted suddenly in the narrow street, the horses heaving and the men breathing hard. They could hear shouts and cheers and screams from above the tumult of firing in Juarez across the river.

Dawn was coming rapidly. A white mist, resting on the surface of the Rio Grande, barred sight of what was going on so near at hand.

Behind Davies a river of horses filled the narrow street from curb to curb. Whispers came down the columns.

"The bandits have captured Juarez. The Butcher is leading them!"

The occasional high scornful notes of a bullet keened overhead, ending in a loud *ping*, as it buried itself in adobe wall or telegraph pole.

IN JUAREZ the clamor began to lessen. Daylight came at last. The mist on the river began to lift. Through the dimness they saw bands of ragged men on the other side, all wearing straw sombreros, all heavily armed and carrying many bandoliers of ammunition slung across their shoulders.

Colonel Jameson, sitting silent beside Davies, watched them from under his heavy red eyebrows.

The firing lessened to single shots and occasional volleys. Following a cessation of all firing, came the reiterated sound of crashing volleys from different sections of the town.

"The executions!" growled Colonel Jameson, twisting his red beard.

The volleys crashed on interminably. Davies thought they would never end.

Taking out his field glasses, Davies adjusted them and trained them on Juarez across the river. An angle of a dusty courtyard came into his range of vision. A line of unarmed men was stretched across it. Each man was distant from his fellows on the right and left by two or three yards. They seemed to be patiently waiting for something.

The nearest man engaged Davies attention. He was a slim, dark eyed, dark haired man of middle age. He was partially clothed, as if recently waked from slumber. A pair of gold rimmed *pince-nez* were perched on his nose. He stood stoically gazing straight ahead. Davies felt a queer thrill of horror go through him. There was something strange about the stoicism of these patiently waiting men, something resigned and fatalistic, about their pose.

Suddenly another man stepped into the field of vision from behind an obtruding wall. A familiar note about this newcomer made Davies sit up straighter. He was tall and broad shouldered; he was dressed in a black suit trimmed with silver buttons. Upon his head he wore a great sombrero, heavily encrusted with silver. Without being able to see his face, Davies realized instantly that it was the Butcher himself. What was he doing? Davies stared more intently through the glasses. The Butcher carried something in his hand, something that gleamed in the first rays of the early morning sun.

The man with the gold rimmed *pince-nez* calmly awaited the approach of the Butcher. He bowed his head, as the tall bandit stepped up to him. Davies, horrified, saw the Butcher raise the object in his hand to the ear of the waiting man in front of him, saw the man suddenly quiver and jerk, then slump awkwardly to the ground, his gold rimmed eye glasses spinning away covered with blood. The man lay sprawled on the ground, his head resting in a slowly extending pool of something dark that glinted sardonically when the sun's rays touched it.

The next man in the line tossed away a cigaret carelessly, as the Butcher approached him. He was quickly dispatched, flinging his arms up wildly as he fell, as if clutching for support. The next and the next met a like fate. Then the Butcher

stopped, reloading his pistol slowly and methodically. One or two in the waiting line swayed slightly, but recovered, and continued to smoke their inevitable cigarets.

Davies lowered his glasses, boiling with a great and unholy rage at this man they called the Butcher. Mixed with it was a new feeling of respect for Mexicans in general. Men who could die as stoically and bravely as that were men worthy of honor.

Again he raised his glasses. There was no one in the courtyard now. There was naught but a line of still figures, sprawled out in ungainly attitudes, denied in death the dignity that was theirs in life.

The silence was suddenly broken by the quick, nervous chattering of a machine gun far down on the right. It was followed by shouts and a few scattering shots. Davies could feel a quiver go through the regiment, waiting behind him. Again there was silence.

There was a clatter of hoofs. A staff officer galloped up and saluted Colonel Jameson.

"The general's compliments and you are to take the 'Steenth over to Juarez and move against the enemy's right flank, driving them back out of rifle range of El Paso. The other cavalry regiment will attack on the enemy's left flank. The general orders that you will accomplish this with as little bloodshed as possible, it being his desire merely to protect El Paso. His headquarters will be at the El Paso end of the International bridge."

The old colonel nodded his head eagerly. He raised his hand to the waiting regiment. Men swarmed into the saddles.

"Forward! Ye-e-e-o-ow!" rang out like a clarion from the old fellow.

"Shall I send forward an advance guard?" questioned Davies.

"H-m, yes, surely," said the colonel.

Davies reined Beelzebub back, waiting until Montgomery rode up at the head of the first squadron. Briefly he made the situation clear. Very swiftly a troop detached itself from the first squadron and galloped by the colonel, across the bridge, where it quickly resolved itself into point and flankers, advance party and support, and flung through the streets, seeking the left edge of the town.

The red bearded old chap turned his face to Davies, as the latter caught up with him again. The colonel's eyes were blazing with excitement. Above the rattle of hoofs on the bridge Davies heard him shout gleefully:

"Looks like a fight! 'No bloodshed, says the general! My aunt's cat's whiskers, how you goin' to fight without bloodshed?"

A messenger came galloping back from the advance guard.

"Captain Smithers' compliments, and the enemy are retreating toward the southeast of town. There are about two thousand of them!" he shouted.

"Hurrah!" shouted the colonel. "Trot! Ye-e-e-o-ow!" Then, looking back at the suddenly quickened regiment, he yelled "Ga-a-l-l-o-p! Ye-e-e-e-o-o-o-ow!" He set spurs to his horse.

Davies frowned, as Beelzebub took up the increased gait. The colonel was crowding his advance guard too closely. This was dangerous, as the same machine gun or rifle fire could wreak havoc with both advance guard and main body if they were bunched up together. But there was nothing to do but gallop on and hope for the best.

THEY were now in Juarez, and the narrow dusty streets were deserted, the low adobe houses were all heavily barred and shuttered. The colonel swung sharply to the left and led the regiment out toward the edge of the town. As Davies, by the colonel's side, cleared the last few houses, he saw the advance guard not more than three hundred yards ahead of them. Some four hundred yards in advance of the point was the Mexican force, a great black cloud of men and horses, slowly withdrawing in plain view.

Surely the colonel would slow down now, keeping his regiment under cover, while he made his dispositions. Davies frowned, as the Old Man continued gal-

loping out into the open, the leading units of the regiment following.

"On right into line!" shouted the colonel suddenly.

The leading troop obediently executed column right and slowed down, while its men, in sets of fours, galloped up and formed line, one after the other, extending out to the left. The rear troops came galloping up on the left, so that a line whose base was on the edge of the town, rapidly formed itself, extending out into the open plain.

The colonel moved out to the center of the regiment and, while the last squadron was forming line on the left, gave the commands:

"Draw saber! Charge!"

As the great rank of men and horses started into the gallop, and as the sabers flashed out like a tossing wave of silver and men bent low on their horses' necks, Davies, peering ahead, saw the advance guard halted and Smithers waving back madly to the oncoming regiment, giving the signal to halt. He tried to draw the colonel's attention to it, but the Old Man would not heed.

The colonel galloped at the Mexican force, without a single backward glance. The Old Man, instead of keeping on a straight line to the front, began to swing to the right. As the regiment followed him, the whole mass of men and horses shifted obediently to the right. This crowded Montgomery's squadron back into the Juarez streets. Davies saw him squeezed back, until finally it was impossible for him to move forward in line. Montgomery at last did the only thing possible—signaled to his men breaking the line into columns that could move more easily among the houses and trees and streets into which he had been forced.

Davies, his face grim, rode at the colonel's left. Beelzebub was running smoothly with great easy strides. The remaining two squadrons of the regiment were pounding along behind. The advance guard moved off toward the flank, to uncover the front of the regimental line. They were still signaling to halt. Davies, suspicious, began to pull Beelzebub in. It was well that he had her under control, for suddenly they topped a small rise and thundered down straight toward a black expanse of mud, a marsh that lay directly on their front and extended between them and the Mexican force.

Davies drew Beelzebub in. She, trained at polo, sat back on her haunches and came to a sudden halt. The colonel's horse plunged directly into the ooze and began to plunge. The regiment thundered past Davies and followed, sweeping into the marsh like an avalanche. The onward progress was effectually checked. The straight ranks of the squadrons broke into plunging groups of mired horses, most of them belly deep in the treacherous ooze.

Gazing anxiously at the Mexican force, Davies saw them halt and look back. As the plight of the Americans showed itself plainly, they began to turn. Looking over to the right, Davies saw Montgomery's squadron showing itself intermittently through the screen of houses and trees. It had halted uncertainly, as the regiment stopped in the mire.

The marsh seemed to extend across the entire front of the American force. Davies wondered whether it crossed the front of Montgomery's squadron, as well. Why, oh, why had not the colonel reconnoitered before charging? The major was torn between two demands—one to gallop to Montgomery's outfit and lead them around the flank of the Mexican force, the other to remain and bring order out of these two broken squadrons. He decided swiftly to depend upon Montgomery, and he dismounted from Beelzebub, throwing his reins on the ground.

Some few men were struggling out of the mire. These he rallied to him, and had them link their horses and draw their rifles. It was a forlorn hope, but if he could get enough riflemen there, he might be able to cover the regiment's confusion by well directed fire into the Mexican forces. Suddenly he saw Beelzebub, her head held high, so that she would not get her feet tangled in the reins, galloping

along the edge of the marsh toward Montgomery's squadron. There was no time to worry about that.

The Mexicans were beginning to dismount. A group of them were assembling what he took to be a machine gun. The time was getting short. At any moment a devastating burst of fire might strike into the mass of men and horses slowly extricating themselves from the ooze. He now had collected some twenty-five or thirty men and he led them, dismounted, to the small rise behind the regiment.

Suddenly he saw a commotion among the Mexicans. He saw Beelzebub gallop in among them and saw men running before her. She was striking and kicking and biting like a fiend possessed. Marveling at the strangeness of this sight, he reasoned quickly that there was a clear way around the swamp to the Mexican flank. If Montgomery would only do the right thing!

Any moment might bring a hail of bullets into the helpless American force. He rallied more men feverishly. His group was slowly growing larger but it was still too small to make much of an impression against the Mexicans.

THE ENTIRE Mexican force had now turned back. Hundreds of men were dismounting and advancing with rifles. The group around the machine gun was dragging it forward. Any second might start the slaughter.

Beelzebub had disappeared among the mass of Mexicans and their horses.

Suddenly Davies' heart gave a great leap. Gazing anxiously along the edge of trees and houses on the Mexican flank, he saw a long line of men in khaki advancing rapidly. It was Montgomery's squadron, dismounted and ready to pour a murderous fire into the flank of the Mexican force.

He nearly tottered over with the relief from the strain. The situation was saved. Montgomery had done the right thing!

The Mexicans saw the American force on their flank. They turned tail and began to retreat. In a few seconds all of them were fleeing. The danger was past. Davies saw Montgomery mount up his squadron, saw them follow the Mexicans. The retreat became a rout.

The regiment was slowly reformed. The colonel, cursing like a whole platoon of mule skinners, was fished out of the marsh, filling the air with brimstone. Shortly thereafter word came that the bandits were cleared out of Juarez, and orders came for the regiment to return.

Montgomery brought his squadron back, riding gaily at their head. An orderly led Beelzebub, who was scratched and torn and bloody, but carried herself proudly as usual.

"She blamed near killed that Butcher fellow," Montgomery shouted, as he approached. "Believe me, I don't want that mare to take a dislike to me."

As he rode up and dismounted, Davies patted him on the shoulder.

"Damn well done! I should say that you were the conquering hero of the day."

"Most of the credit is due Beelzebub," grinned Montgomery. "She galloped across my front, while I was trying to make up my mind. She found a way across the marsh. I followed her, and that was that."

"Believe me, I spent a bad few minutes waiting for that to be that," confessed Davies.

"Depend on your teammate," quoted Montgomery. "Hold and hit. I saw you were holding, and it was up to me to hit."

"What the hell do you mean?"

A deep voiced roar broke on their ears. They turned, startled, to find the colonel bearing down on them, his breeches smeared with black mud from the marsh, his red beard sticking out in indignation.

"What do you mean, Montgomery, chasin' away those greasers before I could get a crack at them?"

The old colonel's voice rumbled deep in his chest. The air was full of sulphur. The lean young adjutant bowed his head to the storm, but said nothing. There was nothing to say.

The Camp-Fire

A free-to-all Meeting-Place *for Readers, Writers and Adventurers*

Believe It Or Not!

COMRADE M. A. RUSSELL of Vidalia, Georgia, sent in a clipping from the Atlanta *Journal*, which tells what is by all odds one of the best snake stories of the year.

Juliette, Georgia.

A large rattlesnake was exploded by the air pressure fromthe tire of a Ford car in the swamps of a creek near here Tuesday afternoon.

It is reported that while the construction gang of a power company were putting in posts for a line through the swamps the rattlesnake struck the tire of the car which was being used by one of the workmen. The air pressure was transmitted through the hollow fangs of the reptile and blew up and exploded it.

It seems unfortunate that the fate of the Ford is not mentioned. Perhaps a tire service station man repaired the inner tube. But when he came to replace the patched tube he found it did not fit. The casing had swelled up to full balloon size.

James W. Bennett

WELL KNOWN in other publications, and for his books, Mr. Bennett arises with a word of self-introduction to comrades of the Camp-Fire. Mr. Bennett's first story, "Heavenly Flowers," appears in this issue of *Adventure*.

I've always been possessed, it seems, of curiously itching feet. In 1911 I spent a summer in Tahiti. The island was primitive; very much more so than it is now, I believe. I hobnobbed with a fat and smiling Island potentate and a lanky, melancholy American consul. Since then—well, two circumnavigations of the globe. Nearly a year as an American vice consul in Shanghai, China, and in Sydney, Australia. A year lecturing in a Chinese University in Shanghai. There I taught short story writing to a group of eager young Chinese. I didn't need to teach them much, for they were gifted tale-spinners; a racial heritage. The stories of one of my students appeared (in collaboration) in my book, "Plum Blossoms and Blue Incense," published in Shanghai by the largest publishing house in the world, namely the Chinese firm of The Commercial Press, Ltd. On my last trip to China, I landed in the midst of three wars, went through an overnight capture of a city (Peking), and, in Hongkong, I lived through a general strike that was very much akin to war. At that same time, I took a trip down to Canton, stayed there five days and got out—just two hours before the Kuomingtang (the Nationalists) bombarded the city. There were some eight thousand of us aboard the flat-bottomed river steamer; fortunately most of the passengers were traveling third class—and they seem supremely accustomed to semi-suffocation. I have published two novels (Duffield and Company, Publishers, N. Y.), "The Manchu Cloud," which deals with Peking and "The Yellow Corsair," an adventure story of the pirate colony of South China.—JAMES W. BENNETT.

Along The Trail

II

WHEN the spur line first cut across Bright Angel Playa, eliminating the long, thirsty cattle trail from the fertile ranges of Miramar and Boyce to rail head at Hartnett, Crab Lenihan hung up his stock saddle and took to railroading. And the waddies of the CT spread breathed some easier.

Not that Nature had aimed to make Crab a bad guy. Back there in 1902, he was sorrel-topped, puggy of nose, and with a wide mouth and eyes meant for smiling.

The trouble had begun a couple or three

years back, in a scrap which started in a Tres Palmas cantina—and ended when Lon Reardon swiped the barrel of his hog-leg across young Lenihan's front teeth, knocking him for a loop.

Of course the teeth broke; but worse was to come. Nowadays the docs probably would wag their noodles wisely, and say, "Uh-huh, four out of five!" or something like. Anyway, three months later when Crab barged into the Squeejaw Saloon at Hartnett, his face was swelled up till it looked a unanimous case of mumps. That didn't bother his shooting much, though, and he was better than the average run of cowpokes who hadn't ever thrown down on a man.

It was pretty close to an even break, as such things go; but Lon missed by about a yard, and Crab's first shot went home plumb center. That's all there was to it. The boys buried Lon; and Crab celebrated by getting pie-eyed and having the barber yank all his teeth.

That operation cured up his mouth, but it didn't help his temper any to speak of. During the next four-five months, till he got his new plates from Denver, Crab gummed his disposition, as well as his food.

By and by he got so bad Nig Childress tried to fire him; but just one look at Crab's big, shiny wolf tusks bared in a snarl and Nig—who never carried a gun—hired him right back again in a hurry.

So it was the CT outfit didn't mourn any to speak of, when Crab got him a job as shack on the L. H. & M.

What kind of a railroader he was, during the next five-six years, I don't know. Probably he had the cattle freight cons buffaloed; or maybe, at that, he rated his sixty a month. They weren't awfully fussy back on those desert branches, those days.

I rode with him on a string of empties, going into Caton. He was thin, a little bent, and sort of hitch-and-stepped, hitch-and-stepped from some past injury to his left knee. I noted that he wore a big, black wooden handled gun, thrust through the waistband of his trousers.

On a two percent down grade—and a terrible roadbed — the empty freight reached a terrific speed of perhaps twenty-five miles an hour.

Not realizing that Crab had learned all his railroading on this forty-seven mile spur, I quoted irreverently from Gene Field's "*Schnellest Zug*"—

"Thirteen miles an hour's
The fastest rate they ever go;
While on the engine's piston rods
Do moss and lichens grow."

And then fatuously went on to yarn about some real speeds achieved on railways—the famous ninety-mile-an-hour race on the last lap to Omaha, for the U. S. mail carrying contract; the Philadelphia-Atlantic City non-stop run; the new Chicago-New York fliers.

Oh, I laid it on thick enough, and none too accurately, perhaps; but imagine how my jaw dropped when that little, limping sorrel-top leapt up in front of me, flourishing his black cannon, and calling me more species of a liar than Ananias and Munchausen ever imagined!

On my person just then, the deadliest weapon was a single barreled cigarette. So under protest I took the worst calling I ever received.

Later, still half angry, half amused, I remembered a detail of one of my first jobs, which had been that of factotum in the superintendent of motive power and machinery's office of the C. & N. W. Railway, at Chicago.

The detail had been the handling of locomotive speed recorders—those little graph lined rolls which show exactly the speeds attained by passenger engines along every mile of their trips.

After some correspondence and finagling, I got the evidence—a recorder which showed that twice on this particular trip, an engine drawing the Los Angeles limited had exceeded seventy miles an hour.

I sent this to Crab, with an explanatory letter.

A week later I received his reply—a postcard.

Dear Sir,
It's a dam lie just the same.
B. LENIHAN

—TOI-YABE TOLMAN

THE MARINES' HYMN

From the halls of Montezuma
To the shores of Tripoli
We fight our country's battles
On the land as on thesea.
First to fight for right and freedom
And to keep our honor clean,
We are proud to claim the title
Of the United States Marine.

Our flag's unfurled to every breeze
From dawn to setting sun;
We have fought in every clime or place
Where we could take a gun;
In the snow offar off northern lands
And in sunny tropic scenes
You will find us always on the job—
The United States Marines.

Here's health to you, and to our corps,
Which we are proud to serve;
In many a strife we have fought for life
Andneverlostour nerve;
If the Army and the Navy
Ever look on heaven's scenes
They will find the streets are guarded by
The United States Marines.

—ANON.

E. S. Dellinger

"BURNING BRAKES," his first story in *Adventure*, appears in this issue; and Mr. Dellinger arises to tell new comrades of the lure of a railroad career.

Born in the heart of the Missouri Ozarks in 1886, I was reared on a hill "forty". Here I began chopping and hauling cordwood as soon as I was big enough to swing an ax and drive a team. At the age of eighteen, having secured a certificate by examination, I began teaching in the rural schools.

In 1907, I followed my older brother into the train service as brakeman on the Missouri Pacific at Osawatomie, Kansas. After working here for a time, I returned to the Ozarks again to take up farming, chopping and teaching.

By 1918, I had sold my "forty" and became principal of schools at Sparta, Missouri. However, the inward urge to go back to railroading was still with me. In the summer of that year, the urgent need of men of some experience for the train service, due to the inroads made among the employes by the selective service draft, gave me excuse which I could offer to myself and my family for going back to work on the railroad. I worked on the Eastern Division out of Springfield, Missouri, from early in 1918 to late in 1919. Again in 1920, I worked for the Frisco out of Kansas City.

From the time I first went railroading, I began listening to the tales of the old-timers with the idea of some time using some of the material in fiction. I have felt for years that the American reading public knows less about the life, work and character of railroad men than of any other group of workers in the nation; yet, this is perhaps the most vital of all our industries, and the life and work the most fascinating one could possibly find. Every man has a story, if he only chooses to tell it.

—E. S. DELLINGER.

End Over End

COULD this knife thrower's accuracy and control of the air spin have been due to an uncanny, instinctive judgment of distance and direction? The following account, sent in by a member of the American Society of Civil Engineers, does not try to analyze the phenomenon, but is interesting nevertheless.

In a recent number there was some interesting stuff about knife throwing. When I read a story—a good breezy sea story for example, in which one sailor throws his sheath knife at some one, always hits him in the throat and thereby assists in the ultimate triumph of vice or virtue as the case may be—my sense of credulity is always stilled and comforted a little by the recollection of a chap I once hunted with along the eastern edge of the Everglades. Outside of stage performers this is the one man I have seen—or actually heard of at first hand—who *could* throw a knife. He was a native who had spent his youth with the Seminoles, knew nothing and cared less for the printed word, but read his pine woods and swamps just as a matter of course, and perhaps more comprehendingly as to practical results than we read the daily paper.

Along with his shirt and overalls and galluses he wore a belt which bore a sheath on the right side, and a common hunting knife with a blade about six inches long. One morning he and his helper, who drove the wagon which moved our camp stuff, disagreed; and when the argument started the helper had a shotgun in his hands which he laid down promptly when our guide laid his hand on the hilt of his hunting knife. The two men were standing perhaps twelve or fifteen feet apart, facing each other.

Later I twitted the wagon driver a little for laying down his gun and was emphatically told that if I had ever seen the other chap throw his knife I would know more about it. After I had seen him throw it I was convinced of the wisdom and discretion of the wagon driver.

Of course the guide had no more idea how he threw his knife than a colored brother whose guitar stuff I once tried to get, in East Tennessee, knew how he picked the blues out of his box. He "just throwed it." My knife expert grabbed it, literally, by the handle, with the thumb and first finger of his right hand, drew it back over his shoulder and let fly, like a kid throwing stones, or perhaps more like the short-arm throw of the ball player. The knife turned end for end in the air of course, but it *almost always* arrived point first—and this irrespective of distance and angle. He would run past a tree at any distance up to twenty or twenty-five feet and stick the knife in the tree as he ran; and if he had any conscious thought of distance or angle it was not apparent. He "just throwed it."

Please count me among those who are inexpressibly glad that you have gone to the old type of cover.
—SHIRLEY C. HULSE, Bedford, Pa.

Exhibit No. 1

IT IS too early to know whether or not *Adventure* fans care for the idea of a trophy room—a genial hearthside where authors and readers might visit when passing through New York. But if the interest is genuine, I am promised splendid quarters in this building.

Of course the trophies—each preferably with its story of a man's adventure in some far place—would have to come first.

As a starter, however, Clem Yore of Estes Park, Colorado, has sent in a magnificent carved walrus-tusk, secured on a trip to the sub-Artic. The tusk is made into a cribbage board, with carved and inked pictures of the walrus hunt, over its entire length. It was made, forty-seven years ago, by an Eskimo.

Minnesota Style

COMRADE HARKNESS is not attempting particularly to describe his most thrilling gastronomic adventure—but he makes out a pretty good case just the same. This advertisement (if any) is herewith presented gratis, to the restaurant in question.

Pogey Ramsey, Doc Annett, Bluejay James and I have been taking our vacations together ever since a "Pullman" ran on two wheels 'stead of sixteen. Once we hoboed to Pocatello—in order to have enough jack for a real trip—and then went horseback up through Jackson's Hole and the Park. Six glorious weeks!

The cycling bug bit us then, and we pedaled to Indianapolis; and next year we met 'em in "St. Louis Louie" for the Fair.

It was just after that the Doc bought his first car. It was a one-lung Packard, second hand—and it sounded something like "Fire at will!" with the 155 mm. rifles; not so fast, but fully as desperate.

In it, at four A.M. one July morn, we cruised forth bravely, aiming in the general direction of Ludington, Michigan. But that start plumb fizzled. In six hours we only got from Oak Park Avenue to Garfield Park—five miles.

As the years went along all of us—being bachelors—rated cars; and so we took turn about. Our hair is some thinner, and our poker—particularly Doc's—fiercer. But the old kick still remains in the long trail off the tourist routes.

I remember one day we were stuck about forty miles out of Duluth—our vac tank in a sling—when Bluejay composed our road song. (Lemme say, parenthetically, that for three years straight nothing ever passed us on the road. And then we challenged Ralph de Palma, who was tuning up for the Elgin road races . . .)

The song goes to the air of a well known ribald ballad:

Once there was a band o' bums
An' a rattlin' busted bus;
Whenever the engine started,
It raised a helluva fuss.
It wouldn't run on gasoline
Till it was primed 'th booze—
Then it made a mile in nothin'-at-all,
Before it lay down to snooze.

Chorus

Oh, tickle me carburetor
And jam down the throttle gas,
'Cause up there on the ribbon o' road
I see a car to pass!
Oh, maybe he's a Packard—
Or maybe he's a Ford—
But he'll eat my dust, the sonofagun,
While I've this band aboard!

And incidentally, let me mention the chow we had that night—a meal I'll never forget. We got in late at Duluth, and according to custom, looked immediately for a fat man. (On the average, a fat man will always know the best place in town to eat.)

We got hold of a big fellow—I think he was a lumberjack—and he sent us to a place called Delmonico's, right up in town.

Each of us ordered a sirloin, two vegetables, French fried potatoes, pie and coffee—for we thought ourselves starved. I kind of thought the waiter looked at us funny, but didn't pay any attention. Huh! I didn't know the half of it.

The orders came—and how! It seems that Duluth must have a bracing climate, or something. Each of those meat portions was an entire sirloin steak, *cut about one inch thick!* Enough for all four of us in one order, of course.

But listen to what followed, brethren!

You know these half-gallon earthenware soup dishes Pittsburgh Joe used to ladle full for three cents—back in the dear dead days when the "largest in the city" cost a nickel?

Well, for my two vegetables—peas and buttered beets—and for my French fried, I got *three of these bowls, heaping full!*

I'll bet that was where Paul Bunyan went when he was real famished.—C. L. (DOOTS) HARKNESS, Oak Park, Ill.

Unusual Accuracy

COMRADE LIPLINSKY writes concerning the really marvellous proficiency he has attained in the throwing of knives. And a one pound knife is a formidable weapon, indeed!

Have been down here on the border off and on for the last forty years, learned knife throwing from a Mexican at an early age, am still at it. I practise from one half to one hour daily. I use a heavy special knife which I made myself of one pound weight twelve inch spear blade. Contrary to Mr. Johnson, I do not grasp knife around the point, but between thumb and forefinger at end of handle. At twenty feet distance from target, I can hit the pip of the ace of spades or hearts, three times out of five; can at any time land within the space of a playing card. I use an over and throw putting hips and shoulders into the swing; have thrown knife one pound weight through two inches of hard pine, from two to three inches of blade protruding at opposite side.—HARRY A. LIPLINSKY, El Paso, Texas.

BEGINNING with the next issue, ADVENTURE will discontinue its Lost Trails Department. The following close out the material on hand:

DUNKEL, FRANK—About 50 years old, a former New York State resident. Your sister and niece want to hear from you. Won't you let us make you happy. Financial aid will be gladly given. Your whereabouts will be kept secret.—Write to A. B. C, care *Adventure*.

BLOOMENTHAL, JAMES—Of Harrisburg, Pa., and last heard of in New Orleans, La. Please communicate with H. E. BARTH, Box 58, Schofield P. O. Hawaii.

IRONS, MRS. WILLIA—Last heard of in Great Falls, Mont., year 1923. Supposed to be in Western Oregon. If you see this please write to your old friend or anyone who can give me her address.—MRS. WILLIAM ROWEN, Box 84, Ione, Wash.

CASEY, JAMES B.—Dad died, left property, awaiting your presence to be settled. Write WILFRED CASEY, 5051 Brooklyn Avenue, Detroit, Michigan.

RUBEN, SHAFFER (Shocky)—Would like to hear from him. Last heard of aboard S. S. *Cantigny* in 1920. Write his old friend L. F. KENNEDY, 1909 Ave. N½, Galveston, Tex.

HENNESSEY, EDWARD—About 50 years old. Left Ballyann, Co. Wexford, about 1898, with Jennie Lee of Rosegarland. Poor or rich write your sister.—ANNE HENNESSEY FRAIN, 177 Pavonia Avenue, Jersey City, N. J.

DALEY, JOHN—Born in Manchester, New Hamp. Have not seen him for seventeen years. Last heard from, he was married in the west. Brother—DENIS DALEY, 145 Granite St., Manchester, New Hampshire.

STRAIN or FAIRLEY, MRS. JANE—Last heard of about 25 years ago, staying in St. Main Street, Montreal. Brother David inquires.—DAVID FAIRLEY, 5-12 Street, Cardenden, Fife, Scotland.

HULL, HARRY H.—Last heard of at small town in B. C. Canada. About 43 years old. Light brown hair, blue eyes, 5 ft. 8 in., weight 170 to 180 lbs. Rather quiet, well read. Father—Reward for information.—A. N. HULL, 1331 Maple Ave., Santa Ana, Calif.

C. V. G.—Daddy darling. Please get in touch with me at the old Boulevard address. Good news and you must know it. We are lonesome for you. Come home if possible.—JANE.

FARSON—Would like to hear from relatives or descendants who have information or bear this name. Family originated from Pittsburg, Pa., were known to have resided there in 1870. Pension claim depends in locating relatives.—MRS. L. COLLINS, 1626 No. Harvard Blvd., Hollywood, Calif.

L. J. RUSSELL—Doc—There is no unity, nor is life complete without you. Please communicate.—Y. F. PETS

BALLADE OF BOOT-HILL

In silent tombs the killers sleep
On naked, sun-burnt desert land,
While overhead the sandstorms sweep
And cacti guard the shifting sand.
They were a daring, dauntless band
With nerve to meet the smallor great;
The men who bet a "fifty grand"—
When Texas was a two-gun State.

Gone are the badmen of the west,
And gone are monte, stud and draw;
The faro man has dealt his best,
And gone with him is six-gun law.
Yes, gone are days when life was raw,
And men would jest at ruthless fate,
Though Death stood watch with grinning maw—
When Texas was a two-gun State.

The gunmen sleep in Boot-Hill grim,
While overhead fast airplanes sail;
And on the road, a paving gem,
That once was but a cattle trail,
A horseless cart that needs no rail
Is speeding past at breathless rate.
But Boot-Hill knew a somber tale—
When Texas was a two-gun State!

Envoi

Sleep, killers, sleep in Boot-Hill's sod—
The men who knew the sting of hate,
And fought and died with "shooting rod"—
When Texas was a two-gun State!

—W. A. WARD

Good Shooting

THE cross-bow, of course, is interesting chiefly for the sport of firing it, and in the surprising accuracy achieved by some modern exponents. It is not likely, however, that the snipers in some future battle of the Marne will abandon their high powdered flat trajectory rifles in its favor.

Just as a matter of interest, with no particular bearing on anything. Page 188 of the September 1 *Adventure*, Mr. Buehl says: "It (the cross-bow) is almost as accurate as a rook rifle up to fifty yards. Gallwey says he can put eight bolts out of twelve in a six inch circle at sixty yards." Now, I myself have put four out of five bullets in a ½ inch circle at twenty-five yards, which is equivalent to putting them in a 1½ inch circle at sixty. And I am by no means an expert marksman. I was using a Winchester .22, and can figure to duplicate that score almost any time, when in shape. So I don't think the cross-bow is such a terrific article for accuracy, though I have no doubt it would be a lot of fun. As I write, I have in front of me a target made with a 22 rifle. (No, not one of mine!) Twenty shots in a group 1¾ x 2¾ inches *at 200 yards!* What price the cross-bow. —PAUL L. ANDERSON

Playing Favorites

IN YEARS gone by it used to be the custom for *Adventure* to invite its friends—and enemies—to vote on their preferences in fiction, and to state their frank opinions concerning the stories published during each past year. In an early number of the new year the results of this vote were tabulated and published.

This is a mighty pleasant practice—for the editor, at any rate. He is given a straightforward pointer to guide him in pleasing the men it is his honest desire to thrill and satisfy. Let's do it again this year!

In the past I have been associated with magazines which rather specialized on "reader control"—running coupons in the backs of the numbers, on which preferences, issue by issue, could be scored.

I slightly distrust that system now, steady though the response was, for the reason that month after month the *same* readers sent in their choices. In time the natural tendency was to edit each magazine for a coterie of two or three hundred patrons who might or might not represent the hundred thousands who remained silent.

I am trying to uphold and substantially increase the prestige and honest worth of the grand old magazine. But, in spite of being an old-timer at the Camp-Fire, I am a newcomer at the editorial desk of *Adventure;* and I'd surely appreciate whatever counsel comrades out in the firelight are willing to give.

How about it? Will you tell me the serial, the novelette and the short story you liked best this year? Think it over, and when you have read the next issue, that of December fifteenth, send me a real Christmas present in shape of a story vote and letter of general criticism.

I'll like 'em all—even if some of 'em contain teaspoonfuls of asterisks . . .
—ANTHONY M. RUD.

Statement of the ownership, management, circulation, etc., required by the Act of Congress of August 24, 1912, of *Adventure*, published twice a month at New York, N. Y., for Oct. 1, 1927. State of New York, County of New York, ss. Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared LEVIN RANK, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Treasurer of THE BUTTERICK PUBLISHING COMPANY, publisher of *Adventure* and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, embodied in section 411, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit: 1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, THE BUTTERICK PUBLISHING COMPANY, Spring & Macdougal Streets, N. Y. C. EDITOR, ANTHONY M. RUD, 223 Spring Street, N. Y. C. Managing Editor, JOSEPH COX, 223 Spring Street, N. Y. C. Business Managers, None. 2. That the owner is: THE BUTTERICK PUBLISHING COMPANY, a corporation, Spring and Macdougal Streets, New York City, whose stockholders are: THE FEDERAL PUBLISHING COMPANY, a corporation, 15 Exchange Place, Jersey City, New Jersey, whose stockholder is: THE BUTTERICK COMPANY, a corporation, Spring and Macdougal Streets, New York City, whose stockholders are: ASIEL & CO., 11 Wall Street, N. Y. C., WM. BLAIR BAGGALEY, 5 S. Wasbash Ave., Chicago, Illinois, CHAS. D. BARNEY & COMPANY, 65 Broadway, N. Y. C., WILLIAM FREIDAY, 66 Broadway, N. Y. C., WILLIAM O. HAMLIN, 60 Broadway, N. Y. C., JAMES HAMMOND, 66 Broadway, N. Y. C., FREDERICK J. HART, c/o MOORE & SCHLEY, 100 Broadway, N. Y. C., HAYDEN, STONE & CO., 87 Milk Street, Boston, Mass., IDA J. LATSHAW, Haddam, Conn., STANLEY R. LATSHAW, Butterick Building, 223 Spring Street, N. Y. C., LUKE, BANKS & WEEKS, 14 Wall Street, N. Y. C., MERRICK & CO., c/o Customers Securities Dept., THE NEW YORK TRUST COMPANY, 100 Broadway, N. Y. C., JOS. A. MOORE, 300 Park Avenue, N. Y. C., WM. P. REDHEAD, c/o J. W. SPARKS & CO., 66 Broadway, N. Y. C., FRED SIEGMUND, c/o MOORE & SCHLEY, 100 Broadway, N. Y. C., J. W. SPARKS & CO., 66 Broadway, N. Y. C. 3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: DIME SAVINGS BANK, De Kalb Avenue, Brooklyn, N. Y. C. 4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner; and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest direct or indirect in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him. LEVIN RANK, Treasurer. Sworn to and subscribed before me this 30th day of September, 1927. BLEVINS C. DUNKLIN, Notary Public, New York County. County Clerk's No. 203, Reg. No. 9041; Bronx County Clerk's No. 4, Reg. No. 2901; Kings County Clerk's No. 5, Reg. No. 9059; (*My commission expires March 30, 1929.*) (*Seal*)—Form 3526.—Ed. 1924.

ASK *Adventure*

For *free information* and *services* you can't get elsewhere

Crime at Sea

WHOSE is the jurisdiction when the offender is an American member of a British crew bound for a French port?

Request.—"Can you give me some information relative to the jurisdiction over crimes committed at sea? The particular case I have in mind was as follows: The offender was an American merchant sailor who killed a ship's officer. The crime was supposed to have been committed around 1880 or 1890. I can not say which port but it was an important one. I don't know if the story of the crime was true or not but I think it was."—BYRON BROSE, Dubuque, Iowa.

Reply, by Lieut. F. V. Greene:—There are two very important points that are not given in your letter; these are:

The country that the ship hailed from.

The port in France for which she was bound.

In general, the country that the ship hails from takes jurisdiction in the case. In particular if the country is a large important one, in the case of a small weak country it is not at all certain just what action would be taken by one of the big fellows. The country that a ship hails from has jurisdiction over thatship as part of its territory, in the case of a merchant ship, except that in local laws of a port in which she may be, she comes under these laws, but murder would notcome underthis heading. I have an example of a case that is somewhat similar to the one that you mention; it also shows several possible jurisdictions. It happened at an earlier date than you mention, but is a good example.

This is a case of an American citizen, a British ship and a French port. Evidently in the case of Regina vs. Anderson the British government assumed jurisdiction and the French government did notinsiston their rights:

REGINA vs. ANDERSON

(Court for Crown Cases Reserved, 1868. 11 Cox, C. C. 198)

James Anderson, an American citizen, was indicted for murder on board a vessel, belonging to the port of Yarmouth in Nova Scotia. She was registered in London, England, and was flying the British flag.

At the time of the offence committed the vessel was off the River Gironde, within the boundaries of the territory of France, on her way to Bordeaux, which city is by the course of the river about ninety miles from the sea.

(BOVILLE, C. J.)—There is no doubt that the territory where the offence was committed was within the territory of France and that the prisoner was therefore subject to the laws of France, which the local authorities of that country might have enforced if so minded; but at the same time, in point of law, the offence was also committed in British territory, for the seaman on board a merchant vessel, which as to her crew and master, must be taken to have been at the same time under the protection of the British flag, and therefore also amenable to the provisions of the British law. It is true that the prisoner was an American citizen, but he had with his own consent embarked on board a British vessel as one of the crew. Although the prisoner was subject to the American jurisprudence as an American citizen, and to the law of France as having committed an offence within the territory of France, yet he must also be considered as subject to the jurisdiction of British law, which extends to the protection of British vesscls, though in ports belonging to another country.

IF THIS crime had been committed in a French vessel, he would certainly have been tried in a French court. If the victim had been a Frenchman, it is difficult to say where he would have been tried, except that the country that the ship hailed from

would probably have claimed jurisdiction. As I said before, there are a lot of jurisdictions that overlap, which makes a situation of this sort very complicated.

Red Snow

MICROSCOPIC vegetation that creates patches of "blood" in old and deep-packed snow fields.

Request:—"Can you please inform me what is the cause of the patches of red or pink snow often encountered late in summer above the 6000 foot level. This phenomenon was first brought to my notice by a Government surveyor about 3 years ago.

Last week I climbed Mount Albert Edward which is one of the highest peaks on Vancouver Island. When nearing the summit I found 3 patches of pink snow. All three were circular in shape, the largest about 6 feet in diameter and the other two about 18 inches. The largest patch was in a chasm or ravine where the snow might have been 100 feet deepor more.

I dug about 4 feet in this patch and found that the deeper I went the more pronounced the color became."—WILLIAM DOUGLAS, Courtenay, B. C., Canada.

Reply, by Mr. Victor Shaw:—Yours is the first query I've had regarding the curious phenomenon which is known as "red snow." This in spite of the fact that it is of a rather spectacular nature, and is found in various localities where snow fields of the more permanent type exist.

The color is due to the pigmentation of a species of microscopic vegetation, which thrives mainly on old snow fields. The older the snow the deeper this plant will penetrate.

It is known in certain localities on the higher peaks of the Rockies both American and Canadian; on some of the Alaskan coastal glaciers; in the Swiss and Italian Alps, etc., and especially large fields appear in northern Greenland and Ellesmere and Grant Lands.

I've seen it in places along the shore of Smith's Sound (north of Mellville Bay) when it resembled a field of fresh blood; and the illusion could hardly be dispelled when handfuls were taken up and examined.

As you will readily see, the shape of the bed of snow has nothing whatever to do with this plant, in color or growth, nor does the depth of the field seem to influence it any way. Just how the spores may be brought to any given locality, and what the period of germination may be, I'm not informed, nor do I think botanists have yet arrived at a satisfactory conclusion, but it seems to have to do with the *age* of the field. No doubt it is fairly slow to germinate; hence a snow accumulation which has its surface periodically disturbed has little chance for the growth.

Catfish Stew

YOU will agree that this dish certainly appears to do wonders for an otherwise lowly fish.

Request:—"Many years ago I was camped with an old Englishman who prepared a stew using a lot of small catfish which he scalded, scraped, cleaned, dug out the eyes and cooked, leaving the heads on saying that the heads were the best part of the fish. He lined a tin tray with slices of bread that was dried out and when the stew was done poured it over the bread. It was most certainly a delicious dish. Do you put out a book or pamphlet about camp cooking?"—J. S. SMADES, Springfield, Mo.

Reply, by Mr. Horace Kephart:—I do not usually boil small fish, preferring them steamed or fried; but the following method may be used for a change:

Prepare the fish as you described. Put a tablespoonful of butter, or some sliced salt pork, in the bottom of a kettle and fry in it a sliced onion or two. Some chopped carrot and celery fried along with the onion will improve the dish, if you have them. When the onion is brown, put in the fish and add enough boiling water to cover them. Season with salt, pepper, two or three cloves and some vinegar or lemon juice. I can not give amounts without knowing how much fish you have; just taste the liquor and season to suit you. Boil very gently until the fish will part easily from the bones. Skim off scum as it rises. Line a dish with toast or with crackers dipped first in cold water. Fill with your stew. Add melted butter as a sauce, or a rich white sauce prepared as follows:

For four people, cook two tablespoonfuls of butter till it bubbles. Add a tablespoonful of flour, rubbing it in, and cook until it is smooth. Remove from direct heat of fire, but let it simmer, while you add a pint of milk, a third at a time, rubbing into a smooth paste each time it thickens. Then season with a half teaspoonful of salt and an eighth teaspoon of pepper. Cook up and use immediately.

Talisman

SAINT GEORGE and his dragon on this lucky piece are supposed to have the power of warding off sudden death from him who carries it.

Request:—"I would like a little information on a coin or medalwhich I have in my possession. It is about 1 1-16" in diameter, is composed of metal which looks like bronze or brass. On one side it has a picture of St. George and the dragon, with the words, 'Georgius Eqvitum Patronus,' and on the other side has a picture of three men in a ship, with the words, 'Intempestate Securitas.' It is thin and quite worn."—MYRON COCHRANE, Chicago, Ill.

Reply, by Mr. Howland Wood:—The piece you write about with St. George and the Dragon on one side and a ship at seaon the other isnot a coinbut a talisman or lucky piece. These have been made for several hundred years, especially in Germany, and come in sizes from about a dollar to the size much smaller than a ten cent piece. They can be bought in various metals—gold, silver, brass, copper and etc. They are of private origin and are sold by jewelry and novelty shops, especially to soldiers and sailors, the superstition being that they are supposed to ward off sudden death.

Log Cabins

THEY are not all the crude, stark affairs of the frontiersmen; nor can you easily tell a real one from its exterior.

Request:—"Being much interested in the erection of a log house in the West (Wyoming), to be used as a summer home, and not being able to get much data on the subject, I am taking the liberty of writing you. I am especially interested in the architecture and interior decorations of such buildings." —J. H. HUTCHINSON, Atlantic City, N. J.

Reply, by Mr. Arthur Woodward:—It so happens that log cabins are a bit outside my department but I am glad to give you what little information I may have on them. In many parts of the West so called log cabins are the genuine article only as far as the exterior shows. In other words, the living quarters are finished off as nicely as any other home, the appearance of the outside being that of a real log cabin which is achieved by nailing half portions of logs with the bark on, over a regular siding.

The early type log cabins were in two classes, the "hog pen" and "dovetailed finish." The hog pen style cabin was one of the rudest types. The logs were not notched sufficiently to permit them to rest as snugly against one another as they might and the ends of the logs projecting at the corners of the cabin were left uncut. Then, too, the chinking of such cabins was not always of the best. The better class cabins were built with more care, seasoned timbers being used, the corners of the logs trimmed until the cabin looked like a neat substantial wooden box with mitered joints. The chinking of wood, mud, moss and ashes was more evenly laid on and the whole dwelling had a much more prosperous air.

The details of how to build various types of cabins adapted to modern use will be found in "Log Cabins and Log Cabin Building," by Oliver Kemp. Stewart Edward White's "The Cabin" will also prove interesting to you. If you wish to get details on some cabins erected after the style of the pioneers of the trans-Allegheny region write to the Chamber of Commerce of Attica and that organization may be able to furnish you with photographs and specifications of the cabins the residents of the surrounding neighborhood have erected in the park in Attica for the accommodation of transient automobile tourists. These cabins are constructed entirely by hand, from the puncheon floors to the hand hewn shakeroofs.

While I do not happen to have Kemp's book at hand I believe it was published by Outing Publishing Co., New York. Some of the Boy Scout Handbooks and other woodcraft books for general use contain plans and specifications for log cabins. If I were you I would go to the nearest library and get a list of such books and then go through them. I am not sure, but I believe Ernest Thompson Seton has log cabin plans in his book of Woodcraft.

The 1804 Silver Dollar

MR. H. F. ROBINSON offers another interesting explanation of the scarcity of this much discussed coin, of which perhaps no more than a dozen are known to be extant.

From 1801 to 1805 the United States was embroiled somewhat with the Mediterranean pirates of Algiers and Tripoli. In 1805 the trouble was finally settled and the United States paid $60,000 for the ransom of Christian captives, principally Americans who were held in slavery. As I understand it, the ransom money was demanded in silver coins and the entire issue of silver dollars that were minted bearing the 1804 date was sent to Tripoli; first sufficient amount to pay this ransom in silver and a certain other additional amount in silver to pay off the fighting men of the expeditionary force while they were there, as it was necessary for them to also be paid in silver so that they could use the money for the purchase of supplies along the north coast of Africa.

2. **Where to Send**—Send each question direct to the expert in charge of the particular section whose field covers it. He will reply by mail. Do NOT send questions to this magazine.

3. **Extent of Service**—No reply will be made to requests for partners, for financial backing, or for chances to join expeditions. "Ask Adventure" covers business and work opportunities, but only if they are outdoor activities, and only in the way of general data and advice. It is in no sense an employment bureau.

4. **Be Definite**—Explain your case sufficiently to guide the expert you question.

Salt and Fresh Water Fishing *Fishing-tackle and equipment; fly and bait casting and bait; camping-outfits; fishing-trips.*—JOHN B. THOMPSON ("Ozark Ripley"), care *Adventure.*

Small Boating *Skiff, outboard small launch river and lake tripping and cruising.*—RAYMOND S. SPEARS, Inglewood, California.

Canoeing *Paddling, sailing, cruising; equipment and accessories, clubs, organizations, official meetings, regattas.*—EDGAR S. PERKINS, 5742 Stony Island Ave., Chicago, Ill.

Yachting BERIAH BROWN, Coupeville, Wash., or HENRY W. RUBINKAM, Chicago Yacht Club, Box 507, Chicago, Ill.

Motor Boating GEORGE W. SUTTON, 6East45thSt., New York City.

Motor Camping JOHN D. LONG, 610 W. 16th St., New York City.

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Hiking CLAUDE P. FORDYCE, M.D., Falls City, Neb.

CampCooking HORACEKEPHART,Bryson City, N. C.

Mining and Prospecting *Territory anywhere on the continent of North America. Questions on mines, mining law, mining, mining methods or practise; where and how to prospect; how to outfit; how to make the mine after it is located; how to work it and how to sell it; general geology necessary for miner or prospector, including the precious and base metals and economic minerals such as pitchblende or uranium, gypsum, mica, cryolite, etc. Questions on investment excluded.*—VICTOR SHAW, Loring, Alaska.

Forestry in the United States *Big-game hunting, guides and equipment; national forests of the Rocky Mountain States. Questions on the policy of the Government regarding game and wild animal life in the forests.*—ERNEST W. SHAW, South Carver, Mass.

Tropical Forestry *Tropical forests and forest products; their economic possibilities; distribution, exploration, etc.*—WILLIAM R. BARBOUR, care *Adventure.*

Railroading in the U. S., Mexico and Canada *General office, especially immigration, work; advertising work, duties of station agent, bill clerk, ticket agent, passenger brakeman and rate clerk. General Information.*—R. T. NEWMAN, P. O. Drawer 368, Anaconda, Mont.

Army Matters, United States and Foreign LIEUT. GLEN R. TOWNSEND, Fort Snelling, Minn.

Navy Matters *Regulations, history, customs, drill, gunnery; tactical and strategic questions, ships, propulsion, construction, classification; general information. Questions regarding the enlisted personnel and officers except such as contained in the Register of Officers can not be answered. Maritime law.*—LIEUT. FRANCIS GREENE, U. S. N. R., 2200 Kinzie Ave., Racine, Wis.

U. S. Marine Corps LIEUT. F. W. HOPKINS, Fleet Marine Corps Reserves, Box 1042, Madford, Oregon.

State Police FRANCIS H. BENT, JR., care *Adventure.*

Royal Canadian Mounted Police PATRICK LEE, No. 2 Grace Court, Brooklyn, N. Y.

Horses *Care, breeding, training of horses in general; hunting, jumping, and polo; horses of the old and new West.*—THOMAS H. DAMERON, 911 S. Union Ave., Pueblo, Colo.

Dogs JOHN B. THOMPSON ("Ozark Ripley)," care *Adventure.*

American Anthropology Northof thePanama Canal *Customs, dress, architecture, pottery and decorative arts, weapons and implements, fetishism, social divisions.*—ARTHUR WOODWARD, Museum of American Indians, 155thSt. and Broadway, N. Y. City.

Taxidermy SETH BULLOCK, care *Adventure.*

Herpetology *General information concerning reptiles (snakes, lizards, turtles, crocodiles) and amphibians (frogs toads, salamanders); their customs, habits and distribution.*—DR. G. K. NOBLE, American Museum of Natural History, 77th St. and Central Park West, New York, N. Y.

Entomology *General information about insects and spiders; venomous insects, disease-carrying insects, insects attacking man, etc.; distribution.*—DR. FRANK E. LUTZ, Ramsey, N. J.

Ichthyology GEORGE S. MYERS, Stanford University, Box 821, Calif.

Stamps H. A. DAVIS, The American Philatelic Society, 3421 Colfax Ave., Denver, Colo.

Coins and Medals HOWLAND WOOD, American Numismatic Society, Broadway at 156th St., New York City.

Radio *Telegraphy, telephony, history, broadcasting, apparatus, invention, receiver construction, portable sets.*—DONALD MCNICOL, 132 Union Road, Roselle Park, N. J.

Ornithology PROF. ARCHIBALD RUTLEDGE, Mercersburg Academy, Mercersburg, Pa.

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The TRAIL AHEAD

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White Plumes

By Arthur O. Friel

"And I have heard it said that a white man who can go there and bring out such feathers must be truly strong and clever, because it is a dangerous country, with many bad men in it." The challenge spoken through a barred window in a crooked street in Venezuela started *Fernando Velez*, who had just gambled away the gold for which he had done murder, on his perilous Orinoco quest for treasure greater than gold.

The Medal

By J. D. Newsom

For *Private Alexander Sutton* the aftermath of the Great War was a belligerent French wife. But as *Cabillot*, garrulous little down-and-outer from the gutters of Paris pointed out, one could find peace in the desert wastes with the Foreign Legion. So the two signed on for their penny a day wage, "to wield the bright sword of glorious France (so *Cabillot* chirped) and *la mort* —the Death—to face her at close quarters."

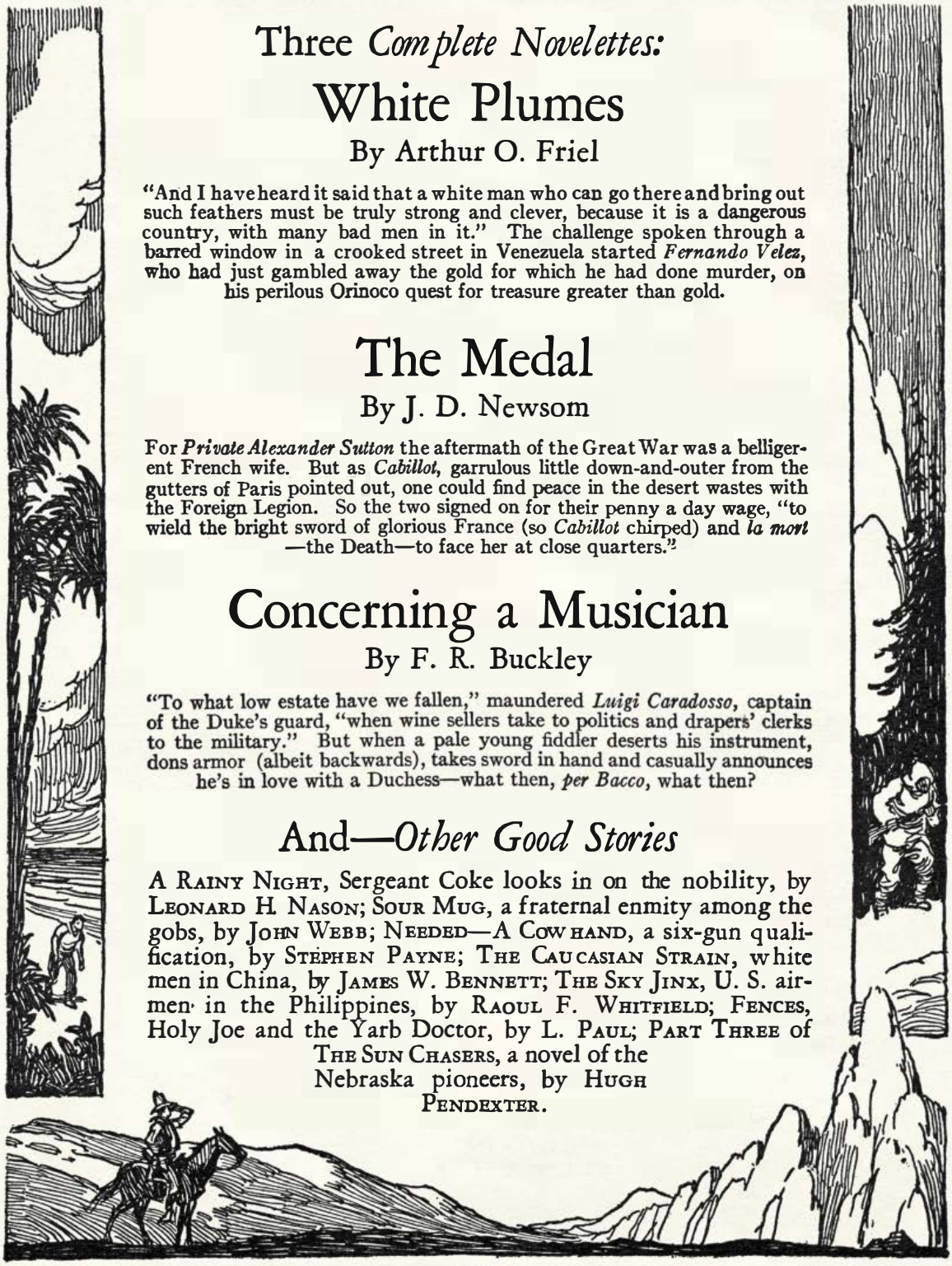
Concerning a Musician

By F. R. Buckley

"To what low estate have we fallen," maundered *Luigi Caradosso*, captain of the Duke's guard, "when wine sellers take to politics and drapers' clerks to the military." But when a pale young fiddler deserts his instrument, dons armor (albeit backwards), takes sword in hand and casually announces he's in love with a Duchess—what then, *per Bacco*, what then?

And—*Other Good Stories*

A Rainy Night, Sergeant Coke looks in on the nobility, by Leonard H. Nason; Sour Mug, a fraternal enmity among the gobs, by John Webb; Needed—A Cowhand, a six-gun qualification, by Stephen Payne; The Caucasian Strain, white men in China, by James W. Bennett; The Sky Jinx, U. S. airmen in the Philippines, by Raoul F. Whitfield; Fences, Holy Joe and the Yarb Doctor, by L. Paul; Part Three of The Sun Chasers, a novel of the Nebraska pioneers, by Hugh Pendexter.



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AN evening arrives when there is nothing special to do. The picture at the movies is one you've already seen. Nobody feels like reading and you can't get anything on the radio that the folks want to listen to. As for cards, you've all played so much lately that you're fed up. What, oh what, can a bored family find to amuse itself?

That's the time to get out all your snapshots. The farther back they go the more fun they'll be. Nothing draws a bigger laugh than the picture of some one you know dressed in the style of ten years ago

And how those old snapshots do start conversation going. A moment before each one of you may have been sitting around glumly with never a word to say. Now everyone talks at once, anxious to remind the others of incidents he remembers but which they may have forgotten.

When you see a well-loved face or scene, you immediately think of all that has happened since the snapshot was made and the evening becomes one of delightful reminiscence.

Perhaps it's time for another happy evening among the pictures of people you met, friends you made, and trips you took

Prepare now for such evenings in the future. Don't make the mistake of trusting too much to your memory. You never hear anyone say, "I'm sorry I took so many snapshots." The cry is always "Why didn't I take more?"

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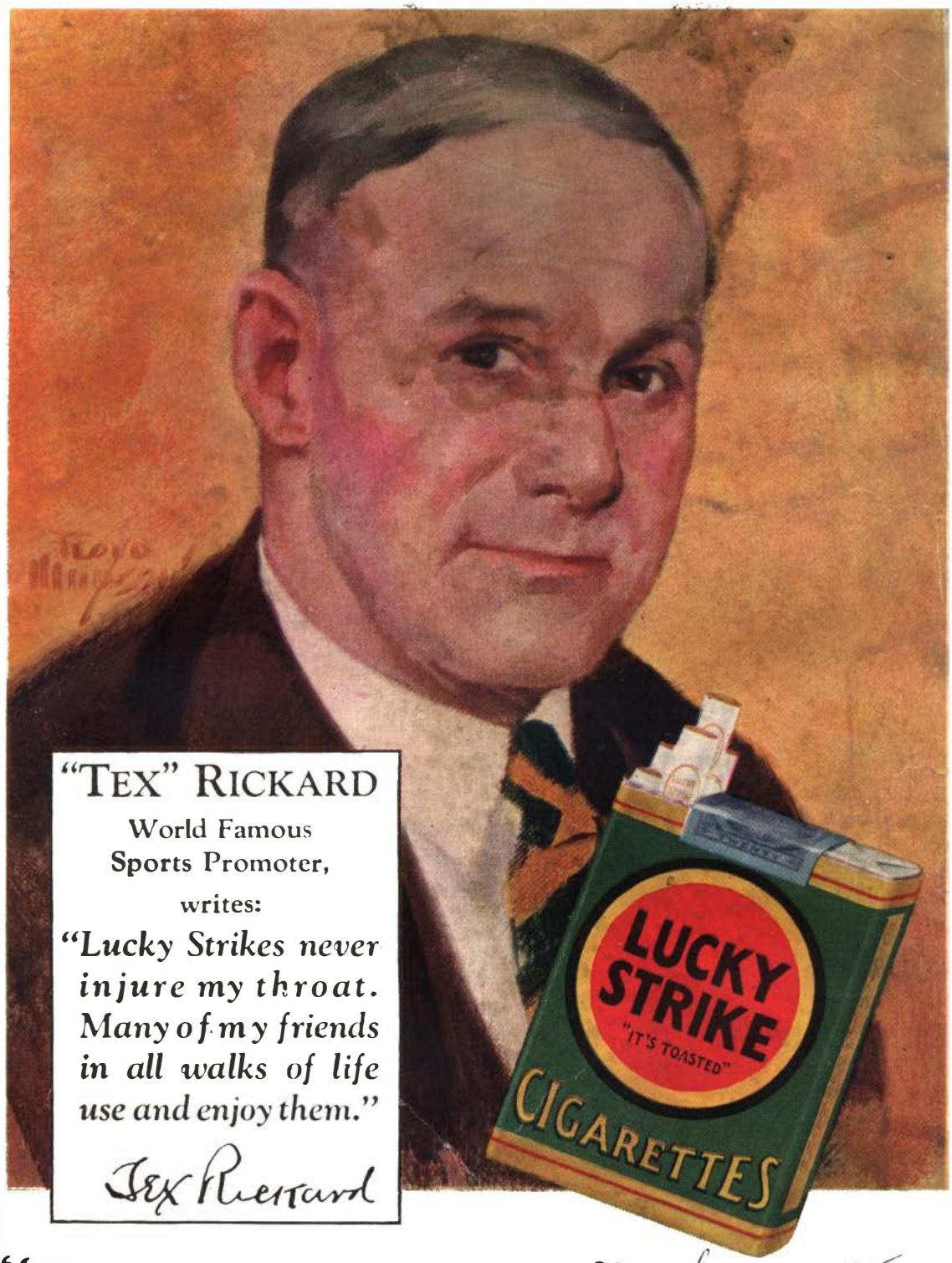

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