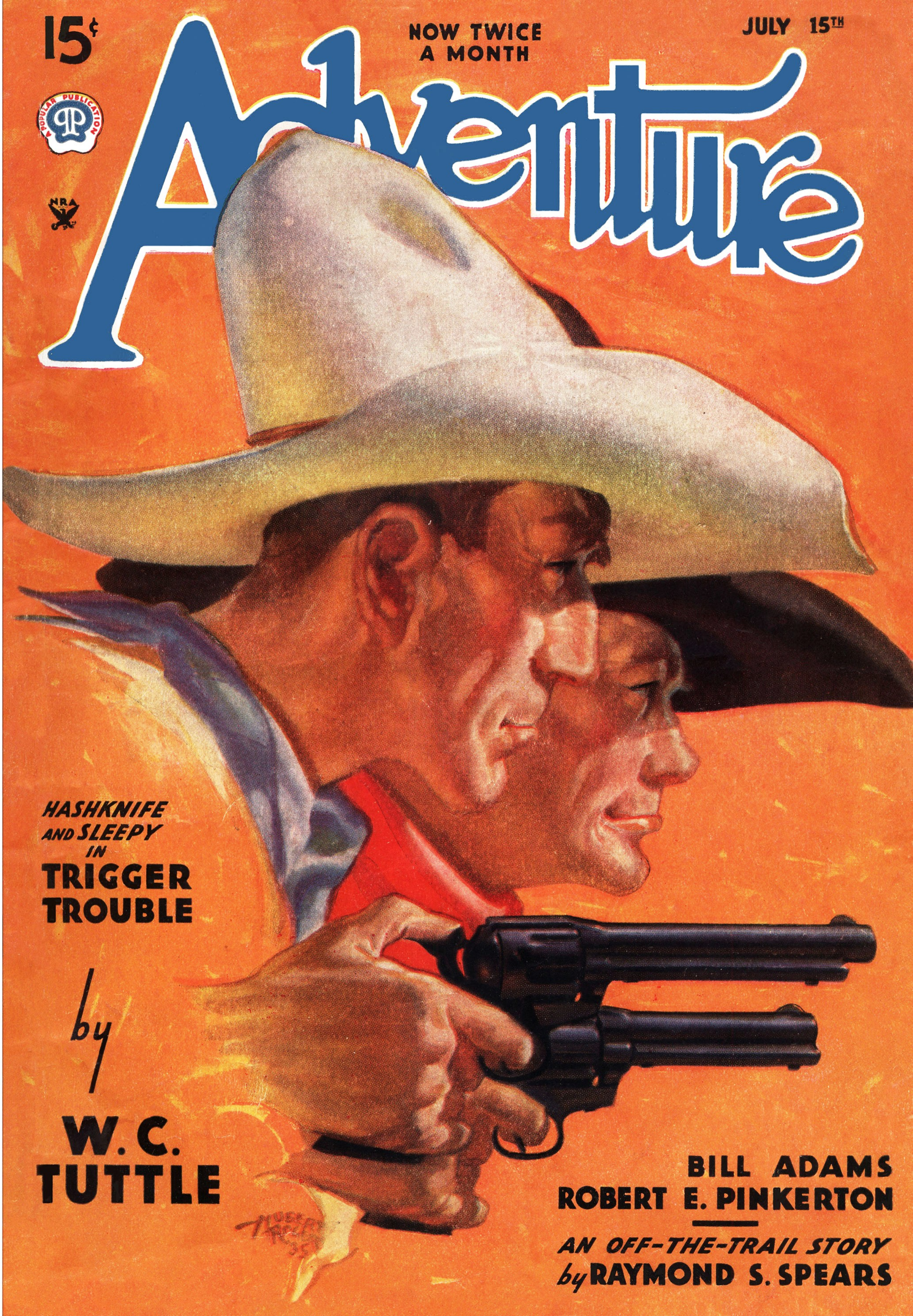

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Trigger Trouble

SLEEPY STEVENS awoke, yawned wearily and looked up at the rough ceiling of the bunk-house. Judging from the sunlight through the window, he was late in doing his chores. But it was Sunday morning, which in itself was an excuse for oversleeping.

Sleepy licked his dry lips and wondered what made his head feel so queer. There was a dull ache in the back of his head, and his muscles felt stiff and sore. And there was that queer, dry taste in his mouth. He glanced over at the adjoining bunk, before remembering that Hashknife had gone on a hundred-mile trip to look at some horses for Frenchy La Clede, owner of this Circle XO ranch.

It was quite an effort for Sleepy to swing his legs off the bunk, and he sat there on the edge of the bunk, slightly nauseated.

"And I went to bed as sober as a judge," he said aloud. "I hope I ain't comin' down with somethin' I never ate."

He rubbed a hand across his face, and glanced quickly at the hand. It was heavily stained with dried blood.

"That's funny," he said. "I must have scratched myself in my sleep. Both hands! Shucks, I never bled that much from one scratch."

He got weakly out of bed and looked at himself in the piece of broken mirror fastened to the wall. There was no blood on his face.

"Well, that's somethin' to figure on," he muttered, as he put on his shirt and overalls.

Drawing on his boots, he reached to his shirt pocket to find the makings of a cigaret. But his hand stopped short.

A novelette by W. C. TUTTLE

There was dried blood over the front of his shirt. And on his overalls and boots.

Sleepy looked at himself blankly. He distinctly remembered coming to bed. He and Frenchy La Clede had eaten supper together about eight o'clock. Sleepy had been working hard all day, and was hardly able to keep awake long enough to undress.

He walked back and sat down on the edge of the bunk, trying to puzzle out the reason for all this blood. He looked at his watch.

"Half-past ten," he muttered. "Late."

It seemed impossible for him to think clearly. Something was wrong with his head. He needed a stimulant. From under his bed he took a pint bottle of liquor, uncorked it and filled his mouth. Then he spat it out, made a wry face and tossed the bottle aside. A sound at the door caused him to look up. Two men were standing in the doorway, looking at him, and after a moment he recognized Len Tracey, the sheriff, and Nick Harper, the deputy.

"Howdy, gents," said Sleepy huskily. "Come in."

"Yeah, we thought we would," replied the sheriff dryly. He was tall and gaunt, with a bony face and a sparse mustache.

They came close to Sleepy and looked him over.

"What's the joke?" asked Sleepy, and turned to watch Harper take his gun off the little table. The deputy snapped Sleepy's gun open, examined the cylinder, and turned to the sheriff.

"Two empties," he said, and pocketed the gun.

"What gits me is this," said the sheriff, "why in hell did he stay here?"

"Is everybody as crazy as you are?" queried Sleepy. "What's this all about, anyway?"

"Look at the blood on him!" exclaimed the deputy. "Why, the danged fool never even washed his hands."

"Oh, yeah," replied Sleepy, looking at his hands. "I've been wonderin' about that myself. Funny, ain't it?"

"Funny!" snorted the sheriff. "Are you crazy?"

"I wouldn't bet either way," replied Sleepy. "All I know is that I've got a headache."

"You'll have worse than a headache before this is over," declared the sheriff. "Watch him, Nick; I want to look around."

The sheriff looked all around the bunk-house. He found the bottle under Sleepy's bunk, but tossed it aside after smelling of the contents. Sleepy's old gray coat was hanging on the wall.

"Yore coat?" asked the sheriff.

"Yeah, that's mine," replied Sleepy. "Hey! What right have you got to search my clothes?"

"Set still," warned the deputy. "He's got plenty right."

From a side pocket the sheriff took an object which he looked at in the light from the doorway. Then he came back to Sleepy and held out a small brown bottle, half-filled with dark colored pills.

"What's this stuff?" he asked.

Sleepy looked at the bottle and shook his head.

"I dunno; I never seen it before. What is it?"

The sheriff smelled of the pills and looked curiously at Sleepy.

"How long you been takin' these things?" he asked.

"I don't even know what they are."

"What do you ask for when yo're buyin' opium?"

"Opium?" Sleepy looked blankly at the sheriff. "Hell, I never bought opium in my life. What's all this about, anyway?"

There was nothing about Sleepy Stevens to indicate that he was a drug addict. He was of medium height, very broad of shoulder and narrow of waist. His head was well-shaped, his features strong, and his eyes very blue. The sun and winds of many ranges had given him a permanently bronzed skin.

"It shore looked like the work of a hop-head," remarked the deputy, and the sheriff nodded.

"Stop talkin' riddles!" snapped Sleepy. "What's the matter with you two fellers? Is it a secret?"

"Yore name's Stevens, ain't it?" asked the sheriff.

"Yeah, that's my name."

"Stevens, I arrest you for the murder of Frenchy La Clede and his Chinese cook."

"Well," replied Sleepy, "if you know any more funny ones, keep 'em to yourself. My head aches."

"You think it's funny?" queried the deputy.

"Well, it shore sounds funny to me," replied Sleepy.

As he started to get up, both officers grabbed him, and before he realized it, they had snapped handcuffs on his wrists.

BRACED against the bed, and panting a little, Sleepy looked at the handcuffs.

"It gets funnier all the time," he said.

"Go ahead and laugh," said the deputy. "Shall we take him up to the house, Len?"

"Yeah, I reckon we better. C'mon."

The main room of the ranch-house was a shambles. In the center of the floor, sprawled on his back, was Frenchy La Clede, shot through the head. Lying near the doorway to the dining-room was the Chinese cook, stabbed to death. And the room looked as though a cyclone had passed through. Drawers had been yanked out of cabinets and table, their contents broadcast. A valuable gun was left in one cabinet showing that the looters were looking for something in particular. Pictures had been torn off the walls.

Sleepy stood there, staring at the two dead men, his hands clenched. He had no idea what it was all about. In fact, it was more like a dream than a reality.

"Still denyin' it?" asked the sheriff.

"I shore am."

"With their blood on yore hands and all over yore clothes?"

"I can't seem to think straight," sighed Sleepy.

"You took too much opium, eh?" said the deputy, sneering. "Thought you jist took enough. That's what caught you—too dopy to pull out. Well, I reckon that's all we can do, Len."

"Until we can get the coroner down here," nodded the sheriff. He turned to Sleepy.

"What the devil was you lookin' for, anyway?"

"Lookin' for?"

"Yeah—to tear up everythin' like this. You searched every room; so you must have been lookin' for somethin'."

"Somebody," said Sleepy, "is crazy; and I'm not sure who."

They took Sleepy to the little jail at Wolf Butte, and locked him in a cell. The prosecuting attorney, a pompous little man, came down there with the sheriff, and tried to question Sleepy. He seemed to be sure of Sleepy's guilt, and only wanted Sleepy to supply the motive.

"You're just another Wyomin' lawyer who can go to hell as far as I'm concerned," replied Sleepy.

"How long have you known La Clede?" asked the lawyer.

"About two weeks," replied Sleepy.

"Didn't you know him previous to going to work for him?"

"We never seen him before in our lives."

"We?"

"Me and Hashknife Hartley, my pardner?"

"Oh yes. and where is your partner?"

"He's gone to Chinook Flats, buyin' horses for La Clede. Went day before yesterday."

"Do you know when he will return?"

"I wish I did. Listen, will yuh? I never killed La Clede. Why would I kill him?"

"Why would you kill the Chinaman?" countered the lawyer.

"With a knife," added Sleepy. "I hate a knife. Why, that poor Chink has only been there one day."

"One day? La Clede has had that Chinaman ever since he came here, six months ago."

"No, he ain't. He had a Chink named Louie. But Louie quit the job, and brought this feller Wong out yesterday mornin'. Said Wong was a swell cook, too. La Clede didn't care, as long as he had a good cook."

"Mebbe," suggested the sheriff, "you had to kill the Chink. Mebbe he seen you kill La Clede."

"A reasonable theory," nodded the lawyer. "Sheriff, I'd advise you getting some other clothes for the prisoner; we'll need the overalls and shirt as evidence."

"Yeah, I'll do that right now, before we go down there with the coroner. What size pants do you wear, Stevens?"

"Four inches long and three inches around," replied Sleepy. "Anyway, I feel that small. And I'll make you a little bet that when Hashknife Hartley gets back, he'll hang the man who murdered La Clede—and it won't be me."

"Yore pardner must be quite a man," drawled the sheriff.

"Hashknife Hartley," said the lawyer. "Queer. That name has a familiar ring. I've heard it somewhere, but I can't quite remember where it was."

"Send a telegram to the secretary of

yore cattle association and ask him," suggested Sleepy.

"That was it!" exclaimed the lawyer. "Range detective."

"We'll give him a chance to work on the case," replied the sheriff, "but I'm afraid yo're in for a tough time, Stevens."

"I don't know whether it's yore homely face or somethin' I ate," replied Sleepy. "I shore feel narrow at the equator."

That long afternoon in the cell gave Sleepy a chance to recuperate and do some clear thinking. He realized the overwhelming evidence against him. Bloody hands, bloody clothes, empty shells in his six-shooter—and that bottle of opium.

Sleepy knew that he was not guilty, and yet he wondered why the ransacking of the house, the shot did not awaken him. Suddenly it occurred to him—a solution.

"I was doped!" he exclaimed softly. "Supper—that new Chink. I remember I was sleepy as the devil. That was it! He doped me and La Clede. Mebbe it was in the coffee. That's why I never woke up until so late—never heard anythin'. But the Chink was murdered, too. I remember—La Clede didn't drink his coffee."

That did not fit in with the rest of Sleepy's theories. He sat on the cot and thought deeply.

"There was somethin' the Chink wanted. He doped us. By golly, it might be that it was somethin' that somebody else wanted—somebody that followed that Chink. Mebbe that's the answer. Gee, I wish Hashknife was here. He'd know."

Sleepy Stevens' faith in Hashknife was not unfounded. Time after time Sleepy had watched the long, lean, keen-eyed cowboy solve range mysteries which baffled the local peace-officers. Hashknife was in no sense of the word a man hunter. But in bunk-house and around camp-fires, along their back trail, down the years, men spoke of him kindly and drank a toast to him, wherever he might be; while others swore softly and wondered where he would be working next.

There was no reason why Hashknife and Sleepy were in the Wolf Butte country, except that it happened to be on the other side of the hill from where they had been. Always, they wanted to see what was on the other side of the next hill. Two drifting cowboys, never staying long in any place. Some one mentioned them as soldiers of fortune, but Sleepy corrected them with: "Cowpunchers of disaster, Mister."

And it seemed as though disaster had overtaken them this time. It was late when the sheriff came back. He looked in on Sleepy, asked him if he was hungry, and brought in a generous meal.

"Any more evidence?" queried Sleepy.

"Any more? How much evidence do you suppose we need to hang a man in this country?"

"I dunno—I was just wonderin'," smiled Sleepy.

"Yeah, you've got plenty nerve," admitted the sheriff. "Now, about that little bottle. If you happen to need some of it—"

"Some day, Sheriff," replied Sleepy pleasantly, "I'm goin' to hit you so hard that both yore horns will fall off."

The sheriff laughed and walked out.

"And I've got to eat with my fingers," sighed Sleepy. "They never even trusted me with a knife and fork. Mebbe they was scared I'd commit suicide."

DARKNESS came swiftly. There were no lights in the jail, the only light being through a barred window above Sleepy's cot. He stretched out on the cot and was enjoying a cigaret, when something was shoved through the bars of the window, and fell across his feet.

Wondering what it could be, he searched and found a narrow hack-saw, with three extra blades tied to the handle with a piece of string. The window was not very high up on the wall. When he stood on the cot, the bottom of the window was at his waist.

"Yore invitation received and accepted," he said softly, peering through the bars. "By golly, I wonder if Hashknife—no, that wouldn't be like him. Well, here goes."

It is very likely that steel bars were specified in the plans for the Wolf Butte jail; but these were certainly not steel. They cut easily, bent easily. It was too good to be true. In less than an hour, Sleepy was all set to leave the bed and board of Wolf Butte. But years of working with Hashknife had caused Sleepy to take most things with a grain of salt.

This whole thing seemed too simple. Who gave him that hack-saw, and why? Except for Hashknife, he had no friends in that part of Wyoming. There could be no good reason for any one wanting to see him get out of jail. Hashknife had often said:

"Always think it over. There's a reason for everythin', and it's a lot better to figure it out before than after. Any fool has hindsight."

Sleepy had not stinted in cutting the bars. Right now he had an opening that a fat man could go through. But still, he sat on the cot and thought it over. Suddenly he had an idea. At any rate it was worth a trial. Quickly he tore some strips off the cheap blanket, rolled up the thin mattress and the rest of the bedclothes, and tied them at each end.

He lifted this to the ledge of the window, crawled up beside it and slowly lowered it over the edge, letting it drop.

And just as he released the bundle in the dark, a shotgun flamed from a corner of the jail and a heavy charge of shot smashed into the bundle of bedding. A man came running heavily, a dim blur in the darkness, and as he reached the bundle Sleepy leaped out between the wrecked bars and came down with his full weight on the man's head and shoulders.

The man crashed down under the impact of Sleepy's hundred and eighty pounds, his shotgun clattering aside, while his head hit the earth with terrific force. Sleepy was up in a flash. He found the man's six-shooter and yanked it from the holster.

Sleepy ran behind the jail and circled several buildings. Men were running across the street, seeking the cause of that shot and apparently heading for the jail. No one saw him cross the street to a hitch-rack, where he untied a horse, swung into the saddle and rode slowly away into the night.

"They can't hang me any higher for takin' a horse," he told himself.

Down at the jail, a curious crowd stood around the sheriff. Above them were the twisted and sagging bars of the window, and there on the ground was a bundle of jail bedding, well riddled with shot. A couple of lanterns illuminated the scene.

Len Tracey, the sheriff, sat against the wall, while Nick Harper, his deputy, picked a few pieces of gravel out of his forehead. Len's nose was skinned, both cheeks were skinned, and there was a spot the size of a quarter on his chin where the skin was missing. Len's face had been fairly driven into the hard dirt, and there was a strong possibility that his nose was broken.

"I had the shotgun at home," wailed Len, "and I was takin' it back to the office, when I seen somethin' poke out of that window. I stopped and took a good look. Then I thought I seen a man slide out of the window; so I cut loose with one barrel. Down he went, and I comes runnin' in. Jist as I stooped over—I thought a house fell on me."

"Mebbe he was takin' the beddin' along with him," suggested Nick. "Anyway, you saved that."

"That's somethin'," said one of the men.

They went into the cell and found the hack-saw. The sheriff cursed feelingly as he mopped his bleeding nose.

"He must have had a friend on the outside," said a man.

"Yuh didn't think that hack-saws was reg'lar equipment in our cells, didja?" asked the deputy. "The question is, where do we look for this *hombre?* Where would he go?"

"He'd shore git out of this country," groaned the sheriff. "Wire his description, Nick. Oh, hell, I don't care what you do; I'm sick."

THE CIRCLE XO ranch was dark, as Sleepy drew up beside the house. He found that the sheriff had locked all the doors, but that was no problem to Sleepy now. He kicked out a front window and went inside, where he lighted a lamp.

He went to a rough gun cabinet in the main room, where he removed the beautiful Winchester rifle that had not been disturbed when the murderers ransacked the place. La Clede had told him that the gun had been made to order for him. He took a supply of cartridges, an extra Colt .45, and a belt full of ammunition. Then he went to the kitchen, where he threw a supply of canned stuff into a sack.

Down to the stable he went, where he saddled his own horse. He yanked the saddle and bridle off his borrowed horse and turned the animal loose. He wrapped his food inside his slicker and tied it behind his saddle, after which he led the animal up to the bunk-house.

He knew he must leave some word for Hashknife, but he did not dare leave a note, saying where he was going. A sharp kick broke the lock on the bunk-house door, and he entered to light a lamp. He found an old tablet and a pencil. Sitting down at the table, his face very grave in the yellow lamplight, he proceeded to draw a picture.

Not having much artistic ability, this was a task. The finished result showed the head of a man; a one-eyed man, with a huge mustache. On his head was a tall hat with three points at the top, the center point much higher than the two side ones. It was a queer way to shape a sombrero, but Sleepy was not an artist.

He seemed highly satisfied with the result. Leaving it there on the table, he went out, closed the door and climbed into the saddle.

"Brownie," he said to the horse, "we're goin' a long ways. It ain't goin' to be no easy trail. The U.S.A. ain't no place for me—not now. Let's be movin', bronc. I feel kinda itchy."

HASHKNIFE HARTLEY, saddle-weary from the long trip into the Chinook Flats, dismounted in Wolf Butte and walked into a little restaurant on the main street. Hashknife was several inches over six feet in height, slender but powerful. His face was long and lean, with prominent cheek-bones, generous nose and a wide, thin-lipped mouth. While men might forget his other features, they never forgot his eyes. Steel-gray in color, they never seemed to waver. Almost hypnotic in their intensity, they seemed to look through the surface of things.

Hashknife knew nothing of the tragedy at the Circle XO when he sat down at the little oilcloth-covered table and ordered a big meal. There had been no eating places between Chinook Flats and Wolf Butte. The sheriff and deputy had seen him ride in, and Hashknife was busy with his food when they came in. He glanced at them and nodded indifferently.

They came over to his table and he looked a bit curious.

"Didja have any luck buyin' horses at Chinook Flats?" asked the sheriff.

"It was sort of a wild-goose chase,"

replied Hashknife. "They had a lot of six-bit broncs for sale at twenty dollars. No use drivin' 'em all the way down here, when La Clede can buy just as good right here. What's new in Wolf Butte?"

"You ain't been down at the Circle XO yet, have you?" queried the sheriff.

"Not yet. Why?" There was a flicker of interest in the eyes of the tall cowboy.

"And you ain't heard nothin', eh?"

Hashknife laid his fork on the table and looked keenly at the sheriff.

"I haven't met any news-carriers," he replied. "Now, what's on yore mind?"

"Yore pardner Stevens shot La Clede, knifed the chink cook—"

"Wait!" snapped Hashknife.

The sheriff drew back a little, amazed at the sudden transformation. One moment Hashknife had the amiable expression of a contented man, and the next moment his face was a gray mask, with slitted eyes and a thin line for a mouth.

"You know that's a lie," he said evenly.

"No—wait," begged the sheriff. "I'm only tellin' what I know."

"Talk fast," said Hashknife flatly.

There was no change in his expression as the sheriff told the story of the tragedy, the arrest of Sleepy and his subsequent escape. There was a slight flicker of amusement in the slitted eyes when the sheriff came to the part about Sleepy's outwitting him at the jail.

"And," concluded the sheriff, "he stole a horse—"

"Stole it?"

"Well, yeah, the law would consider it stolen. But we found the horse and saddle at the Circle XO yesterday mornin'. I reckon he left it there, when he took his own horse and saddle. We've sent his description all over the country."

Slowly Hashknife's features relaxed. The first shock was over.

"So La Clede is dead," he said thoughtfully. "And Louie, too."

"It wasn't Louie," replied the deputy. "Stevens said that Louie quit his job and brought another Chink to do the cookin'. It was his first day."

"Louie brought another Chinaman—well, that's interestin'. Where is Louie?"

"He bought a ticket to Frisco the day he quit the ranch," replied the sheriff. "I looked for him, you know. The feller, Wong, was new to this country."

"Have you held the inquest yet?"

"Yesterday. The jury fixed the guilt on Stevens."

"They prob'ly would. Have you buried 'em yet?"

"Not yet."

"What did you find on the Chinaman, when you searched him?"

"Not a danged thing."

"Them Mexican pesos, Len," said the deputy quickly.

"Oh, yeah. Five of 'em. They don't mean anythin'."

"I suppose not," said Hashknife thoughtfully. "Would you mind lettin' me look at the body of the Chinaman?"

"Why no—shore not."

They walked down to the doctor's home and office, where Hashknife looked at the remains of the Chinaman, a man of about thirty.

"He had some mighty expensive bridge-work in his mouth," said the doctor. "I know what that work costs."

"Kinda unusual for a cook, ain't it?" asked Hashknife.

"At least for a cow-ranch cook," smiled the doctor.

As they walked out to the street they met a man whom Hashknife had never seen in Wolf Butte. He was of medium height, slender, with close-clipped reddish hair, and was possibly forty years of age. Hashknife and Nick Harper walked on while the sheriff stopped to talk with this man.

"Cattle buyer," said the deputy. "New

man, workin' for some Chicago outfit. Name's Tracey."

"I thought he was a stranger," said Hashknife. "Related to the sheriff?"

"I don't know. I think he dropped in here to look over some of the Circle XO stuff. But that'll be tied up in court until they find out who will get it. Nobody seems to know whether La Clede had any relatives or not. He never told anybody, I don't guess."

"I never heard him mention any relatives," replied Hashknife.

"He wasn't much of a hand to talk. Just dropped in here and paid cash for the Circle XO. Seemed like a nice feller."

"Nice enough," admitted Hashknife. "Didn't know much about the cow business, but was willin' to learn."

The sheriff caught up with Hashknife and Nick, but said nothing about the cattle buyer.

"What's yore plans, Hartley?" he asked. "Naturally, you won't stay on the Circle XO."

Hashknife smiled slowly.

"In other words," he said, "yo're wonderin' where I'll meet my pardner. Well, you can rest your mind on that, sheriff; I'm not goin' to meet him. At least, not where you can touch him. I don't know where he's gone. He left no word for me; so I'm as much in the dark as you are. I'll go back to the ranch, get my war-bag, and move along, I reckon."

"Yeah, I reckon that's about all there is for you to do, Hartley. He said he'd bet you'd hang the man who murdered La Clede—and it wouldn't be him."

"I hope he's right," replied Hashknife seriously. "Anyway, it's worth tryin'. I reckon I'll ride down to the ranch and take a look."

"You'll be back here, won't you?" asked the sheriff.

"I don't know. Why?"

"Well, the prosecutin' attorney said he wanted a talk with you; but he ain't here today."

"For all the good it'll do him, it can wait," replied Hashknife, and went to his horse.

The two officers watched him cross the street, and the sheriff said:

"You stay here, Nick. I'm goin' to foller him. It may be that his pardner left some sort of a message. Anyway, I want to see which way he pulls out when he leaves the ranch."

HASHKNIFE rode his tired horse to the ranch and yanked off the saddle. He noticed with satisfaction that several good saddle animals, wearing the Circle XO, were around the place. He went up to the bunk-house, where he observed that the lock was broken on the door.

He felt sure that Sleepy must have left some message, and the first thing he spied was the old tablet on the table with the crude pencil drawing. Hashknife scowled thoughtfully for several moments as he studied the drawing.

"Good boy!" he whispered exultantly. "One-Eyed Gonzales and the triple peaks west of Agua Amarillo. He's headin' for the Mexican town of Yellow Water. But that's a long, long ways, with a sheriff in every county lookin' for you, cowboy."

He tore the drawing into bits and flung them into the yard, where the breeze scattered them quickly. He rolled and smoked a cigaret, leaning against the front of the bunk-house, as he tried to decide on his next move. Making up his mind, he went down to the stable, where he took his rope, cornered a good-looking gray gelding, and tossed the loop over its head.

"The Circle XO owes me two week's salary," he told the gray, "and yo're worth about that much—plus that leg-weary bronc of mine."

He saddled quickly and led the animal up to the house. The doors were still locked, but he found where Sleepy had broken into a window. He inspected the gun cabinet, wondering who had taken that pretty Winchester. He finally decided on a .30-30 carbine in a leather scabbard, because there was plenty ammunition.

A search of the house netted him exactly nothing. There was plenty of evidence that the place had been thoroughly ransacked by somebody. The floor and rugs still bore blood-stains, where the two bodies had laid. But Hashknife was not so interested in making an analysis of the crime as he was in finding Sleepy.

Carrying the rifle, he came out through the broken window and went around the house to his horse. Speaking softly to the nervous animal, he began fastening the rifle scabbard to his saddle.

Sping! A bullet creased along the upper part of his left arm, struck the saddle-horn and then thudded into the wooden wall of the house. Without giving a thought as to the cause of the shot, Hashknife plunged away from the horse and fell in a huddle on the ground. To an observer it would have seemed that Hashknife had been killed, or at least badly hurt.

The horse, frightened by the report of the rifle, twisted and turned, snorting softly. But Hashknife was out of reach of its hoofs, doubled up there on the ground, his face turned in the direction of the shot. His danger now was that the assassin might fire a second shot in order to be sure of his quarry.

But no shot came. Hashknife did not move a muscle. As he went down, his right hand had snaked the black-handled Colt from his holster, and it was now beneath his throat, gripped in his right hand. His keen eyes, mere slits beneath twisted brows, watched all movement around the stable, corrals and the hills beyond. Minutes passed, but nothing moved.

"Cut loose one shot, and ran away," decided Hashknife, and just at that moment he saw a man peering around a corner of the stable.

He stepped into full view, and Hashknife recognized the sheriff, Len Tracey. The sheriff had a six-shooter in his right hand and was coming toward the house. Hashknife's lips tightened. The sheriff was not over twenty feet away now. He stopped and looked back. At that moment Hashknife twisted and lifted his gun.

"Hyah, Tracey," he said coldly.

The sheriff whirled, jerked up his gun, and Hashknife fired. The tall cowboy had no intention of making a grandstand gunplay and it was not a deliberate attempt to disarm the sheriff. However, Hashknife's heavy bullet smashed into the cylinder of the sheriff's gun, knocking it from his hand.

And as the sheriff went staggering around, his right hand shocked, his thumb badly wrenched, Hashknife came off the ground like a coiled spring and sprang over to him and grabbed him by the collar. He swung him around, jabbing the muzzle of his gun against his middle.

And at that same moment a bullet thudded into the sheriff, and he collapsed against Hashknife. The bullet came from a thicket of willows to the left of the stable and behind the main corral. The frightened horse snapped its tie-rope, and as it wheeled around Hashknife caught the rope.

With a slap of his hat he drove the snorting horse along the house, being fairly lifted off the ground himself. He heard another shot as he jerked the animal to a stop in front of the bunkhouse, where he was shielded from the shooter.

Swiftly he climbed into the saddle, spurred around the rear of the ranch-house and went straight away, using the house as a shield against the bushwhacker in the willows. Five hundred yards away he rode up a slope to the crest of a hill, where he drew up and looked back at the ranch.

"This is one side of a hill I can get along without," he remarked aloud. He removed his big hat and waved it aloft. Ten feet over his head came the soft *flutt-t-t* of a bullet, and a moment later he heard the dull plop of a rifle shot.

Then he put on his hat, reined the horse, and galloped away down the other slope—heading south.

IT WAS siesta time at the Rancho Moreno. Ages old was this hacienda of the Morenos, with its time-colored walls, weathered wooden balconies, cloistered walks and the tower of bells, like one of the old missions.

Its original grant of thousands of acres to Don Abelardo Moreno had shrunk through the generations, but the old houses, half-hidden in the grove of huge white oaks, remained the same. The tiled patio was grooved from the feet of many people. Pigeons waddled and pecked around the circular well in the center of the patio, and birds sang from the roses along the thick walls.

Seated in the shade, on an iron bench near the patio gate, was Rance Moreno, the last male member of that particular Moreno family. Rance Moreno was forty-five years of age, handsome in a dissipated way, his hair as white as snow. He wore a soft white shirt, slightly soiled, a wrinkled pair of riding breeches and well-worn riding boots. Cigaret butts littered the ground in front of him, some of them still burning. Beside him on the bench was a tall glass, now empty, and a bottle of liquor.

Rance Moreno rubbed his palms nervously across his face, and leaned forward, bracing his elbows on his knees, his face between his hands. A pigeon alighted near his feet, and he frightened it away, with a scuff of his foot.

A man came slowly through the patio gate, and Rance Moreno looked up quickly. It was Hashknife Hartley—but what a different looking Hashknife than the one who had ridden away from the Circle XO ranch little over a month ago.

This one wore a battered old hat and hadn't shaved for weeks. His shirt and coat were wrinkled and soiled, his old pants bagging on his long legs, his shoes nearly worn through at the sole and sides.

Rance Moreno looked at him, a scowl on his face.

"What do you want here?" he asked coldly. Hashknife looked around the patio, his eyes on the well for a moment.

"I might at least use a drink of water," he said. "It's shore hell—walkin' in this country."

"Nobody forced you to come here, did they?" queried Moreno sarcastically. "Help yourself to a drink—and get along. We don't care for beggars down here."

"I'm not beggin'," replied Hashknife, as he shuffled over to the well and took a long drink of the cold water. He held out his hand, and a pigeon alighted on his arm.

Moreno was in no mood to trifle with any one. He wanted to be alone—to think.

"I told you to get out of here," he snarled at Hashknife. "You've had your drink—*vamoso!*"

Hashknife lifted the pigeon off his arm and came back to Moreno. He looked straight at Moreno for several moments.

"Thank you for the water," he said. "Yo're very kind."

"Damn you and your sarcasm!" snapped Moreno. "If you don't get your mangy carcass away from here, I'll—"

He reached back to the holstered gun at his hip, but slowly lifted it away. From somewhere, or nowhere, a gun magically appeared in Hashknife's right hand, its muzzle unwavering as it covered Moreno.

"Mister," said Hashknife, "you've got a lot to learn—both in manners and in reachin' for a gun. I don't reckon you'll ever be a gentleman—but you *could* learn to draw a gun."

Ranee Moreno blinked several times, his bloodshot eyes looking into the muzzle of the revolver. He drew a deep breath and looked up at Hashknife, only to find those gray eyes boring into him. Moreno shifted nervously and licked his dry lips.

"I—I don't understand where that gun came from," he said.

"That don't matter, does it?" asked Hashknife, as he carefully lowered the hammer and put the gun inside his coat.

Rance Moreno's manner changed again. The nerve of this scarecrow! Drawing a gun on a Moreno in the patio of Rancho Moreno!

"Don't say it," advised Hashknife, anticipating another pettish outburst. "Learn to control yore feelin's, even when yo're half-drunk. Thanks again for the water."

He started to limp away, but Moreno stopped him.

"Wait a minute!" he called. "Come back here."

He looked up, as Hashknife stopped near him.

"Looking for work?" he asked.

"That depends on the job, mister."

"My name is Rance Moreno. What can you do, Mr.—"

"By the name of Hartley," said Hashknife. "I can punch cows."

"*Vaquero,* eh? In those clothes?"

"After all is said and done," smiled Hashknife, "a cow cares little for styles."

"I just happened to think that I need a *vaquero,*" said Moreno. "One of my men left day before yesterday. I'll furnish you with some clothes."

"Right now, I need somethin' to eat. It's been twenty-four hours since breakfast."

"Have a drink? No? All right. Follow me to the kitchen, and I'll have the cook make you a meal."

The abrupt change in Moreno's attitude rather amused Hashknife. As they stepped up to the doorway of the house, a girl met them. Hashknife stopped short and looked at her. Framed in that old doorway, Hashknife thought she was the most beautiful girl he had ever seen. Except for her coloring and her chestnut hair, she was Spanish. She was dressed in a white shirt, riding breeches and boots.

"Eva," said Rance Moreno, "this is Mr. Hartley, who will work for me. My daughter, Mr. Hartley."

The girl seemed puzzled, as she looked at Hashknife. But she smiled and nodded her head.

"Welcome to Rancho Moreno," she said.

"Thank yuh, Miss Moreno," replied Hashknife gravely, and they went back through the big house to the kitchen, where an old Mexican woman was preparing vegetables.

"A meal for this man, *mujer,*" said Moreno kindly. "He is Mr. Hartley—our new *vaquero.*"

She seemed very severe, until Hashknife smiled at her.

"*Bueno,*" she replied softly. "I fix ver' queek, Señor Moreno."

"All right, *mujer.* Sit down here, Hartley; she works fast. When you finish, I'll meet you in the patio."

Judging from the repast she placed before Hashknife, they did not stint on meals at the Rancho Moreno. The old cook smiled, but said nothing until Hashknife said:

"You have been here a long time, *mujer?*"

"*Si, señor;* all my life. And before me, my mother, and my grandmother. The Olivas's always cook for the Morenos."

She said it proudly, as though it was an honor, and went about her work. Hashknife finished and walked back to the patio, where Rance Moreno was sitting beside the gate. The content of that bottle was considerably less now.

"That was shore a great meal," smiled Hashknife.

"Eh? Oh, yes. I forgot."

He pointed across the patio at an open door.

"The *vaqueros* sleep there," he said. "You will find an empty bunk, where your bed will be made. A shave, eh? And clothes. Later. You are tired. Go and sleep. *Mañana* we will talk. That is all."

"Thank you, Mr. Moreno."

"No thanks required. Have a drink? No? Don't you ever drink?"

"Yeah, I do—once in a while."

"So do I—every once in a while."

Hashknife carried his own razor, and with some borrowed soap he shaved cleanly. The old Mexican woman brought bedding. At the rear of the bunk-house was a rough wooden bathtub, with the water supply brought in through wooden pipes. He took a bath, the first in weeks, and climbed into a clean bed, although it was early in the afternoon.

"I wonder why Rance Moreno called me back," he asked himself. "It wasn't because of my beauty, that's a cinch. Mebbe it was the way I pulled a gun. And I wonder what he'd say if he knew that the officers of Wyoming are lookin' for me for the murder of a sheriff at Wolf Butte. But I've got a clean body, a clean face and a clean conscience; so why worry about the future?"

ABOUT eight miles due south of Rancho Moreno, across the Border in Mexico, was the rancho of One-Eye Gonzales. The ranch-house was a box-like affair, typically Mexican in architecture, of whitewashed adobe, with the rough roof poles extending outside about three feet. The yard was devoid of any vegetation, and the nearest tree was a dead sycamore, a hundred yards away.

Tilted back in a home-made chair, enjoying the shade of the front side of the house, was Sleepy Stevens. Seated in the doorway, on the floor, his bony hands hanging over his knees, was One-Eye Gonzales. Hunched against the side of the wall were two Mexicans, Pancho Ramirez and Diego Morales.

One-Eye was a villainous looking Mexican, with his uncovered sightless right eye and his huge black mustache. His long black hair looked as though it had never been combed. Pancho was short and fat, with little, pig-like eyes. Diego was small and skinny, with a long, turkey-like neck, a huge nose, and a mustache which grew well only on one side. An artist would say that Diego's mustache was "indicated on one side, but not inked-in."

For the first time in his life Sleepy Stevens wore a full beard. Nearly every day Sleepy rode over from Agua Amarillo, and sat there in front of One-Eye Gonzales' ranch-house. He was beginning to wonder whether Hashknife had ever discovered that drawing in the Circle XO bunk-house. Sleepy had come south very fast.

Knowing that the officers would be looking for him on a horse, he turned the animal loose at the first railroad, boarded a freight and made good connections. But he kept his guns. He got a bed-roll, in which he carried that take-down Winchester. Once across the Border, he felt safe for a time, at least. A "wanted" man was no novelty in Agua Amarillo; the place was full of them.

"Pretty queek," observed Pancho, apropos of nothing at all, "there weel be revolution in theese countree. Maybe I be beeg heneral."

"For theese love from Mike!" exclaimed Diego. "You? A heneral? You mak' me laugh your head off."

"Sure—w'y not?" agreed Pancho.

"Me, myself, personally, I'm mak' damn good heneral. I say, '*Alto!* Choorge!' "

"Like hell, we weel! You say, '*Alto!* Ron like hell, theese soldier got a gon.' "

"You make me seek," declared One-Eye. "W'at the hell you know from war? You see theese eye from me? You see? That ees war."

"Sure," nodded Pancho. "War damn bad. You 'ave war een Yuma weeth bartender, and he heet you weeth baseball bat. I'm spik from raglar war. You know—boogle blow, *soldado* march."

"W'at ees a boogle?" asked Diego.

"You don' know w'at ees a boogle? Eet go yaw, ta, ta, ta, ta."

"Oh, sure. Hees odder name ees coyote."

"You beeg fool, you can't blow on coyote."

"Jus' so easy as for you to be a heneral."

"When's this here war comin' off?" asked Sleepy, his eyes full of tears.

"Oh, t'ree, four day, I t'ink," replied Pancho loftily. "I'm not get my *uniforme* yet."

Sleepy chuckled as he rolled a smoke. These two Mexican thieves gave him a dozen laughs a day. For some unknown reason they had attached themselves to him and were never far away. He knew that their principal business was to steal horses and cattle for old One-Eye Gonzales. Agua Amarillo was too isolated for the Mexican Government to bother about the morals of the place. True, there was a small garrison there, but apparently badly corrupted.

One-Eye Gonzales was a cheerful old ruffian. He stole horses and peddled them down south, and sold stolen beef to Agua Amarillo. Sleepy knew that Gonzales was also one of a gang of smugglers, whose headquarters were in Agua Amarillo. There was Tex Severn, who apparently guided the destinies of Agua Amarillo.

Severn was a tall, thin, sallow-faced gambler, with cold eyes and an habitual sneer on his thick lips. Sleepy had not been quite accepted by the inner circle.

There was nothing for Sleepy to do down there until he was accepted. At least, there was no danger of being arrested, as long as he stayed south of the Border. Sleepy knew that there was not a chance in the world for him to prove his innocence in the killing of La Clede and the Chinaman. But, most of all right now, he wanted to see Hashknife Hartley.

He looked at One-Eye, who seemed half-asleep in the doorway.

"One-Eye," asked Sleepy, "what are the Seven Stars of Montezuma?"

The one eye blinked open. He looked at Sleepy, and then at the two Mexicans.

"W'y you ask?" he inquired.

"Nothin' special," replied Sleepy. "I heard a man speak of it."

"W'at man speak of that?"

"I heard a man speak of it to Tex Severn."

One-Eye nodded solemnly.

"Do you know how mooch ees half-meelion dollar, *Americano oro?*"

"A half-million in American gold, eh? No, I don't know how much it is, One-Eye; my brain ain't that flexible."

"*Mucho dinero.*"

"Yeah, I'll betcha it is. But this Seven Stars of Montezuma. I asked yuh what they are."

"*Siete diamante.*"

"Seven diamonds? Worth half a million. Yo're crazy."

"*Quien sabe?* A man weel pay all these money."

"Yeah? Where are them seven stars, One-Eye?"

The old Mexican shrugged his shoulders, his palms outstretched.

"That ees the wors' of eet—nobody know."

"Then there ain't no Seven Stars of Montezuma, eh?"

"*Por Dios*—yes. But nobody know where."

"Well, what's it all about, anyway? You Mexicans are about as intelligent as a flock of catfish. What's the story, One-Eye?"

One-Eye sighed deeply. This was siesta time, and this foolish American wanted questions answered.

"Sometime," he said, "eet ees not good to talk too *mucho*."

"I see; a secret, eh?"

"Weeth me—*si*."

"I'll ask Tex Severn."

"Sure; he knows."

"Well, I'll be ridin' back to town, One-Eye. Are you two jugheads goin' back with me?"

"Sure," replied Pancho. "That ees our job."

"So that's the answer," grinned Sleepy. "I wondered why you two chili peppers tagged me around all the time. Shucks, I thought it was my looks and my personality—and all the time you was hired to spy on me."

"*Madre de Dios!*" exclaimed Diego. "Pancho, you have speel our bean."

"That's all right," laughed Sleepy. "I won't tell on you."

"*Bueno!*" exclaimed Pancho, vastly relieved.

They got on their horses and rode slowly back to Agua Amarillo. Sleepy questioned them about the Seven Stars of Montezuma, but they knew nothing.

The main building in that huddle of adobe was the two-story adobe which housed the Foreign Club. Just why Foreign, and why Club, was unanswerable. There was a bar and a kitchen and a gambling room, with several rooms on the upper floor. Sleepy lived up there with seven other men who were wanted north of the Border.

From what Sleepy had learned since coming to Agua Amarillo, this was a headquarters for smugglers. Apparently it was a favored place to plot against the established government. In fact, he had learned that right here and now, a plot was hatching. But there was no smuggling going on. Something was wrong. Tex Severn and some of his men met once a day in a private room, where they held long sessions.

Sleepy stabled his horse and went upstairs in the Foreign Club, where he found Chuck Hadley stretched out on a bunk, reading. Chuck was a middle-aged cowboy who was wanted in New Mexico for shooting a deputy sheriff. To him, Sleepy had confided that he was expecting his partner any day now.

"Didn't show up yet, eh?" he said, reaching for a cigaret.

Sleepy tossed his hat aside and sat down on his bunk.

"Not yet, Chuck," he replied.

Slipping off his boots, he stretched out on the cot.

"Chuck, do you know anythin' about them Seven Stars of Montezuma?"

"Sh-h-h-h!" hissed Chuck quickly. "Not so loud, Stevens. Who told you about 'em?"

"I heard Severn mention 'em."

"Uh-huh," drawled Chuck thoughtfully. "I'll tell you somethin', cowboy; you've been under suspicion down here, and they don't quite trust you yet."

"I know I have. They've had Ramirez and Morales doggin' me all around. But that's all right—I've got no mustache to deceive the eye."

Chuck laughed softly, and turned to face Sleepy.

"Yo're all right with me, Stevens," he said. "What you know and what you don't know can't help nor harm me. Them Seven Stars of Montezuma are what's brought this here organization up against a stone wall. I ain't never seen 'em myself, but I know they're seven big diamonds, all exactly alike.

"I'm only tellin' you what I've heard. These seven stones was owned by some millionaire in South America, and was stolen. How they got out of South America and into Mexico I don't know.

They say that every one of 'em has been soaked in blood many times. But that ain't got a thing to do with us.

"The stones was here. They say they was to be sold to a collector for a half-million dollars. This gang down here had to raise eighty thousand. The way I get it, forty thousand had been raised. The other forty thousand was to come across the line. The stones was held by a feller named Harter.

"Well, I don't reckon anybody knows what happened. The man who brought the forty thousand from across the line was to meet Harter at a certain place. He says Harter was dead when he found him and the seven diamonds was gone. This man said he didn't know what to do, so he took his forty thousand dollars and high-tailed it across the line, where he got stuck up and relieved of all his money. Mebbe it sounds fishy, but mebbe it wasn't. *Quien sabe?*"

"And the half-million dollars' worth of diamonds never showed up since, eh?" mused Sleepy.

"I'll say they ain't; and this gang has been busted flatter than a derby hat under a box-car wheel. It's sort of a case of button, button, who's got the Seven Stars of Montezuma."

"Who's suspected?" asked Sleepy.

Chuck shrugged his shoulders and blew a gust of smoke from his nostrils.

"A man wouldn't live long if they suspected him, Stevens. You see, eighty thousand is a hell of a lot of money."

"Did Harter bring the diamonds here?"

"Hell, no! A Chinaman brought 'em. Oh, I don't mean a Chink. This was a high-class Chinaman. Harter belonged over in Kiopo City. He had a rep for straight dealin'. Both sides was willin' to let Harter have the stones and make the deal."

"What about this high-class Chinaman; did he get forty thousand?"

"Nope; Harter had it. The man who got the diamonds also got the money, as far as anybody knows. Mebbe he was the same one who made the stick-up at the border and got the other forty."

"What became of the Chinaman?"

"Aw, he faded out after a week. What could he do? He was sunk, like the rest of 'em."

"And what about the man who was supposed to handle the stones across the line?" asked Sleepy.

"He was to accept delivery in Kiopo City. You see, this Harter was an expert on smugglin'. He knowed every trick in the game. He was to handle that end of it, 'cause the Border Patrol had wind of a big deal and was watchin' awful close. Nobody except Harter knowed how he was goin' to get the stones across the line. Nobody except Harter knowed what happened at the finish. All we know is that Harter was shot down and cleaned out."

"So that's why there ain't no activity around here, eh?"

"Shore. They got cleaned out on the biggest deal they ever had. I dunno how much money they each had in the deal. Tex Severn had some, and I know Tom Tracey put up a lot of it."

"I ain't never seen Tracey," said Sleepy.

"He's been gone five or six weeks. Went to Frisco, I think. He owns the saloon in Kiopo City. I'll have a talk with Tex about you, Stevens. I'll tell him to call off them two Mexicans."

"Let 'em alone," grinned Sleepy. "They keep me from gettin' downhearted."

"All right, if they make you laugh. But I'll tell Tex to put you on salary. He pays each of us a dollar a day and a room. There'll be work enough, once they git on their feet again."

"That's nice of you, Chuck; I won't forget it."

"What the hell!" snorted Chuck. "We're all in the same boat. Dell Cline shot a gambler in Tucson. MacCord collected from two banks in Texas, where he didn't have no deposit, before they spotted him. Lew Nichols is wanted in three States for things too numerous to mention, and Ed Borch piled up five thousand dollars reward, dead or alive, before he came down here. But I don't trust any of 'em, Stevens. Me and you each made a mistake—that's why we're here. Them four fellers wasn't mistaken—they was habitual. Dell Cline was a horsethief, before he killed that gambler."

"No chance of you goin' back?" asked Sleepy.

"Not a chance. I shot that deputy by mistake. No, I don't mean that a feller makes mistakes when he shoots a deputy sheriff. Me and another feller agreed to shoot on sight. I knowed he was in a certain saloon, and I waited for him to come out. You know, there ort to be a law against deputy sheriffs wearin' a white shirt and a white Stetson, same as a danged ranahan was wearin'. I blasted down that white shirt and hat—and split me a lot of breeze all the way down to *Mejico.*"

"Mebbe you didn't kill him," suggested Sleepy.

"At twenty feet, with two .45 slugs? Cowboy, I can split a pea at that distance."

"Good shootin'," observed Sleepy.

"Yore danged right. They used to call me Split-Pea Hadley."

"It would be sort of a slow process, if yuh was hungry for soup," said Sleepy seriously.

"Aw, I didn't go into it commercially," grinned Chuck. "You pick up a six-gun as though you knowed which end the handle was hooked onto."

"Well, I ain't no pea-splitter, Chuck. In fact, I never killed the feller whose death drove me across the line."

"You didn't? Then why did you come?"

"I was the only one that knew it."

"Well, you might as well have killed him. You'd have had that much more pistol practice. It all counts in a pinch."

"I suppose that's right. What about this talk of revolution?"

"Mebbe. If it happens, we'll make money. Horses and beef from across the line, along with guns and ammunition. I want to make a stake. Then I'll go down around Mazatlan, marry me a seen-yuh-reeta and live easy. We'll work together, Stevens. You strike me as a hell of a good man to have at yore back, when hell busts loose."

"What makes yuh think I wouldn't run like hell, Chuck?"

"Yo're too bow-legged, boy. And that chin of yours wasn't built to foller runaway feet."

THE TWO cowboys at the Rancho Moreno were civil enough to Hashknife, but not exactly friendly, especially Shorty Vestal, the foreman. Shorty was six feet, five inches tall, and so thin that, as Jack Corbett said, he could wear a twelve-gauge shotgun for drawers. Corbett was a good-looking youngster, with a perpetual grin.

Shorty was laconic and noncommittal. Hashknife mentioned it to Corbett, who was more friendly than the rest.

"Shorty's funny," admitted Corbett. "He'd have to know you a long time before he'd trust yuh with a pitch-fork in a hay field. But he's a good cow-man. Been foreman here three years."

"Is Moreno a good man to work for?" asked Hashknife.

"As good as any, I reckon. I'll be doggoned if I can figure him out lately. He's shore hittin' the liquor hard. I feel sorry for Eva. She thinks he's the greatest man on earth—and too much whisky—well, mebbe she'll change her mind. Anyway, it ain't none of my business."

"Nor mine," agreed Hashknife. "This is a wonderful place."

"No better on earth. At that, I'd rather be further away from the Border if I was raisin' cows. It's a temptation."

"Do the Mexicans rustle cattle from this side?"

"They don't have to; the *Americanos* do it for 'em."

"I reckon there's some bad boys down there, Corbett."

"Go down to Agua Amarillo and take a look at 'em."

"I might do that," replied Hashknife.

Shorty Vestal talked with Corbett about Hashknife.

"I'm figuring him a Federal man," said Shorty. "Look at the way he showed up here—and look at him now."

"That don't mean a thing," smiled Corbett. "He shore knows which side to git onto a horse. And even if he was a Federal man, Shorty, he ain't tryin' to git anythin' on us."

"I know," replied Shorty.

"The Old Man's drinking a lot. He tried to bluff this tramp, and the tramp didn't bluff. Moreno said the tramp reached out in empty air and got a cocked gun. That's what whisky does to yuh. But it's Moreno's business—not mine."

"Somethin's wrong around this damn *rancho,*" declared Corbett. "I can feel it. What's wrong with the Old Man? He didn't drink this way a month ago. Now he acts jumpy and packs a gun all the time. If he's in trouble, why don't he let us in on it, Shorty? We're not angels, you know."

"His business, I reckon," replied the laconic Shorty.

Rance Moreno paid his men that evening after supper, but payday meant nothing to Hashknife. He owed Moreno for clothes and would still be in debt for several weeks.

Corbett wanted him to go to Kiopo City with them that night, but Hashknife declined because of lack of funds. Hashknife believed that Sleepy was somewhere south of the Border, possibly at Agua Amarillo, but he was not quite ready to go down there yet. Hashknife knew that there was a warrant out for him, charging him with the killing of Len Tracey, and he was afraid there might be somebody in Kiopo who would recognize him.

Hashknife would have agreed with Corbett that something was wrong. Rance Moreno stayed in the house most of the time, drank entirely too much liquor and acted jumpy. Hashknife could see that Eva was worried. She avoided him and seemed preoccupied much of the time.

It seemed strange, too, that Hashknife had not been given any work to do. Several times he rode away from the ranch with Corbett, but, except for range-branding a few calves, their work did not amount to anything.

It was a warm night, with no moon and little starlight. Hashknife stretched out on a plot of grass near the old well, smoking and taking his ease, while he listened to the mocking-birds. The only visible light in the ranch-house was in one of the upstairs windows, directly over a balcony. Hashknife knew that this was Rance Moreno's room.

A slight sound caused him to turn his head, and he saw three dim figures come through the patio gate and go quickly to the door of the ranch-house. He heard the old iron knocker thud softly against the door, and after a few moments the door was opened. He heard Mrs. Oliva say something in Spanish, but apparently she was quickly silenced.

The door was not closed, and there was a slight glow of light in the hallway, which showed that one of the men was still at the doorway, possibly acting as a lookout for the other two men.

Hashknife moved aside a few feet, where he would be screened by the well, and got to his knees. A movement at one of the upstairs windows attracted his attention. He caught a flash of white on the balcony, the swish of cloth against wood, as the wearer climbed over railing and climbed swiftly down a corner support.

But the man in the doorway had seen her, and as she ran across the patio, he caught her near the old well, and only a few feet from where Hashknife was crouched.

"Keep your hands off me!" she panted.

"Wait a minute," replied the man huskily. "What's the idea of all this slidin' down poles and runnin' away?"

"That is none of your business. Take your hands away."

"So yo're Moreno's pretty daughter, eh? Yeah, I've heard about you. Go ahead and scream. We happen to know that all the crew are in Kiopo City. Stand still, you little devil; I want a look at you."

But Eva tore away from him, dodged between Hashknife and the well, and when the man lunged at her, Hashknife's long arms encircled his legs, and he came crashing down, his head striking the tiled curbing of the well.

Eva had turned quickly, and Hashknife called softly:

"It's all right, Miss Moreno. He's out—cold."

"Mr. Hortley!" she exclaimed. "I thought you went—"

"No, I stayed here. Are those men after your father?"

"Oh, I don't know! They're—"

"Here—take this!" he said. It was the unconscious man's gun. "Get into the bunk-house and bar the door. Hurry!"

"But you—"

"I'll get along. Go fast!"

He turned and hurried to the doorway, thankful when he heard the bunk-house door close behind the girl. He could hear heavy boots on the stairs. They crossed the main room to the hall, where a voice called cautiously:

"All right, Mac?"

"All right," replied Hashknife, imitating the husky voice of the man he had knocked out at the well.

Two men came out, carrying a third. It was too dark for any identification.

"Mac, you and Dell take him out and tie him on the horse. Dell, you pull out for Kiopo City and see if you can find Tom. He may not be back yet, but if he is, tell him to come right down to Agua Amarillo. I'm goin' back and search that room some more."

Hashknife accepted the job, grasped the half-conscious Moreno, and let the man named Dell lead the way. The horses were tied some distance away in the deep shadow of an old adobe shed. There was no conversation. Dell took a rope off his saddle, feeling for the saddle-horn as he made his first hitch, and Hashknife hit him over the head with the barrel of his six-shooter.

Hashknife cautiously lighted a match and examined Dell. Satisfied that Dell would not interfere with things for a while, he dragged him around to the opposite side of the adobe. Rance Moreno blinked at the matchlight and scowled at Hashknife.

"You?" he breathed hoarsely.

"Listen!" hissed Hashknife. "Can you understand what I'm sayin'?"

Moreno nodded. Hashknife took him by the shoulders and dragged him into the shed.

"Stay here until we're gone, Moreno," he ordered, and walked out.

An idea suddenly occurred to him. He picked up Dell, roped him to the saddle, cut loose one horse, taking a chance that it was Dell's animal, and then squatted on his heels, waiting for the other man to come. He did not have to wait long. The man came hurrying from the patio gate.

"All set?" he asked anxiously.

"Yeah," grunted Hashknife.

The man untied his horse and swung into the saddle, reaching out for the lead-rope on the other horse.

"Dell pulled out, eh?" he observed.

"I'll lead this horse. I'm not takin' any chances on losin' him now. You follow behind, Mac."

Hashknife was thankful for this arrangement, because he wasn't sure where they were going, except that he believed they were from Agua Amarillo. He had no idea what it was all about. It had been a deliberate attempt to kidnap Rance Moreno; and there must be a good reason. He wondered who Mac might be, and what his reactions would be, when he awoke and found everybody gone.

The man on the lead horse seemed to know the country very well, and in less than a mile south of the ranch-house, they struck a trail. The man called back to Hashknife:

"Don't light any matches from here down to the line, Mac; that damn Border Patrol is all eyes these days, and I'd hate to have to answer any questions tonight."

AS USUAL, Sleepy had spent the afternoon sitting in front of One-Eye's place, watching the trails from the north. Off to the west he could see those three peaks, looking very much like the hat he had drawn on the one-eyed sketch. Inside the place, Pancho, Diego and One-Eye were playing a game with jumping beans for a peso a corner.

The beans were marked, placed inside a small circle, with a much larger circle drawn outside. The first bean over the outer circle would win two pesos. A little white worm, with convulsive tendencies, which grew inside this so-called bean, caused it to "jump".

At times one of the beans would roll swiftly, erratically, almost over the circle, where it would turn and go back just as swiftly, while its backer swore deep, dark, Spanish oaths. At least it was an honest game. The little worm was incorruptible.

The game had started at noon, and at five o'clock all three beans were still in the center circle. Sleepy yawned and went into the place, ready to ride back to Agua Amarillo. Every time Pancho or Diego decided to take up their peso and quit the game, one of the three beans would start jiggling toward the outer circle, causing much subdued excitement.

So Sleepy rode back to Agua Amarillo alone, arriving there about dark. He met Chuck Hadley in the Foreign Club.

"Tex was lookin' for you a while ago," said Chuck. "He said he had a job for you; but I guess he took Dell Cline along."

"I was over at One-Eye's place," said Sleepy.

"I told Tex that I thought you was. Had supper yet?"

"Not yet. Anythin' new, Chuck?"

"Tom Tracey's back again."

"Not knowin' anythin' about him, that ain't news."

"He's the big gun around here, Sleepy. Somethin' will start soon. Tom ain't no idler, y'betcha."

"Oh, he's the hair-pin that got nicked on them seven diamonds."

"He's the one. Let's go and eat."

They sat down on the rough stools at the counter, and a Chinaman turned from the stove to take their order.

"Louie!" exclaimed Sleepy. "Where the hell did you come from?"

It was the Chinaman who had left the Circle XO ranch in favor of Wong, who had been knifed to death. He looked blankly at Sleepy.

"No sabe yo'," he said blankly. "My name Ah Lee."

"Aw, hell!" snorted Sleepy. "Yo're Louie."

"No sabe. W'at yo' want eat?"

Sleepy grinned and scratched his chin.

"You got cousin named Louie?" he asked.

"I'm not t'lee, fo' cousin. Big flamily. My name Ah Lee."

"All right, Ah Lee; I'll take yore word for it. You got nice steak?"

"Can do. Yo' like plenty cook."

"Just like Louie always cooked 'em," agreed Sleepy.

"Where'd you know this pig-tail?" asked Chuck, when the Chinaman went back to the stove.

"I reckon I didn't," grinned Sleepy. "*His* name's Ah Lee."

"He knowed you wanted yore steak well-done."

"Mebbe Louie told him, Chuck."

Chuck left the counter and went across the room to talk with a man, and the cook came back to wipe off the counter.

"I quit wo'k eight 'clock," he told Sleepy. "We talk on stleet."

Sleepy waited around, until the cook went off shift, and they met a short distance from the Foreign Club.

"What are you doin' down here, Louie?" asked Sleepy curiously.

"W'at yo' do?" countered the Chinaman.

Without wasting any words, Sleepy told him what happened at the Circle XO ranch, and why he was below the Border.

"Wong my cousin," stated the cook, after Sleepy told his story. "Wong wo'k in Kiopo City. Wong send me letta sometime. I send Wong letta. We b'long same tong. Wong come Wolf Butte, 'longside me. He say, 'You go way—I take cook job'."

"Just like that, eh?" remarked Sleepy. "You quit good job, when Wong tell you to quit, eh? Stop lyin', Louie. Tell me the truth. Wong is dead—and the officers are after me for killin' him. But I never killed him. Why did you quit and give Wong that job?"

"Where Hashknife, Sleepy?"

"I don't know. Why did you quit and come down here?"

"I don't know who kill Wong."

"Why did you come down here?"

"Wong my cousin. He come see me. He say, 'You quit job fo' me, or I tell yo' not got papah foh stay this place'."

"Uh-hah! Illegally in the U.S.A.!"

"Yessah. He tell Louie go back China. I quit job, Yo' *sabe?*"

"Cinch. But why did Wong want that job?"

"No *sabe*. Wong wo'k long time Kiopo City. He have velly good café."

"Did Wong know La Clede?"

"No *sabe*. He not tell me."

"Where was you, when La Clede hired you?"

"I cook li'l bit in café in Wolf Butte."

"Did you work down here before you went up to Wyomin'?"

"No. I come Seattle. Go Missoula' wo'k in laundly. Bimeby, go Butte. Go Salt Lake. Bimeby go Wolf Butte. I no see this place befo' now."

Sleepy could see that Louie would be no help in establishing his innocence. It was rather difficult to determine whether Wong had gone to the Circle XO to protect or kill La Clede. No doubt Wong had a good reason for wanting the job, otherwise he would not have threatened to turn Louie over to the immigration authorities.

"I no wan' go China," stated Louie. "I stay heah. Bimeby, go Alizona again. You no heah flom Hashknife?"

"Not a word, Louie. I had to run like hell."

"Too bad. I lun like hell, too."

Sleepy went back into the Foreign Club, rather disappointed in his talk with Louie. Chuck Hadley was at the bar, having a drink with a man who was a stranger to Sleepy. The man was of medium height, rather slender, with reddish hair, which he wore closely clipped. His eyes were a peculiar shade of greenish-blue, and he looked closely at Sleepy as he walked past.

"Who's that?" he asked Chuck.

"A waddie named Stevens, Tom. Been around here long enough for Tex to accept him. He'll be a top-hand."

"Dodgin' the law?"

"For a double killin', I understand. He's all right."

There was a peculiar expression in Tom Tracey's eyes as he turned back to the bar.

"You don't know where Tex went, do you, Chuck?" he asked.

"He never tells anybody except the boys who are with him. He'll shore be glad to see yuh back. We all will. Hell, this place has been as dead as a can of corned-beef since you left."

Tom Tracey had a private room on the second floor, adjoining the one used by the six cowboys. When he went upstairs Chuck joined Sleepy.

"That was Tom Tracey," he explained. "He asked about you."

"They're shore careful about their help," smiled Sleepy.

"Why not? Look what a spy could do to their organization."

"Yeah, that's true. I don't blame 'em."

LATER in the evening, Sleepy Chuck and Ed Borch were playing seven-up at one of the rear tables when Tex Severn came in. He looked the crowd over carefully before coming over to the table.

"Is Tracey around?" he asked Chuck.

"He went upstairs, Tex."

"Good enough! Go up and—wait a minute! Unbar that door to the back stairs, and have 'm come down that way."

Chuck hurried for the stairs, and Tex motioned for the other two to follow him. They went out behind the building, where a stairway led up from the rear, and saw the three men coming down. Tex met them at the bottom and shook hands with Tom.

"I've got Moreno," said Tex.

"The hell you have!"

"I sure have. And he's goin' to talk, too, Tom. I got information that Moreno never drew a dime from the bank in Kiopo. He's goin' to tell us where he got that forty thousand dollars he's supposed to have lost in that stick-up after he found Harter dead."

"Well, that will be interesting," replied Tom. "I'd like to hear him tell about it."

It was as dark as the proverbial stack of black cats out there. They were obliged to use their hands instead of eyes. Chuck and Borch untied the captive, who was a dead weight in their hands.

"He's shore limp," panted Chuck. "Mebbe he's dead."

"Oh, he can't be dead!" exclaimed Tex. "He was two-thirds drunk when Dell smacked him on the jaw. He's all right."

"Jaw, hell!" snorted Borch. "There's sticky blood on his head."

"Bring him upstairs," ordered Tex. "Can't see nothin' down here."

They all trooped up the back stairs, with Chuck and Borch carrying the unconscious man. One glance at him in the lamplight almost caused the two men to drop him.

"Dell Cline!" exploded Tracey. "Why, damn it, Tex!"

Tex leaned against the wall, his eyes wide. He licked his lips and stared at Dell, who was squirming and muttering.

"What happened, Tex?" asked Tom.

"Gawd!" exclaimed Tex. "I don't know. Where's MacCord?" His eyes flashed around the small crowd.

"Find MacCord," he said huskily. "He—he was with me. Damn it, him and Dell brought Moreno—I'm damned if I can see—"

"Just what did you do, Tex?" queried Tom.

"We went past Kiopo. Dell nosed around and discovered that all of the Moreno punchers was there. We went to the rancho. Me and Dell went in, while MacCord guarded the door. We got Moreno and took him down to the patio, where I turned him over to Dell and MacCord. They was to tie him on the extra horse. I told Dell to go to Kiopo and look around for you—and if he found you, to tell you to come down here.

"I went back to Moreno's room, where I made a search of everythin'. Then I went out to the horses and found Mac there, with Moreno tied to a saddle. From there, we came straight down here, without a single stop."

"You found MacCord at the horses, eh?" mused Tom. "Sure it was MacCord?"

"Well, I'm damn sure—"

Tex hesitated and looked at Dell Cline.

"Well," he said, "I'm as sure as I could be—in the dark."

Dell Cline was showing signs of recovering, and Tom gave him a drink from a bottle he had on the table. Dell choked over the strong whisky, and looked around the room. They helped him into a chair, gave him another drink, and Chuck poured some water on his head. The blow on the head gave him a nasty scalp wound and a rather knobby appearance, but no permanent injury.

Dell remembered a little. He remembered starting to fasten the rope to the saddle-horn, but from that time he was rather blank. Chuck and Borch went down and looked at the horses, of which there were only two. Tex was thoroughly puzzled. He knew every one of the Moreno cowboys, as did Dell Cline; and Dell swore they were all in Kiopo City.

"Mebbe MacCord double-crossed us," said Tex.

"Naw, he wouldn't do that," denied Chuck.

"But," insisted Tex, "there was only Moreno, his daughter and the old Mexican woman. We know damn well Moreno didn't do it; he wasn't in no shape to hurt anybody."

"A woman couldn't rope Dell on a saddle," interrupted Chuck.

"No woman hit me," groaned Dell, feeling of his head. "Damn it, every bone and muscle in my body is pulled loose."

"I reckon you'll survive," snarled Tex. "Now, what's to be done?"

"Ask yourself," retorted Tom. "You've put Moreno on the defensive. He won't be alone next time. You certainly bungled things."

They left Dell on the bed, a bandage around his aching head, and went downstairs. Sleepy was only amused by the incident, because he didn't know who Moreno was, nor why they wanted to kidnap him. Tex and Tom went to the bar to get a drink, and Sleepy sauntered over to the counter, where Lew Nichols was getting his supper. Sleepy stopped at the end of the counter to roll a cigaret, when he saw Louie, the Chinese cook, standing in the front doorway.

With a slight jerk of his head, Louie signaled Sleepy to come outside. Sleepy lighted his cigaret, and walked slowly to the doorway, where he stood, looking into the dark street.

He couldn't even see Louie out there. Finally he stepped out, walked quickly past a front window, whirled and peered cautiously back into the room. He knew that Tom Tracey had been watching, when Louie gave the signal. He saw Tom call Ed Borch, speak swiftly to him, and Borch came quickly to the front. Tom had told him to follow Sleepy, who stepped around the corner, almost colliding with a man.

"Sleepy!" whispered Hashknife.

"Pardner!" muttered Sleepy. "Back up—we're follered."

Slowly they moved away along the side of the building, as Borch came to the corner. The light was strong enough for them to distinguish Borch, but he could not see them.

For several moments he seemed undecided which way to go. Then he came, walking cautiously on his toes, hurrying toward the rear of the building. There was no way for Hashknife and Sleepy to avoid him and not be seen, because he was walking right into them.

And Mr. Borch got the shock of his life, when he walked straight into Sleepy, who grasped him tightly around the waist. He gave a smothered grunt when Hashknife's left arm encircled his throat. Down he went on his back, choking and gasping, unable to put up any resistance, while a voice whispered in his ear:

"One bleat out of you, and I'll pat yore head with a gun."

Ed Borch had no desire to be patted with a gun, and in a few moments he was tied, hand and foot, with a heavy neckerchief between his teeth, and tied tightly at the back of his head. They picked him up and placed him against the wall of the Foreign Club.

Then Hashknife and Sleepy shook hands.

"We can't talk here," whispered Sleepy. "Mebbe we better pull out together. When Borch tells what we done to him I won't last a minute with the gang."

"Borch, eh? What's his job down here, Sleepy?"

"Keepin' away from the law. He's worth five thousand, dead or alive, across the Border. My golly, pardner, can't we go some place and have a talk? I've waited at One-Eye's place every day and—didja find my picture writin' at the Circle XO?"

"I shore did. The law wants me, too, Sleepy. They say I killed Len Tracey. I've been on the dodge ever since you left there."

"Lovely Dove! Who *did* kill him, Hashknife?"

"I don't know. You say this feller was follerin' you?"

"Yeah. They seen Louie tip a signal to me. You saw Louie?"

"I shore did. Listen, Sleepy; I'm at Moreno's *rancho*. If you—"

"Was it you who played three-card monte with Dell Cline?"

"Guilty. But I don't know what it's all about—yet. See if there's an extra horse behind this place. I'll take care of Mr. Borch. You stay here and play the game. If I want you, I'll get in touch with you at One-Eye's place. Keep goin' there. Don't let anybody know I've arrived. Sleepy, we've got one hell of a job to clear our names of all that murder stuff. I'll meet yuh soon, and we'll talk plenty."

In the Foreign Club Tom and Tex waited for Borch to return. Chuck joined them at the bar, and Tom asked him just what he knew about Stevens.

Chuck shrugged his shoulders.

"Why ask me? Stevens admits that he's wanted for a double killin' somewhere in the States. He didn't say where. You know, we don't ask a lot of questions down here."

"He goes out to One-Eye's place almost every day," said Tex.

"I know," nodded Chuck. "He's lookin' for his pardner."

"Who's his pardner?" queried Tom.

"I never asked him. Aw, he's all right, Tom."

"I'm not so sure. Where'd that new Chink cook come from?"

"He drifted in," stated Tex. "Damn good cook. Better than the last one we had."

Tom scowled thoughtfully as he said:

"I'm sure I seen the Chink signal to Stevens. Maybe I'm wrong. But we'll have some big deals coming up soon, and I want to be damn sure who's working for us."

They were still at the bar, when Sleepy sauntered in. Apparently he had only been out for a stroll. He yawned and sat down at a table, where he picked up the cards and proceeded to make a solitaire layout.

"Maybe I was wrong," said Tom.

"Shore," agreed Tex. "Well, I'll buy a drink."

LONG after Sleepy left One-Eye's place, the three Mexicans continued to play their jumping bean game. But as the air grew cooler, the worms in the beans were less active. One-Eye brought out bottles of tequila, that potent distillation of the maguey plant, which brightened the conversation and added to the game materially.

When the beans would no longer take active interest, One-Eye brought out beans and beef for his two guests.

"Theese ees feet for a quin," declared Pancho. *"Viva la carne!"*

"W'at the hell ees a quin?" asked Diego. "You spik *Americano* like feesh."

"You got all my brains in your feet," declared Pancho disgustedly. "You play card, and you don't know w'at ees a quin! Hace, keeng, quin—"

"Oh, *reina!* No wonner I don' onnerstand. You spik ver' bad. You say quin. You mus' say quin. That geeve me idea w'at you mean."

"Some day," declared Pancho darkly, "I'm goin' cut hoff my ear and throw heem right in your face. 'Ow you like those, eh?"

"Don' count my cheeken, biffore he ees dead," returned Diego loftily. "Sometime he ees bad egg."

"Leesen, you two *idiota,*" said One-Eye. "You wan' do job for me?"

"'Ard work?" queried Pancho cautiously.

"Por Dios! I geeve you food, I geeve you tequila—and you ask ees eet 'ard work I'm asking. No!"

"Buena!" exclaimed Pancho expansively.

"He spik for jus' one," reminded Diego, helping himself to more liquor.

"You know w'ere ees Rancho Moreno?" asked One-eye.

"Sure," replied Pancho. "I fin' heem in the dark weeth your eyes shut."

"You know Rance Moreno?"

"Sure, I know heem."

"Not for spiking—jus' looking," corrected Diego.

"Tonight," said One-Eye, "you go fin' Moreno. You tell heem to come see One-Eye. You do theese, I geeve more tequila *mañana.*"

Pancho wiped his greasy lips on his sleeve, took one more drink, shoved the bottle inside his shirt, and got to his feet.

"Huh!" grunted Diego. "We go odder side from theese Border, eh. *Soldado* catch us, and I go to jail for the rest of your damn life."

"No *soldado* at Rancho Moreno," assured One-Eye.

"You got damn good eye. I can see good, too, but I can't see *ocho milla.*"

"Eight mile," sighed Pancho. "Come, Diego."

They got on their old horses and headed for the Border, which they crossed some distance east of Kiopo City. Circling the town, they struck the road to Rancho Moreno a mile west of Kiopo. They invariably rode in single-file, with Diego at least fifty feet in the rear.

Hashknife, Tex Severn and their captive had been gone about ten minutes, when Pancho and Diego rode cautiously up near the patio gate and dismounted. Diego was not so happy.

"One time," he reminded Pancho, theese Vestal say to me, 'You cock-eye *Mejicano,* eef I ever fin' you 'ere once more, I shoot you once for every frijole you ever eat.' "

"Hees lie," declared Pancho. "He can't count so many."

"Huh! Suppose he shoot me t'ree, four time hextra? 'Ow you like that?"

"Shut off," replied Pancho. "We go fin' Moreno."

Grumbling softly, Diego followed at a careful distance. Like a burned child dreading the fire, Diego was ready for flight. He had no wish to encounter the lanky Shorty Vestal, who might make good his threat.

MacCord awoke beside the well, suffering from a thoroughly-bumped cranium. He had no idea that any time had elapsed. As far as he knew, Tex Severn and Dell Cline were still in the ranch-house. He remembered the girl, and wondered where she had gone. He remembered that he had fallen and struck his head on the curbing of the old well. Bracing one hand against the well, he cogitated. There was no girl in sight, no sounds, except the sleepy twitter of the birds. He felt for his gun, and discovered only an empty holster. He swore softly and rubbed his aching head.

Tex Severn had ordered him to guard that doorway. In case any one came to the rancho, MacCord was to yell a warning. If they were too close, he was to use his own judgment about using a gun. He started for the back door and found that his knees were wobbling a bit.

He stopped in the darkness, trying to regain his equilibrium, when Pancho bumped into him.

"Tex!" yelped MacCord. It was more of a squeak than a yelp, and with both hands he grasped the startled Pancho.

"*Dios!*" yelped Pancho, and began fighting with his hands and feet.

Diego was so frightened that he forgot to go back through the gate. Gathering all his possible speed, he went across that patio, missing the well by inches. The patio was not familiar ground, but just now Diego Morales was going places, regardless, flinching at every jump as he visualized bullets coming in his direction.

He also had a vision of going over the patio wall. This was all very nice, except that he crashed into the bunk-house door, and went head-over-heels into a huge, climbing rose bush. And as he fell, a revolver thudded inside the bunk-house, and a shower of splinters blew out from the door. Eva Moreno was following Hashknife's advice.

Diego got to his feet, scratched and torn from the thorns, but full of palpi-

tating energy. He was imbued with one idea—speed. Straight back toward the gate he went, whimpering a little prayer, his feet thudding on the old tiles.

Wham! A shotgun, loaded with black powder, in the nervous hands of Rance Moreno, blared from the balcony, lighting up the patio like a flashlight just as Diego crashed into a staggering figure near the gate. They both fell completely out of the patio.

For several moments there was complete silence again. Then Diego's voice, quavering and panting:

"Now, I lay me down for slip. I'm pray—I'm pray—"

"Go ahead," interrupted Pancho's tired voice. "I'm go back to *Mejico.* Theese damn place ees gone crazy."

"Sure," agreed Diego. "Theese *rancho* ees bog-house. Are you 'urt?"

"W'at you theenk? I'm leek seven beeg men—me."

"Huh! I'm h'only leek seex; that ees all I'm can catch."

They got together and limped out to their horses. That is, they limped out to their horse—one was gone, thanks to MacCord.

"W'ich way ees south?" queried Pancho, after they were both on the same horse. "I am all turn 'round."

"Don' ask me," wailed Diego. "I am all turn outside in. *Madre de Dios*, don' stan' 'ere! Geeve a keek on theese 'orse. This place make me seek."

"I'm fil same way. But we never geeve Moreno theese message."

"Sure. We tell One-Eye tow men ees not enough; he mus' send army."

"*Buena!* That ees damn smart idea. Send *mucho soldado,* weeth machinn-gons."

Kicking the old horse into a trot, they made a guess at a southerly direction, and disappeared in the darkness.

IT WAS about midnight, when the Rancho Moreno cowboys gave three separate and distinct yelps, fired three shots skyward, got on their horses and departed homeward. Shufflin' Sanderson, deputy sheriff, who was also slightly pie-eyed yelled a weak good-night and went erratically toward the sheriff's office, where he slept.

At the doorway he tripped over something and went sprawling on the old wooden sidewalk and skinned his chin. Sitting there against the wall, he cursed feelingly and lighted a match. Then he got to his feet, stepped over the obstruction and lighted a lamp in the office, after which he dragged the bound form of Ed Borch into the office.

He placed the captive in a chair, cut away the gag, and examined Borch critically.

"Jist where in the devil did you come from?" asked Shufflin'.

Borch spat painfully and told Shufflin' where he could go.

"You didn't walk here, that's a cinch," stated Shufflin'. "Hm-m! All you need is a shippin'-tag, feller. Huh!"

Shufflin' rubbed his chin and considered Ed Borch.

"Mind tellin' me about it?" he asked. Borch spat, but refused to talk.

"Huh!" grunted Shufflin'. "Lemme see-e-e."

He opened the sheriff's desk and began pawing over some papers. Not finding what he desired, he opened a desk drawer, and drew out a mass of loose papers. The finding of Ed Borch had sobered the deputy quite a bit. He found a certain paper, read it carefully and looked at Borch. Borch turned away, and Shufflin' chuckled.

"Sandy Claws brought yuh, feller! Yuh can't fool me. Edward Borch, eh? Five thousand dollars, dead or alive. Welcome home, Eddie."

The door banged open, and a half-dressed man bounced in. He was slight and grizzled, his hair standing on end.

"Damn it, Shufflin', I told yuh to make that Moreno bunch stop shootin' late—What the hell yuh got here?"

"Sheriff Toland," replied Shufflin' gravely, "I'd like to have you meet Edward. Borch. Here's his recommendations."

Shufflin' held out the reward notice to the sheriff, who looked at it, glanced at Shufflin', and smiled curiously.

"Edward Borch, eh? I'm damned; where'd you git him, Shufflin'?"

"Oh, I jist went out and picked him

up, Abe. You said I'd been wastin' my time around here; so I thought—"

"Who brought him, Shufflin'?" queried the sheriff seriously.

"You forgot to put on yore pants," said Shufflin'.

"What if I did? Didn't I tell you to stop them punchers from shootin' around here late at night? Folks don't like it."

"I was busy pickin' up val'ble prisoners, Abe. It ain't every night that we can make twenty-five hundred apiece."

Sheriff Toland rubbed his stubbled chin thoughtfully.

"That's true, too," he admitted. "But where'd you find him?"

"Settin' against the door out there. I fell over him. Look at my chin, will yuh? Now, don't go saying that the only way I'd ever take a prisoner—"

"Never mind that. Let's put him in a cell. Got anythin' to say, Borch?"

"Go to hell," gritted Borch.

"He's shore full of advice," grinned Shufflin', "but it's always the same. Mebbe he's got one of them single-track minds."

HASHKNIFE was asleep when the boys came home. Shorty Vestal discovered the bullet hole in the bunk-house door and queried Hashknife about it.

"I was cleanin' my gun," replied Hashknife seriously, "and it went off."

"Oh!" exclaimed Shorty, his voice filled with unbelief, but he dropped the subject.

Shorty was the first one up next morning, and he came in, bringing three sombreros which he picked up in the patio.

"How do you account for those?" he asked Hashknife, who sat up in his bunk and looked at the three hats.

Two were shapeless old Mexican hats, but the third was a fairly expensive Stetson.

"You say you found 'em in the patio," remarked Hashknife. "That's funny. Why, I never did hear of a hat shower before. Assorted sizes and ages, too. Well, well!"

Shorty grunted and dumped the lot on the table, after which he walked out and closed the door.

"Bullet hole in the door and three hats in the patio," mused Jack Corbett aloud. "I wonder what it means."

From the kitchen doorway came the deep-toned clang of the breakfast bell, and they hurried to get dressed.

Hashknife and Corbett were the only ones at the table, but Shorty Vestal came as they were finishing. He sat down and looked across the table at Hashknife.

"Moreno wants to see yuh, Hortley," he said. "Upstairs."

Hashknife picked up his hat and walked into the main room. Eva was on the stairs, as he came up.

"Thank you for last night," she said.

"Yo're mighty welcome," drawled Hashknife smiling. "I had a real nice time."

"I'm glad you came back."

"Well, I'm kinda glad myself, Miss Moreno."

She leaned in closer to him and whispered seriously.

"Look out for Shorty Vestal."

Hashknife looked curiously at her and glanced back down the stairs.

"Look out for him—why?"

"Sh-h-h-h!" she whispered, and went swiftly down the stairs.

Hashknife watched her leave the main room, and turned back to continue his way to Rance Moreno's room. The door was open, and Moreno, clad in white, was sitting by the front window. He was sober, but pale, and he seemed much older. He managed to force a smile, as he indicated for Hashknife to close the door. The tall cowboy came over near the window and sat down.

"Hortley," said Moreno, "I sent for you; and now I don't know what to say."

"That's all right," smiled Hashknife. "Let's forget it."

"Forget that you saved my life—saved my daughter? Could any man be so ungrateful?"

"Well, things like that happen. When they do, we try to do what seems to be the right thing. No thanks required. I had a good time."

"A good time?" Moreno's brows lifted slightly.

"I reckon we all have our own ideas of fun. I went to Agua Amarillo with the man named Tex, and we took the man named Dell along, roped to a saddle. I reckon it was quite a shock when they discovered Dell instead of you."

Moreno nodded grimly. "I imagine it was. They tried to capture my daughter, too, it seems."

"Well, a feller was chasin' her around the well, when I interfered, and he got his head bumped."

Moreno nodded and glanced through the window.

"I waited until you were gone," he said, "before I came back to the house. I couldn't find Eva. I was up here, when more men came. I heard a commotion in the patio and stepped out on the balcony with a shotgun. It was too dark to distinguish anybody. A shot had been fired in the bunk-house, and I fired at a running object. Later, Eva came from the bunk-house. It was she who fired that shot. She said you gave her a gun and told her to use it if they came after her."

"I see," smiled Hashknife. "That accounted for the bullet hole in the door and the three hats in the patio."

"You told Shorty Vestal that you accidentally fired the shot through the door."

"I know. Did you tell him different?"

"Yes, I told him the whole story. You see, Vestal is going to marry Eva some day, Hartley. He's a good man."

Hashknife looked curiously at Moreno, but said nothing. He was wondering why Eva had warned him against Shorty Vestal.

"We are an old, old family—we Morenos," said Moreno wearily. "I'm the last male member, and I am the only one to ever marry outside our own blood. Eva is half English."

"She's a mighty sweet girl," said Hashknife.

Moreno nodded thoughfully, frowning as he said:

"We may as well be frank about things, Hartley. As I told you, Eva is to marry Shorty Vestal."

Hashknife smiled slowly. Moreno's meaning was very clear.

"Yore private affairs don't mean a thing to me, Moreno," he said, "or are you in doubt about the girl *wantin'* to marry Vestal?"

"I have explained sufficiently, I believe."

"You made it pretty plain. Was that what you wanted to talk with me about? If it is, yo're barkin' up the wrong tree. The little lady has spoken to me about three times since I came here. I'm old enough to be the lady's father, and my skin is too tough for one of Cupid's arrows to even scratch. Are you satisfied now?"

"Yes—perfectly, Hartley, you are a gentleman."

"I'm no such a damn thing, Moreno; I'm merely human. On the spur of the moment, I pulled off a deal last night. Personally, I don't know whether I was right or wrong; but I fight for the side that seems to be the underdog. You took me in and gave me a job, and I'd be a polecat if I didn't take yore side in a fight—right or wrong."

"Thank you. I believe that is all."

Hashknife left the room and went down the stairs no wiser than he had been, as far as local conditions were concerned. No doubt Shorty Vestal was jealous and had talked with Moreno about Eva. But Hashkife knew he had not given Shorty any cause for jealousy.

It suddenly occurred to him that Shorty might want to get him off the *rancho;* and for some other reason than jealousy.

HE WALKED out to the stables, where he found Jack Corbett. Jack was about twenty-four, a lithe, clean-looking young cowboy, with strong features and a pair of very blue eyes. Vestal had ridden away, and Jack was saddling.

"Shorty said for you to go with me," said Jack. "We're goin' over into the Paint Pot country, lookin' for strays. We brought a bunch out of there a while ago, 'cause water was scarce, and mebbe we left some stragglers."

Hashknife saddled a horse and they rode away. Corbett seemed rather quiet, but Hashknife laid that to the fact that all the boys had imbibed too much whisky in Kiopo City last night.

"Funny thing about them three hats in the patio," said Corbett.

"Yeah, it was kinda queer," admitted Hashknife.

They rode along for a mile or more, when Corbett said:

"Was Moreno sober this mornin'?"

"Apparently," nodded Hashknife. "Nice feller."

"I suppose that was the right thing to say."

Hashknife grinned slowly. "It sounded nice, anyway, Jack."

"Uh-huh. I'm glad Shorty sent you with me. I don't care a damn what yo're doin' down here. There's no deadwood on me; so we can talk out loud to each other."

"I don't quite get yore meanin'," replied Hashknife.

"Shorty says yo're a Federal detective. Mebbe you are; it's all right with me. He says yore name prob'ly ain't Hortley, but that's all right, too. Names don't mean a thing to me."

Hashknife grinned widely, turning sidewise in his saddle.

"Shorty don't like me, not even a little bit, does he, Corbett?"

"Well, he prob'ly won't send you any Valentines next February if that's what you mean."

"He's in pretty solid with Moreno, eh?"

"Meanin' what?" asked Corbett.

"Well, he gave me to understand this mornin' that Shorty Vestal is goin' to marry Eva."

"Yea-a-a-ah?" Corbett drew a deep breath, shut his jaw tightly and looked away. Hashknife looked at the young cowboy sharply.

"The boot kinda pinches you, don't it, cowboy?" he asked.

Corbett turned slowly and looked at Hashknife.

"He—he didn't say when, did he?"

"He said it would be sometime."

"Sometime, eh?"

"You didn't know it, Jack?"

"That he wanted Eva? Certainly I knew it. But she won't marry him. Damn Rance Moreno!"

"Wait a minute," said Hashknife. "You say she won't. It strikes me that mebbe you've been tryin' to stake out a claim, too."

"Tryin' to?" queried Corbett. "Damn it, Hortley, I worship the dirt she walks on, I tell you. And—and she likes me, too. Keep this under yore hat; I've got skinned shins from crawlin' up to the balcony at ungodly times of night, jist for a few words with her through her window. Nobody else knows—except you."

"Well, yore secret is shore safe with me," replied Hashknife. "If I can help you any—tell me what you want done. Corbett, I can't tell you about the three hats in the patio, except from what Moreno told me this mornin', but I can tell you a queer story. Mebbe you can tell me what it all means—Moreno apparently won't tell."

And as they rode along through the brushy hills, Hashknife told Jack

Corbett what happened last night at the Rancho Moreno. He did not tell Jack about bringing Ed Borch to Kiopo City, nor about his meeting with Sleepy Stevens. Jack listened in amazement.

"I'm just as much stuck as you are," he swore. "Like I said yesterday, there's somethin' queer goin' on. Eva don't know what it is. All she knows is that her father is in serious trouble."

"Uh-huh. And Shorty Vestal thinks I'm a Federal detective, eh?"

"Yeah, he thinks you are."

"Do you know of any reason why he should be scared of a Federal detective?"

"No, I don't. Moreno has a fine reputation. He's ace-high with everybody in this country. I'd shore hate to think that Moreno was up to any crooked work."

"Well," said Hashknife seriously, "for yore own information, Jack; I'm not a Federal detective. In fact, I ain't a detective of any kind. And my name is Hortley."

"It's all right with me," said Corbett. "I'll let Shorty think what he pleases."

"That's right. Do yuh know anythin' about a feller named Tom Tracey?"

"Shore. He runs a saloon in Kiopo City. He's a red-headed feller."

"Red-headed, eh?" Hashknife's mind flashed back to that day in Wolf Butte, when Len Tracey stopped to talk with a red-haired cattle buyer, whose name was Tracey.

"Was he ever a cattle buyer?" asked Hashknife.

"Not since I've knowed him," laughed Corbett. "He's a cold-blooded gambler and saloon-keeper. Hell, he wouldn't know one cow from another. You don't happen to know him, do you?"

"No, I don't know him, Jack. The name reminded me of a man up in Wyomin', who was supposed to buy cows."

"That must have been a different person."

"Yeah, I s'pose it was. Anyway, he don't mean anythin' to me. Have you and the girl made any plans?"

"Plans? A million of 'em—and none of 'em any good. I ain't got enough money to go places. If she married me, she'd lose the Rancho Moreno. Rance Moreno is hard as hell, when he feels thataway. No, we can't see our way clear a-tall. I reckon we'll just have to let things drift. But I'll tell you this much—she's not goin' to marry Shorty Vestal."

"I TELL yuh, I don't know what happened," insisted MacCord, as he sat in Tex Severn's room, being questioned by Tex.

"You say the girl slid down a porch-post?" queried Tex.

"Yeah. I thought mebbe she was goin' for help, like I just told yuh. I dunno what tripped me—it was all done so quick. Mebbe I fell over a dog—I dunno."

"And you came straight down here last night, eh?"

"Yeah, I shore did."

"Which means," observed Tex, "that you was knocked out quite a while. Yore head looks like it had been bumped plenty hard. But all of this don't tell us how Ed Borch got into jail at Kiopo City. He goes out to follow Stevens, and ends up in jail. What does Stevens know about it?"

"Not a thing. I talked with him this mornin'. He never even seen Borch."

"Mebbe he's lyin'."

"I don't think so."

"Well, there's somethin' queer at the bottom of it all. When Tom comes down tonight, he might have some information. Him and that jug-headed sheriff up there are good friends; so Tom might get a chance to talk with Borch. Where's Stevens now?"

"Aw, he's gone out to One-Eye's place. Spends most of his time out there, waitin' for his pardner to come from the States."

Tex Severn served a drink from his private stock, and after they had imbibed, Tex said:

"I've been doin' a lot of thinkin' in the last couple days. I've kinda combed every angle, trying to figure out where them stones went. Have any of you fellers thought about Frenchy La Clede?"

"Where would he be in?" asked one of the boys.

"He was Tom's top gambler. Naturally he'd know quite a lot about Tom's business; and Frenchy was nobody's fool."

"He left here about that time, didn't he?" asked Nichols.

"The day before, I think," replied Tex. "Went east, Tom said. Now, I'm not accusin' Frenchy, you understand. He wasn't the hell-bender kind, but he was plenty deep. If Tom did happen to let him in on the deal, mebbe he double-crossed all of us."

Tom Tracey came earlier than usual, and went to the private room with Tex and Chuck Hadley.

"Where's Stevens?" asked Tom, when they were in the room.

"He's out at One-Eye's place, I reckon," replied Chuck.

"I've got him lashed to the mast," grinned Tom. "I had a talk with Shorty Vestal this afternoon, and he told me about a new puncher named Hortley, out at the Rancho Moreno. He described this *hombre* plenty good.

"Then I had a talk with Abe Toland, the sheriff, and he let me talk with Ed Borch. Ed says that Stevens and another man, who was very tall, jumped him that night, and he heard Stevens call this man Hashknife. The tall one packed Borch on a horse and left him in front of the sheriff's office at Kiopo.

"The description Shorty gave me covers Hashknife Hartley—damn him!"

"Why damn him?" queried Tex.

"Because he's wanted for murderin' my brother."

"For murderin' yore brother?"

"That's what I said, Tex. I tipped off the sheriff, and by this time, Hashknife Hartley is behind the bars. Stevens is also wanted for murder. We can either wipe him out down here, or turn him over to the sheriff."

"Well, I'll be the uncle of a black cat!" exclaimed Tex. "What do you know about that?"

"I'm in favor of handlin' Stevens ourselves," said Tom callously. "We can't take any chances on a bird like him."

"Yeah," agreed Tex, "I reckon that's best. But there's no use advertisin' it, Tom. Stevens ain't back yet. I'd say—"

Tex turned and loked at Chuck curiously.

"How'd you like the job, Chuck?"

"You mean—meet him on the trail and kill him?"

"Why not?"

Chuck's jaw tightened perceptibly.

"I only kill my own personal enemies thataway," he replied. "Stevens ain't done me no personal dirt."

"Squeamish, eh?" jeered Tex.

"You might call it that, Tex."

"All right, I merely asked how you felt. Go down and send Dell or Mac Cord up here; they've both got personal grudges to settle."

Chuck nodded and left the room. He found both Dell and Mac Cord down there, decided on Dell and walked outside. It was just getting dark as he went out to the stable, and Sleepy was there, unsaddling his horse.

"Get up in the loft and stay there until Dell Cline gets away!" hissed Chuck. "Quick, Stevens; do as I'm tellin' yuh!"

Cline was coming down the back stairs, as Chuck stepped outside.

"Thanks for the job," said Cline gruffly, and walked into the stable to saddle his horse.

Without any further words with Chuck, he rode swiftly away, while Chuck climbed to the loft with Sleepy.

Whispering cautiously, Chuck proceeded to tell Sleepy what had been said, and why Cline had rode away so quickly.

"Somebody is goin' to shoot you on sight, Stevens," warned Chuck. "Yore goose is cooked, as far as Agua Amarillo is concerned. Yuh better stay here, until dark. Dell will go all the way to One-Eye's place; so he can't be back for a couple hours."

"I won't forget this, Chuck," swore Sleepy. "I'm wonderin' if it would be possible for you to dump my old bed-roll out of that side window. It's all roped up tight."

"If I can make it, Stevens. Cline's gone, Mac Cord's half-drunk and Lew Nichols is away. In an hour from now it'll be on the ground."

They shook hands warmly and Chuck went back to the Club, where he met Tex and Tom.

"Cline was glad to take the job," smiled Tex.

"Every man to his own taste," replied Chuck. "Mine don't quite run to dry-gulchin' people."

THE BOYS at the Rancho Moreno were at supper when the sheriff and deputy came from Kiopo City. They came straight through the house and were in the dining-room with guns in their hands before anybody realized what was being done.

"Hartley, yo're under arrest," declared Toland sharply. "The rest of yuh set still and keep out of this."

"You didn't think we was goin' to interfere, did yuh?" grinned Shorty Vestal.

Shufflin' Sanderson took Hashknife's gun, and snapped handcuffs on his wrists. Eva and her father came in, and the sheriff told them what it meant. Hashknife looked steadily at Vestal.

"I suppose I can thank you for this, Vestal," he said coldly.

"No, not exactly. But I don't mind takin' the credit, Mr. Hartley."

"What was the big idea, Shorty?" asked Jack Corbett.

"Maybe you like to work with murderers—I don't."

"If the law was to use a real fine comb—" began Corbett.

"No, Jack," interrupted Hashknife. "Let it pass. Folks—" Hashknife turned to Eva and her father— "I'm sorry this happened. I'm not a murderer. That's all I'm sayin'—now."

"Anythin' you say—" began the sheriff.

"I know. I've told lotsa prisoners the same thing."

Eva came and put a hand on Hashknife's arm. He smiled at her.

"Don't say anythin'," he told her. "It's all right."

"I—I wish I could do something," she said.

"I appreciate that, Miss Moreno. The whole thing is in the laps of the gods right now."

"And I want you to know I'm behind you," added Moreno. "The Moreno family is not without gratitude."

"That's fine," replied Hashknife. "We will be goin' now. Good-by, all of you."

"*Vaya con Dios,*" whispered Eva. "Go with God."

On the way to Kiopo City, Hashknife tried to find out who recognized him, but neither officer would tell.

"Can'tcha give us some credit?" asked Shufflin' in aggrieved tones. "We're full of efficiency."

"You might show some gratitude," grinned Hashknife. "I left five thousand dollars on yore doorstep, yuh know."

"You? You left Borch at our door?" asked the sheriff.

"Yeah—and I forgot to get extradition papers in Mexico."

"Well, shoot me for a spy!" exploded Shufflin'. "We wondered who brought him. Thanks a lot, Hartley."

"Yo're welcome."

Ed Borch leaned against the bars of his cell and watched them lock Hashknife in their only other cell.

"So yo're the hairpin that put me here, eh?" snorted Borch. "How do you like it, High-Pockets?"

"As long as they don't hang us on the same scaffold, I'll like it all right," replied Hashknife. "I'm particular who I hang with."

"It might simplify things for the county if we put 'em both in the same cell, Abe," suggested Shufflin'.

"No you don't!" yelped Borch. "Keep him where he's at!"

"It's all right with me," grinned Hashknife. "I'd like to get my hands on him again."

"You keep away from me, you danged boa-constrictor!"

The officers laughed and walked out.

DELL CLINE'S trip to One-Eye's place was a disappointment. One-Eye told him that Stevens must have been back at Agua Amarillo, before Cline left there. Cline was both mad and disappointed. He wanted Stevens for himself. All the way out there he had rehearsed just what he was going to say and do to Sleepy.

He rode savagely on the way back, hoping that no one had taken the job out of his hands. The light was fairly good, and he kept the tiring horse at a full gallop. The last mile of the trail was slightly uphill, and just as he topped the rise, where he could see the lights of Agua Amarillo, a loop of rope hissed out from behind a mesquite clump beside the trail, jerked tight around Cline's body, and arms, and lifted him bodily off the saddle. He came down with a crash, while the horse galloped on for a few jumps, and stopped, breathing heavily.

Dell Cline was knocked unconscious. Sleepy spurred his horse from behind the mesquite, keeping the rope taut, dismounted quickly and examined Cline. He took Cline's gun, roped his feet and hands securely, and easily caught Cline's tired horse.

"Allus," grunted Sleepy, as he secured the knots, "when yuh go to a foreign country you take home a souvenir. Yo're mine, Dell."

FOR THE first time since he had been elected to the office, Sheriff Toland felt expansive. With two badly-wanted murderers in his jail, he could afford to expand a little. He stopped at Tracey's saloon before breakfast, and had a satisfactory drink.

"Yeah, we're gettin' quite prominent down here," he said to the bartender. "Looks t' me like it was goin' to be a hard season on murderers in this here county. I'll betcha they shy away from Kiopo City, after this."

"How much reward is there for this Hartley feller, Abe?"

"I ain't been advised yet. Must be pretty good—he murdered a sheriff in Wyomin'."

"I wonder why they pay more for sheriffs," mused the bartender.

" 'Cause there ain't so many good ones, I reckon."

"Yeah, I've noticed that."

Abe Toland cocked his hat at a jaunty angle, and went down to his office, where Shufflin' slept on a cot. He was both deputy and jailer. Shufflin' was still in bed, and Toland was about to berate him for spending all his time in bed, when he happened to notice that Shufflin' had a towel tied around his mouth and chin.

A closer examination disclosed the fact that Shufflin' was all tied up, and fastened to the iron cot. The sheriff's heart missed several beats, as he cut Shufflin' loose and removed the bulky gag.

"Whew!" sighed Shufflin'. "I thought you'd never show up, Abe."

"Well, spit it out!" cried the nervous sheriff. "What happened?"

"Las' night—'bout eleven, twelve o'clock, somebody knocked on the door. I couldn't hear what he said, when I asked who it was so I opened the door."

"Yeah!" snorted the sheriff. "I've told you a hundred—"

"I know. Mebbe it'll sink in next time. Anyway, like I said, I opened the door; and about two hundred pounds of fightin', young manhood landed straddle of my carcass. Don't ask me who he was, Abe! Don't do that. All I seen was stars. If you ask me for a description, I'll say it was seven, eight pointed, very bright, and kept dancin' around in the air, shootin' sparks."

"You damn fool—what happened?"

"I been tellin' you. When I woke up —I was like you found me."

The sheriff glared at Shufflin', his mouth working nervously. He pointed dramatically at the door to the jail corridor.

"Have you looked in there?" he asked hoarsely.

"That's a hell of a question, Abe. I'm no magician, yuh know."

With Shufflin' limping behind him, the sheriff unlocked the door and went into the corridor. Ed Borch glared at him from behind his bars.

"One," counted the sheriff thankfully. He peered into Hashknife's cell. "Two, by gosh!" he snorted. "I—uh—hey! Who the hell are you?"

Dell Cline, sitting on the cot, head between his hands, looked up at the sheriff, a blank expression on his face.

"Damn you, come up here!" snapped the sheriff.

"You do all the comin' that's done," replied Cline painfully. "I'm too damn sore to walk."

"Well, who are yuh, and how'd you git in here?"

"That's none of yore damn business—and I don't know."

"Don't know how you got here?"

"I s'pose I was brought—I dunno."

The sheriff whirled on Borch.

"What happened in here, Borch?" he demanded.

"Why ask me?" retorted Borch. "Somebody unlocked the cell door in the dark, let Hartley out—and put that feller in, I reckon."

The sheriff nodded and turned to Cline.

"Who are you, anyway?"

"Aw, go lay an aig!" snapped Cline. "My head aches."

Shufflin' had been looking closely at Dell Cline and now he grasped the sheriff by the sleeve, drawing him back to the office. They closed the door behind them.

"What's eatin' you?" demanded the sheriff. But Shufflin' was busy with a stack of reward notices.

"Here it is!" he announced gleefully. "Dell Cline, wanted in Yuma for murderin' Slim Thomas. A thousand dollars reward, Abe."

"Are you shore, Shufflin'?"

"There's his picture. Well, can you beat that?"

They sat down and looked at each other curiously.

"We—we've lost Hartley," said the sheriff.

"Yeah, but I'll bet we got the best of the trade, at that. And I kinda liked that tall puncher, Abe."

"He wasn't bad," agreed the sheriff. "Well, I dunno. That was sort of a pack-rat idea; put and take. I—I reckon we've got to hunt for Hartley, Shufflin'."

"Yeah, but let's be moderate, Abe; we've only got them two cells, yuh must remember. If I was you, I'd send a telegram to Yuma. If the sheriff down there is honest, we're five hundred apiece better off than we was last night. And we want to git an empty cell as quick as we can, 'cause you never can tell when we'll git another delivery."

"I'll go send that message," said the sheriff, and walked out.

A block up the street he met Tom Tracey, going to breakfast.

"How are yore prisoners, Abe?" asked the saloon-keeper jovially.

"Fine, Tom. Hartley walked out on us last night, and left a feller named Dell Cline in the cell. Cline's the feller who killed Slim Thomas, that Yuma gambler, a few months ago."

"What in the devil are you talking about?" exclaimed Tom.

"Well, I reckon it did sound funny. But it's a fact. Somebody tied Shufflin' all up, took Hartley out of jail, and put Cline in. It's kinda hard to understand, but it's a fact. Mebbe we'll get Hartley later. Well, I've got to send that telegram."

The sheriff hurried on, leaving the puzzled Tom standing there alone.

"Well, of all the cock-eyed things I ever heard!" exclaimed Tom aloud. "Hartley out—Cline in. That's funny —or is it funny? Cline went to get Stevens—and Cline's in jail. That ain't so good. Hartley's out—and that ain't so good either."

Tom forgot breakfast, turned around and went back to his saloon.

NEEDLESS to say, Dell Cline did not return to Agua Amarillo that night. At midnight Tex Severn sent Mac Cord and Lew Nichols to One-Eye's place, looking for Cline, and two hours later they brought back word that Cline had been there, looking for Stevens, but had gone back. Both Stevens and Cline were missing. One-Eye told them that Stevens left at least an hour before Cline came to the rancho.

"Missed each other some way," decided Tex. "But where are they?"

"Mebbe Cline's still chasin' Stevens," suggested Mac Cord.

"In the dark?" said Tex. "Don't be a damn fool."

"Mebbe they shot it out, and are layin' out in the brush."

"There's some sense in that. But Dell wouldn't be fool enough to give Stevens a chance for his white chip. We'll look in the mornin'."

Mac Cord and Nichols went to their room, but Mac Cord was back in a few moments.

"Here's somethin', Tex," he said. "Stevens kept his extra bed-roll under his cot, all roped up tight. It's gone."

"Gone, eh? When did you see it last, Mac?"

"Well, it was there, when I went to supper. It was stickin' out a little, and I remember kickin' it back. Yuh see, my cot is next to Stevens'."

"I see-e-e," mused Tex thoughtfully. "Where's Chuck?"

"He's in there, asleep."

"Never mind, I'll ask him in the mornin' if he remembers about it bein' there."

Mac Cord started to leave the room, when Tex said;

"Mac, did it ever strike you that Chuck was friendly to Stevens?"

"Oh, I dunno. No, I can't say that it did, Tex."

"We offered that job to Chuck, first—the job Cline went out on—and he refused."

"Well, that don't mean anythin'. Chuck ain't that kind of a killer."

"All right."

Louie, the Chinese cook, was preparing breakfast for Tex, when Tom Tracey came next morning. It was about eleven o'clock, which was their usual breakfast time.

"Man, you got down early today!" grunted Tex, turning on his stool.

"I had a damn good reason," said Tom quietly. "Eat this with yore breakfast, will you? Hartley broke jail last night in Kiopo and left Dell Cline in the cell."

Tex jerked to his feet, his eyes wide.

"Why—why—you mean—"

"That's exactly what I mean, Tex.

And the sheriff has identified Cline. He was wiring to Yuma for instructions early this morning."

"But I—I don't see how—how could it happen?"

"You don't need any crystal ball to tell what happened, Tex. In some way Stevens outsmarted Cline and took him along when he went to take Hartley out of jail at Kiopo. Naturally, he put Cline into the cell."

"But how in hell would Stevens know that Hartley was in jail?" asked Tex. "He was at One-Eye's place, and didn't know—"

"Ah, there you are!" exclaimed Tom. "Stevens was told."

"Wait a minute!" grunted Tex. "Mac Cord swears that Stevens' bed-roll was taken from their room, some time between supper time and around two o'clock. Either Stevens came up there and got it, while nobody was in the room, or somebody got it for him."

The two men looked at each other curiously. Tex turned on his stool and looked toward the kitchen.

"Where's that damn Chink with my ham and eggs?" he asked. "Yeah, I s'pose he went out to git wood for the stove. Well—"

"Never mind the ham and eggs," said Tom.

"There's just one answer."

"Just one," gritted Tex. "Damn him, I'll—"

"Keep cool," said Tom quietly, and the two men started for the stairs.

None of them heard the outside stairway door close softly. They walked up, turned to the right and opened the door. The cots were empty.

"He was here ten minutes ago, still asleep," said Tex.

Tex turned and ran down the hall. The outside stairway door was unbarred. He threw it open, while Tom crowded in behind him. There was no one in sight. As Tex started down the stairs, they heard the thud of hoofs on hard-packed ground, and a horse lunged from the stable door, the rider swung sidewise along the animal's neck.

It was Chuck Hadley, making a swift getaway. With a curse, Tex jerked his gun and fired one wild shot, as the horse and rider went out of sight around the corner. On the impulse of the moment, the two men ran to the bottom of the stairs, where they did nothing except curse their bad luck.

And while everybody was interested in the shot at the rear of the Foreign Club, Louie, the little Chinaman, crawled from behind a cot, padded softly down the stairs, unseen, and reached his kitchen. Tex's ham and eggs were getting cold on the counter, when the men came back.

"You wan' coffee?" inquired Louie blandly.

Tex glanced at the platter of food, gave it a shove, and it crashed to the floor inside the counter.

"Too bad," sighed the unperturbed Louie. "Ham an' egg velly nice. You like, I wa'm him ovah."

"No!" roared Tex. "I hope you understand."

"Can do," said Louie.

"BELIEVETH me," declared Chuck Hadley, as he rode swiftly away from Agua Amarillo, "I'll never say a word against Chinamen again. If it hadn't been for Louie, I'd be ventilated plenty by this time. I dunno what happened, except that the man who helped Sleepy Stevens last night better be movin' fast."

Chuck did not dare leave Mexico. He had little money and no destination; so he circled back and struck the trail to One-Eye Gonzales' *rancho.* He knew One-Eye very well, and he knew that One-Eye was not so very fond of Tex and Tom. At any rate, it would be a stopping place, and One-Eye might make a suggestion, because One-Eye knew every crooked gang along that Border.

Chuck rode boldly up to the box-like ranch-house, because he knew that none of the Agua Amarillo gang could have beaten him there. He swung out of his saddle, stopped short and stared at the doorway, where Sleepy and Hashknife were standing, grinning at him.

"Hyah, Chuck," laughed Sleepy. "The way you was actin', it kinda looked like you was goin' for a doctor."

"Or tryin' to keep away from one," panted Chuck, as he came over to the doorway. "How are yuh, Stevens?"

"Just right. Hadley, meet Hashknife Hartley."

They shook hands solemnly, and then Chuck grinned widely.

"So yo're the feller who took away our Mr. Borch, turned Rance Moreno into Dell Cline, and kinda raised hell in general, eh?"

"Somethin' like that, Hadley. Glad to meet you."

"Why the hurry, Chuck?" asked Sleepy.

Chuck leaned against the wall and rolled a cigaret, while he told them what happened in Agua Amarillo.

"And may God bless all Chinamen," he concluded. "They're shore a great race of people."

"Were you headin' for any place in particular?" asked Sleepy.

"Not me," replied Chuck gravely. "All I wanted to do was to get some distance away from Agua Amarillo. Gosh, I never expected to find you fellers here. Why—why, if it comes to a showdown, we can lick Tex and his gang. That's an idea! Let's lick that bunch and take Agua Amarillo."

"What good is it?" queried Hashknife gravely. "They all went broke."

"Yeah, that's true, too."

"C'mon in," invited Sleepy. "One-Eye's cookin' frijoles and beef."

One-Eye turned from the stove and grinned at Chuck. Two rifles lay on a table and Chuck looked them over critically. One was the fancy Winchester Sleepy had brought south, and the other was one that Hashknife had selected from Sheriff Toland's gun-rack. He had also found his own six-shooter in the sheriff's desk.

"Man, that shore's a pretty weapon," said Chuck, examining the special-made Winchester. "I'll betcha it cost plenty *dinero*."

"It's just a little too fancy," replied Hashknife. "I'd always be scared that somebody would kill me to get the blamed thing."

"Anyway," grinned Sleepy, "we're pretty well heeled, in case Tex and his gang go on the war-path."

NO ONE at the Rancho Moreno knew that Hashknife had escaped, until Shufflin' Sanderson rode out there that afternoon with the news. Jack Corbett did a double-shuffle in the patio, much to the evident disgust of Shorty Vestal. Eva was delighted, and Rance Moreno smiled thinly.

"Well, I wasn't exactly sore about it m'self," admitted the deputy. "You see, there's a reward of a thousand dollars for Dell Cline and not a dime for Hartley. We got a telegram from Wyomin', tellin' us that there ain't no reward—just a wish.

"Cline's one of Tex Severn's bad bunch, down in Agua Amarillo, and a bunkie of Ed Borch. If I can persuade Toland to let Hartley alone long enough, we'll have all Tex's gang in jail. Whoever brought Cline shore rode my carcass to town. Whee-e-e! I never got hit so hard in my life. But I'd take it all over again for my split of that thousand dollars."

"I think Hashknife Hartley is wonderful," said Eva.

Both her father and Shorty Vestal looked curiously at her.

The news put Shorty Vestal in a savage frame of mind. After Shufflin' left the rancho, Shorty saddled and rode away. Two men of the Border Patrol dropped in at supper time. They were always welcome at the Rancho Moreno, as both men had known Moreno a long time. Shorty came back for supper, but had little to say.

No one had gone for the mail that day; so after supper Shorty rode to Kiopo alone. Jack Corbett had tried all day to get a word with Eva, but failed. She and her father sat most of the evening with the two Border officers.

After they were gone Jack climbed up to the balcony. There was a light in both Eva's and her father's windows, and Jack was about to tap a signal on Eva's window when Shorty came back.

Jack flattened on the balcony and waited for Shorty to enter the bunk-house, but instead Shorty went into the house. The window of Rance Moreno's room was raised a few inches for ventilation, and Jack heard Moreno greet Shorty when he came in.

Because of the curtains Jack was unable to see into the room, but their low-pitched voices were plainly audible.

"Well, I told you they wouldn't listen to reason," Shorty was saying. "They don't believe you ever was robbed. They think you murdered Harter, took the diamonds and the other forty thousand."

"The fools!" exclaimed Moreno hoarsely. "I tell you, Harter was dead when I arrived. I never touched a thing. And I *was* robbed. Oh, the fools!"

"I know. But that ain't their angle. They want their money."

"Their money?"

"They want their forty thousand dollars."

"So do I," groaned Moreno.

"Well, I've done all I could. They swear you'll pay 'em the full forty thousand, or else—"

"That I'll pay 'em forty thousand? Vestal, are they crazy?"

"Mebbe. Losin' money does make folks crazy—they say."

"It's ridiculous! Why, I haven't forty thousand. This *rancho* is mortgaged for forty thousand—and that last forty thousand was secured on a ninety-day personal note. Eighty thousand dollars, Vestal! My God, that is a lot of money. Oh, I've been a fool!"

"The *rancho* is worth it."

"Worth it? Perhaps—if I found a buyer. But I'd have nothing left. Vestal, I'd be a beggar; and the Moreno family never begged. Their demand is ridiculous, unreasonable. I wouldn't pay it, if I had the money. No, I wouldn't."

"I don't reckon I blame you," replied Shorty. "The worst they can do is have personal vengeance on you. Of course, they could tell what you've done in the past, and kinda ruin yore name."

"They couldn't prove anything," said Moreno quickly.

"Folks don't always need proofs; they're quick to believe."

"God knows that's true, Vestal. What's to be done? I can't raise that much money."

"No, you can't. I'm worried about Eva. You can't tell what that gang might do to her, hittin' back at you. If me and her was married—well, I don't reckon they'd touch her. I've always played square with 'em—and they need me."

"They wouldn't dare touch her, Vestal."

"All right—keep blind, Rance. That gang never forgets a double-cross—and they're all broke. I've merely told you what I'd do."

"I—I'll think it over tonight, Vestal. Maybe I can think of a plan."

"I hope you can," replied Shorty Vestal.

Jack was back in the bunk-house when Shorty came in. The tall foreman looked curiously at Jack.

"Any news?" queried Jack. Shorty sat down at the table and picked up a deck of cards, shuffling them absently.

"The only news," replied Shorty evenly, "is that yo're all through here, Corbett. You can pack yore bed-roll in the mornin'."

Jack's eyes narrowed, but his lips smiled, as he said;

"Well, that *is* news, Shorty. Kinda sudden, dontcha think?"

"Sudden? What difference does that make?"

"Not much. Is that an order from Moreno?"

"If you need an order from Moreno—yes. But I'm runnin' this *rancho*, if anybody asks yuh."

"I see. Kinda gettin' runty over that Hartley deal, eh?"

"Never mind Hartley. Yo're through."

"Guess again, Shorty—and I'm not through."

"What the hell do you mean, Corbett?"

Jack came over close to the table, looking down at Shorty.

"I mean just what I said, Shorty—I'm not through. Do you think I'm blind? Don'tcha give me credit for havin' *any* sense?"

Shorty blinked and licked his lips.

"I dunno what yo're talkin' about," he grunted.

"How much of that forty thousand are you figurin' will go into yore pockets, Shorty?"

Shorty stared at him, blinking, his lips twitching.

"I—I don't know what yuh mean," he managed to say.

"Then yo're awful damn ignorant, Vestal. I know all about you tryin' to pry loose forty thousand dollars from Moreno, usin' Tex Severn and his gang as a threat. *Keep yore hands on the table.* That's fine. You've taken yore cut on the beef they've stolen from Moreno. Don't deny it, Shorty. You've been workin' for Tex Severn—not Moreno. Now—am I fired?"

Shorty's hands were on the table. He knew that Corbett was plenty fast with a gun, and Corbett was watching him closely.

"What do you want?" asked Shorty, his voice strained.

"What have you got to offer?"

"You want to cut in on the deal, eh? Just an honest cowboy."

"Yeah, just an honest cowboy," replied Jack evenly. "And all I'm askin' from you is that you pile onto yore bronc and head for Mexico. I mean—now—tonight. And never come back."

Shorty's smile was a grimace.

"Is *that* all? Don't be a fool, Corbett; I'm still foreman of Rancho Moreno."

"We'll pass the title, Shorty. Either you get on yore bronc and head for Mexico—or I will."

"Well, that kinda makes it simple, don't it?"

"Simple?"

"You headin' for Mexico."

"No—it makes you simple, Shorty, 'cause you'll be here on the floor, drilled full of holes."

"Yea-a-ah? You couldn't murder a man."

"I know I couldn't, Shorty; but I could kill a skunk."

Shorty's face flamed, and his fingers twitched.

"You can make yore choice—now," said Jack evenly. "It don't make a bit of difference to me. I like Mexico."

Shorty got slowly to his feet. He was fast with a gun, and there might be a chance. But Jack's gun was out, covering him.

"Just go kinda easy and unbuckle yore belt," said Jack, "and let it fall on the floor. Fingers itchin', eh? You know, I almost wish you'd reach for yore gun."

"I'm no fool," whispered Shorty, and stepped away from the gun and belt on the floor.

"I'm followin' you out to the stable," said Jack. "You might go up and borrow a gun from Moreno."

He followed Shorty, watching him saddle his own horse, and saw him ride away. But Jack was not foolish enough to think that he was finished with Shorty Vestal. He went back through the patio gate, where Eva spoke softly from the porch. He answered her, and she came out to him.

"What happened?" she asked anxiously.

"Why—nothin' much," he faltered. "Why, Honey?"

"Where did Shorty Vestal go?"

"Shorty? Oh, he—well, he went for a ride."

She grasped his arm and drew him back along the vine-covered wall.

"I heard what was said in my father's room," she told him. "I saw you on the balcony, and was about to lift the window, when I heard Shorty Vestal come in. I—I was so worried about father, Jack, that I bored a little hole in the partition yesterday. I listened tonight—" Her voice trailed away miserably.

"So did I," replied Jack. "I couldn't help it, dear."

"And I was afraid there might be trouble between you and Shorty Vestal," she said, "so I came down."

"Shorty's gone to Mexico—without his gun," said Jack.

"You told him what you heard?"

"No, I didn't; I told him that I knew all the time. I want to help yore father—and I don't want Shorty to marry you."

"But what can my father do?" asked Eva. "Just think—he owes eighty thousand dollars! Why, Jack, the Rancho Moreno is broke."

"It's shore bent plenty," agreed Jack. "Gee, I wish I could talk with Hashknife Hartley. He knows about us; I told him, and he said he'd do anythin' to help us. But he's gone now, runnin' away from the law."

"Do you suppose Shorty will come back, Jack?" she asked anxiously.

"I'm afraid he will, dear. I reckon he wants to break yore father, so he can get the rancho. I accused him of gettin' a cut on the cattle they've rustled from yore father—and he didn't deny it. He's as crooked as a snake, and he knows that I know he is, Eva."

"I'm not worrying about Shorty Vestal," she said, "but I am worried about father. He's in debt so deep that he never can get out. And it is a criminal debt, Jack. Oh, I can understand lots of things now. Severn has been here late at night several times with Tom Tracey."

"Tracey is a bad one," said Jack. "He's supposed to be a solid citizen of Kiopo City. The Border Patrol take him for granted. He goes and comes as he pleases. Tex don't dare let 'em catch him, 'cause he's wanted on this side. Well, we'll just have to wait and see which way Mr. Vestal decides to hop."

"You'll be careful, Jack?"

"Shore will, honey. You hop back to bed."

He kissed her, and watched her disappear into the house. The lamp was still burning in Rance Moreno's room.

SHORTY VESTAL'S emotions were rather mixed, as he headed for Kiopo City. Things were not working out so well. Just when he had Moreno frightened, and grasping at straws, this fool kid cowboy had to step in and toss a wrench into the smooth-working machinery. There was no doubt in Vestal's mind that Corbett knew too much. He stopped at Kiopo City and found Tom Tracey. He told the saloon-keeper what had happened at the ranch, neglecting, of course, to tell about this conversation with Rance Moreno.

"Just how much does Corbett know?" queried Red Tom.

"He acts like he knew everythin'," replied Shorty.

"Take him in with us," suggested

Tom. "I mean—let him think he's in with us. Once in Agua Amarillo—exit Mr. Corbett."

Shorty shook his head quickly.

"No chance, Tom; he's too smart. Anyway, he's honest."

"All right. There's only one thing to do, and that is this, fill him full of lead, before he has a chance to talk."

"I don't believe he'll talk, because he won't want to implicate Moreno."

"Don't take any chances. Are you goin' back to the *rancho?*"

"Not tonight; I'm goin' down to Agua Amarillo and see if Tex has any bright ideas. What about Borch and Cline?"

"Still in jail. There'll be an officer here in a couple days to take Cline. I don't know what's been done about Borch; he's wanted in so damn many places."

But Tex Severn did not have any bright ideas. He was alone when Shorty arrived and told his tale of woe. Tex did not seem greatly concerned.

"What are you goin' to do?" queried Tex. "Go back there and let that young cow-waddie line yore insides with lead?"

"I'll handle him, when I git ready," replied Shorty. "You don't think I'm goin' to let some half-baked puncher run me out of my own country, do yuh? Hell, I'm to marry Moreno's daughter."

"If you go back there, you might get drilled," suggested Tex.

"If I don't drill him first."

Tex chuckled softly, as he suggested a drink.

"We'll talk this over later," he said. "I'm dry."

HASHKNIFE, Sleepy and Chuck were still at One-Eye's rancho, because there was no place else for them to go. Except for keeping watch for anyone from Agua Amarillo, there was nothing to do.

But none of them cared for this inactivity. There was no source of news in this isolated spot, and each day was the same as the one before. It suited One-Eye Gonzales. Plenty of good beef, a sack of frijoles and a string of peppers. What did he care about the rest of the world? But old One-Eye was no fool. In his uneducated way, he was a philosopher.

"All theese hurry around," he said. "*Por Dios,* w'at ees the use? You eat, sleep—pretty soon you die. W'ere I go, w'en I die? W'at ees deeference? Plenty people go, w'ere I go. Maybe too damn many—I never get chance for siesta."

"Who do yuh think got the Seven Stars of Montezuma?" asked Hashknife. One-Eye shrugged his shoulders.

"*Quien sabe?* Moreno, Severn, Tom Tracey. Theese bonch ees so crooked they steal from each other."

"Did they really give Harter forty thousand dollars?"

"I believe theese ees true."

"Do you believe Moreno was robbed of his forty thousand dollars?"

"Moreno ees a fool. Too many men know he ees breeng this money. *Madre de Dios,* they would cut hees throat for ten pesos."

"I think One-Eye's right," said Chuck. "I know 'em well. And Shorty Vestal is as crooked as any of 'em. He plays the game with Tracey, and between 'em they've broke Moreno. If you ask me Tom Tracey got them diamonds."

"Mebbe," replied Hashknife. "You say Len Tracey was Tom's brother, eh?"

"He shore ties in with that cattle-buyer. But I can't quite figure it out—yet. Is there anybody else who might have got them diamonds? It was quite awhile ago, and mebbe they've overlooked somebody. Chuck, did yuh ever see a feller around here who was about forty years old, kinda lean, with a hooked nose and a high forehead? He had long hands, with big joints on his fingers, and the first joint of the little finger on his left hand is stiff. His hair is brown, and gettin' thin on top."

Chuck leaned across the table, listening curiously to Hashknife's description.

"Why, that sounds a lot like Frenchy La Clede," he said. "He had a stiff joint on his little finger, and—"

"Who was he, Chuck?"

"He was Tom Tracey's top-gambler."

Hashknife laughed softly and began rolling a cigaret.

"And you say that the Chinaman who had the diamonds ran a restaurant in Kiopo City for quite a while, eh?"

"Yeah, he was there quite a while. He was supposed to be in the restaurant business, but his job was runnin' dope."

Hashknife smoked silently for a while. Finally Sleepy said:

"Let's do somethin'. I'm sick and tired of doin' nothin'."

"Go across the Border, and they'll give you plenty to do," suggested Chuck. "Gawd, I wish I was free to go. I'd shore shake the dust of Mexico off my boots mighty quick."

"How badly do they want you, Chuck?" asked Hashknife.

"Bad enough, I reckon; I shot a deputy sheriff."

"Arizona?"

"New Mexico. I mistook him for another man."

"Didja ever see a reward notice for yourself?"

"I didn't wait to see anythin', Hashknife. I heard a man yell:

" 'My Gawd, he's killed Jim Prentice!' and then I lit a shuck for Mexico."

Hashknife slowly took the cigaret from between his lips, his level gray eyes searching Chuck's face.

"Jim Prentice, eh?" he said slowly. "How long ago did this happen, Chuck?"

"Almost a year ago, Hartley."

"Jim Prentice!" blurted Sleepy. "I never knowed—"

Chuck drew back, looking from one to the other.

"What's this all about?" he asked curiously.

"Are you shore it wasn't less than that?" asked Hashknife. "Didn't yuh kill him within the last six months?"

"Hell, no! It'll be a year—"

"You might as well start gettin' happy, cowboy," said Hashknife. "It ain't quite six months ago since me and Sleepy met Jim Prentice in Tucson."

"My Gawd! Hartley, you don't mean that! It must be another Prentice."

"Mebbe it was, Chuck. This one said a feller named Sibley bushed him on the street at night, and—"

"Sibley?" Chuck was on his feet, leaning across the table, an expression of amazement on his face. "Why, Sibley was the feller I was gunnin' for. I mistook Prentice for Sibley. He—he wasn't dead?"

"No, he wasn't dead," laughed Hashknife. "He said Sibley shot twice at him. Missed him once, and hit him high on the right shoulder with the other bullet. Him and Sibley had trouble in the saloon, and he punched Sibley in the jaw. Sibley went out the back door and circled around to the street, bushin' Prentice as he came from the saloon."

"Lovely dove!" breathed Chuck. "Missed him once and hit him high on the right shoulder! Sibley!"

"Split-Pea Hadley," said Sleepy. "Old Split-a-Pea Hadley."

"Go ahead," laughed Chuck. "Lay it on, pardner. I don't care. They don't want me! Do you realize what that means, boys?"

"I hope to tell you," replied Sleepy.

"And I can go back! Gawd, that's a wonderful feelin'. No law on my trail, no sheriff to dodge. I wonder what happened to Sibley."

"He got away, too, I reckon."

"Good! I hope they didn't get him. Man, if I ever see that galoot, I'll love him like a brother. Hashknife, I don't know how to thank you for meetin' Jim Prentice."

"It wasn't any trouble at all," laughed Hashknife. "Next time, you better stay and see how well you was shootin'."

"There ain't goin' to be any next time, I'll promise you that much. I'm cured."

"I suppose you'll be pullin' out for New Mexico now," said Sleepy.

"Not as long as you boys are down here, Sleepy. I'm stickin'."

"You might never get back, cowboy," said Hashknife.

"That's all right with me; I'm stayin'."

DIEGO MORALES thought the world was a great place to live in. He had won six pesos and a bottle of tequila in a stud-poker game, and the whole world had a rosy tint. In addition to his winnings, his stomach was well filled with tequila, as he wended his erratic way out to the little shack which he and Pancho Ramirez called home. It was a noble edifice, composed of assorted boards, corrugated iron and tin from old oil cans. An ancient burro stood near the door, nodding in the shade. Diego saluted him gravely, stumbled over the wooden box which was used as a doorstep, and flung open the door.

He went inside and stopped short. In the middle of the dirt floor sat Pancho Ramirez, busily engaged in wrapping string around a dozen sticks of dynamite, which were already fused. Diego turned abruptly around, started away, but went square into the edge of the door, and came across the room, walking on his heels.

With a yelp of warning, Pancho went skittering on the seat of his pants, clutching the lethal bundle to his bosom. Diego ended up against the opposite wall, a slight smear of blood trickling down his upper lip.

"You theenk you are fonny, eh?" sneered Pancho. "Maybe you wan' boomp into me, eh? You like step 'ard on these dynamite?"

"*Dios!*" groaned Diego. "Who heet me?"

"Dronken peeg!" snapped Pancho. "Seet down. Geeve me bottle. Theese job ees dry work. 'Ow you filling, Diego?"

"My nose ees bruk and I'm scare from hell. W'at you do weeth those dynamite? You wan' keel myself? T'row eet away."

"Leesten."

Pancho came close and whispered in Diego's ear. Although that was no one to hear him, Pancho loved secrecy.

"He promise us theese?" queried Diego.

"One hunnerd dollars, *Americano oro.* That ees same as two hunner peso, Diego. *Mucho dinero,* eh? I buy me a horse and get married."

"You can' marry weeth a horse," said Diego. "W'ere you get dynamite?"

"I steal 'm. Bimeby we put heem in sack, go tak' ride, eh?"

"Sure. You carry sack."

"Coward."

"Sure, Ver' smart coward. Suppose I'm drop sack, eh? Boo-o-om! You go so damn high I get bozzard in both hand. *Zooie!* You come down so hard I break my neck. You carry sack, Pancho. Geeve me that bottle!"

"Sure. You don' need for be scare of theese stoff. I'm not scare from dynamite."

"Your brain are all in my feet! Not scare? Hm-m-m-m! You are beeg fool, that's all I 'ope."

Pancho got the bottle again and took a deep drink.

"I'm go be beeg business man," he declared. "Two hunnerd pesos."

"Bah! You count my cheeken biffore I am hatch, Pancho. You sure you no have a drim?"

"Drim? W'at ees a drim, Diego?"

"A drim is w'ere you 'ave no pants on in your sleep."

"No pants on in my sleep?"

"Sure. Everybody laugh like hell."

"Hah! Somebody ees crazee, and it ain't you. Geeve me dreenk."

When the bottle was empty, Diego went back and purchased one more for each of them. Unfortunately for them they were only able to find one horse; an old sway-backed gray of the vintage of years ago, which they mounted double and rode away in the darkness.

"Theese sound like crazee idea," declared Diego. "Are you ver' sure he say he geeve one hunner dollar to us?"

"*Por Dios*, you theenk I'm can't hear from my ears? I'm hear heem say, 'For theese weel I geeve one hunner dollars, *Americano oro*—and he damn glad from eet. 'Eef you theenk I am crazee why don' you fall hoff and let me do theese alone, eh? I show you I am beeg business man. Two hunner peso! Eef I'm ever have so much, you never spik in my face again."

"Huh! Two hunner peso! You can' count so much."

"Who geeve a damn? I'm hire me a bookkipper. Quit shove! You wan' me drop theese bondle?"

"No! Suppose *Americano* hofficer catch us, Pancho? He's say, 'W'at the hell you do weeth dynamite, eh?' W'at you say from those, eh? He say, 'Hoh, hoh, hoh! Two damn *Mejicano* 'orse-t'ief, eh? W'at you goin' do weeth dynamite—blow up 'orses?' W'at you say, Pancho?"

"He never fin' me weeth dynamite; I drop heem queek."

"Sure," agreed Diego. "That ees damn good way. Then hofficer never fin' Pancho and Diego. Never fin' gray 'orse, too."

"Oh, theese stoff ees not bad. I'm 'andle dynamite for ra'lroad. You queet worry. Jus' trus' Pancho."

Still arguing, they crossed the Border on a little-known trail and circled the town of Kiopo City. It was a dark night, and no one saw them. They left their horse a goodly distance from town, and proceeded on foot, with Pancho carrying the dangerous bundle.

Cautiously they approached the rear of the jail, halting often to listen, before going on.

INSIDE the sheriff's office, in front of the jail, was rather a peculiar sight. Four masked men, all heavily armed, stood around Shufflin' Sanderson, the deputy, who was seated at the desk, staring at the circle of guns.

"There ain't no use arguin'," stated the spokesman. "All you've got to do is produce the keys to them two cells and open the doors."

"Yeah, I reckon that's all I've got to do," agreed Shufflin'.

"And do it fast," ordered one of the men. "This here gun is soft on the trigger."

"Most of 'em are—when they're pointin' at you," sighed Shufflin'.

He could see all that reward money fading in the distance. Abe Toland, the sheriff, was out of town—and Abe would blame him. He had not heard these four men until they flung open the door and walked in on him. Doggone it, he had forgotten to lock that door again!

He sighed heavily and got to his feet. Two of the masked men held their guns against him as he opened the connecting door and went into the jail corridor, carrying the lamp. Ed Borch and Dell Cline were at the bars, wide-eyed at the sight of masked men. It was either a delivery—or just the reverse.

A pat on the back reassured Dell Cline as he stepped out. A moment later Ed Borch was out, chuckling with glee. They all walked to the back door.

"Wait a minute," ordered the spokesman. "Just in case somebody might be layin' for us, the deputy walks out first. I'll go next. Ed and Dell better come out last, 'cause they ain't armed. All set? Go ahead and unlock the door, Sanderson."

Shufflin' unlocked the back door and flung it open. As he stepped out on the little rear porch, a gust of queer-smelling smoke eddied across his face. It was the unmistakable odor of blasting fuse. Shufflin' stepped off the porch. Against the porch was the spitting glow of the burning fuse.

With a yelp of fright, one of the masked men vaulted the low railing of the porch.

"Dynamite!" he screamed. "Look out!"

The men leaped for safety, scattering like a flock of frightened quail. Shufflin' was going like a rabbit when the explosion came. It knocked him off his feet, and he went rolling, while debris rained down upon the roof-tops.

A little later he got up and ran back toward the jail, expecting to find it in ruins. People were running from all over the town. Some had seen the flash of the explosion, and guided the others. The little steps of the jail had vanished, and in their place was a three-foot hole in the hard earth. The rear end of the jail was cracked, but still standing.

Inside the jail they found Dell Cline and Ed Borch, who had been too late in starting. Both of them were bruised and dazed, when Shufflin' locked them in their cells again, while the curious crowd asked a million questions, none of which Shufflin' could answer.

It was about midnight when Pancho and Diego walked into the Foreign Club. There was a curious crowd at the bar, talking with Tex Severn. Pancho closed one eye, as he looked at Tex, because Tex looked funny. One eye was swollen shut, his head was bandaged and his clothes looked as though they had been through a threshing machine.

"How in the hell do I know what happened?" said Tex peevishly. "We had Ed and Dell out of their cells, and went out the back door. Gawd, I got one whiff of that blastin'-fuse smoke—"

Mac Cord limped in from the front door. Tex had sent him back to see what happened to Ed and Dell.

"Gimme a drink!" he exclaimed huskily. "Man, am I a wreck!"

"What did yuh find out, Mac?" groaned Tex.

"Plenty. That damn bomb blowed Ed and Dell back into the jail, and they're back in their cells again. In Kiopo City they're sayin' that somebody wanted to execute Ed and Dell with a bomb; and I reckon they're right. Shove that bottle over here, will yuh?"

Pancho touched Diego on the sleeve, and they sauntered outside, where they went quietly over to their little shack. By the light of a tallow candle they looked at each other across the table.

"Two hunner pesos," sighed Diego. "That ees damn hard lock."

"Sure. I guess I'm mak' meestake een dynamite. I'm theenk I steel blowing-out dynamite, but I'm get blowing-in dynamite." "*Por Dios,* can' I trus' you weeth anytheeng?" queried Diego peevishly. "Some day I am going bite off my nose to spite your face."

"The bes' theeng to do," decided Pancho, "ees to shut off. W'at you don' know, won' 'urt me. Let's go to bed."

THIS was the second day since Shorty Vestal had gone away, and Rance Moreno was worried. He had not seen his foreman since their talk that night. He queried Eva about Shorty, but she told him nothing. He was glooming in the patio, when Jack Corbett came in from the stables, chapped and spurred. Moreno stopped him.

"Corbett, have you seen Shorty Vestal today?" he asked.

Jack shook his head quickly.

"I ain't seen him for a couple days, Mr. Moreno," he replied.

"Queer," said Moreno. "I don't understand it. Did he sleep here night before last?"

"No, he didn't."

"Well, where on earth is he, I wonder?"

"Oh," Jack laughed shortly, "he's prob'ly down at Agua Amarillo, cookin' up some more deviltry."

Moreno got slowly to his feet, his face almost as white as his clothes.

"What do you mean, Corbett?" he asked coldly.

"I mean exactly what I said, Mr. Moreno. Shorty Vestal is crooked enough to hide behind a corkscrew."

"This is—" Moreno hesitated—"well, amazing."

"Is it?" queried Jack curiously.

"It—it certainly is. Why, I don't—"

"Oh, yes, you do," interrupted Corbett calmly. "Anyway, you hadn't ought to be amazed, bein' as you been playin' the game with him. The only mistake you made was this; you tried to play straight in a crooked game—and it can't be done."

Rance Moreno stepped back and sat down heavily on the iron bench, staring at the young cowboy.

"Why, where—where did you find this out?" he whispered.

Jack Corbett laughed at him.

"I'm neither deaf, dumb nor blind, Mr. Moreno."

"God! Eva don't—know!"

"I reckon she does."

Moreno went limp for a moment, his eyes filled with anguish.

"You—you're not sure—she knows?" he whispered.

"Yeah, she knows all right."

Jack stepped in close to Moreno, his eyes snapping.

"And you'd give her to Shorty Vestal, you damn coward! Yes, I'm tellin' yuh what yuh are. Yo're scared of that six feet, five inches of deviltry."

Moreno's white face flamed for a moment at Jack's accusation, but he seemed unable to reply.

"He scared you into tellin' him he could have her," continued Jack mercilessly. "The danged skunk is playin' both ends against the middle. He ain't playin' square with you nor with Tracey. He's quite a man, this foreman of yours. You ought to be proud of him. But I don't care a damn for yore opinion.

Shorty Vestal ain't goin' to marry Eva—'cause I'm goin' to marry her myself. Roll that in a corn-husk and smoke it."

Jack turned abruptly away from Moreno, and swaggered across the patio to the bunk-house. For several minutes Moreno sat there, staring at the bunk-house door, before getting to his feet and going over to the ranch-house doorway, where he met Eva.

She looked at him in alarm.

"You are ill?" she said in Spanish. "Let me send for a doctor."

But he brushed her aside and went up to his room. She followed closely and prevented him from closing his door.

"What is it?" she asked. "You are as white as a ghost!"

He sank down in his easy chair, refusing to talk. Eva walked over to the window and saw Jack Corbett come out of the bunk-house. She turned to her father.

"You talked with Jack Corbett?" she asked. Rance Moreno nodded.

"And he told you what he knew, Dad?"

"It doesn't matter," he told her. "He said you knew, too."

"Yes, I know," she said. "Jack told Shorty to leave this place, or he'd kill him. Shorty tried to discharge Jack, but instead, Shorty went away. You promised Shorty he could marry me?"

"He said you loved him, Eva."

"He lied. He asked me to marry him, and I laughed at him. You are afraid of Shorty Vestal. A Moreno—afraid!"

"God help me, I am, Eva. Everything I own is about to be swept away. They think I lied to them. I can't ask for protection. If the Border Patrol knew that I've fooled them time and again—and Shorty Vestal will tell them. He's vindictive. It means the end of the Moreno control of the Rancho Moreno."

"Why did you do these things?" she asked.

"For money. I wanted to get back the acres we used to own. I wanted to live—like a Moreno. Oh, I've been a fool! Corbett was right when he told me that I tried to play straight in a crooked game."

"I'm not going to marry Shorty Vestal," she said.

"No," replied Moreno dully. Shorty swore he'd expose me, if I hindered him from marrying you. He said you loved him, too."

Eva laughed bitterly. "Love *him?* He lied."

She walked back to the doorway, where she turned.

"You have often said, 'A Moreno is never afraid,' " she told him. "Why don't you prove it?"

She closed the door softly and went down the stairs.

IT WAS Sleepy who spied the three riders approaching One-Eye's rancho while they were still a mile away. One-Eye swung a bunk away from the wall, disclosing a hole three feet square in the adobe wall. Here, for a space of about six feet in length, the thick wall had been hollowed out, giving plenty of room for three men to stand upright. One-Eye replaced the bunk, and went to the doorway to meet Mac Cord, Pancho Ramirez and Diego Morales.

"Hello, One-Eye," greeted Mac Cord, as he dismounted. "Got any tequila handy?"

"Sure, I'm got lettle beet," replied One-Eye.

"Trot it out; we're thirsty."

They came in and sat down at the table, where they proceeded to drink tequila from tin cups. The potent liquor loosened Mac Cord's tongue quickly.

"How're you fixed for ridin' horses?" he asked.

"How many?' asked One-Eye.

"Oh, ten, twelve."

"Too many. I'm got seex een stable now. Take two, t'ree day for catch more."

"We'll take the six," said Mac Cord. "Tex sent us."

"W'at he want so many horse for, eh?"

Mac Cord finished another cup of tequila.

"Well, I'll tell yuh, One-Eye—we're movin' some cattle tomorrow."

"So-o-o?"

"Yeah. If everythin' goes right, we'll have half the Bib M beef on this side of the Border by tomorrow night. You see, Tex has hired ten Yaqui Injuns to help on the job. They'll git a cow apiece and a quart of liquor."

"That ees' ard to onnerstand," said One-Eye. "I'm theenk Rance Moreno ees *amigo* weeth Tex."

"Not on yore tin-type. They're plenty *enemigo* now. Moreno owes Tex a lot of money, and won't pay it; so we take his cattle."

"Hm-m-m-m! Maybe be beeg fight, eh?"

"Naw! Shorty Vestal is with us. Hell, he had all the cattle put into Sunshine Valley. He's been workin' 'em into that spot for weeks. All we've got to do is drive 'em a mile or two. Nobody will know it, until after they're gone. If that revolution breaks, we can supply the army."

"You say Shorty Vestal leave Rancho Moreno?"

"Shore. He quit the job. That only leaves two punchers on the *rancho*. Cinch. Well, let's git them broncs and head back."

The three horses belonging to Hashknife, Sleepy and Chuck were kept in an old deserted adobe down in an arroya, only a short distance from the house, while the stable was in the opposite direction. When the men had gone with the horses, One-Eye came back and let the boys out of the wall.

"You hear w'at he say?" queried One-Eye.

"Yeah, we heard all of it," replied Hashknife.

"I don' like theese idea," stated One-Eye. "Moreno ees good man."

"You've done et plenty Moreno beef," accused Chuck.

"Sure. But no man go broke from w'at I eat."

Hashknife sat at the table, smoking a cigaret, his gray eyes thoughtful.

"What's on yore mind, pardner?" asked Sleepy curiously.

"I was just thinkin' of a pretty girl in an old adobe doorway; and about a very earnest young cowpuncher who wants to marry her."

"And then—what?" asked Sleepy.

"I reckon we'll take a ride, as soon as it gets dark—if you two whipoorwills don't mind."

"Mind?" blurted Chuck and Sleepy together. They both laughed.

"You say she's pretty?" queried Sleepy.

"Too pretty—and nice—to have a deal like this pulled on her."

"You ain't thinkin' about Moreno?"

"Shore—I always pity a fool, Sleepy."

TWO officers came to Kiopo City that day and took away Ed Borch and Dell Cline. Neither of them would tell who the masked men were, and went away silently.

"I tell yuh, the leader was Tex Severn," insisted Shufflin' to the sheriff, after the men were gone.

"Well, it don't matter," stated Sheriff Toland. "Our jail is empty now. But I'd like to know who busted our jail last night."

"So would I. Why, they blew me back seven generations, Abe."

"Yore family don't go back that far, Shufflin'. That's what they call a figure of speech."

"Anyway, I seen the shade of my great grandfather, as I went past him," declared Shufflin'. "And don't be funny, Abe—he didn't bray."

"They don't allus bray. Only sometimes."

"Do yuh know," said Shufflin', tilting back in his chair, "there is times when I git to thinkin', Abe."

"You never thought in yore life. Why yuh can't even remember to keep the door locked."

"We'll skip that argument," sighed Shufflin'. "Abe, didn't you ever wonder why Tracey came over here to talk with our prisoners?"

"Oh, jist curiosity, I reckon."

"He's the only curious man in Kiopo City, ain't he?"

"What are you drivin' at, Shufflin'?"

"I've been watchin' Tracey for quite a while, Abe. Oh, I ain't advertised it none. But almost every night he goes south."

"Well?" queried the sheriff.

"Build up yore own answer," replied Shufflin'. "He's got plenty liquor, plenty gamblin' right in his own joint; he don't need to go down there. He came in here and talked with Ed Borch and Dell Cline, didn't he? You let him do it—alone. Yo're a trustin' soul, Abe."

"If I wasn't," grinned Abe, "I'd have fired you a long time ago."

"We'll skip all unpleasant arguments. I talked with Evans and Richards, them two Border Patrolmen, today. There's plenty talk of another revolution, they tell me; and they've got their eyes on every danged man in Kiopo City. They asked me what I knew about Tracey, but I couldn't tell 'em much. They know he's crossin' the Border, I reckon."

"Yuh can't hang a man for crossin' the Border, Shufflin'."

"I know you can't. But I'll bet Tracey packed plenty talk down to Tex Severn. Mebbe he packed talks from Tex to Cline and Borch."

"Anyway, we collect on them two," grinned the sheriff.

"We shore do, Abe. Let's mosey out to the Rancho Moreno this evenin'. We ain't had a meal off Rance Moreno for ages."

"You do suggest somethin' intelligent once in a while," said the sheriff. "We'll do that."

Things were gloomy at the Rancho Moreno. Rance Moreno was frankly worried over what Shorty Vestal might do.

"I can't appeal to the officers for help," he told Eva. "I'd have to tell them too much."

He knew how Eva and Jack felt toward each other, and he called them into the room together. His idea was for them to leave at once, get married and keep away until conditions changed.

"I shall keep going as long as possible," he told Jack.

"If you think we're goin' to run away and leave you alone, yo're plumb crazy," declared Jack. "If we go, you go along."

"Impossible. I'm not afraid for myself."

"Here's an idea," suggested Jack. "Tell the whole story to the Border Patrol. They're good fellers. Put the deadwood where it belongs. Tell 'em the whole thing. They'll take care of that gang."

"No, I can't do that, Jack. The only thing—was that some one in the patio?"

Moreno jerked out of his chair and went nervously to the doorway. The visitors were Sheriff Toland and Shufflin' Sanderson.

"Howdy, Rance," grinned Toland. "Me and Shufflin' got hungry for some of Mrs. Olivas' enchiladas."

"Welcome," smiled Rance, much relieved. "Come right in."

"My, my!" exclaimed the sheriff. "Eva gits prettier every day. If I was twenty years younger—"

"You'd still be old enough to be her father," finished Shufflin', dryly. "If you want to git callow, brush up on arithmetic, Abe."

"Well, it's mighty nice to be out here again, anyway," grinned the sheriff. "Where's Shorty Vestal?"

"Shorty's away," said Jack quickly. "He prob'ly won't be here tonight."

"I'll tell Mrs. Olivas to make enchiladas," smiled Eva.

"Tell her I'm here, and she'll make a extra batch," said Shufflin'.

Dinner at the Rancho Moreno was always an event to Shufflin' and the sheriff, who reveled in albondigos, the savory meat-balls, Spanish rice and enchiladas, with steaming cheese sauce; washing it down with plenty of Moreno's good red wine.

There were many things to discuss, including the attempt to deliver Borch and Cline from the jail, and the fortunate dynamite bomb, which blew them back, where they belonged. That explosion would always be a mystery—naturally.

"I wonder where Hashknife Hartley went," said Eva.

"We've kinda wondered about that, too," said the sheriff.

"We ain't lookin' for him very hard," grinned Shufflin'. "They wasn't offerin' no reward for him up in Wyomin'. Mebbe they're too poor."

"I hope you never get him," said Eva.

"Same here. He's plenty safe around me."

"Yo're a fine deputy!" snorted the sheriff.

"Shucks, you wouldn't arrest him either. He's been an asset to us."

"He's a wanted criminal."

"Yea-a-ah! He's the goose that laid us a golden aig, if you ask me. Anyway, he never shot any of my friends. I'd like to meet the *hombre* who busted in to take him away. That feller's the champion heavyweight of the world. He's got more fists than a centipede has legs."

It was long after dark when they shoved back from the table and accepted some of Rance Moreno's black cigars. None of them heard any one come into the house. Eva happened to glance toward the doorway to the outer hall, and there stood Hashknife Hartley, flanked on either side by Sleepy and Chuck.

Sheriff Toland jerked up his head, staring at them.

"Howdy, folks," drawled Hashknife lazily. "Set right still, please. How are you, Sheriff? Just take it easy."

Rance Moreno got quickly to his feet.

"Why—why, it is Hashknife Hartley!" he exclaimed softly.

"Yeah, it's me. Folks, I'd like to have you meet Sleepy Stevens and Chuck Hadley. Sleepy on the left, Chuck on the right. Boys, these folks are Miss Moreno, Mr. Moreno, Jack Corbett, Mr. Toland, our estimable sheriff, and Shufflin' Sanderson, the deputy sheriff."

"Well, I'll be danged!" snorted the sheriff.

"I'd let it go at that if I was you," said Hashknife. "You see, we're on a peaceful mission. Hello, Mrs. Olivas. *Buenas dias, mujer.*"

"*Buenas dias, chico,*" grinned the old lady.

"She calls you the Little One," laughed Eva.

Sleepy sniffed audibly.

"Somethin'," he remarked, "smells awful danged good to me."

"You 'ongry?" asked Mrs. Olivas.

"Do you know One-Eye Gonzales?"

"Sure. He ees no good."

"Well, we've been eatin' his cookin'—and it don't smell like this."

"Sure. You wait minute. I feex good supper."

SHE bustled away to the kitchen. Hashknife looked curiously at the sheriff, who seemed undecided what to do.

"How about makin' a truce, sheriff?" he asked. "If you'll promise to not make an arrest, I'll promise to not shoot anybody."

"Come on and sit down," said Shufflin'. "He ain't goin' to make no arrests tonight."

"This is my home," said Rance Moreno. "I promise that no arrests will be made in here. Hartley, I am glad to see you again."

The three men came forward and shook hands all around.

"Oh, we have wondered and wondered where you were," said Eva. "Only a while ago we were talking about you."

The sheriff took an old bill-fold from his pocket and was looking through it, as he remarked:

"Here's somethin' that struck me kinda funny, Hartley. The other day them Chinks at the restaurant was burnin' some trash behind their place, and I went around there, kinda lookin' out that it didn't start a fire. The wind was blowin' quite a bit, and I picked up one of them kodak pictures, which blowed off the pile. What made it seem funny was because on the back of it was the name of the town where you was wanted—Wolf Butte, Wyomin'. Here it is."

Hashknife took the picture and looked at it curiously. It was a good picture of Louie, the cook at the X Bar O, and in the background was the unmistakable picture of Frenchy La Clede. On the back of the picture was stamped; SMITH—WOLF BUTTE—WYO. No doubt it was the name of the man who did the developing and printing.

"I never seen that Chink before," said the sheriff, "but I'd recognize Frenchy most anywhere."

Hashknife's mind worked swiftly. Wong had been a cousin of Louie. Louie sent Wong this picture, showing Frenchy La Clede. Wong suspected Frenchy of stealing the Seven Stars of Montezuma. That was why Wong came and forced Louie out of the job.

"It is kinda queer," said Hashknife, handing the picture back to the sheriff. "You don't know the Chinaman, eh?"

"Nope. But I never paid much attention to Chinks."

"They're worth payin' attention to," said Chuck gravely. "I like 'em."

"But how did you happen to take a chance on comin' up here tonight, Hashknife?" asked Jack Corbett.

"Well, I'll tell you, Jack. You've got a lot of cattle rangin' in Sunshine Valley, ain't you?"

"Pretty near every one that belongs to the *rancho*."

"By orders of Shorty Vestal, eh?"

"Well, yeah, it was. The feed and water is better and—"

"And they're handy to a good place to cross the Border."

"What are you driving at, Hartley?" asked Moreno anxiously.

"Just this, Mr. Moreno. At daylight tomorrow mornin', several white men and ten-twelve mounted Yaqui are goin' to raid yore cattle. They're goin' to steal every four-legged critter in that valley."

Both the sheriff and Moreno were on their feet.

"Why, where did you learn this?" asked Moreno.

"We was behind a thin wall, and heard a little birdie. That's why we came here."

"Well, dog my cats!" exclaimed the sheriff. "Goin' to raid, eh?"

"Beef for the revolution, eh?" said Shufflin'.

"Sure," said Hashknife quickly.

"And you—you came to help us," said Eva. "Knowing that the law wanted you."

"Want me, too," said Sleepy, not to be outdone.

"What for?" asked the sheriff.

"What do you care?" snapped Shufflin'. "You ain't got no deadwood on him, Abe. Quit bein' a sheriff for a minute. I've got me a hunch that the buzzards of Sunshine Valley better be sharpenin' their bills."

"Supper ees r'eady," announced Mrs. Olivas.

"Oh, Lord," groaned Shufflin', "I wish I'd waited. That's my whole trouble—lack of capacity. The spirit is willin', but the skin will only stretch so far. Hop to it, boys; I'm with you in spirit."

Abe Toland was not exactly satisfied

that he was doing the right thing. Here were two men, possibly three, wanted by the law, eating under the very nose of a man sworn to uphold the law. Perhaps Shufflin' Sanderson read his thoughts, because he edged his chair over to Toland and whispered;

"Stop lookin' wise, and begin to use yore brains, Abe. There's a lot of work to be done, and these men came to help. Don't be a fool all yore life."

The sheriff nodded grimly, and Shufflin' added:

"Anyway, there ain't no rewards—not that we know about."

"You're a regular danged Sherlock," retorted Toland.

"Shylock," corrected Shufflin'. "And you don't even know who he was; so relax and smoke yore see-gar—it's out."

TOM TRACEY knew all about the coming cattle raid, but was not going to be there in person. He was a little perturbed over the fact that Shorty Vestal had split with Rance Moreno. He had never quite trusted Vestal, and when Vestal told him he had simply quit Rance Moreno, he was sure that Vestal was lying. Of course, Tom knew nothing about Vestal's trying to frighten Moreno in to paying another forty thousand dollars. That was entirely Vestal's doings, prompted by a suggestion, spoken more in jest than in serious consideration.

Tom was late in going to Agua Amarillo that night. He found Tex, Shorty, and some of the boys, drinking together in Tex's upstairs room. They were full of plans for the raid, and Tom listened.

"Shorty says this is his last job, Tom," informed Tex.

"Yea-a-ah?" drawled Tom. "Quittin', eh? What's the idea, Shorty?"

"Oh, I've been down here long enough, Tom. Like I told Tex, I'll sell my interest in the cows we get t'morrow for five dollars a head. That's dirt cheap. But I need the money."

"Where yuh aimin' to go?" asked Tom curiously.

"North. I want to see some country, before I git old. The cash I get for my share will take me a long ways."

As Shorty reached for the bottle and filled his glass, Tex and Tom exchanged glances. Shorty would never collect any cash from that gang.

"Who's ridin' on this raid in the mornin'?" asked Tracey.

"I am," said Shorty. "There's me and Mac Cord, Nichols, Pancho, Diego and a bunch of Yaqui Injuns. Tex says he'll mebbe go along."

"I'll see how I feel," grunted Tex. "A little ridin' might do me good—I'm gettin' soft. There won't be nothin' to this job. Tom, should we give them Yaquis some guns?"

"Are you crazy?" retorted Tom. "They wouldn't care who they shot, if trouble started. Anyway, I'd never get my guns back, and you know that, too. They don't need guns. It's a cinch that Moreno won't know about this raid."

"No, and he probably won't know, until roundup time," laughed Shorty. "We ought to get three, four hundred head this time. Boy, that'll make me a nice little hunk of *dinero*. Let's drink to good Moreno beef."

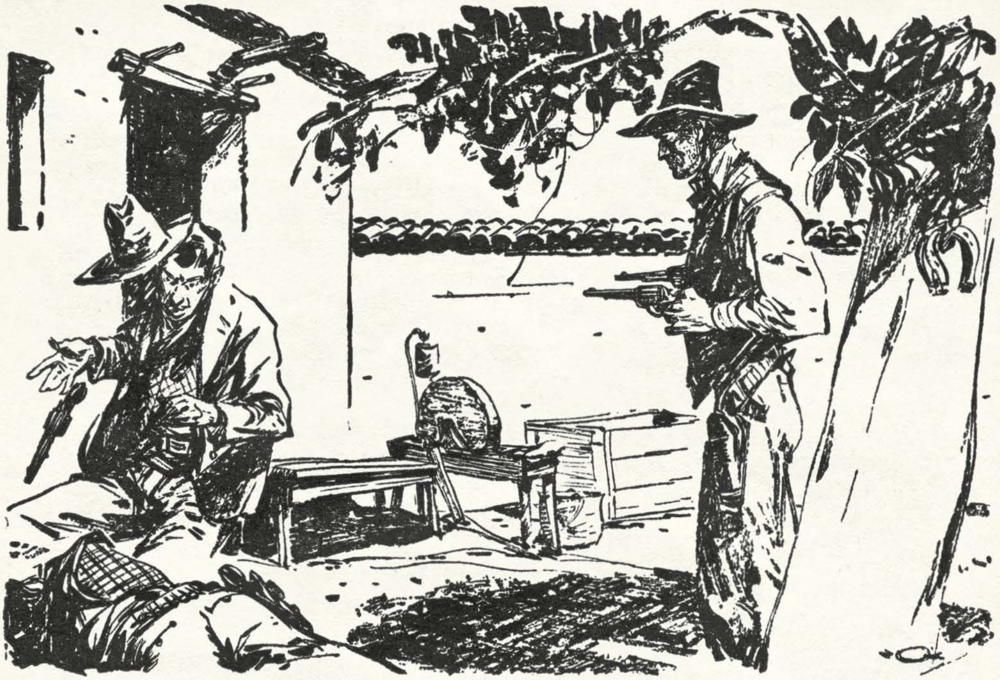
When the meeting broke up, Tex followed Tom to the street.

"What do yuh think about Shorty's proposition, Tom?" he asked.

"Who'll have a couple thousand in cash to pay him?" countered Tom.

"Don't worry," chuckled Tex. "I'm goin' along. When the cows are across the Border—there'll be an accident. Yuh see, I'm careless as the devil with a thirty-thirty."

SUNSHINE VALLEY was about two miles directly south of Rancho Moreno; a snug little pocket in the hills,



roughly four miles in length, and about a mile and a half in its widest part. In places it was not over a hundred yards wide. Except in extra dry years, there were flowing springs in the valley, and the feed was usually very good.

From the south side of the valley, it was not more than a mile to the Border, but, except at the east and west ends of the valley, the terrain was so broken and brushy that it would be impractical to attempt a cattle drive to the south. The raiders would be obliged to drive the cattle out one way or the other, and the obvious way would be for them to come in from the east end, drive the valley and take the herd out the west end.

There was as yet no hint of daylight, when seven riders, in close, single-file came down through the hills from Rancho Moreno, with Jack Corbett in the lead. It was cold down in those hills at that time in the morning, but the men rode slowly, silently.

Jack led the way straight to the west end of the valley. Hashknife had been down there with Jack, and remembered some of the details. Here was a sweep of open country; sort of a gateway out of the valley, about a hundred and fifty yards across. It was as though a mighty mowing-machine had cut a swath right through the hill.

Hashknife had mentioned to Jack that Moreno would be wise to throw a fence across this gap, and prevent cattle from straying southward. But Jack replied that there was neither feed nor water to the south; so the cattle would not stray. And as far as putting up a fence as a barrier to rustlers, it would be a useless expense.

The eight men dismounted in a mesquite thicket near this pass. Well screened from anyone in the valley, they smoked and waited for daylight. Gradually they were able to distinguish individual objects, and the east began to glow.

Sleepy caressed the stock of his fancy rifle.

"Beauty is as beauty does," quoted Hashknife.

"Well," grinned Sleepy, "if she shoots as good as she looks, I'll get me a limit of rustlers this mornin'."

Daylight came swiftly after the false-dawn. The blue-black range in the east changed swiftly to a beautiful cobalt, with a golden crest. A sweep of gold shot across the hills around Sunshine Valley, and in a few moments bright sunlight slanted the length of the little valley.

They could see a few cattle scattered among the live-oaks in the valley and along the low hills to the north. Even if the rustlers started their roundup at daylight, it would take some time for them to sweep the valley.

Moreno watched anxiously, his face deep-lined and grim. Many a Big M steer had gone across that Border to feed hungry mouths, paying no revenue to either Moreno or the government. Now Moreno knew that Shorty Vestal had aided and abetted the stealing. All those cattle were in Sunshine Valley on Shorty's orders.

Two long hours passed without a sign. Cattle grazed placidly, birds sang from the mesquite, and quail called from the slopes.

A coyote passed within a hundred feet of them. It stopped, sat down and gravely considered a cow and calf, but continued on, after a brief pause. Rabbits were too plentiful to bother with a calf.

"If you ask me, I'd say it's a false alarm," stated the sheriff, looking at his watch.

"This ain't a horse race," reminded Hashknife.

"That's right," agreed Shufflin'. "Have patience, Abe. Remember Job had patience."

"Yeah, and he got boils from it, too, didn't he?"

"Search me."

"Look!" exclaimed Moreno. "Those cattle—the further ones. They're all turned, looking down toward the east.

Beyond the interested cattle was a narrow spot in the valley, and as the eight men watched more cattle began drifting in.

"They're driven cattle!" exclaimed the sheriff. "By the horns on the moon, you was right, Hartley!"

"All right!" snapped Hashknife. "We'll scatter out. Keep to the brush. Spread wide apart, so they can't do any pot-shootin'. Let me open the festivities. Unless," he turned to the sheriff, "you want some prisoners, Sheriff."

"Don't mind me," replied Toland, stuffing shells into the loading-gate of his Winchester.

"No," said Shufflin' quietly. "You see, there ain't no rewards offered."

Cattle were streaming through the narrow spot in the valley, and behind them came the riders. Hashknife counted sixteen men, and estimated about two hundred and fifty head of white-faced cattle. A rider spurred from the group and swiftly circled the herd, coming toward the ambush. It was Mac Cord, riding to force the herd to swing to the left at the pass. He drew up about a hundred yards from Sleepy, facing the oncoming herd.

Rance Moreno, his nerves shattered from drink and worry, cocked his rifle. He cursed his trembling fingers and started to let down the hammer, when it slipped from his moist thumb. The smashing report of that .30 clattered in gathering echoes from the hillsides.

The main body of riders were too far away, and shielded by the moving cattle, but the report of that rifle seemed to throw them into confusion. Mac Cord whirled his horse, as he drew his rifle from under his saddle-fender; and then Mac Cord went head-long out of his saddle. Sleepy levered in another cartridge and got to his feet.

Other rifles were spitting lead from the slopes, and the frightened cattle were milling wildly as bullets hummed over their backs. The rustlers were shooting blindly, keeping in low on their horses.

They could not see the men who had stopped their advance.

The unarmed Yaqui were quitting. This had not been in their bargain. Some leaped from their horses, clawing their way up the slope, diving for safety in that tangle of rocks and thorny brush, while bullets whined around them. Others whipped their horses wildly, heading back for the east pass.

The cattle were scattering, going back, some heading for the more gentle slopes of the north side. A steer bawled loudly, and went bucking up the slope, creased by a misdirected bullet, which caused the herd to stampede.

The rustlers scattered, every man for himself. A running horse went down, throwing its rider, end over end. Hashknife sprang to his feet and ran down the slope.

"Corbett?" he yelled. "Hey, Jack! Who rides a blaze-face sorrel?"

"Shorty Vestal!" came Jack's reply from down in the brush.

Hashknife turned and ran to the horses, followed by Sleepy, who did not stop to ask questions. But Hashknife was first in his saddle, tearing back through the brush toward the old trail, which led to the Rancho Sereno. The battle was over. Pancho and Diego went tearing back for the east pass, the Yaqui had disappeared, and two of the rustlers, Mac Cord and Nichols, would never steal cattle again.

TOM TRACEY knew that the sheriff and deputy went out to Rancho Moreno that evening. It was Tom's business to know what went on in Kiopo City. He also knew that Shufflin' Sanderson came back about ten o'clock, was in the office a few minutes, and went back to the rancho. He did not know that Shufflin' took two rifles back with him; but the mere fact that both officers stayed all night at Moreno's place disturbed Tom a little.

Under any circumstances it would have seemed queer, but especially this night, with the cattle raid due at daylight in the morning. Tom was riding out of Kiopo City before daylight, and went straight to the rancho. The ranch-house was in darkness, but there was a light in the stable.

Cautiously he made his way to the stable in the darkness, and discovered a lighted lantern, which they had forgotten to extinguish. But the stable was empty of horses. Tom knew then that something was wrong. There *had* been a reason for the two officers staying at the *rancho.*

Tom knew the way to the old trail, which would lead close to the west end of Sunshine Valley, but he had never ridden that south range enough to know how to cut across to the east end in time to warn the boys of a possible ambush.

He mounted his horse and rode straight for the south trail, not a little fearful of running into the ambush himself. Just as the sun broke over the eastern range, he rode to the top of a pinnacle, where he could get a view of the valley. Leaving his horse behind the pinnacle, he climbed to a vantage point, took a pair of powerful binoculars from his pocket, and sat down to watch.

Tom Tracey saw the rustlers long before they came in sight of Hashknife and his hidden men; and he plainly saw them scatter when Moreno accidently fired his rifle. He saw Mac Cord plunge out of his saddle, saw Nichols go head over heels, riddled with bullets, and saw the Yaqui herders scuttle for the brush.

Grimly he watched the swift action, too far away to be of any assistance. He swung his powerful lenses further to the north, and saw a rider, mounted on a swift, blaze-face sorrel, going north. It was Shorty Vestal, heading back toward the Rancho Moreno. Tom quickly pocketed his binoculars, ran down to his horse, and spurred back toward the trail.

He wanted to see why Shorty was going back there, instead of seeking safety across the Border.

Eva Moreno was on the balcony, straining her eyes, as she searched the southern hills; anxious for word of the possible battle, when she saw the lone rider. Too far away for identification, she watched horse and rider, until she could distinguish the blaze-faced sorrel. Then she knew that the rider was Shorty Vestal.

Off to her left was another rider, converging in on the ranch-house. It was Tex Severn—but Eva did not know him. Mrs. Olivas was behind Eva, looking anxiously. Eva drew her back into the house. She knew that all the lower doors were locked and barred.

Shorty spurred his lathering sorrel in close to the stable, dismounted and ran inside. The other rider, Tex, apparently thought Shorty had gone through the patio gate, because Tex galloped through the gate, and jerked his horse to a stop near the bunk-house. He whirled his horse several times, swinging a gun in his right hand, apparently wondering what became of Shorty.

Tom Tracey saw the sorrel near the stable and jerked up his horse, as Shorty ran outside, stuffing something into his pockets. Shorty jerked up and went for his gun—but too late. Tracey swung sideways in his saddle, sent shot after shot into Shorty Vestal at a distance of twenty feet. The lanky ex-foreman of Rancho Moreno went down, still clawing weakly at his holster.

Sleepy lost Hashknife in the wild ride back. He saw him just before they came in sight of the ranch-house. Apparently Hashknife had swung wide, avoiding a long clump of mesquite, and was coming in at the rear.

Near the patio gate, Sleepy skidded his mount in a shower of gravel, flung himself to the ground and went running toward the gate, rifle in hand. He heard the thud of running hoofs, and came face to face with Tex Severn in the gateway. Tex's horse was buck-jumping out, right into Sleepy.

There was no time to shoot. As quick as a flash, Sleepy swung up his rifle and smashed the lunging horse across the nose. And almost at the same moment the right shoulder of the horse struck Sleepy, knocking him spinning.

But the horse went down, too, and Tex struck on his hands and knees a dozen feet away, skidded and turned over on his back.

Tom Tracey had dismounted and ran to Shorty Vestal, tearing away the dead man's pockets to get at what Shorty had put in them. Hashknife stepped around the corner of the stable as Tom stood up, his back to Hashknife. He could hear the hoof-beat of running horses. Whirling around, he started to his horse.

"It's a nice day for it, Tracey," said Hashknife clearly.

The red-headed saloon-keeper of Kiopo City whirled in his stride and flung up his gun. Hashknife fired twice, before Tom could pull the trigger. The heavy bullets whirled him around, and he fell, sprawling on his face, just as Moreno, Corbett and Sheriff Toland jerked their horses to a stop near the stable.

Shorty and Tom were lying close together, as Hashknife went slowly over and turned Tom on his back. His pockets were bulging with currency, and a few bills were scattered on the ground.

"Tracey killed Shorty Vestal," said Hashknife. "I reckon Shorty had a cache in the stable, and came back to get it. Moreno, if I ain't mistaken, here's the forty thousand dollars that Shorty stole from yuh."

"Forty thousand!" exploded the sheriff. "Did you say forty thousand, Hartley?"

"I did. You see, Moreno drew forty thousand to pay off a mortgage on his ranch, and Shorty stole it from him."

"Hell, that's news to me! Gawd, he's shore lucky to recover it!"

Moreno was staring at Hashknife, who had lied to save the honor of the Moreno name. He swallowed thickly, and tried to smile. The sheriff was swiftly emptying Tracey's pockets and taking money from inside his shirt, where he had stuffed it. Sleepy was yelling:

"How damn long do yuh reckon I'm goin' to set on this pelican out here?"

He was sitting on Tex Severn, and wondering what was going on elsewhere. Shufflin' and Chuck arrived, and went to Sleepy's assistance. Two more riders, Richards and Evans, of the Border Patrol, attracted by the shooting, came galloping in. The sheriff yelled at them, and they came quickly from their horses.

"Cattle raiders," explained the sheriff. "We broke 'em up down in Sunshine Valley, and three of 'em came here. They're all down."

"Tom Tracey!" exclaimed Richards. "Shorty Vestal!"

"Tracey was as bad as the rest," said the sheriff. "Vestal stole forty thousand of mortgage money from Moreno, and cached it in the stable. He eame to get it, I reckon. Tom Tracey killed him, and was takin' the money, when Hartley downed Tracey. You see—wait a minute; Tracey ain't dead!"

The red-headed boss of the Agua Amarillo gang was trying to sit up. The sheriff lifted his head and shoulders, and Tom looked around. He seemed to know what had happened.

"Better get him to a doctor," said Moreno.

"No," replied Tom weakly. "No use for a doctor—now. Hell of a finish, wasn't it? Downed by a stranger."

"Not a stranger, Tracey," said Hashknife, leaning close. "Hashknife Hartley from Wolf Butte, Wyomin'."

"Wolf Butte? Oh, yeah—Wolf Butte. Hold—me—up—a—little. Good!"

"Lyin' won't help anybody now," said Hashknife. "You came to Wolf Butte and killed Frenchy La Clede, then you killed Wong, the Chinaman."

"No," denied Tom weakly, "I only killed La Clede—Frenchy. He—he killed Wong, with Wong's own knife. I saw—through window. I killed Frenchy."

"You men heard that," said Hashknife tensely. "Don't forget what he confessed. Tracey, can you still hear me?"

"Yes," whispered the dying man.

"You and Len Tracey, yore brother, tried to murder me. You shot at me and killed Len."

"God—forgive—me—I did. I said you killed him. Where—is—Stevens?"

"I'll tell him, Tracey."

"I—I—put—blood—on—him. Wong—doped—coffee—"

"I dunno what it's all about," said the sheriff," but I'm a witness to the fact that Tracey murdered Frenchy La Clede and Len Tracey."

He lowered Tom Tracey's head to the ground and got to his feet, as Sleepy, Chuck, Jack Corbett and Eva came running.

"Tracey confessed, pardner," said Hashknife. "The law don't want us now!"

"Holy henhawks! Is that good news in the mornin'? But look what Eva's got!"

Eva, half-laughing, half-crying held out her open hand. Sparkling in the sunlight were seven huge diamonds. Sleepy held out the splintered butt of his fancy Winchester, which he had smashed over the nose of Tex's horse. It had been hollowed out for several inches, and the butt-plate screwed on over the diamonds.

"They were scattered around the patio," said Eva.

"The Seven Stars of Montezuma!" exclaimed Chuck. Richards looked at Chuck quickly.

"What do you know about the Seven Stars?" he asked sharply.

"Only what I've heard, officer."

Evans, a hard-faced, keen-eyed officer,

was examining one of them very closely. Richards looked at him curiously.

"What will it weigh?" he asked.

"That doesn't matter," replied Evans. He looked around at the interested faces.

"I'm pretty well up on precious stones," he informed them. "I appraised stones for several years, before I came down here for my health."

He placed the glittering stones in Eva's hand, and smiled at her.

"They're very pretty," he told her. "Nicely cut, and not bad imitations. They'll make a nice necklace, Miss Moreno."

"You mean—they are imitations?" asked Moreno huskily.

"Very nice ones, too, Mr. Moreno." He looked at the broken gunstock, and smiled.

"I'm afraid someone was due for a shock," he said.

Hashknife looked at the two crumpled bodies beside the stable and nodded slowly. He moved over and flung an arm around Sleepy's shoulders.

"It's been a long, long trail, pardner," he said. "From Wyomin' to Hell and back."

"And bein' back ain't so bad, either," grinned Sleepy.

"I'm sendin' a wire to Wolf Butte, Wyomin' t'day, boys," said the sheriff. "This here county is goin' to pay for a telegram long enough to explain everythin' Tom Tracey confessed. Dad-gum it, I'm as happy as you are."

Moreno was unable to talk. He put an arm around Eva, and they walked back to the patio gate, where Tex was all tied up. Tex merely grunted, as they went past.

FAR DOWN across the Border, Pancho and Diego sat on their horses. Every few minutes a Yaqui would pop out of the brush, heading on foot for Agua Amarillo. But not an *Americano* came across.

Pancho scratched an ear, still itching from the breeze of a passing bullet.

"You wan' know sometheeng, Diego?" he asked.

"Sure. W'at I'm wan' know, Pancho?"

"Somebody," stated Pancho wisely, "t'row monkee-wranch in theese machinnery."

"For once in my life you are right."

"Hm-m-m," mused Pancho. "You wan' know somethеeng?"

"Sure."

"Leesten ver' close, Diego. I'm feeger theese out from my own head. Eeet ees bes' to be hones', biccause nobody ees trying for keel honest men."

"*Buena.* But that ees not new from knowing, Pancho."

"But eet ees new from doing. I bilieve I 'ave found damn good idea. We try heem out, eh?"

"Sure. We go back 'ome, steal bottle tequila from Foreign Clob, and talk theese good idea over."

AND while Pancho and Diego planned a new deal for their future, Hashknife and Sleepy rode past Kiopo City. The folks at Rancho Moreno thought they were merely going to Kiopo City; but they were drifting along. Their job was over, and they were heading for the tall hills ahead. Sleepy pointed south, where three bald peaks reared their heads together.

"There's the Mexican hat," he said. "I've been wonderin' what's on the other side, Hashknife."

"Keep wonderin', pardner," smiled Hashknife. "They won't interest me, as long as there's strange American hills to cross—and you to cross 'em with me. But everythin' is all right again. Moreno got some of his money back, Jack gets Eva—and the law don't want us."

They looked at each other and smiled, before they turned and rode on, looking at the hills ahead.

SAND STORM

(An off-the-trail story)

by RAYMOND S. SPEARS

PACKY BUNT was a great thief, a mongrel, his citizenship long since lost and forgotten. He led other renegades of lesser degree, who shared his inordinate pride in the thought that none ever excelled or even equaled him. Nevertheless, ambition stirred him to attempt a feat beside which even his own scoundrelisms would seem trivial.

He longed to steal, not a little band of sheep, but a major flock, one of those great divisions of twenty thousand head or so which traveled in regimental sections and spread over a whole county or two in ceaseless forage marches. If he could capture and escape with such a mass of woolies he should be forever famous among The Borderers, and even the least of his outlaw band, a lackwit, would have a fortune to spend and a name.

His desperadoes were called The Stealers, *Los Ladinos*. Of horses they had captured many, and to cattle ranches they had been a scourge. They had caused dismay to prospectors, miners, stage drivers and express messengers. The thunder of their horses' hoofs shook communities with dread; their patronage brought ruin to the merchants whose shelves they denuded. The rendezvous of Packy Bunt was Sinsink. There, while his scoundrels shouted and cheered, Packy boasted that he would perform a feat so great that the Ten Commandments would be unseated.

The band set its courses for the tallest mountains and traveled by the light of the stars. Because they were choosers and pickers, they rode the best of mounts and drove for pack man-mules of many brands.

Despite long experience they had never stolen sheep. A flock of sheep would be different from other loot. Assuredly, they had often killed sheep to eat, while the sheep herder raged inwardly but smiled outwardly, his feelings enraged at feeding these white-teethed, red-brown cheeked and black hearted villains. They picked their mutton with care, choosing wethers of the best condition. They would shoot a priceless dog that did not veil his resentment or contempt.

Packy Bunt always added a disk of silver or gold to the red snake skin around his hat, serving as a ribbon, when he had led his followers into a successful new crime, or killed some one with his own hand—that hat-band was a tinkling, glistening reminder of his prowess, each medal kept bright by sweethearts on his range.

He was careful of but one feature of his dress—the hat. He wore blue overalls, or discarded trousers found at some raided ranch; a shirt stripped from some victim, regardless of the slight perforation where a bullet had passed through; and lacking a fifty-cent pair of suspenders, he would take a piece of lariat or a strip of rawhide cut from beef to hold up trousers of too great girth. The belt or two of cartridges without and the money belt within troubled the small of his back when these shirts were too tight for comfort.

The outlaw always carried a watch, which he as regularly forgot to wind, since he knew the hours by the sun, moon and stars. At the same time it was a fine looking jewel, having been presented to a mine manager on account of excellent up-building work in the interests of owners, and so Packy Bunt carried it and polished it as he sat moodily by a fire at night, letting the flames reflect their brightness in the color of gold, and pass through the diamonds and rubies with which the case had been studded. Sometimes he would scrape the metal with his meat knife to admire the brightness.

Packy thought of a thousand great flocks of sheep that were undisturbed. He saw in his mind's eye the dust a flock carries with it, grazing through young white sage, through scattering corn, over harvested cabbage field or along the edge of timberline. His chuckle greeted the thought of a forest ranger grimly patroling the forest edge while a sheep herder haunts the "limit," grinning and patiently waiting the chance to go inside to violate by grazing the forbidden terrain.

Going up and down in the camp and town stages, he studied the sheep along the roads, up the adjacent hills and their watering places. He could read a sheep flock by the dust it raised, whether it was a migrating band, a feeding flock, or wethers, ewes or mixed. He judged the shepherds according to their close-herding or scattering rangers. He became acquainted with hundreds of sheep tenders. When on occasion he met one, far from his trusty band of sheep, not one would betray him through fear of his revenge. Of all people exposed to vengeance by nature and occupation, none is quite so easily attacked as a sheep herder.

The time ripe, he took thirty of his best men and segregated them in the County of Carsicce, where he sat them around fires that burned in the red canyon brightly, illuminating the high walls.

EVEN BUNT was astonished at the excellence of his followers. Not one but had committed many murders; not one but was scarred by bullets, knives, rope or mishandling of horses. Some were young and forward; others humped up over the flames in the morose silence of maturity. Half-breeds, far wanderers, they spoke many tongues. Two or three were fat and lazy in appearance, but they had particular values—often enormous strength; others were lean and frail looking, but had astonishing endurance or spirit or other distinctions. A boy among them had stabbed a woman in the back.

"We'll get the flock of Pasque Carbone, the Basque!" Packy ended his harangue to the picked band. "You, Miguel, go with me, while Inagua the Jack takes—" Accordingly, he assigned each of his chosen men. When they were through, the Carbone flock was wholly encompassed, from the band of ewes attended by Pedro the Innocent to the twelve thousand wethers attended by Judd the Yank. Fourteen bands in all comprised a master flock of twenty thousand sheep and thousands of lambs. All were in the Hawkane Basin, grazing at the moment toward the low winter pastures of the Fond Devils Tuilles, a great marsh, five months distant.

The Hawkane Basin was just over the mountains from the canyon where The Stealers received their last instructions. They rode up over The Pass and spread through the basin, each with his own job to do.

Inagua and his sole companion approached Pedro the Innocent and deftly cut his throat; Judd the Yank was less easily disposed of, resisting several bullets and succeeded in killing Miguel. The other shepherds were disposed of with varying difficulty, and all were nicely sunk in the ground or in bottomless pits or heaped over with rocks. Only two dogs were killed, and as the dogs remained with the flocks, the renegade shepherds easily persuaded them to continue their duties.

As for Pasque Carbone, the owner, he was the most easily overcome of all. Having gone to town for supplies, he returned with a wagon load of simple needs, such as beans, bacon, onions, lentils, and garlic, with ample peppers. Unhappily for himself, he had drunk corn liquor and cactus sap. Packy Bunt had merely to drop a lariat noose around his neck and drag him to a convenient place for hiding in the arid land, thus doing two things at once—killing and removing. The wagon driver, not so drunk, caused excitement before he fell struggling in death.

On the next day but one, Packy rode to an isolated mountain top in the great Hawkane Basin and looked in the early dawn over that vast domain. A grand scene, a valley spotted by chaparral, by bare areas of lifeless alkali, by rolling crinkles of earth and fallen, crumbling slips of talus along mountain foot and wastes of desiccating stone.

In the distance, by the Mountain of Lost Jaguars, Packy saw dust ascending against the face of the sunrise. At the ends of this faint cloud he saw puffs of dust—the dashing of drivers and dogs. Other rising clouds of floury alkali disclosed the exact location of all the captured bands. Packy Bunt smiled to himself, a grin that contorted his face into a mask of unloveliness under that beautiful hat with its weight of metal insignia of triumphs. The new disk should be of bright, new gold—a double eagle; a silver dollar was not precious enough.

Silhouetted against the sky line, he drank to his own health and prosperity.

When he turned down the mountain, assured that all was well, he rejoined the captured wagon, which was pounding along a trail hundreds of years old. From all directions he watched the dust clouds marking the progress of the sheep bands, all heading in the same direction as before, only faster. Only the shepherds had changed. One does not much hurry woolly heads, a fact making the theft of twenty thousand with lambs a great venture, requiring not only good luck but extermination of owner, foreman, herders and witnesses.

"Hi-i!" breathed Bunt, riding his horse near the wagon, like an owner in good standing.

He was manager and proprietor now. He needed time to make his getaway, but he had it. Carbone had been notoriously wrapped up in his sheep, staying with them, with no one to keep track of them but himself and no one to inquire into his own coming, going or failure to appear. Perhaps another sheep man might notice his mark and the strangers attending the flocks, but pasture enemies would mind their own business, not his.

SO THE SHEEP moved in Hawkane Basin. From spring to spring, from pasture to pasture, from end to end, weaving through three different passes into the next basin, where the Basque, Carbone, had won the grazing privilege against cattle and horses and held it against his kind, a vast forage valley. Past there, they hit the desert.

One day was like another. The tawny land was trod by all the hoofs, each hoof tossing a bit of dust into the air at every step. The master thief rode at large, leaving the wagon to visit the minor flocks and exult with the rascal herders over their great feat. They descried their fellows by the color of the dusts; Bunt knew by the clouds what each band was doing. On the wind was white dust.

Day by day the sheep measured the land with their million steps, little heads pecking at the ground, like agitated hens, the fuzz behind the ears where there was too much skin stretching in and out like unsymmetrical springs.

Beyond the El Segundo Basin the trail of the great flock was not the trail of usage. It could not be. The market did not lie in that normal Sierra feed-land of winter. From here, onward, Bunt must go where other flocks did not, finding new country where neither he nor the sheep brand were known. To sell his twenty thousand sheep with big lambs, he must find an unsuspicious fence who would ship according to his need.

Where a band came to water at a spring, he shot the homesteader, who had tried to collect two cents each for permitting the eager sheep to drink. He shot the man's wife for good measure and left the baby in the cabin.

He was constrained to bring all the bands together to cross the Valley of Skeletons, a desolation beyond which was a land of increasing feed and—his chief consideration—a market. The scattered bands, floating together across the shadeless desert, made indeed a pretty picture. They were like dull clouds casting shadows upon the land, and the noise they made was oddly tender and gentle in the waste of thirst and heat.

Bunt looked with feelings akin to supreme self-dependence. Was it not proved by this time that it was even possible to steal sheep, if one but fooled the sheep herders, if one waited the occasion expertly to use a knife or gun to slit a throat or break a heart? It needed but the covering of a grave.

And so they came to Skeleton Valley, a month too soon.

A DRY stream bed meanders from end to end of Skeleton Valley. A most unpromising simplicity of detail prevailed —scattering sage brush, unusually withered even for sage; alkali, pale cream in color, reflecting the sun with relentless glare and boiling head of false mirage. Over low ranges and knolls, running waves of sand lay down the center of the wide, level bottoms. A once living forest there had been turned by Time's magic to stone.

No tradition tells by whom the valley was named after its skeletons, though innumerable bones indicated the appropriateness of the nomenclature. Skeletons of historic and prehistoric origin both gave testimony.

When Packy Bunt came over the divide with his outlaws, goats, dogs, sheep and mules, the mountains across that way loomed clear and stern, the crest cool with snow, the flank dark with evergreen shade. The long range seemed but a short distance away. Across the bottom waves seemed to be washing through the troughs of the sand dunes and these broke around and through the fossil trunks and up-swung ribs and limbs of the monsters of old.

The great master flock ate the forage quickly. The sheep surged through the waterhole and trampled the outlet, leaving turgid muck. The sheep stealers looked to their leader, askance. Behind them was the waste of their trail; ahead of them, down the valley, was that lurking spread of thorns and dust, of bones and fossils and mirage. They could not now turn back, since on the other side was new country, fresh pastures, and the run-off of early snows and timberbelt reservoirs.

Neverthless, they hesitated, looking back at pastures too quickly crossed by sheep driven close-herded. Not fear nor lack of confidence checked them. They saw coming down the basin a figure whirling in buoyant dance, a Sand Maiden; they knew and did not love her. The goats started on; the sheep followed; the dogs yelped, and the mules strained ahead. The men had no choice. They swung reluctantly to their places. Those behind saw those in the lead plunge into a sea that did not exist.

They poured into the damp runoff from the mucky waterhole. The mud stank. Men, goats, mules, horses and dogs found a last feeling of moisture. The sheep flowed like a gray blanket, bleating and baa-ing, unterrified, unconquered, each jealous of his own place in the great, smoky cloud spreading out over the undulations of that weird, withered land.

Living upon a past as successful as his, Packy Bunt saw nothing to dread. He plunged ahead, dumpy in pride and grinning satisfaction, sipping at his own waterbag and chewing a pebble. Out of the corners of his eyes he noticed an occasional sheep or lamb dragging behind. At first he barked to have these hustled ahead into the flock—to save three dollars or six dollars—but presently the same weaklings would fall forward and lie squirming, as if mortally wounded, gasping. Such were now left for vulture, raven and coyote. These birds were now flocking above the dust of the herd, they that must have awakened concern in less perfectly self-satisfied, confident men. It would be hell to cross—but sure, they'd make it.

For hours they kept going, unresting, squinting, shrinking and bending in the glare. They came to the sand and found lanes through it, where the wind had swept the gravel and clay bare. On either side golden waves rose in billows and surges, rollers and swells—and there were glaring white waves of sand, too, white crystals among the yellow dunes, sorted out, like with like.

The driven sheep fell into a panic of urgency. Behind them stretched the fallen tufts of gray, with solemn sentinels around them, and less patient black scoundrels perched upon them, ravens flapping bold wings at the feeble struggles—vultures waiting. What was a sheep or two in a flock of thousands?

SOMETHING began to happen. Gusts of zephyr, blasts of heat, lifts of sand, came smoking from the crests of dunes. Eyes that were bloodshot looked toward the north and saw the head of the valley veiled by an uplifted host of figures.

"The Sand Maidens are beginning to

step!" some one cried from parched throat.

The wind freshened into a gale. The hot earth that had been at rest in the valley lifted suddenly in a tawny burst of swirling harpies, spinning Sand Maids, leaping and bounding skyward, but kicking the earth with toe-tips. High in the blue, unsuspected moisture suddenly became white cumuli of clouds—peaks, valleys and crystalline shadows, spreading with rose blushes, cool to suggestion as seen by the tormented travelers in that depth of stinging heat. All around the horizon were green and golden skies, the sun vanishing amid great rings of purple, in raw colors and flaming halos that licked the eyes with searing tongues and the imagination with lurid threat. The sheep stealers looking about, caught glimpses of one another, some in halos of red and some romping in black flames, while the sheep were pink and sparkling. They laughed and still were not afraid, only suffering and cursing.

The wind in the hour of terrific color appeared to be coming from the northward, beating against a tall, blank wall of yellows in streaks and heaps, flying over an army of racing Sand Maidens who wore flapping yellow and greenish raiment—but some were dark and deathly orange.

At one moment all saw the vast approach of a wonderful mansion, or castle, or devil's cathedral of imaginable front, flaring windows and towering spires. Their mad laughter ceased as they tried with gutturals and yelps to indicate what they noticed to the dimly veiled figures of men nearest them.

They saw blue and red, columns and balconies, hallways and enormous ballrooms; they felt the blasts from eternal fires that heated the sand about them in the flying skirts of the merciless Desert Sisters, whose singing rang in their ears and added to the uproar of twenty thousand sheep, yelping dogs and shouting men.

Through the vast mirage glowed lurid flames. It was as though it were a house afire, but with imperishable, eternal heat, flashing through the fantastic structure that staggered in its own blasts. High overhead, where the sunset was glowing, the sky seethed and boiled, still continuing the illusion of vast portals and terrible conflagration, all in a land where it seemed as though nothing could possibly have remained unburned to feed a fire. The fossils of trees turned to torches, mockeries.

The incredible, fiery storm swept down upon the sheep, the goats, the dogs and the mounted sheep stealers, who regarded it with the buoyant defiance bred of long experience in escaping written codes, humans and natural phenomena.

The shadows brought a kind of coolness; high clouds poured down ragged shreds of black rain, which the dry air of the sandy billows sucked dry a mile above the parched earth, each drop turned hot and evaporated on flying tiny stones. Rattling, clicking and fretting became the roar of a multitude of dry, crisp sounds; the promise of rain and moisture turned to stinging crystals of sand, from which even the weathered and toughened bandits turned. The sheep, white, grayish or green with settled dust, began to smoke and turn yellow and ghastly in the hot, dry blizzard, their bleating protests dying away into the terrified gasping silences of a panic-struck, breathless flock. They suddenly began to race, to break, to bob and bump along, scattering through men and dogs. Packy had a sudden realization of the necessity of holding them in a compact mass to take what was coming. Who could quiet a sheep stampede?

The sheep, futile in silent terror, fled. Men, circling about, ran them down with blood-stained clubs and lariat hondas; the dogs galloped low, faithful to the flock, snapping at the heels, shouldering into the throats of bell-wethers, and herding the goats. The tinkling of flight spread out into the thickening sand cloud, mocking the shrieks of the thief-herders, who no longer spat mud but blew dust from mouth and nostrils.

They lost sense of direction as the wind swirled in ten thousand columns of mingled sand and alkali, the Dancing Maids of the Desert, lifting and tumbling victims about with their heels. Some men abandoned their efforts, the herders afoot searching for their horses at the supply wagon, where they crept into the shelter of canvas stretched over the hoops and on the earth. Some never found the wagon. The sheep vanished in the fog without moisture, whose drops were hurtling pebbles like buckshot, drops without water.

Instead of dying in the dusk, the storm blew all night, all the next lurid, unbreathable, tawny day; through another night and another day. It swept and rushed dry cyclone, made up of tornadoes and whirlwinds, in a host of uncountable, swirling figures dancing down Skeleton Valley to the singing music of wind upon singing sand a-march. The vast dwelling of devils flew by at last. Suddenly the gale blew out in gusts; the mile-high tornadoes puffed up; the host of the Dancing Maids twitched their flying robes and became scatter witches, whose skirts, flung high, spread wide and vanished. A soft, tender breeze fell cool from the rimrock moutains upon the parched and quivering valley.

The sun shone through the hovering dust which rained quickly to the earth; the western sky was revealed in immeasurable calm and color. An evening star shone; constellations appeared and the sky became alight. The air cleared. Dust returned to dust.

The moon rose less than full. The last, lightest dust, upon the dry play lake became as a sea. Beams shone upon the plain of long, stretched-out drifts of sand, wherein lifted dune crests cast shadows and fossil trees raised stony branches above the whitened bones that gave Skeleton Valley its name—relics of monsters upon whom the Sand Maidens had danced in myriads of assemblies down the deathful ages, hot-footed in wanton carelessness, merry and cruel.

Where had grown an ancient park the skeleton of a buffalo lay whole, with flapping shreds of dark skin hanging upon the ribs, uncovered by the running of the dry sand sea. Hunks of alkali, skulls of horses, deer and cattle, a dead man sitting huddled with his blanket blown from his withered mummy frame—there the harpy sprites had embraced him.

OUT in the midst of the valley a huge monument, a great swollen wave of gray sand, had come to rest in the lee of one of Bunt's wagons. Now, through cracks in the box, ran down the fine sand, hour-glass emptying of the dust the vanishing dancers had become, filling the interstices of the load.

Sharp, crystal quartz had cut the canvas, polished the planks, and even brightened the iron rims, axle nuts—all the metal of the wagon tongue and chains. Humans, horses, dogs and goats lay prostrate, but mules were shaking the dust out of their coats and digging sand out of their ears with hoofs, sticking out their tongues to prodigious lengths, shaking the sand off of them, scraping them with their teeth, patient and disgusted.

Men crawled out of their tarp rolls, the sand running down their greasy shirts in dry rivulets and little avalanches. From their lips issued a waning torrent of groaning profanity, whispering, husky and futile, rasping the silence.

Packy Bunt crawled up into the desolation, stroking his felted black hat with trembling fingers worn in the stress of that tense agony. His green eyes flickered redly as the dust hung upon his twisted lashes. He shook and dry dust fell out of his ears and hair. He held his head to listen for a voice, for a bleat or cry of sheep. He heard only the faint whine of loose sand, settling in the troughs of the poised dunes.

Other men stumbled up with the mules, but Bunt looked around in the glaring moonlight and tried to find the twenty thousand sheep and uncounted lambs that he had stolen. As dawn broke he found drifts of sand with little wool tufts along the top, little spreads of curly woolen mats. Dragging at these, he found smothered ewes with lambs beneath, mouths fastened to mothers' teats. There about them, down the lee, he saw bits of mats, like bunch grass—sheep drowned in dust of stone. He cursed the stupidity of sheep.

He saw goats come up out of the beds of prickly pear. Snorting, they blew dust like smoke from their nostrils, as though they were possessed; plucking away the spines of barrel cactus, they gnawed into the sap within.

"This is Hell!" Bunt cursed, looked around and saw his gang, indifferent to what he said, unable to understand his words, but watching the contortions of his face, whose skin the crystals had cut through and streaked with dust and blood.

All were spitting dust; they pounced upon surprised goats, stabbed them and drank the blood to assuage their thirst. Yet as they saw the dust-smoking nostrils when the goats snorted, the bandits shrank and blinked in suspicion and even fear of creatures who breathed such fumes.

Packy Bunt surged to the largest and strongest mule, snarling at another man of similar choice and intention. He dragged a saddle from a heap, careless of whose it was. Men came charging in upon the big pack beasts, whose endurance was best of all the things still living. Trembling with weakness, hatred and terror, seeing their leader, the most stalwart of all, now abandoning them, after leading them headlong into this unspeakable mess, hands reached for heavy holsters or for knife sheaths, tentatively, with lessening doubts and increasing anger and recklessness.

For minutes they mustered strength, circled for position, watched for openings, keeping clear of one another, yet making way—the strong against the weak, the quick against the strong,—all conscious of their unfitness, all hesitating to begin without the advantage, rising tide of panic and hatred becoming lust of vengeance as they saw Packy assuming to take the biggest, best mule. Against him they ranged; in watchful hesitation he tried to cinch the mount he had already bridled.

Suddenly, mustering all that he had, Packy Bunt snatched out his revolver. It jerked forth in a cloud of dust that had filled his holster. When he let go the barrel-full of alkali and sand jumped and burst. Others, who had held their guns till they were drained empty, let go. Bunt staggered back and stumbled, sagged and went down, snatching at his other gun in a gesture of hate.

The big mule kicked and squealed. Running mules marked the shooting and stabbing of the rascals among themselves, their bullets smoking into sand, ripping into men, whimpering through the air when they had scratched long gouges along surfaces—dogs, goats and masters engaged in mutual extermination.

The shooting and the dry-throat howls and chokings died away as the men died. Overhead came circling vultures; ravens planed down on spreading wings from the mountain junipers and higher pines, squawking and anxious lest they be cheated. They saw the mules stretching out in a long line, ears laid back, eyes upon the mountains ahead, nostrils sniffing for water, and around them dogs and goats; stumbling and reeling after them, some creeping, were men who presently lost the trails and crawled around in circles.

VULTURES chose their own dead. Pitching down out of the sky, having come far and arrived late, the birds were still coming when others were sailing up, surfeited. And the flying host made unmistakable landmark in that enormous basin—a sign that a man saw, a desert rummy known as the Texas Hatter, so-called because he was always mad about something or other.

Coming to satiate his curiosity, he found the birds perched around. There was the wagon. He walked about, staring and swearing softly to himself. The heavy birds flapped away from dead things. Slinking coyotes retreated from the sheep they were unearthing. There were skeletons of buffalo and sabre-tooth tiger, claw-footed horses, mammoths, sheep and humans—accumulations of wild creatures of these thousand ages.

"Huh—Here's luck! First whack at this outfit!" Texas Hatter grinned, grumbling to himself, "A whole damned herd of all the brutes and beasts that never was! Huh—Sheep! They started acrost the valley too early, looks like. Why, them's Ol' Carbone's sheep tags. Pasque neveh in God's world came this-away—Shu-u! Hyar's a dandy .30-30 carbine—'Taint rusty a bit—Dog-gone! Sheep stealers, I reckon. That's what—bandits!"

He stood gazing at two figures in twined embrace, skeletons and rags, big knife driven up, a big-six pointed to a hole in the top of a skull.

"Hell, that's funny!" Texas Hatter reflected, "Fightin' like cats and dogs. An' if that ain't Packy Bunt's big hat—the sun-of-a-gun! I'd know that anywheres—spangles and all. He's picked clean as a trout—huh! They sure cut up his bones with lead slugs. Must-a be'n one hell of a battle! Um-m—They all got theirs—"

He stood turning the big, black hat around on his forefinger.

"Hi-i—That's tinklin' music!" he chuckled to himself, "Them spangles is money. Silver—Lawse! An' some is gold, yeller double-eagle gold! I c'n trade them in anywhere's, I bet. Yes, sir—I betcha—when I git to town, now, I c'n sure as God swap 'em for a drink!"

Only the vultures heard him.

BILL ADAMS

NEVER GET EXCITED

KEEFE, the owner of the bark *Kinnaird,* stood by her gangway having a last word with her skipper.

"I'll be in Frisco when you get there," said Keefe, giving the skipper's hand a good-by shake. With a glance toward six apprentices on the *Kinnaird's* fo'c's'le head, he added, "Don't forget about *them.*"

"Hicks will attend to that," said the skipper; and, as Keefe went ashore, shouted to Hicks, the mate.

"Get the gangway in, Mister! Cast off the mooring lines!"

Keefe sat in his office with pencil and paper, doing some figuring. In the six years he'd owned the *Kinnaird* she'd been round the Horn to San Francisco and back five times. In six years twenty-nine apprentices had deserted her in San Francisco. When an apprentice signs his indentures he pays a premium of thirty pounds; a hundred and fifty dollars American. If he stays with his ship the money is returned to him in annual installments. If, finding life too tough, he deserts, the money goes to the owner. Twenty-nine times thirty is eight hundred and seventy. In six years Keefe had made that much clear profit from deserting apprentices. Very nice. Thinking of the sole apprentice who had not deserted, he frowned.

"They'll fix him this voyage. I'll make a little out of him yet," he muttered.

The *Kinnaird* was slipping past the Irish coast in a light breeze. The skipper came to the poop, where Hicks leaned on the taffrail. Five first-voyage apprentices stood by the bulwarks amidships, gazing at the last of the land. An older apprentice sat on the hatch behind them.

"Mister Hicks, you've sailed in ships that carried apprentices?" asked the skipper.

"Yes, sir," said Hicks, and you could tell by his tone that he had no use for apprentices.

A ratty little man, the skipper. Hard eyes. Thin lips. Hicks, whose eyes were equally hard, whose lips were yet thinner, towered above him.

"They must all skip when the ship gets to Frisco, Mister," said the skipper.

"They'll skip," said Hicks.

The skipper looked at the lone apprentice on the hatch.

"That young devil's been in her two years. He's tough," said he.

"I'll tough him, sir," grunted Hicks.

"I leave it to you, mister. No questions asked," said the skipper.

The *Kinnaird* was a little bark of four hundred tons. She carried six able seamen who lived in the topgallant fo'c's'le under the fo'c's'le head. Till Keefe owned her she'd never carried apprentices. For apprentices' quarters he had had a wretched little deckhouse built amidships, just aloft the mainmast, where the bark took the heaviest water in bad weather. It looked like a dog kennel.

The door was at the forward end. Had it been at the after end the kennel would have been drier in heavy weather. Keefe had it put at the fore end purposely. There were two bunks on each side, and two across the after end. There was just room for six sea chests, and none for a table. Two small ports gave a little light by day. In most apprentices' quarters a good oil lamp hung in bright brass gimbals. In the *Kinnaird's* a cheap lantern hung to a beam overhead. The beams were only five feet six from the deck.

The *Kinnaird* had been built by a man who liked fancywork in a ship. Wheel-box, wheel, taffrail, saloon skylight and chart room were teak. The taffrail was rimmed with a brass border. Along the skylight, above the stained glass, were many little brass rods. Round the chart room was a brass handrail. The poop accommodation ladder was teak, its steps rimmed with brass. The fife rails were teak, rimmed with brass. There was a round brass plate on top of the quarterdeck capstan. There was brass and teak enough to keep six apprentices scouring and polishing all the time. Six seamen were enough to keep the rigging in good shape.

The *Kinnaird's* six seamen were all of them "Dutchmen," from the waterfronts of such places as Hamburg, Danzig, Helsingfors, Antwerp — good enough sailors, but without any kick in them. The sort that will contentedly eat the barest whack of poor food, and never complain, let alone mutiny.

An apprentice can't complain. Well, maybe he can; but it'll do him no good and only get him in bad with his skipper. Mutiny is out of the question. He's there to learn the business of a seaman. His indentures read: "The said shipowner shall use all proper means to teach him the business of a seaman." At the end of his four years' apprenticeship he takes an exam for a second mate's ticket. If, owing to having kicked, he gets a bad conduct reference from his skipper he may as well not take the exam, for he'll not pass it. His hash is cooked.

THE *Kinnaird* had been fourteen days at sea. She was slipping along with a light northeast trade wind in her canvas. Since sailing she had met with nothing but the finest of weather. Today the sun had been hot, for she was in the tropics. The apprentices sat at supper. Flinty hardtack, and skilly in a dirty old tin pot. For fourteen evenings supper had been precisely the same. Fourteen breakfasts had been the same too, except that coffee almost too bitter to swallow had come from the dirty spout of the dirty old pot.

Hicks looked in at the open door. He had to stoop to look in.

"How d' you like the sea?" he asked, in a cold voice that implied very plainly that he didn't give a damn how they liked the sea.

O'Brien, the eldest apprentice looked up with a grin.

"The sea's hell, sir," he replied.

He was six foot three. There was a lump on his forehead; a wen that had been caused on his first voyage by continual bumpings against the beams overhead. He was lean as a rake handle. He weighed a hundred and seventy-nine, stripped. He was just turned twenty. His eyes were big, blue, and innocent. Looked like a girl's eyes. But there was a panther-like litheness to him.

All day, for fourteen days, he'd been scouring brass. In two full years aboard the *Kinnaird*, in fine weather, he had done little but scour teak, polish brass, and holystone the decks. In two years no mate or second mate had ever dreamed of showing him how to tuck a splice of any sort in rope or wire, how to mend a sail, or do any of the many things that go to making a seaman. He had, of necessity, learned how to furl and to loose sails, of course; and how to steer.

Hicks noticed a piece of new rope lying in a corner.

"What's that rope doing in here?" he demanded.

"I've been teaching the first voyagers how to splice, sir," said O'Brien.

"Who in thunder told you you could have a piece of good new rope to waste?" demanded Hicks.

"I bought that rope myself, sir, the day before we sailed," replied O'Brien.

"You've got your blasted nerve, you young liar," said Hicks, and picked up the rope and went off.

"How do you kids like scrubbing teak and polishing brass?" asked O'Brien, grinning round at the other five apprentices.

No one answered him. It was easy to see how they liked it. Most of them had come to sea with the same old notion that most apprentices go to sea with; thinking that all they'd have to do would be to walk up and down carrying a long telescope under an arm, wearing a nice neat double-breasted blue serge suit with two rows of natty brass buttons on it. O'Brien had had the same idea rather more than two years ago. All were dressed in dirty old dungarees, of course.

O'Brien laughed, and, his supper finished, opened his sea chest; and took from under its lid a piece of old soft rope.

"I swiped this old rope from the sail locker," he said. "New rope's a lot harder to handle. One of you keep watch, and speak quick if you see the mate coming. I'm going to teach you to splice, by gad."

For the rest of the dog-watch, for nearly two hours, O'Brien showed the first-voyagers how to splice, and to make knots. Masthead knots, clove hitches, sheepshanks, rolling hitches, bowlines, and so forth. No one had ever showed him. He'd taught himself, on starry nights when no mate was about. Hungry and dispirited, the first-voyagers didn't take much interest at first. He made them take interest.

"If no one else is going to teach you, by gad, I am. No damned foolishness now! What the blazes did you come to sea for?"

He looked at them sternly, with a sort of amicable scorn in his eyes. He taught them with infinite patience.

The *Kinnaird* was a kalashi watch ship, at Keefe's suggestion. In a kalashi watch ship all hands are on deck all day, and have the whole night in; turning in at eight and out at about dawn. By night they take turns at the wheel and lookout, of course. In the *Kinnaird,* with six seamen and six apprentices, there *should* have been ample time for sleep for every one. But at Hicks' order the apprentices took all the wheels at night, and all the lookouts.

Figure it out yourself. No apprentice could get more than six hours sleep, and two could get but four. And Hicks kept them at work all day, on the brass work and teak. By the end of fourteen days the first-voyagers were half dead with weariness, and thin as staves. All were a year or so younger than O'Brien. Only he seemed never weary. And whenever he replied to Hicks it was with a cheery "Aye, aye, sir" that made Hicks scowl.

Evening by evening O'Brien taught the green hands to splice and to knot, whether they liked it or no. From a seamanship book he explained to them the ropes, the rigging, the sails, the spars. He was hard-fisted, and they were almost as afraid of him as of Hicks himself. Only it was a different kind of fear. He wasn't a bully. He was one of them, and in him was a pride that, as yet, they could not understand.

The *Kinnaird* came to the doldrums and lay becalmed with the sun overhead. The able seamen were busy, getting the rigging into shape for the storms down south. The apprentices polished brasswork and scoured teak with pumice stone and oil till it was smooth as glass. Their heads ached. Their eyes swam. Flinty hardtack, salt pork that was half spoiled, nauseated them. The mind of every first-voyager was fully made up to desert as soon as the bark reached San Francisco.

THE *Kinnaird* picked up a good southeast trade wind and headed south at a smart clip. Then Hicks put the apprentices to holystoning the decks. All day they knelt in a row, each with a bucket of water beside him and a flat sandstone in his hand. Of all dull jobs in a ship holystoning is by all odds the worst. If ever Hicks caught a lad sitting back on his heals to rest for a moment he kicked him. Not too hard a kick. Just a gentle reminder.

Once in a while the skipper came down from the poop and strolled about the main deck. When he kicked an apprentice it was a kick. And he didn't bother about whether or no the apprentice was sitting back on his heels. And his victim was invariably O'Brien. O'Brien always said, very politely, "Thank you, sir," which invariably called for another kick. When the skipper was gone on O'Brien always winked at the other apprentices and murmured:

"Never get excited."

The *Kinnaird* ran from the trade wind into a wet rainy wind. The apprentices sweated in oilskins. Drizzle dripped from their down-bent backs, sweat from their lean faces. The seamen stood under the fo'c's'le head all day making robands; little woven ropes wherewith to tie the sails to the jackstays. A pleasant job, at which men can talk when the mate's not about. Hicks never came round. But did he ever hear an apprentice speak while holystoning, a kick.

And still, every evening, O'Brien taught the first voyage apprentices about the sails, the ropes, the rigging. A stern determined look was in his usually girlish eyes, but a friendly grin on his lips. Determined though they all were to desert as soon as she came to San Francisco, they dare not gainsay the eldest apprentice. And they were learning quite a lot. More than the average apprentice learns, with a mate to teach him.

Off the River Plate coast the *Kinnaird* at last ran into a blow. For the first time since sailing it was necessary to take sail off her. For the first time her apprentices went aloft. Strange though they were on the yards, thanks to O'Brien's teaching they did their work well enough. So well that both the skipper and Hicks were much surprised. Hicks damned them for a lot of young lubbers, of course. O'Brien, by way of a little encouragement, winking, unseen by Hicks, said, "Good kids! You'll make sailors." And though each yearned for Frisco, and freedom from the enslavements of Hicks, there half awakened in them all a vague hint of something faintly akin to pride.

Thenceforth the wind was continually shifty and uncertain; so that often sail must be taken in by night as well as by day. The *Kinnaird* could be a kalashi watch ship no longer. The apprentices worked four hours on and four hours off, with the men. They got more sleep, and became used to being aloft. But the food was bad as ever, and, with the weather daily growing colder, there was no hint of any pleasure at all in life. Whenever by day they were not aloft, or hauling at the braces, they were on their knees holystoning.

There came at last a morning when the sky hung low and dark above the rolling mastheads. A bitter rain drove, on a bitter wind. The sea was black. Then Hicks said:

"Put them holystones away."

O'Brien said:

"This is the Horn."

Then for over three weeks there was no holystoning, no brass to polish, nor teak to scour. The wind screamed. The black sea thundered. Always sleet, or snow, or rain, or hail, drove by. Often there was a thin coating of ice on the rigging. Day and night the apprentices toiled aloft with the men; or hauled on ropes on the deck, waist deep in icy water. Now in the dogwatches O'Brien left the first-voyagers untutored.

Into the cracks upon their torturing palms, they rubbed vaseline; and when the vaseline was gone, pork fat. Their knuckles were broken and bloody from fisting frozen canvas. Where their oilskins rubbed at wrist and neck, salt water boils came. Always they were soaked to the hide. Always they were famished with hunger. Often there was no sleep all night, and but a snatch or so by day. Seas, roaring aboard when the *Kinnaird* dived too deep, crashed on the halfdeck door.

It was when the bark had been two weeks off the Horn that one pitchy midnight a gray-back burst over the rail just as one of them had the door half open, on his way to the deck. Water filled the apprentices' dog kennel, knee-deep; washed into their sea chests; swirled to and fro in the dark.

Not knowing that a hinge on the door was broken, they climbed aloft in the dark to furl a topsail. And when they came down there was no door, and in the dog kennel were no bunks, no sea-chests, no lamp. It was gutted utterly. They could see nothing, but knew by the feel of feet half-frozen, and of bleeding hands, that their kennel was an empty shell.

They followed O'Brien to the poop then. O'Brien shouted to Hicks:

"The half-deck's gutted, sir!"

Hicks shouted back, in the pitchy dark:

"What the hell did ye come to sea for?"

And till dawn broke cold across the rain-hid sea, they all clung to the taffrail, while the *Kinnaird* plunged to the gale.

At dawn the wind lulled a little, enough to enable one of the Dutchmen, helped by O'Brien, to get the half-deck door back on; with makeshift hinges. O'Brien gestured to the first-voyagers then; and down they all came from the poop, and forward to their swamped kennel. Hicks followed, and after Hicks came the skipper, curious to see how the apprentices would like their kennel now.

"Can we have an old sail to sleep on, sir?" O'Brien asked the skipper.

"There are no old sails to spare," replied the skipper.

"Then I guess we can sleep on the deck all right, sir," said O'Brien, looking the skipper straight in his face. And on O'Brien's face was the hint of a grin.

"The Horn won't last forever," added O'Brien, "After this anything'll be pie, sir."

The skipper and Hicks returned to the poop. O'Brien fetched the coffee, and the eight of them sat shivering on the bare planks in the half-deck; and ate hard-tack and drank bitter lukewarm coffee.

On the poop, the skipper said to Hicks, "That fellow's tough, mister."

"I'll tough him, sir," replied Hicks.

"I leave it to you. He's got to skip in Frisco—or before," said the skipper. Hicks nodded.

How the apprentices managed to go on living for another week off the Horn not one of them could have told you. Not even O'Brien, perhaps. The able seamen dug out a few rags of clothing to spare them, and three of the able seamen carried their own donkey-breakfast straw mattresses to the half-deck for the use of the boys. The lantern glass was broken, so that all the light they had after dark was what came from its flickering smoking flame.

The *Kinnaird* was running up the southeast trade winds, heading north at a good clip; just at the low edge of the tropics. The night was dark, her mast-heads swaying through a wide arc against a sky of dim indigo in which a few stars showed.

Hicks went down to the main deck, laid his hand on, and jerked the lee royal buntline, so that the stop on the royal yard broke, and the buntline came tight across the belly of the sail. Then, back on the poop, he blew his whistle for an apprentice. O'Brien appeared. The bark was on kalashi watch again, and O'Brien had been asleep on the deck outside the dog kennel; the night being warm.

"Jump aloft and overhaul that lee mizzen royal buntline," ordered Hicks.

"Aye, aye, sir," said O'Brien, cheery as pie.

When he could see O'Brien outlined against the sky, on the swaying royal yard, a hundred and ten feet or so above the night-hid sea, Hicks, on deck, threw the royal brace off its pin, so that the yard swung suddenly five or six feet and came up with a sharp jerk. Just as he did so a cloud hid the sky, and the yard. Hicks returned to the poop, looked in at the chart room door, and said to the skipper:

"He's gone, sir."

The skipper nodded.

A minute later, puffing his pipe in the darkness, Hicks heard a cheery voice say from the deck below:

"The royal brace needs tightening, sir. It slacked while I was aloft."

Hicks didn't hear O'Brien murmur to himself:

"You dirty devil!"

Next morning the skipper said to Hicks:

"Tonight you'll open the sea-cock on the fo'c's'le head just a little for a few minutes. Tomorrow you'll send him down to bale the well. Keep him baling it till Frisco. That'll fix him."

Forty feet from the *Kinnaird's* bow was a watertight bulkhead. In front of the bulkhead, between it and the stem, was the well. Under the fo'c's'le head, in the men's quarters, was a small hatch that led down to the forepeak, where the pork, beef, ropes, and ship's stores were kept. In the deck of the forepeak was a tiny hatch that led down to the well, by way of a narrow iron tunnel with ladder rungs fastened to one side.

Next morning O'Brien went down the tunnel to the well. So broad his shoulders were that to get down it he had to keep his arms straight up above his head. Hicks lowered a smoky lantern and two buckets down to him. As O'Brien filled the buckets two first voyage apprentices hauled them up and emptied them overboard.

Night by night Hicks opened the seacock a little for a few moments. Day by day O'Brien baled the well. Always when he came up in the evening he was soaked to the hide, but cheerful.

"It don't seem to faze him," said Hicks to the skipper.

"Let a little more water into the well and send two of the first-voyagers down to help bale. It'll make the air fouler," ordered the skipper.

Lest they become too sick in the stinking darkness of the well, so sick that they wouldn't be able to climb out up the narrow tunnel, Hicks had the first-voyagers take turns in the well; leaving O'Brien there all the time. The other three hauled up and emptied the buckets.

The green boys in the well stumbled against each other and O'Brien as the barque pitched. Their heads ached. Wet through, they vomited in the lantern's smoky light.

"Cheer up," said O'Brien. "This won't last forever. Never get excited."

That night, after the apprentices were up from the well, Hicks said to the skipper:

"He's beginning to look good and green about the gills, sir."

The skipper nodded. For days O'Brien had had a splitting headache.

Next day a drenching rain fell. A steady torrent that hid everything a few feet from the bark. That day the skipper and mate could get no sights. Dusk set in early; the *Kinnaird* pitching lightly to an easy swell, making perhaps three miles an hour.

Bringing with it a yet heavier downpour, a squall whined from the gathering gloom. Suddenly the bark shivered throughout her length, and came to a dead stop. As she heeled far over there was a splintering crash. A seaman shouted from forward:

"Fore t'g'l'nmast carried away, sir!"

Before his voice had died there was a second crash. The main topgallantmast had come down too. From the deep glooms to windward came the moan of another squall's advance.

"Clear the boat away!" shouted the skipper.

Running on deck, the second mate bumped into Hicks.

"Get them damned apprentices up from the well, mister. She's gone ashore on a reef. She's done for," said Hicks.

The second ran forward, and back again. The door of the topgallant fo'c's'le had clanged shut as the bark grounded and heeled over. And hard against the shut door, holding it jammed and immovable, lay the fallen fore topgallantmast. The squall shrieked. The sea hissed. The rain beat down, a drowning torrent.

"Der boat! Der boat!" shouted a frightened Dutchman.

"Kervick mitt der boat! Der sheep goes to seenk!" cried another.

The seamen swung the boat out and lowered her. They leapt into her. The second mate leapt into her. The skipper said to Hicks:

"My God, it's not our fault! We'll have to leave 'em. She's going any minute. Jump, mister!"

Hicks jumped. The skipper jumped after Hicks.

"Give way! Get clear of the ship!" ordered the skipper.

The sailors pushed out their oars, and in a moment the ship was lost in the gloom and the rain.

"We'll stand by till morning. Maybe she won't be gone, and we can get them boys out," said the skipper.

All night the squalls whined, the darkness absolute. All night the boat drifted, blown by the squalls.

WHEN the *Kinnaird* grounded, the lantern in the well fell into the water and went out; leaving O'Brien and two first voyage boys in pitch darkness. One of the three trapped in the fo'c'sle above looked down the fore peak hatch and shouted:

"O'Brien, the door's shut, and we can't get out!'

O'Brien shouted back, "Keep your shirt on!" Holding one of the boys back, he ordered the other up the tunnel, "Don't get excited. Keep your head," he said. "And sing out when you get to the top."

As soon as the first boy was in the forepeak he sent the other up.

In a few minutes the six apprentices were shoving at the fo'c's'le door together. No use.

"Don't get excited. We're not dead yet," said O'Brien.

Having found matches in a sailor's bunk, he lit the fo'c's'le lantern, and descended to the forepeak; whence he returned in a moment with a topping maul.

"Now let me try that door," he said, and swung the maul high and brought it down against the door.

Again and again, first on the latch, then on first one and then another of the hinges, he pounded at the door. When, pausing to rest, he looked round at the first voyagers. One was crying and the others were white as ghosts. He lifted the maul again.

"Something's got to give," said he. "It'll be that blasted door, or the maul. It won't be me."

Presently he paused again, laid down the maul and took off his jumper and shirt. Grinning at the frightened five, he spat on his hands and lifted the maul again. In the lantern's smoky light his muscles rippled under his clear white skin. He appeared to be enjoying himself, seen from behind. But on his face, which the others could not see, was a grim determination such as is seen on the face of a gambler who plays a game at which the stake is death.

The top hinge gave. The bottom hinge gave. The latch slipped back. The door dropped from its sill to the deck. O'Brien grasped the handle ring, and putting all his weight on it slid the door back a little. "Now out you go!" he ordered. One by one the five squeezed through, to the deck. O'Brien followed. He shouted and had no answer.

"They've abandoned her," said he. "By gad, I'm hungry. Let's go eat!" He led the five to the saloon. "Make yourselves at home while I rustle some grub," he said, and went down to the lazarette beneath the saloon. In a minute he was back with canned milk, cabin biscuits and a large can of marmalade.

"We'll eat till we bust, then we'll sleep; and later we'll see about things," said O'Brien.

"Suppose the ship sinks, sir," said one of the five in an awed voice.

"Don't 'sir' me, I'm no dog," said O'Brien. "She's not sunk yet. Quit whining. Don't get excited, and maybe we'll come out all right."

They ate till they could eat no more, drinking canned milk from little holes punched in the cans, munching good cabin biscuits thickly spread with cabin marmalade. With their bellies full, much of the fear passed from their faces. O'Brien fetched the blankets from the mates' and second mates' bunks and spread them on the saloon deck.

"Lie down and have a good doss till morning. I'll keep a lookout," he said.

The five lay down and in a few moments were sound asleep. For a few minutes O'Brien stood on the poop, staring into the darkness, listening. Then he went down to the saloon, stepped over the sleepers, entered the captain's cabin and curled up on his bed. At the first streak of dawn he woke and went on deck. Torrents of rain still, dense gloom, and a light breeze ruffling the sea.

Having fetched bacon, canned milk

and cabin biscuits from the lazarette he woke the five. They went to the cook's galley, lit the fire, made good coffee in the cabin coffee pot and feasted. All that day they feasted. Color came to their faces.

"Maybe tomorrow will be clear. Then we'll see what happens," said O'Brien, and spent the day poring over a seamanship book.

Sometimes he laid the book down and went to the deck, where he studied the wrecked rigging. That night the six slept again, all night. Next day they feasted, next night they slept; all curled on the saloon deck.

The next day broke clear. O'Brien scanned the sea, searched the horizon with the telescope.

"The boat's gone. Probably some ship picked her up," he said. "Now we'll see if we can get the old barky afloat. We're going to do some seamanship, by gad!"

He led them to the gig. With the bark lying far over to one side, to get her into the water was easy. He fetched the hand lead, jumped into her and ordered two of them to get in and row her astern of the bark. When well astern he began to take soundings.

"Good. Now get back aboard," he ordered. He made the gig fast by the break of the fo'c's'le head.

"Did you ever hear of a kedge anchor?" he asked. "That's one," he said, pointing to a small anchor lashed in front of the foremast.

He went aloft to the foreyard and rigged a tackle. Having taken the tackle to the windlass, they hoisted the kedge anchor and swung it over the gig. O'Brien jumped into the gig.

"Lower away easy when I tell you," he ordered, and as they lowered the kedge laid it in the gig's stern, with the flukes over the stern.

He took the gig to the bark's stern, made a long line fast to the kedge, and called two of the boys. With the weight of the anchor the gig's stern was almost level with the smooth, windless water. Having rowed some hundred fathoms astern, O'Brien tipped the anchor so that it dropped to the sea.

They returned to the bark. O'Brien made a four-fold tackle fast to the anchor line, took the fall to the quarterdeck capstan and told them to heave. They heaved. The bark remained fast. He fetched another four-fold tackle, made it fast to the first, and tried again. The bark remained fast.

"There's more ways than one of killing a cat," said O'Brien. "We'll have to lighten her."

He opened the forehatch, and all the rest of that day they dumped cargo from the fore hold into the sea.

"With her fore end light and her stern heavy, she ought to slip in time," said he.

At evening they heaved on the capstan again. The bark remained fast.

"Maybe she's holed forward. I'll go see," said O'Brien, and went down the well. The well was dry.

"We'll eat and roll in. We ain't whipped yet. Tomorrow is another day. Don't get excited," said O'Brien.

In the middle of the night O'Brien woke with a start. He ran to the deck. A brisk breeze had risen from dead ahead, was pressing the sails back against the masts. He shouted down to the five. "Man that capstan, and heave for all your worth!" They heaved. Inch by inch, the bark began to slip astern.

The breeze freshened, with a quick squall. "Now! Now! Heave!" cried O'Brien.

With two fourfold tackles tight at her stern, with her sails all aback in the brisk wind, the *Kinnaird* suddenly slipped clear, and came erect on an even keel, but with her bow up, her stern down. O'Brien cut the anchor line and ran to the wheel. Her bow paid off. Her sails filled.

"Go below and get your sleep out!"

ordered O'Brien. 'Tomorrow is another day."

While the five slept, he held the wheel, now letting the bark go ahead for a while, now bringing her up to the wind, so that she drifted. "Don't get excited, old barky, don't get excited," he said. "Just jog along till morning, and tomorrow is another day."

When day came he led the five below, after they'd feasted well. All day they shifted cargo from aft forward. By night the bark was trimmed.

"Tomorrow we'll get the wreckage clear and see about rigging jury topgallantmasts," he said.

By the end of the third day he had a small jury mast above each topsail, with a topgallantsail set on its spar.

"It may take a little time to bring her to Frisco, but we'll get there," said O'Brien. "Hell, we're just as good as Columbus and Magellan and those chaps. I've got books they didn't have. They didn't know a hell of a lot more than I do, you can bet on that."

Day and night, the *Kinnaird* stood north in a fresh southeast trade wind, O'Brien navigating with Hicks' sextant. The skipper had his in the boat. It was pleasant weather, the tropics cooled by the balmy trade wind.

On the fifth day they sighted a steamer, crossing astern, just within signalling distance, bound for Valparaiso. O'Brien signalled "Please report me all well," and gave her the *Kinnaird's* name. She dipped her pennant in reply. O'Brien said:

"Now they'll know in Frisco that the old barky's on her way."

WITH the line well astern, the *Kinnaird* was sailing slowly in a light northeast trade wind when a south-bound ship appeared ahead; coming down to pass close to port. When she was close O'Brien began to signal her. Instead of answering, she backed her main yard and dropped a boat.

"By gad," said O'Brien, "I bet it's the skipper, or Hicks, or both. They got to Frisco and were going home in that ship."

Very soon he saw Hicks in the boat. And then in a few minutes Hicks swung himself over the rail, followed by four sailors the skipper of the other ship had spared him.

"All right," said Hicks to the four sailors, not so much as looking at O'Brien and his apprentice crew. "Back the main yard and get the boat aboard."

O'Brien stepped up to Hicks.

"You'll back no yard in this ship," said he. "You abandoned her once. She's mine now. Get back where you came from!"

"Get hold of that main brace, you pup!" ordered Hicks.

"Take that, Mister Hicks," said O'Brien, and struck Hicks flat-handed on the face.

The four sailors let go the brace and stared. The five apprentices gave a high cheer. Sun-tanned and sea-toughened, well fed, and rested, they looked altogether different from the five whom Hicks had had baling the well.

Hicks drove a huge fist at O'Brien's grinning lips. O'Brien laughed lightly, stepped, cat-nimble, aside, and struck Hicks full on the end of his nose. Hicks roared an oath and rushed at him. He struck Hicks just where he'd struck him before. Blood spurted, and again the five apprentices gave a high cheer. With blazing eyes, Hicks stepped back and snatched a belaying pin from the rail. But as he rushed at O'Brien one of the five threw out a quick foot and tripped him. He fell, the pin dropping from his hand. O'Brien kicked it aside.

"Come along, Mister Hicks," he said. "You'll have a big nose when I'm done with you."

Hicks ran blindly at O'Brien, his

hands outstretched to grasp O'Brien's throat—and met a fist in his eye.

"Don't get so excited, Mister Hicks," laughed O'Brien.

Hicks stared incredulously at O'Brien.

"Wake up, and get off my ship, Mister Hicks," said O'Brien.

Hicks muttered a savage oath and drove a fist at O'Brien's jaw. O'Brien ducked and struck Hicks on the mouth. Hicks spat out a front tooth. Again the five apprentices gave a high cheer. Hicks, glaring at them, stepped back a pace, stumbled on a ringbolt, and fell. When he rose O'Brien's fist found the point of his jaw. He collapsed on the deck.

"Go back to your ship," said O'Brien to the four sailors. "You can leave Mister Hicks here. I can use him."

"D'ye hear me?" demanded O'Brien as the four hesitated, and he reached a pin from the rail.

They clambered into their boat and pulled away. Hicks rose unsteadily to his feet.

"Get forward, Hicks. Get down the well. We didn't finish baling it, you know," said O'Brien.

Bloody and bruised, Hicks glowered defiantly at O'Brien. Grinning, O'Brien lifted the belaying pin, stepped toward him, and asked:

"Well, Mister Hicks?" Followed by the cheers and laughter of the five apprentices, Hicks turned and went forward.

All day for ten days Hicks baled the well all day, O'Brien opening the sea-cock nightly. By night O'Brien locked him in the topgallant fo'c's'le. For ten days, at meal times, one or other of the five first voyagers passed him, through a port, flinty hardtack or spoiled salt pork, and thin skilly or bitter coffee in a dirty old tin pot. For those ten days O'Brien kept the five at work, the weather being fine, polishing brass and varnishing teak.

"We're going to take her in looking right," said he, when they demurred. "We ain't going to take her in looking like a dirty old tramp."

So they did as he ordered, and found themselves taking a pride in their shining ship.

O'BRIEN took the *Kinnaird* through the Golden Gate with all her flags flying; a bright sun glistening on her burnished brass, and freshly varnished teak, and well oiled decks. Between Goat Island and the San Francisco ferries he lowered her sails away and let her anchor go.

A few minutes after the *Kinnaird's* sails were furled, a boat came off. Keefe and the skipper climbed aboard, and looked about her decks. Her decks were deserted. They went to the saloon door. Laughter came from the saloon, and the smell of good cigar smoke. O'Brien had opened a box of the skipper's choice cigars, and had passed them round to his apprentice crew.

Just within the door, Keefe and the skipper stopped. Incredulously, they stared at the apprentices.

O'Brien rose slowly, his face as a matter of fact as though he himself owned the *Kinnaird*. He took his cigar from his lips. He stepped toward and stood facing Keefe and the skipper.

For a moment no one spoke. Then, like a flash, O'Brien's arms shot out. They were strong arms, hardened by years of hard toil. His hands clamped, one on Keefe's throat, the other on the skipper's.

Before Keefe or the skipper knew what was happening, almost before they were aware of the vice-like grip upon their throats, O'Brien was knocking their heads together. Each raised his hands, to grasp O'Brien's wrists. It made no difference at all.

"You dirty dog, Keefe!" said O'Brien. "You dirty dog, Skipper!"

And then, with a quick heave, O'Brien

sent them both sprawling backward, so that they stumbled on the door coaming and fell on the quarterdeck outside.

O'Brien picked his cigar from the saloon table, set it in his lips, and watched them rise to their feet.

"You young—" began Keefe; but got no further. The skipper spoke also, but his words also were cut short. A large flat hand came down, hard as a board, on the cheek of each.

"I always wanted to slap a shipowner and a skipper on the face," said O'Brien calmly. "It's pretty good fun. How d'ye like it, Keefe? How d'ye like it, Skipper?"

Before either could say a word his hands were on them. He swung them round.

"I always wanted to kick a shipowner and a skipper in the pants," drawled O'Brien, and as his big foot shot out asked, calmly. "How d'ye like it, eh?"

Then O'Brien had them by the backs of their necks and was pushing them to the rail beneath which lay their boat. But he stopped half way and released his hold on their necks.

"Keefe, you've been a dirty dog to your apprentices. If we'd treated you right, we'd have left the poor old *Kinnaird* to go to blazes. But we've brought her in for you. Did you ever hear of a ship's apprentices bringing a ship in before? You didn't, eh? We've been pretty nice to you, eh Keefe?" said O'Brien.

Keefe remained voiceless.

O'Brien looked to the skipper.

"Skipper," he said. "You're the dirtiest dog of the two, by a long shot! Keefe isn't a sailor. Keefe's just a poor louse of a lubber, who happens to own a ship. We can, in a way, more or less overlook Keefe's dirty doggishness. As for you—we'd be ashamed to bait a shark hook with you. We'd have too much respect for a shark!"

Keefe looked from the skipper. Keefe looked along the *Kinnaird's* decks. He looked up at her masts. Everything, aloft and alow, was spick and span. And then he turned to O'Brien.

"Mister O'Brien," said Keefe, and hesitated. He seemed to be struggling within himself. There was a look of shame on his face.

It was the skipper who broke the silence.

"The blasted young pup!" he exclaimed. And then at last Keefe found his words.

"You!" cried Keefe. "You! Get into the boat! Go! Leave this ship at once! We've been—we've been—a couple of devils to these lads, and you haven't the decency to see it!"

"You're a fool, Keefe!" said the skipper.

Keefe looked to O'Brien, and beyond him to the other apprentices.

"Boys," said Keefe. "Put that person off my ship, please."

With a happy grin on his lips, O'Brien stepped toward the skipper. The other apprentices stepped from the cabin door. But the skipper didn't wait. Before a hand could touch him he was over the rail, in the boat.

"Mister O'Brien," said Keefe, "I—I—" and paused, his face red as a beet.

"Get it off your chest, Keefe," drawled O'Brien. "We don't bear you any particular ill will. At least, we won't if you'll do the right thing by us."

"Mister O'Brien," said Keefe. "There's going to be a new skipper in this ship. From now on—from now on, you're going to be treated as the men—as the gentlemen, you are. You've taught me a lesson."

"Gentlemen hell!" said O'Brien. "We're sailors. Let it go at that!"

O'Brien held out a hand to Keefe. Keefe stared at it, incredulously.

"Take it, Keefe," said O'Brien. Keefe took it. The other apprentices crowded round. Keefe held out a shy hand to them, one after another.

ROBERT E. PINKERTON

LEAD DOG

GRIM resolution sustained the skill with which Don Mason swung a fifteen-foot dip net from the crashing water of Kettle Falls to a flat rock behind him. The skill was too smooth and sure to be evident, but the fixed purpose showed in each swift movement, and it produced fish with machine certainty.

Behind Don, slitting the whitefish for drying, Pete Pyne often glanced up in apprehensive estimation of this savage force which actuated his companion. Clearly it troubled Pete, though sometimes he grinned with the arrant smirk of the small-minded. And again, when he looked past Don to Judy, his eyes flamed with startling hatred.

The collie had gone upstream to a boulder that hung above the torrent; atop this she posed. The long, delicate muzzle, the sensitive lift of correctly drooping ears, the faultless sweep of back, the richness of white ruff—Don Mason, glancing up occasionally, believed he had never seen anything so beautiful. Twice he missed a fish.

"The hussy's got you like she's got them!" Pete Pyne snarled.

Don, emptying the net, saw "them," his six sleigh dogs. They sat in a row, tails curled over forepaws, mouths open, tongues dripping, and stared at Judy as if entranced. Several had attempted to win her attention that morning and had been slashed or knocked flat. Now, abandoning all effort to entice their charmer into the glad abandon of a game of tag, they were content to watch.

"Blood on half of 'em!" Pete Pyne continued. "How they goin' to work, when they're fightin' over that cross between hell-cat, streetwalker and carcajou?"

Don did not comment. A rush and shrill outcry from the dogs had turned his attention downstream, where a canoe edged the boiling whirlpool that gave the waterfall its name. One man sat in the middle, two paddled.

"Tourists!" Pete said with his habitual sneer.

Don nodded. He had no interest in city dwellers who travel through the Canadian wilderness for pleasure and did not turn when a man stopped behind him.

"You can breed and breed and not get a dog like that!" the stranger exclaimed. "But will her feet stand snow?"

Don ceased swinging his net. This man knew things.

"I could use moccasins."

"And get a feather pillow for her, and a hot water bag on cold nights," Pete Pyne jeered.

The stranger looked long at Pete.

"But she hasn't been bred for work," he suggested.

"I've found that any dog will work in harness if it's put up to him right," Don said. "Judy would make a top-notch leader in a week."

Pete Pyne laughed derisively and walked away. Don and the stranger watched Judy, outlined against the sky.

"Makes you wonder if kennel people are trying to breed a dog or paint a picture," Don said with a bit of awe. After a moment he added: "But a dog is always a dog if you give it a chance."

The man sat on a log and offered his tobacco pouch.

"You think there is a Judy O'Grady under the silk and satin of this high-born lady, eh?"

"I'd clean missed that," Don said with a slow smile. "Read the story once, too. Here, girl!"

The collie trotted to them. She was perfectly aware of how gorgeous a creature she was, and she had a friendly glance for the newcomer. Don unbuckled an anklet.

"Funny how you hit that," he said. "Got it from this."

"Juditha," the stranger read. "Middle word scratched. Maclymont. I know the strain. None better."

"Meant nothing to me," Don said. "Judy's a flirt and a devil. Pete calls her a streetwalker, and most times she acts like one, stirring up the others, makin' 'em fight. But she's *my* dog, if you know what I mean."

"Perfectly. How do you happen to have such an animal up here in the bush?"

Don frowned. "I was coming from Ahtik three weeks ago. Big hurry. Just hooked up with Pete Pyne; there were trails to brush out and shacks to build. When I was in Ahtik I heard the Winnipeg train had gone into the ditch. Some people killed. Coming out of the river into Beaver Lake, I saw Judy on a point."

"Escaped from the wreck, eh?"

"Baggage car was split open. She was ten miles from steel. Most starved. Scared. Quite a jolt finding *her* in the bush. No time to go back, so I sent out word. But her owner was killed in the wreck."

"Scared, starved—Judy must have looked on you as something of a god."

"We did take to each other quick," Don admitted with his slow smile, and Judy shoved her muzzle into his hand.

"Sure she will work?"

"I've worked too many dogs. But I won't need her. Six are plenty, and the team's been together three years. Besides," and Don grinned, "it seems a shame, making a real lady work."

Pete Pyne had come up. He laughed.

"Lady! She's a damned hussy! You fellers want some hot tea?"

Don did not look up. The stranger shook his head. Pete returned to the camp fire.

"Judy trembled when that man approached," the stranger said, "and not from fear."

"I don't like Pete Pyne either," Don said harshly. "But if you're in a bad jack pot—"

Judy was leaning against the man's knee, looking into his eyes with complete confidence.

"Pete, somehow, got a contract to carry mail and light express to the new mine of Canadian Development," Don continued. "He had no dogs. I had dogs, and no job. That's the why of Pete."

"I would venture the opinion that you should have that contract," the stranger said, "and I'd trust Judy's reactions."

Suddenly Don felt the instinctive faith in this man that his dog had shown. Besides, he had been bottling things up.

"I had money saved a year ago!" he exclaimed in swift confidence. "Joe Toomey got sick. You can't let an old pal die. Took him to a hospital in Port Arthur. Agreed to foot the bills. Joe hung on quite a spell. It cleaned me out. Then I broke a leg. Had to hock my team to the storekeeper in Ahtik to buy food for 'em. I've got a strong hunch Pete and that storekeeper are in cahoots to get my dogs away from me."

"I noticed them," the man said. "A fine team. I hope you keep them."

"Don't worry. I'll put my dog food up here, haul the mail and earn my money, 'spite anything Pete Pyne can do."

The stranger arose and thrust out his hand.

"Good luck," he said. "I'll be back in this country later and hope to see you—and Judy and the others."

"We'll be together," Don said savagely; he returned to his fishing.

THAT NIGHT Old Doc, the leader, and Ogema started a fight. Don was not certain, but he suspected that the flirtatious Judy was at the bottom of it. Pete Pyne had no doubts.

"She'll wreck the winter's work!" he shouted. "You got to get rid of her."

Don did not reply at once. He had worked with dogs for many years, understood them, actually loved his team of six. Yet Judy was different. She had beauty and breeding, high intelligence and a sense of humor.

"We can't afford cripples," Pete insisted. "The good dogs'll kill themselves fighting over that hussy."

"Judy stays," Don said coldly.

They put up two thousand fish, worked on the trail and finished the two-way camps. Pete continued his attacks on Judy. The man's hatred was disturbing, but Don remained intent on putting the job through, on balking any attempt to get his team. As soon as the first snow fell and small ponds were frozen, he began to haul fish from Kettle Falls to the way camps.

Judy was astounded, bewildered, and mad with jealousy. Don seemed to have forgotten her. Feminine wiles no longer touched him or the sleigh dogs. Old Doc and his mates were entranced by the smell of harness. They toiled from dawn to dark, wolfed their supper, sought nests for the night. Don himself was too tired for more than a pat on the long, slender head.

To Judy, this world of toil was entirely new. She could not draw upon atavistic memories for anything resembling it. But she saw that the other dogs labored gladly, with a vast interest and a common purpose. She sensed a comradeship between her beloved master and the six, a mutual delight in a task well done. The culmination came when Mike, ugly with pain in a fang-torn foreleg, snarled as she passed.

More snow came, and winter cold.

"I'm going to Ahtik in the morning to start the first trip," Don said one night. "You break trail north from here."

"Sure," Pete agreed. "I'll have it broken past the second camp, unless her ladyship needs too much waitin' on."

"I'll take Judy with me."

Pete's rage flared. "You crazy? Her feet'll play out and you're soft enough to haul her on the toboggan and slow up the team. You're not goin' to wreck my chances to make money this winter."

Don admitted, to himself, that Pete was right about Judy's feet. He had often considered the question. The work dog, of Indian breed, has only a few stiff hairs between his toe pads. Dogs reared in civilization, particularly collies, have a fine down that quickly collects snow. This packs and freezes until a growing ball of ice spreads the pads and splits the tender skin and flesh.

Yet Don had fought against experience. Judy's beauty, intelligence and humor had made an appeal he could not resist. He sensed in her a fine loyalty and the qualities of an excellent lead dog. He had seen an advantage in putting her in Old Doc's place carrying mail, for a run of one hundred and fifty miles was to be made each week.

Old Doc was as dependable as the planets and took ordinate pride in his position. But he was not fast. With a heavy load he would pull valiantly and inspire the team to do likewise. A fast gallop with a light load was outside his emotional habit.

Judy, big and rangy, full of fire, could lead five dogs to fast time. She would keep all on their toes. Don had often grinned when thinking of the fury with which she would turn on one that misbehaved, and of the idolatry with which all would follow her. But her feet!

Now, on the eve of a winter's toil, Pete Pyne seemed bent on making an issue of Judy. To illustrate his point, he lifted one of her forepaws to show the thick growth of fine hair.

Judy did not cringe. She did not even glance at Pete, though this was the first time the man had touched her. But Don saw her ruff rise. Her body trembled, then became rigid. She stared straight ahead, confident in her patrician blood, and with lofty condescension.

Pete Pyne caught this as if she had spoken. He shoved her away with a curse.

"The damned hussy!" he shouted. "Who's she that I ain't fit to touch her?"

In a flash, and for the first time, Don understood the basis for Pete's hatred. Judy, a patrician, had only contempt for him. And Pete knew how she felt. A small, mean man could not tolerate this attitude on the part of a dog.

It ironed out many of Don's suspicions of Pete, this revelation, and it decided him irrevocably.

"Judy goes with me," he said.

THEY STARTED the next morning. It was the first time Judy had traveled in deep snow and when Don went ahead, smashing down a trail with his webs, she crowded in behind him, ahead of Old Doc. She knew nothing of trail etiquette, of trail pride. She had never followed snowshoes and frequently stepped on the hidden tails, nearly tripping Don.

"Get out!" he commanded in exasperation, and drove her to the rear.

Old Doc crowded into his rightful place of honor, but stepping carefully and crossing his forelegs. Though the snowshoe tails were buried, he never touched one. Judy, downcast, followed unnoticed at the rear all day.

Don Mason was never certain whether she was responsible for what happened that night when he made an open camp beside the trail. The dogs had rested for several days and were not tired. The load was light and they had merely followed Don at a slow pace. After eating their fish they ranged about a bit while Don cooked his own supper.

He was not keeping an eye on them and did not know whether Judy was resentful or, intent on regaining her lost place as an enchantress, had started a flirtation. The first Don knew of trouble was an avalanche of savage beasts sweeping across his camp fire.

His right hand found a ready stick of firewood and he acted with a swiftness born of many team fights. The dogs would tear each other to ribbons, once complete victims of their madness. They would not even hesitate to strike at him.

Never had Don seen a team fight of such savagery. White fangs slashed. Red throats emitted growls of utter ferocity. Dark forms rolled into the snow and came back as if hurled by an unseen force.

Barking shrilly, egging on the gladiators, Judy darted about the shifting mass.

Don did not soften his blows. A numbed brain was better than a torn jugular. Recognizing Judy's intoxicating presence, he clipped her on a shoulder. Hurt and amazed, she slunk away.

Winter forest stillness at last engulfed the scene. Three dogs lay motionless. A fourth crawled into the brush. Two others fled.

Don examined the wounded. The three motionless dogs had been stunned by the club. All had been cut, but only Mike, when dragged back from the brush, exhibited serious wounds. Don cursed, in anger and in pity, when he saw flesh shredded from a foreleg.

"Start a fight, eh?" he shouted savagely at Judy. "Wreck a winter's work and lose me my team, will you?" he demanded of the others. "I'll give you a lot o' chance to lick those cuts. And you damned streetwalker! I'll make you wish that train had kept on the track! Here, Doc!"

He harnessed the leader. He slipped collars over the heads of the three unconscious animals, dragged them into line and snapped the traces. He put Wallace behind them; then, catching Judy roughly, he fastened Mike's harness about her and hooked her between Wallace and the toboggan.

An awesome quality in Don's manner and voice kept the sleigh dogs quiet. Judy recognized in it something past anger.

A half hour later, when Don had eaten, when Mike had been wrapped in a blanket and lashed on the toboggan, when the three unconscious dogs had revived and raised themselves on wobbly legs, the team started back to the way camp. Without mercy for their bleeding cuts and aching heads, Don drove them at a gallop. He had no mercy for himself as he ran on snowshoes at the rear. The long whip with loaded handle, always coiled in the past, now snapped threats. In less than three hours they pulled up before the dark cabin.

"I told you—" Pete Pyne began in a burst of fury when Mike was carried inside.

"Never mind!" Don Mason snarled. "If you don't give this dog the best of care I'll beat you up."

The words did not touch Pete, but Don's manner brought silence, as it had brought submission to the team.

Don went outside. The dogs lay panting on the snow.

"*Marchon!*" Don shouted. "Gee!"

The dogs, stiff and weary, lifted themselves on aching legs. Old Doc turned the team in understanding obedience.

"Where you going?" Pete demanded.

"I'm going to make the best damned team of *ninnymooshers* that ever tightened a trace!" Don answered.

Back through black forests and across white lakes he drove his team. He rode now, sitting on the small load. His voice cracked with the whip.

At the scene of the battle Don slipped on his snowshoes and began the heavy work of breaking trail. But his spirit swept back over the team. Never were the dogs unaware of it. Weary, aching, they toiled on through the night.

Then Don found a fresh trail, probably broken by an Indian, and his own terrific labor was ended. He sat on the toboggan and uncoiled his whip. The staggering dogs broke into a lope and reached Ahtik an hour later.

Old Doc turned toward the shed at the rear of the hotel.

"Gee!" Don called harshly. "You're too wicked to rest."

"Goin' right back?" the storekeeper called.

"I'm hauling mail," Don retorted. "Any message for Pyne?"

"No. He goin' to pay you in time to settle with me?"

"You'll be paid. Hustle out that sack."

Don lashed it on, went to the station for express, ate dinner and started the return journey. The dogs were slow, but he kept them at it. Before eight o'clock that night they reached the first way camp.

"Any mail for me?" Pete asked eagerly.

Don shook his head. He was too tired to speak, or to see Pete's disappointment. At five o'clock the next morning he was on his way again.

The mail reached the mining company's camp, seventy-five miles north of Steel, two days later. Don was on time, but he waited only an hour before starting back to Ahtik. Day after day this continued. Each night he fed the dogs, examined their feet and their wounds, but without the shake or pat they had always known. On the trail he did not speak those friendly words of encouragement that so gladden a dog's heart and sweep away his weariness. And these days became weeks.

THUS was Judy, the highborn lady, introduced to toil. Imprisoned between the dragging load and five tugging dogs, she could not escape. Her feet became painfully sore, yet even when Don tied moccasins on them each morning and removed them at night he did it in so impersonal a manner no flutter of excitement came to her from his touch.

As her muscles became harder and the first numbing bewilderment vanished, Judy's instinctive insight began to evolve a great truth. Don Mason's dogs had known only justice at his hands, and a work dog ranks justice with food. They had been perfectly aware he disapproved of fighting on the trail. They accepted the consequences. Judy could not escape their attitude or the lesson of that disastrous battle.

Two round trips were made. Don Mason was a grim force darting up and down the seventy-five miles of trail between Ahtik and the mine, grim because he was trying to save his hard-driven dogs from other ownership.

But after the first two trips he no longer feared that Pete and the storekeeper would take the team from him. That thought had been the spur. Pete, small, mean, vindictive, owning those valiant creatures! Now Pete entered the scheme of things only twice a week, once on the up trip, once on the down. Pete worked well enough breaking trail. He took adequate care of Mike. He cooked food in the way camps. All this he had agreed to do.

Don, the strain lessening, began to give thought to Judy. She was always before him, straining against her collar. There were times when he felt her beauty had snared him as well as the team, but she no longer tried to attract his attention. Nor did she give heed to the other dogs. Toil and the North had swallowed her.

"Any letter for me?" Pete asked one night in a way camp.

Pete asked this question each trip in, and there had been no letters.

"I forgot," Don said, and he took an envelope from a pocket.

Pete grasped it with a certain excitement but stuffed it inside his shirt. He had not read it when Don departed the next morning.

The third trip was completed. Heavy snows had held off and the trail was smooth and hard. Don arrived in Ahtik one noon.

"Heavy load this time," the station agent said.

"We can haul it," and Don spoke from secure knowledge of his dogs.

"You'll have to sign for this, and I'm glad to have it off my hands. Five thousand dollars."

"What?"

"November payroll."

Don did not speak. Pete had never mentioned a payroll.

"Once in the bush, you're safe," the agent said.

"Give it here," Don said shortly. "It's safe now."

He started back at one o'clock. The air was crisp and clear, the snow brilliant in sunshine. The dogs were in fine condition and trotted sturdily on the long run to the mine.

To Don Mason, the bush had always been thus, fresh and clean, a place of danger from natural forces to be sure, but one free from man-made perils. He gave no thought to the payroll.

The short afternoon slipped by and the team sped on in the darkness. Don ran behind, on snowshoes, shuffling his steady six miles an hour. He would have to cook his own supper, he reflected. Pete had left for the upper camp that morning.

Pete had been behaving decently of late. He no longer spoke of Judy. Don believed they had settled down to a good winter's work. He would be paid the next week, settle his score with the storekeeper, save his team.

He watched the dogs, trotting briskly. Each was in splendid condition. Judy had not been too beautiful for toil.

Soon after six o'clock they pulled up at the first way camp. The place was dark and carried an air of desertion. Don, as always, unharnessed and examined his dogs and then went to the fish house for their supper. Judy took the frozen meal and retired to her own selected spot. She growled savagely when Ogema passed her. A month had made her a thing of the wilds.

Don hesitated as he saw her slink away like a wolf. His impulse was to call her, give her a friendly shake.

"I'll cook supper first," he thought. "Have her in afterward. All of 'em! they've learned."

He was tired and hungry as he stumbled toward the cabin. He shoved open the door, stepped into the darkness, felt a blinding, glancing blow on the side of his head, a dull, crushing pain in his shoulder.

Dazed though he was, and even before his groping hands touched a moving body, Don Mason knew what Pete Pyne had been planning, how Pete had waited for the first payroll.

RAGE burned through Don's pain and gave him strength, rage at himself for not having guessed. His hands gripped a woolen shirt. He felt another blow from a club, ineffectual because he was so close.

Though the door remained open, the interior of the cabin was black dark. The stove was knocked down by two whirling clenching bodies. Don and his foe rolled in soot and ashes, gouging, striking, battling desperately. Don felt a weight on his chest and struggled futilely to free himself.

For a moment he lay there, gasping, dazed, blinded by blood. Through the open door he heard low whines and savage growls, and he remembered that for weeks he had not patted a head or brought a gleam to dumbly pleading eyes.

Thought of that spurred him, but two heavy hands fastened about his throat and unbearable pain shot through his neck.

Don struggled, knew it was useless.

Pete Pyne lifted his foe's head and beat it against the solid floor of hewed logs.

"Like this?" Pete sneered.

He lifted Don's head high, gathered his weight to put it behind the downward thrust.

Don felt fur sweep across his face. He heard a low, terrible snarl and the clash of tusks.

Slowly, painfully, Don tried to rise. He was aware of a terrific struggle across the cabin.

"Judy!" Don cried warningly and he staggered to his feet and struck a match.

The lantern stood on a shelf and he lighted it. Pete Pyne lay across the cabin, arms folded over his throat, legs drawn up and striking out.

Dancing around him was Judy, white teeth gleaming. The glorious ruff was lifted, like a fencer, swift, certain, she darted in behind a kick to rip wool and skin.

Don felt blood streaming down the left side of his own face, and found himself wondering why he should defend Pete Pyne.

"Judy!" he repeated.

She came reluctantly, ruff erect, lips curled far back from vicious fangs. With a fleeting twist of her head, she gave Don a glance of adoration.

"Keep her off'n me!" Pete begged.

Blood blinded Don Mason. He dabbed feebly at his eyes when a dizzy feeling engulfed him. Pete started to rise, stealthily, with an eye on a stick of stove wood.

Judy growled, deep down in her throat. Don saw it all dimly.

"Here, girl!" came in a cracked voice.

"She licked me!" Pete Pyne moaned. "She knew what I was up to from the first."

He was broken. Don marveled that a man could be so small he would go to all that effort to steal a few thousand dollars.

Pete got to his feet, wavering, blubbering. Judy snarled.

"She's cut me to ribbons!" Pete gasped as he staggered forward.

Don was dizzy and blinded by blood, but he caught the purpose in Pete's eyes. He swayed to the left and put all his waning strength into a blow that met a chin fairly. As Pete collapsed, Judy was springing for his throat.

"Back, girl!"

She stood over the unconscious Pete, snarling, ruff high, legs stiff. Don was dimly conscious of six dogs crowding about the door. They had smelled blood. Deep growls came.

"Don't let 'em fight, Judy!" Don whispered.

Ogema slashed at Wallace, a match to the fuse. Judy sprang through the door, as terrible in her new wrath as when she had attacked Pete Pyne. She split the group, whirled upon it. They cowered before her.

"Payroll's got to go through," Don whispered. His throat ached and words came with effort.

The money and the mail were still on the toboggan. But the mine! Fifty miles! And Pete might revive and escape. Or follow! Don saw that he must get help quickly. The nearest was in Ahtik, twenty-five miles on the back trail.

He never knew how long he was harnessing the dogs. They crowded about him, eager but subdued, dabbing their tongues at his bloody face, trembling when his hands touched them. He fainted once before the last trace was snapped, before he had crawled onto the load and whispered *"Marchon!"*

But the familiar miles were so long. His last strength was vanishing. Old Doc was setting his steady pace. At this rate, Don would fall off and freeze to death.

"Whoa!" he gasped, and the obedient leader stopped.

Don unhooked Judy and snapped Wallace's traces to the singletree. Slowly he dragged himself down the line of dogs. Judy followed anxiously, nuzzling him. When he reached Old Doc he fastened her in front.

"*Marchon!*" he whispered.

Judy hesitated. He spoke again. She started, but looking back to where he lay. When the toboggan was abreast he said "Whoa!" With his last strength, Don climbed onto the load, hooked his moccasined feet in the lashings at the rear, thrust his arms under those in front.

"*Marchon!*" he called. "And go, Judy!"

SHE had been watching, all aquiver, and at the word she hurled herself against the collar. The other dogs were snapped off their feet. When they had caught her stride they swung around a bend in the trail, darted down a slope and out onto a lake.

Judy yipped, and her excitement infected the team. Mile after mile the pace continued. It was smooth going, all level ice, and the trail hard-packed.

The dogs were not accustomed to this speed, and they had already covered fifty miles when they reached the way camp after dark. But if they lagged, Judy knew it instantly. She snarled at slow Old Doc. She fired all with her spirit. She sent back growls or whines, or shrill, pleading yelps.

"Go, girl!" Don Mason whispered.

His next conscious act was to fight off hands that lifted him. He found himself standing beside the toboggan in front of the log hotel in Ahtik. The team lay stretched on the snow, panting, exhausted.

All except Judy. She was still on her feet—feet red with blood, for she had been without moccasins. Lamp-light from a window held her in relief. Her head was up, her plumed tail high. Her great white ruff glistened with a thousand frost jewels.

"So you made a leader of her," came a voice at Don's side, and he turned to see the stranger with whom he had talked at Kettle Falls in September.

"I am John Corson," the man continued. "You see, I have a double interest in Judy. I've become general manager of Canadian Development. Was up looking it over last fall."

Slowly, for his throat still ached, Don explained what had happened.

"Judy knew," John Corson said. "I was watching her that day."

"Pete'll get away," Don insisted.

"A light tracking snow is falling, and I have good men ready to start after him. Is he badly hurt?"

"Judy got rough with him."

"Judy!"

"She pulled Pete off," Don said huskily. "He'd have finished me. And Judy brought me in. Mr. Corson, I've got the best damned lead dog that ever tightened a trace."

"To haul the Development Company's mail this winter," Corson added.

But Don did not hear that. He was walking forward along the team. As he passed each dog a bushy tail was lifted, once, then dropped to the snow in that intimate salute of those who toil together on winter trails.

But Judy's plume was curved high and motionless as he approached. She did not turn to see him come. She did not tremble when his hand touched her head. And when he stopped in the light her gaze met his, warmly, even adoringly, but with something else, something that meant understanding and comradeship—and responsibility and dignity.

"Judy O'Grady!" Don whispered, but he could not see her through a mist.

Conclusion

THE SCORPION

by Colonel GEORGE B. RODNEY

SYNOPSIS

IN THE Jolly Pilots tavern Tom Swayne, young American mariner, ran across Ben Ives, bos'n on his father's boat. Ives brought tragic news. The *Catherine*, commanded by Tom's father, had been overhauled by the buccaneer Long-twelve Porton off the Windward Passage. His ship disabled, Captain Cyrus Swayne and his crew were prisoners. Ives had been sent back as hostage, bearing a demand for ransom.

The fortunes of the young American republic were at a low ebb. Trouble with France had brewed unchecked. Privateers, bearing French letters of marque, had crippled American shipping. Tom resolved not to let his father's ruin go unpunished.

Within a few weeks Tom's brig cleared for the Mona Passage, called the Devil's Graveyard. She was small, but fitted with a long twenty-four-pound gun, rifled and on gimbals. She could outrange any boat afloat. Tom bore letters of marque —American—and a fighting crew, eager for a taste of the Spanish Main and booty. To embroil Porton with the French, Tom renamed his boat the *Scorpion* and masqueraded as the pirate.

Off Jacmel they captured a French brig. Swayne, in the guise of Porton, got booty and information that was even more valuable. One of his prisoners, Mademoiselle Le Gai, was engaged to the Jacmel official mentioned in Porton's letter as the man to whom his father's ransom must be paid. Swayne decided to slip into the harbor, release the girl and try to learn his father's fate.

Jacmel, ravaged by revolution, was heavily guarded, but they landed a boat under cover of darkness. Miss Le Gai's betrothed, overwhelmed with gratitude, told Tom that Porton had landed that very day to confer with de Berrien, the military governor.

They captured de Berrien and got him aboard the *Scorpion*, aided by the confusion attendant upon an attack by insurgent slaves. But Tom and Etion, Miss Le Gai's servant, were captured by the blacks.

Dragged to their captors' camp, Tom discovered that Porton had also been taken prisoner. He was confined in the same room with Tom, and dropped upon the floor a map showing the location of El Cubil, his island stronghold.

Tom and Etion escaped and made their way through the jungle until they could steal a native pirogue. In the confusion Porton also gained his freedom. They located the *Scorpion* and Tom informed the irate de Berrien of Porton's real mission. The governor promised to throw the resources of the Tricolor in bringing Porton to justice, and on that promise Tom released him unharmed.

Then the *Scorpion*, hot on Longtwelve's trail, went shaping a course for El Cubil.

They reached the island ahead of either Porton or Port-fire Batten, his confrère, and Tom located Major Derwent and his daughter, who were among Porton's prisoners. From the girl he learned that his father had been killed by the buccaneer.

Doubly determined upon revenge, Tom, with Etion, moved a hut shown on Porton's chart, so that when Batten's ship, steering by the chart, made for the hidden anchorage, he would pile up upon the reef. This happened, and Batten, murderously raging, stormed into the boats to take quick vengeance.

CHAPTER XIV

NAKED STEEL

"LOOK at 'em. They're leavin' the brig like lice leavin' a bunk."

Squatting under the jungle brush, Tom watched boat after boat spew forth men. Of them, not many were sober. They gathered in little groups above high-water mark and began an interminable wrangling that ended in several fights. Pikes and even cutlasses were used freely until a burly quartermaster knocked a man flat with a pike-butt. Tom saw the flash of naked steel and knew that worse might follow.

"I've counted forty-seven. The rest are still on the brig. There comes a man alone. That's probably the leader . . . " It was Batten himself, though Tom did not know him . . . "Wonder what now."

He felt sure that Major Derwent would be given credit for wrecking the brig. He knew too what would happen to Major Derwent if he were taken by that drunken crowd. He shivered a little as he thought of Ruth. That drunken crew meant danger for them all, but most for her. He watched them carefully and grunted as he saw three men roll a cask from a boat and start up the fore-shore with it. Rum. Before night most of the men would be drunk and out of action. He prayed as he had not prayed for years that every man in that crowd should wax regally drunk that night. After dark he could get back up the beach and start the fires that would bring the *Scorpion* and her men. In the meantime, where could they hide?

"The jungle is the safest place," he muttered, "but that cave is the most handy. If Batten doesn't know of that cave we'll be safe there, unless they stumble on it by accident. If they find that cave they'll look there first of all. Of course that stolen loot is hidden there. The further we are from that loot the safer we are for the time bein'. I've got to find the major and Ruth."

He took a glance at the crowd about the barrel on the beach; then he dropped back into the brush and headed into the jungle.

"I'd better try the shoreline first. Like most men, the major'll travel where walkin's easiest."

With Etion trailing along at his heels, he forced his way through the heavy underbrush and headed for the beach. A few yards from the shoreline he turned back into the scrub of algaroba bush and paralleled the beach as he headed for the cave. He was sure he would find Major Derwent there. Suddenly he turned on the little Negro at his heels.

"Look here, Etion," he said, "what did you say you did to that spring of drinking water?"

"Put in him camaisa buds," grinned Etion. "Men who drink that, they pretty sorry."

"It'll make 'em sick, will it?"

"Yah. Make 'em sorry. Sick, too."

Etion dropped further back to avoid untimely questioning. White men were peculiar in some of their ideas.

"Look here. Wouldn't you think even a British soldier would have sense enough to hide his footprints?" Tom pointed to a long, bare-footed outline in the damp sand. "The man didn't even have brains enough to travel over dry sand."

A faint yell interrupted him and he sprang behind a bush and looked at the far beach, a half mile away. Three men were running swiftly toward him, waving their arms wildly; his eyes caught the gleam of sunlight on steel.

"Come on, Etion!—" Tom broke into a run. "They've sighted us. It's a stern chase now. Follow me."

THE thorny brush delayed quick movements. He broke through it to the open beach and a shrill yell told that the pursuers were after them. Then he leaped back under cover, pulled Etion after him and moved quickly through the scrub. Etion, frightened beyond speech, snatched at Tom's elbow, but Tom jerked him behind a fallen tree whose roots stood high in air.

"Hide here till they've passed," he snapped. "They'll not think we've stopped. They'll be comin' at top speed. There's only three of 'em. We'll let 'em pass an' take 'em from behind."

It was dangerous, but to let those men return with what they knew was still more so. Tom and Etion hugged the earth behind the log. Tom's heart-beats sounded in his ears like the throbs of a force-pump. Then the three men broke cover and ran across the clearing. One of them, on the log almost above Etion's head, stood gazing into the jungle, panting.

"Hell, Mitchell," he growled, "they must be just some turtle hunters, stumbled on the place by chance. There was nobody here but that damned lobster-back an' the Yankee skipper an' the girl when we left."

"Well, there's somebody else here now," said Mitchell with an oath. "If them Frenchies know about this island it'll be good-by to all our luck."

"We'd better git the stuff we buried when Porton was with us," said another.

"You damned fool! Porton was here when we left. How do we know that Porton didn't come back an' lift the loot? He was on the careenin' beach the day we left. D'you reckon he was fool enough to leave the swag where we put it? I didn't think o' that till after we'd left him."

In the breathless silence that followed Tom tensed. The third man spoke.

"I wish to the devil we had guns," he said. "How'll we handle them two men we seen? Mitchell, you've got the only musket. Pitt here's got a pike an' I've got a boardin' axe. Nice outfit if we run foul with a land-pirate."

"Git goin' . . ." Mitchell jumped to the top of the log. "Pitt, you bear off to the east an' follow the sea-beach. Pyle, you take the left. Both of you keep in hail of me. We'll pick up some sign of them land-lubbers before we go far. I'll stand here on this log till you git your bearin's."

Tom heard heavy breathing as the two men headed off into the jungle.

Wild pigs had made narrow paths in that jungle. Pyle took one; Pitt another, while Mitchell, his musket alert, stood on the log directing them. When both men had disappeared in the growth he slipped down from the far side of the log.

Keeping that log between them, Tom rolled noiselessly from his berth and touched Etion. This was their time to get away, but he wanted that musket. He stooped to Etion's ear and whispered low.

"Follow the man who went toward the beach. I'll take this one."

Etion rolled over as noiselessly as a snake; under cover of the log he worked his way to its end.

The moment Mitchell was swallowed up by the scrub Tom was out from his shelter. He paused to wrench a limb from the tree-trunk, then slipped after Mitchell, who was threshing among the bushes as noisily as an elephant. His own noise deadened his ears to lesser sounds; he was never aware of a tall figure creeping from tree to tree behind him. The sharp crack of a breaking stick made him turn sharply but not quickly enough. Something seemed to drop on him. Then the world swam in blackness.

Catherine wheels seemed to spark and break in circles inside his head; Mitchell woke to find himself with his face ground into the soft earth, two iron hands about his wind-pipe and a man astride his back. He tried to shout but those hands closed like the jaws of a vise and shut off his breath until his heart seemed about to burst. Then darkness came.

When he again opened his eyes his hands were tied behind him; a stick was run across his back to which his elbows were tied; a gag of his own shirt was tied across his mouth. His legs had been lashed together and he had been rolled under the fallen tree. His bulging eyes caught a fleeting glimpse of Tom as he threw his captured musket over his shoulder and hurried beachward to help Etion.

But Etion needed no help. The moment he left Tom he paused long enough to tear a strip from his shirt. Then he grubbed up a rock as big as an orange, tied it in the strip and set off to stalk his prey.

His quarry, swearing at the extra work involved, broke noisily through the bushes, never once looking back. Etion trailed him without difficulty. His own movements were no more noisy than the movements of the monkeys chasing each other among the branches overhead. When Pitt stopped, Etion halted also.

His eyes were fixed covetously on the axe that Pitt carried. It was a common boarding axe with a small, razor-sharp head and a long handle; it weighed perhaps two pounds. Pitt shifted it from hand to hand. Finally, pausing to light his pipe, he leaned the axe against a tree while he pounded a flint on a steel that he took from a tinder-box. While he was blowing on the tinder Etion, who had slipped from tree to tree, stepped out into the open. Pitt could not believe his eyes. He stood staring with mouth and eyes wide open, while Etion, with the quickness of light, whirled his improvised projectile.

The rock caught Pitt squarely between the eyes. He fell in a heap without even a groan and Etion was on him. He was a simple, direct savage, with none of the inhibitions of civilization. With him the next step after securing game was to bleed it. Tom, stepping from the cover of the brush, was suddenly aware of Etion kneeling over a dark object. Then his eyes caught the dull glitter of a falling knife. He dared not shout aloud and bring fresh foes on them, but he leaped on Etion and knocked him aside.

"Stop that," he said. "You damned little butcher!"

But he was too late. The knife had

gone home and Etion was grinning up at him.

"Him no good, Cap'n," the Negro growled. "Jus' like snake. W'en you step on snake you not cure him up to bite you o'der time. Better dis way."

"I reckon you're right at that," muttered Tom. "Come on, Etion. An hour ago we had no arms. Now you've got an axe and I've got a musket. But the damned thing has but one load. Hurry, man. That third fellow will look for trouble when he misses his partners. We'll have a hornets' nest about our ears soon. We've got to find Derwent and his daughter before Batten and his devils do. They're almost sure to be at that cave."

They headed for the cave at a run. A hundred yards from it Tom saw Major Derwent's tall figure. He was working like a madman, piling loose rocks before the opening.

It was the very thing he had feared. Major Derwent, in his eagerness for security, had forgotten the necessity for concealment. Any one coming along the beach could see him. Tom wondered why Batten and his men did not know of this cave. Then he realized the jealousy between Batten and Porton. This island of El Cubil was Porton's stronghold. Undoubtedly he kept Batten at sea as much as he could. Tom started forward at a run with Etion at his heels, but he had not run ten yards when a shout behind him made him turn. Five hundred yards away, plowing through deep sands, a score of shouting ruffians were hurrying toward him.

TOM let slip a hot oath. If he and his party took to the brush they would certainly be run down and captured. He felt for his pistols. They were safe and dry. He gave a quick glance over his shoulder as he ran. The cave was their only chance. Once inside, they might hold off the mob until night—and if they could find a way to signal the *Scorpion* she would come to their rescue.

"Inside with you!" He leaped the low stone barrier, almost upset Major Derwent and fell to his knees as Etion scrambled over the rockpile and Ruth, bending over a dark heap, looked up. She had not heard the shouts.

Tom snatched at Etion, drew him to the end of the rock barricade out of view of the approaching mob. That barricade was shaped like a half-moon, about twenty feet from tip to tip. In no place was it more than three feet high. Tom thrust his musket into Etion's hands and almost dragged him to the far end.

"Get out of here before they see you," he panted. "They saw two men come in. I don't want them to see anyone leave. Get into the jungle and as soon as it's dark get two fires started. You know how I was to signal the *Scorpion.* Make those fires at dark for her boat to land. Be sure those devils don't catch you, Etion. Our only hope is for the major and me to stand these people off till dark—and to get help from the schooner. Quick! You can't help us here."

Etion took the musket, assured himself that his knife was loose in its sheath and faded away over the northern end of the barricade, where he could not be seen from the beach from the south. The moment Etion was gone Tom turned to Major Derwent.

"This is more in the way of your work than mine, sir," he said. "I didn't want to take shelter in the cave, but I was afraid to go to the jungle. Are we right in shutting ourselves up here? I have sent Etion out to try to signal my schooner after dark if he can remain undetected."

"Any force," said Major Derwent didactically, "that immures itself in its works with no hope of offensive returns commits military suicide."

"In this case we had no choice," said Tom. "We had to consider Miss Ruth. She must never be allowed to fall into their hands. They have enough men to scour the jungle if we had tried to hide there. We'd surely have been taken. We have just one chance, Major. My schooner will certainly run in at night to look for my signals. We have simply got to hold those men off till after dark—till the *Scorpion* comes."

"I have seen plans fail before," said Major Derwent. "Suppose she doesn't come?"

Tom's face became grave.

"I have heard men say back at home," he said, "that in a fight with the Indians men kept the last shot for themselves. Those men out there are worse than any redskins. Miss Ruth, at least, must not be allowed to be taken prisoner by them. You know what I mean, sir."

"What arms have we?" Major Derwent's tone was despondent.

Tom pulled out his two pistols, the powder horn and a bullet bag and laid them on a rock; he picked up the axe that Etion had left.

"These," he said. Then, as a sudden thought came to him, he added, "We can use some of those rocks, too."

He ran back into the cave and came back with a small coil of the thin line they had found there. He cut it into short lengths and tied each piece to a small rock.

"With these cords we can throw the rocks a hundred yards," he said. "You've played cricket, Major; so 've I. We'll be bowling for our heads this day. What're those devils about now?" he said suddenly.

A boat was pulling hurriedly from the wreck to the shore, a boat crowded with men. At sight of her Tom swore an oath that took in Porton, the brig—and most of all Batten. He never knew how much he owed to Batten. That gentleman, unwilling to trust them gave that boat's crew no muskets. Their appeals for arms got them pikes and cutlasses aplenty, but no guns. Batten, who had betaken himself to his cabin and his white rum, thought that Major Derwent was the only man on the island and that he had only a hatchet to chop firewood. Cutlasses and pikes would be ample for the boat's crew to take the major and his daughter. A second appeal for guns got only a profane rejoinder.

"Get the hell out o' here," he roared. "You're nought but a set o' gabblin' old women. Let one damned lobster-back with a hatchet stand off the whole outfit. I'll have to come myself, I reckon. Stand clear, Fletcher."

He catapulted into the boat, pushed one man overboard, seized a pike. The moment the boat touched the beach he leaped out and hurried to the little group of men who were drinking sun-warm rum among the tufa rocks.

"Take your pikes an' come on," he shouted. "Find that damned red land-crab. He wrecked the brig. There's a sort of cave in the rocks up on that point. I saw it from the brig."

For a moment they stood still, taken by surprise, but he gave them no time for thought. He flung a bundle of pikes at them and cursed them with a blistering tongue.

"Come on," he shouted. "Are you goin' to let one man play hell with you like this?"

"What about the loot?" asked Ferris, a huge Spanish Negro Batten had recruited at Porto Bello. "Who knows where the loot is?"

"We all know where we put it," said Batten desperately. "We'll 'tend to that later. Get the lobster-back first. Come on!"

CHAPTER XV

NOT LEAD, NOR STEEL

"TWENTY-THREE," said Tom, "an' that 's less 'n half of 'em. We've got to stand 'em off, even if we can't. They told my father once that he couldn't beat home from Tristan d' Acunha with a jury-mast in the hurricane season. He did it. We've got to hold those devils off till night, Major! Stick your hat on the end of the rock barricade. I want those men to see it. They'll think we've got more men here than they saw."

At sight of apparently three heads along the top of the rock wall the mob halted. That wall might conceal muskets. Batten, after one glimpse, drew Fletcher aside.

"Hold the crowd here, Tim," he said. "Block the front of the cave. There're at least five men there. I can't guess where in hell they came from. Likely just some turtle-fishers. Whoever it is, they can't guess what we've got hidden here on El Cubil. I've got to know about that loot. Sure as hell somebody's moved it from where we put it. You remember where we buried it, under the upper hut? I looked there, Tim. That hut's been moved and the loot's been took. That's why the brig was wrecked. It was either that damned lobster-back or Porton."

"Then it was Long-twelve," said Tim curtly. "That Englishman couldn't have done it. It wouldn't be no good to him. Porton did it, Cap'n."

"Then he either hid it or carried it off," said Batten. "Most likely he hid it, so he can come back an' have it all fer hisself. One thing's sure. . . . That major can tell us whether Porton came back after we left. We've got to lay hands on those men in the cave. I wish I had all our men."

"We lost a grist when the brig struck," said Fletcher. "There was five men on the topsail yard that never came up; there was the man killed by the gun gettin' loose; there was five in the first boat that capsized an' the man you shot. . . ."

"Get the men in the cave," said Batten furiously. "Never mind tellin' our hard luck."

A sullen crowd faced them as they joined the crew. Word had got abroad that the loot had vanished.

"Somebody hoist a white flag," said Batten. "We'll try talkin' first. We want those men out o' that cave. They may know too much fer us."

A shirt was raised on a pike and at sight of it Tom raised his head above the barrier.

"Come down an' gab," shouted Batten. "Man to man we kin fix this up."

"Stay under cover," said Tom to Major Derwent. "He doesn't know me. If he sees me he'll think I have men with me." He swung down the slope to meet Batten. They glowered at each other in a long silence. Tom broke it.

"Well, my man," he said crisply, "what do you want of me?"

"My man. . . ." Batten mimicked his tone to a nicety. "Who the 'ell are you?"

"None of your business," snapped Tom. "You're done, Batten, if that's your name. There's a gallows waitin' for you on Spanish Point. The governor of Haiti revoked Porton's letters of marque. He's only a damned pirate now—and you're another. If you choose to surrender, I'll promise to put you in irons and see that you and your men have a fair trial for murder and piracy on the high seas. What do you want with me?"

"Want of you?" Batten's voice rose to a shriek. "You come here on El Cubil, where nobody's got any business but us, who owns it. Then you an' that damned Britisher change the hut an' set my brig on the reef an' cost me twelve men. Now you've got the gall to ask me what I want. What 've you done with that loot you stole when you shifted that hut?"

Tom knew now exactly where that loot was.

"Where that loot is has nothing to do with me," he said. "What terms do you offer?"

"Turn that loot over to me untouched an' I'll see you have a boat and a chance to get away from here. Refuse me and—" Port-fire Batten swore a very holy oath—"you'll be sorry. You can't make head ag'in an ebb tide, you fool. You can't touch me. A nigger witch doctor in Spanish-town told me last year. She says, 'You'll gain much gold an' needn't fear lead er steel.' What's it to be?"

The answer was not to come from Tom. Prolonged yelling from a man running toward them made Batten pause; then Tenney, a huge, bearded picaroon almost upset Batten.

"Well, Tenney, what's this mean?" he snarled. "What ails you, man?"

"Them men at the spring," panted Tenney. "Them men at the spring—"

"They was most drunk w'en I left 'em. What about 'em?"

"Pizened," Tenney gasped, "an' the rest of 'em's skeered most dead. They was thirsty from all that rum an' they went to the barrel that we sank in the spring last cruise. Next minute Force was dead and Downs was all swelled up like a blow-fish. Holt's dead, too. Pizened, they say."

Batten's voice shook. "What'd they have to eat and drink?"

"On'y the rum that they brung ashore from the brig," said Tenney. "They say somethin' was put in that." Tenney stared hard at him and Batten read the thought in his eyes.

"My God," snarled Batten. "You don't mean they think I done it?"

"It's you sayin' it, not me," said Tenney. "But all the men say it's your doin'. They say you was last on the brig—and on'y them that et and drunk what you sent ashore was killed."

Batten whirled on Tom in a blaze of fury.

"This is your work, you dog," he shouted. "You can't fight like a man, so you pizen men's drinks." He lunged with his pike at Tom's face.

A quick flirt of the razor-edged axe whirled the pike aside and the steel pike head dropped at their feet. A second whirl of the axe and the flat of the blade caught Batten on the face and sent him to his knees. Before he could regain his feet Tom leaped back behind the barrier and Batten, dazedly rubbing his head, slowly rejoined his men, followed by the surprised Tenney.

BEHIND the rock barricade Major Derwent seized Tom by the arm.

"You must be mad to strike an envoy," he said warmly.

"Envoy hell. The man's just a plain pirate who wanted to discover who I am and how many men I have. Get back in that cave, Major, and look for an exit at the rear. The walls are all soft tufa rock that cuts like clay. If there is a way out it'll save our bacon this day. Look yonder. . . ."

Twin columns of black smoke were slowly oozing up against the northern sky from a point far up the beach. Tom crowed his satisfaction.

"That'll be Etion," he chuckled. "He's made his fire where they'll be afraid to follow him. If they see the smoke they'll not know how many men are makin' it. They'll have to reconnoiter it first. Look at Batten's men now."

Two of the crew had seen the smoke and ran shouting to join Batten. Then pandemonium broke loose in earnest.

"That's put 'em in a mess," said Tom. "They daren't separate for fear of that smoke. It'll mean trouble for us, though. They'll rush us sure! They know that if they are to get us they've got to do it before that smoke brings a crowd of enemies on 'em. Here they come."

He laid out on a flat rock the extra charges for his pistols and looked carefully to flints and priming.

In truth, the crowd below them had little time to waste. They must carry that barrier before aid could come from the men who made the smoke. What could those fires mean? The long point of land jutting out from the shore cut off all view of the beach beyond it. Batten's voice could be heard above all the shouting.

"Get on, you damned fools!" Six of you bear off to starboard. Five to the larboard. The rest of you come with me. There ain't but three or four men behind them rocks."

Even under his urging they came slowly, for they feared what that barricade might hide. Tom, hastily cramming his mouth full of loose bullets, snapped his pistol at the oncoming mass.

The sharp crack of the pistol started echoes; parrots screamed in the jungle and low-flying gulls and a huge frigate bird sheered wide with raucous cries. The linechecked. That barrier might hide muskets.

Even that brief delay helped. Tom reloaded his pistol, thrust it into his shirt, seized one of the rocks that he had prepared, whirled it about his head and loosed the thong. It hurled straight as an arrow and took a man squarely in the belly. He doubled up like a jackknife and two men stumbled over him. A second pistol shot again checked them and suddenly the banging roar of a musket far off among the trees made them strain back. Five men had been sent out to that end of the line. Four men came running back.

"Muskets in the brush," shouted one man wildly. "There're men in the brush."

"That'll be Etion," said Tom sharply. "He had but the one load in his musket. Good Lord, what'll he do now?"

He loosed another rock. The stone fairly hummed through space, its six feet of line steadying its flight. It took Batten fairly in the neck. It knocked him ten feet and the crowd trampled him in its rush for cover, but Fletcher and Caron behind them urged them again forward. There was one appeal that they had saved for the last.

"Them men in that cave stole the loot," shouted Fletcher. "They dug up the gold we buried an' they've got it in the cave. Come on."

They gathered in anon to a gallant advance and Tom knew that he had no time to lose. Only one thing could stem that rush now. He threw his last rock, saw it land on a man's arm; then he seized his axe and backed into an angle of the rock wall as three pikemen rushed him.

A quick flirt of his left hand sent one pikehead aside and he swung his axe with all his strength at a pikeman coming at him. The axe swung full circle but the handle turned in his sweating palms and the flat of the blade caught the man on the shoulder and knocked him six feet. He fell sprawling and the keen blade in its return swing cut the first attacker from shoulder to the middle of the chest. Staggering from the force of the cut, Tom snatched his pistol from his shirt, fired straight in the face of the remaining man. Another banging roar filled all space and echoed from the palm trees.

That was another musket shot! It came from where the first was fired. That first shot had been fired by Etion. But Etion had no second load for his musket. What could that shot mean?

The crowd sucked back among the brush and a confused babble of shouting rose from them. Then Tom saw Batten. A dozen men were gathered about him as he lay prone on the sand. His hands and feet were still beating wildly. It was plain that he was mortally wounded. A renewed shouting swelled in the hot air. Then a sudden roar filled the hot afternoon and a rushing sound like a storm among the palmettos. A silence fell! A silence that hurt. Then a roar. The booming roar of a gun at sea!

That second roar was followed by a crash as a palm tree, bitten off ten feet above ground, fell over. Another tree snapped like a pipestem and Batten's men broke and ran for cover like gulls driven from a stranded fish. The next moment Tom, peering through the tree-holes, saw a white spot move slowly into view. A white spot with a small dark dot in it. It was the patched main-topmast staysail of the *Scorpion*.

HE CAUGHT his breath with a little grunt and stood leaning on his axe. This was too timely to be believed. But it was true. Five minutes passed; a lean prow thrust out against the skyline. Inch by inch the sails grew. Then the long, lean shape of the *Scorpion* took form. She was running on the wind, just outside the barrier reef; Jerry Lynn was feeling his way in with the leads going on each bow. Suddenly her helm went up and another shot from one of her deck guns rattled among the trees; then a sharp whistle broke the hush. That whistle meant, "Boarders away."

Tom could hear the squeak of the falls as the boats dropped squattering into the water and the sharp commands:

"Let fall! . . . And together now! . . . Steady, bow. Oars! . . ." Then . . . "Small-arms men to the beach. Form a line at the edge of the brush and hold every one off the boats." A dozen of the *Scorpion's* men were scrambling through the warm water.

In his wild rush to the landing Tom paused for a second by the body of Portfire Batten. The man lay with arms widespread, his face contorted by pain and what seemed to be surprise. Tom had only time to note a tiny red mark on the man's neck, such as a very small bullet might have made; then he passed on to meet Ives, with a half dozen of the *Scorpion's* men at his heels. The old gunner grinned at him.

"Them was fine fires you started, Cap'n," he said. "Them smokes 'd 'a' brung out all of Mr. Benjamin Franklin's fire-fighters in Philadelphia, I reckon. What's happened, sir?"

Tom told him and Ives listened astounded.

"You mean to tell me, sir, that you brung the brig on the reef and wrecked her an' that the girl an' her father's safe? That's all right, too, but. . . . Where 's Cap'n Cyrus? That's what I want to know, sir."

The sun seemed to lose its fire and warmth as Tom told Ives of his father's murder.

"What 're you aimin' to do now, son?"

"Do?" Tom almost sobbed out. "By God, Ben, I'm goin' to do just as I said I'd do. I'm goin' to hunt that man Porton down if it takes all my life. . . ."

"And this matter of the loot, sir. You say you think it's in the cave?"

"I'm sure of it. Whatever is buried

there had the bodies of two men placed with it. Superstition, of course. To scare any one who might disturb what is hidden in that hole. Throw a half-dozen musketeers into the jungle to hold off any of Batten's men who may think they want what's in that cave. We'll investigate it at once."

Ives sent a detail of men to patrol the forest and followed Tom into the cave. The moment Major Derwent saw Ives he took him by both hands and Ruth frankly kissed him. The old gunner grinned feebly and waved at Tom.

"The minute I seen Mr. Tom back in Delaware an' told him all, I knowed what he'd do," he said. "But I'd ha' give an arm to have saved old Cap'n Cyrus."

"So would I, Mr. Ives. Or is it Bos'n still?"

"No, miss. I'm gunner of the American privateer *Scorpion,* out o' Delaware Bay. Home port Lewes. Owner an' skipper Cap'n Thomas Swayne."

"What's your destination now?" asked Major Derwent.

"All the seas of all the world, till we bring up Long-twelve Porton with a round turn an' two half-hitches. Shall we see what the cave holds, sir?" he asked of Tom.

Tom led the way to the rear of the cave and showed them the light lines and they hauled them in till the heavy tarred ropes came clear. Three men were needed on each rope and they heaved and strained as at a bellying fore topsail in a gale.

"Git one o' them palm tree trunks an' rig a Spanish windlass," panted Ives. "Them cables are made fast to the bollardo o' hell. Now! You paper-backed beggars! Heave . . . "

They walked away with it and three men fell over when the rope suddenly came home with a run and a long chest up-ended over the edge of the hole.

"That's one," panted Ives. "See what the others are fast to."

Inch by inch the other cables came home and the wondering men snatched chest after chest from the hole where the salt water gurgled and roared beneath them. One by one they uncovered the tarred lids, then rough wooden covers, till finally a line of roughly made canvas sacks lay exposed. Tom reached over Ives' shoulder and cut a sack and a mass of dull golden coins cascaded out upon the sand. Major Derwent seized one and held it to the light.

"Portuguese gold moidores of 1722," he said. "Good God! How many of them are there?"

"Seven sacks in that one chest. There are a lot of other things, too," quoth Ives. "What's that?"

It was a metal box some six inches square that Tom picked from under a sack in one of the chests. The soft lead cut like cheese under his boarding axe as he sliced away the top and emptied into his cap a mass of red and green and blue stones that seemed to gather life and light from the dark interior of the cave. Ives let go a great breath.

"Good Lord!" he said. "Them stones come from the Spanish and Portuguese ships, o' course. No other ships handle stuff like them. Porton and Batten must have saved the cream o' the churnin' for theirselves. Look, will you?"

"Never mind lookin' now. Time enough for that when we're back on the *Scorpion*. Hurry, Miss Ruth. We'll get aboard at once. We may have to fight our way back."

BUT the crew of the one-time brig was no longer disposed to make trouble. They were glad to be let alone. Tom got his party to the beach, stowed the chests and bags in the second boat and very carefully helped Ruth aboard. Then he drew back his men from the jungle's edge and Ives thrust the boat off the shingle. The moment they were aboard the schooner Tom called Ives to him.

"Send a boat back for Etion," he said.

"I didn't dare delay even for him with Miss Ruth to look out for. Get Etion, if you have to fight all that gang on the beach."

"Yonder he is, sir, on the beach right now, signalin' to us. Pull, men."

The boat leaped like a live thing. They saw Etion hurl his musket into the boat and scramble in. Then a shout came from forward where Gray had gone aloft like a monkey.

"Sail ho, sir," he shouted. "Broad off the port bow. Looks like a ship of bark. I can't quite make out yet, sir. She's runnin' down with the wind."

"Very good. Lay down from aloft. Mr. Lynn, get your anchor at once. Jib and mainsail. Quick men! We want an offing now till we find out what that craft is. Here comes the boat with Etion."

The boat thumped the quarter; Etion scrambled over the rail like a squirrel and four men swung the boat inboard. Then Tom turned to Etion and shook hands warmly.

"Glad to have you safe aboard, Etion," he said. "I'd have lost the schooner before I lost you. . . ." Then, at a sudden thought, he added: "I saw that man Batten dead in the brush. He was shot in the neck with a tiny bullet. You had but one load for that musket. I know that. Did you shoot Batten?"

Etion blinked rapidly and nodded.

"What did you shoot him with? You had no spare loads for the musket."

Etion grinned slowly.

"W'ite man dam' fools wid guns," he said. "Load too much. I taken de powder out ob musket and load it wid one-half de powder. 'N'en I shoot de firs' man. . . ."

"Yes, I know that. That left you with an empty gun."

"No, Cap'n. I had de res' ob de powder. I load de gun wid dat."

"But you had no bullet—and the mark of the wound that killed Batten was much smaller than any musket ball would have made. What did you use?"

Etion grinned at him.

"One time," he said: "I hear de red major say 'at Batten tell 'im wise woman, 'at *mamaloi,* in Jamaica say lead an' steel not hurt him. I 'member 'at. I shoot him wid ramrod. 'At made ob wood wid brass end, suh."

Tom looked at him and burst into laughter.

"Get forward, you devil," he said. "That earns you a home back in Delaware, if you want it, as long as you live. Give her every stitch she'll carry, Mr. Lynn," he shouted. "Helmsman, keep her as full as you can and keep well to windward of that craft till I make out who an' what she is."

The water sang and gurgled past the after-run and the *Scorpion* laid down to the breeze, as with every sail groaning at the bolt-ropes, she headed out of the little bay.

CHAPTER XVI

WHEN GUINEA GODS CALLED

"BETTER fight shy o' that fellow," said Lynn. "He's sure to be French. He's too big for us. He shows the scantlin' of a frigate."

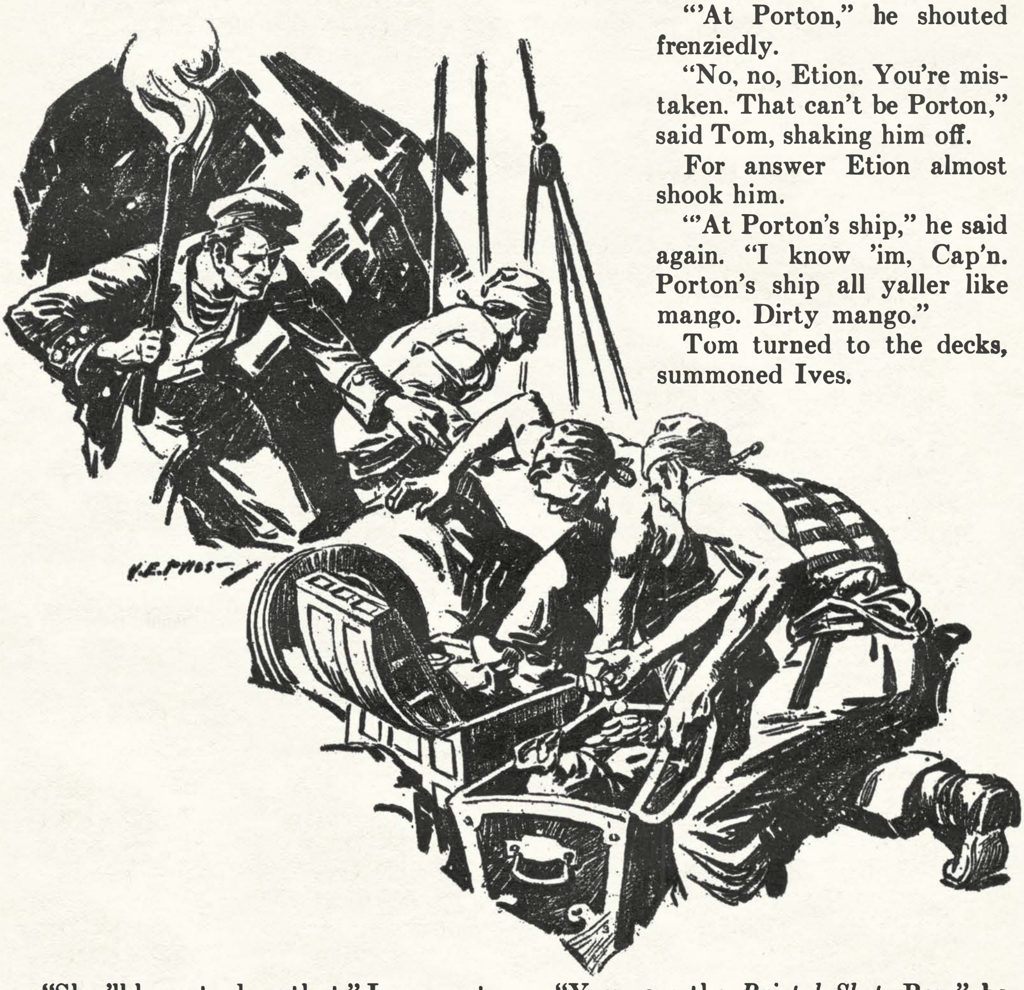
"The bigger he is the better target if he means trouble. Run up the French tricolor, Jerry. We'll see what he is."

The Tricolor rose to the main peak and stood out stiff as a board. Inch by inch the strange sail drew closer, a wall-sided bark, painted a dingy yellow, with a gun-port line flecked with black squares. Tom counted them and whistled.

"Ten ports on a side. She's corvette rate. What colors does she show?"

"Red an' yellow," quoth Lynn, staring wide-eyed. "Spanish colors! No, it ain't," he amended. "She's haulin' down again! By Heavens," he said, "yonder goes the English red ensign. No British merchantman 'd be without convoy in these waters. She's the biggest liar of the seven seas!"

"Delayin' us with false colors till she gets us tucked under her lee where her guns 'll have us safe," said Tom curtly. "Keep her away a bit, helmsman. Mr. Lynn, give her all she'll stand. Give her the main top-mast staysail too."



"She 'll have to drag that," Lynn muttered between his teeth. "That fellow 's a bit too big for us to swallow, Tom, and that's a fact. Look at Etion, will you?"

Tom looked. Etion, who had gone below, came suddenly on deck. He strode forward, pitching to the sway of the decks, clawing at the fore-shrouds to keep his balance. The *Scorpion* was a dry boat, but now she was shipping an occasional crest that swept in a cloud of smother. Etion dodged forward, cleared his eyes of the spray and took one long look to leeward. The next moment he ran drunkenly aft and was clawing at Tom's arm while he pointed to the stranger.

"'At Porton," he shouted frenziedly.

"No, no, Etion. You're mistaken. That can't be Porton," said Tom, shaking him off.

For answer Etion almost shook him.

"'At Porton's ship," he said again. "I know 'im, Cap'n. Porton's ship all yaller like mango. Dirty mango."

Tom turned to the decks, summoned Ives.

"You saw the *Bristol Slut*, Ben," he shouted. "Is that her? Is that the bark that took the *Catherine*?"

Ives looked and hesitated. All colors seen against the sun look black.

"She was as yaller as a carrot," he said. "That bark looks like her some, but I ain't quite sure, Tom, and that's a fact."

A sudden sound behind them made both men turn. Tom faced Ruth, balanced on the top step of the companion-way. She stepped out on the deck and faced forward, where the men stood in little groups along the rail. The schooner dipped her lee rail a little from time to time and green water boiled in the scuppers as she walked up wind with a good weather gage. A long half-mile to leeward a great dingy bark rolled and pitched. Ruth gave one brief glance at the *Scorpion's* crowded decks, another at the water overside sparkling under the sun, roughened by the wind. Then her eyes found the bark and she gave a little cry.

"Oh," she said. Then: "Run, Captain Swayne! That 's the ship of the pirate Porton. I know it. It is Porton."

Tom snatched at her arm and hooked his other arm into the weather main shrouds.

"Steady," he said. "This is vital. Are you sure?" His voice boomed above the roar of the wind in the taut canvas.

"His ship was yellow," she said. "So is that. He had ten guns on each side. They were all brass guns. I noticed that because he used to punish his drunken men by making them shine the guns. You can see the sun on the guns right now. When he was here at El Cubil he rigged a fourth mast on his ship. A little mast behind all the others. You can see it now." And she pointed wildly out across the sea.

"You're right!" Tom's voice raised to a hurricane note. "Keep her up a bit, helmsman, till you open his after-deck. Whatever you do, don't let him get to windward of us. We can sail two points closer to the wind than he. By God, there's his fourth mast! He's mounted a ring-tail." He pointed to a slender mast. rigged abaft the mizzen mast on the bark. "She 's right, Jerry. That's Porton. Douse that damned Tricolor," he said. "Hoist the Stars-and-Stripes. We go into action under our own colors. Ives, fire a shotted gun across his bows . . ! Fore and mainsail sheets aft. Flatten in the head-sails. Helmsman, haul your wind a little. Good. Keep her as she goes."

A GUN flashed from a forward port; then the bo's'n's whistle trilled and rattled and the men hastily dashed for stations. Ives, with his selected men, hastened to the long gun, stripped its cover off and slewed it about, while two men ran for the magazine hatch. In three minutes the crew of the *Scorpion* was at quarters, cutlasses were snatched from racks, stands of grape and canister laid at hand and well-tallowed pikes cut from their lashings.

The bright flag jerked to the peak. At sight of it, the bark, astounded at the temerity of her puny opponent, yawed slightly and twin jets of white smoke broke from her forward gun-ports. The shots fell midway between the vessels and Tom uttered a sharp oath.

"What's that flag on his hoist now?" he asked sharply as a ball of dark bunting jerked slowly to the bark's peak. A twitch of the halliards broke it out—a square black flag with a white figure in the centre.

"The Jolly Roger," shouted Ives. "It's Long-twelve Porton for sure and he's under his right colors at last. Clear away men and see what we can do. Sink him, Cap'n."

"Not if I can help it," said Tom soberly. "I've other plans. Mr. Ives, you may fire when ready. Helmsman, hold her as she goes. Keep as close to the wind as you can. Now, Mr. Ives—"

Ives bent over the breech of the long gun. Not satisfied with the way it was laid, he touched the breech and thrust his grizzled beard across the dispart sight.

"So . . . ." He motioned to a man. "Wait till the bark's on a fallin' sea. I'll catch her as she raises. Fore top sail yard first. . . ."

He waited. They saw the bark's dingy hull drop slowly; then, just as she was at the bottom of her descent, Ives pulled his lanyard and, squatting back over the tail-tackle, watched with gleaming eyes.

The white smoke shredded away into mist. The green hide, used in the long gun for wadding, slapped into the sea a hundred yards from the schooner. Then a shrill yell came to them, followed by a long rending crash. The bark's fore topmast collapsed. It sank through the top —at first slowly, then with a rush that dragged it forward. The stay parted with a twang like a violin string snapping; the next moment the bark was pitching wildly under the wreck of her head-sails, while her great fore-course blew out straight ahead as sheets and tacks parted by the strain.

Instantly her gun-ports dropped and ten guns flashed and roared their wrathful clamor. But the shots fell short. Again they flashed and roared; again and again Ives' long gun spat its spiteful messages. The yelling crew of the *Scorpion* saw a sudden burst of white splinters shoot up like the overflow of a sawmill; that was when a twenty-four-pound shot smashed two gun-ports into one. A chorus of wild shouts came up wind and Major Derwent hopped from one foot to the other in excitement.

"Never saw anything like it, sir," he boomed. "Witchcraft, sir. Plain witchcraft! What a gun!"

"Rifled twenty-four," said Tom curtly. "Better get Ruth below, Major. The main hold's the best place. She'll be well below waterline there. I'll try to keep out of his range, but anything may happen. Mr. Ives . . . ." He turned to the gunner . . . "I'm goin' about an' run under his counter. Try to land a shot in his sternpost. Carry away his rudder an' it's all over."

Ives waved a hand and the long twenty-four sat back on her haunches and spat her mouthful of iron at the reeling bark. The first heavy shot had brought down her fore topmast. Another nipped off the bowsprit with the consequent loss of all headsails; another, a lucky one, had landed in the very head of the mainmast and the mast began to sway.

"There." Ives straightened up from a task well done and his guncrew yelled approval. "Her rudder 's gone, Captain. Took it off at the upper pintle. She's yourn now, sir. She's as helpless as a teal duck with a handful o' small shot between wind an' water."

"Huh!" Tom laughed grimly. "I don't know what to do with her, now I've got her. I don't dare board her. She carries four times our number." Then he clenched his fist. "Sink her, Ben," he said. "Give her a shot under the quarter and another at the waterline as she sends forward on the sea."

"Good God! You don't mean drown the lot of 'em!" Ives' voice rose.

"Unless she hauls down and strikes, sink her," said Tom. He turned away and went down into the cabin with the eyes of his crew following him.

For a long ten minutes he sat and thought and every thought was like turning a knife in a new wound. Finally he went back on deck and Major Derwent seized him.

"As an old artillery-man, Captain, I ask you, can you heat a shot to redness on board this schooner?"

"Certainly. In the galley-fire, unless the cook has obeyed orders and put his fire out," said Tom. "Why?"

"If you drop a red-hot shot into that bark you may set fire to it."

"Merton," Tom shouted to the cook, "get a shot from Mr. Ives and heat it in the galley-fire." Then he turned to the wheel. "Hard a-port," he said sharply. "Hard over, I say. . . ."

"Port it is, sir . . ." And the *Scorpion* went about on the other tack, to glide up abreast of the bark that lay half buried under the wreck of her fallen top-hamper. All steerage way was lost but her main battery replied futilely to the flashes of the long gun that old Ives plied relentlessly.

"She's sinkin' by the head right now, Cap'n," he sang out. "What now?"

"Unless she strikes, let her sink," said Tom wrathfully. "The next move is theirs. If they'd rather drown than surrender, let 'em. Wait," he said sharply. "What's that mean? They 've got a boat over."

A BOAT, lowered on the starboard side of the bark, had shot from under her broken stern; pulled by two men, it labored across the water toward the schooner. Ives laid aside his lanyard and wiped his face; a dozen men lined the rail as the boat touched the schooner's side. One man held on by a boathook while the other swung to the *Scorpion's* deck and shuffled aft to where Tom stood. He knuckled his forehead and glowered.

"Name o' Webb," he said sullenly. "I'm third officer o' the *Bristol Belle* yonder, a French privateer, Captain Porton commandin'. Cap'n Porton sent me to make terms, sir."

"Terms?" Tom laughed. "You fool! I can sink you and never come in range of your footy little guns. Porton's not a French privateer. The French have revoked his letters of marque. He's what he's always been, a damned pirate. He murdered my father and for that I mean to hang him. Go back and tell your crew that if Porton is surrendered to me, the rest go free for someone else to hang. Refuse to turn Porton over to me to be hanged and I sink you in twenty minutes. Choose."

Webb looked his astonishment. His eyes turned to the long twenty-four-pounder gun and to Ives, at that moment superintending the loading of the gun with a shot nearly white-hot. While he watched, the gun was laid, its report echoed back from the water and the shot plumped into the bark. The next moment a ball of black smoke broke from her in the 'tween-decks section. A quick rush of men along her decks told of new trouble.

"That shot set fire to her," said Major Derwent excitedly. "I told you."

"Get back to your bark," said Tom fiercely. "Tell your crew what I say. It's Porton or drown—and I'm damned if I care which you choose."

Cowed and frightened, the man tumbled into the boat; it limped off to the wrecked bark and Ives let his gun cool.

Tom's eyes never left that yellow bark. It seemed to hold all the world for him.

"To drown a hundred men, even pirates, is a terrible thing, my boy," said Major Derwent. "Where do you come from? You hate like an Anglo-Saxon."

"Lewes in Sussex County," said Tom, his eyes on the bark.

Major Derwent almost jumped. "Good Lord, man!" he said. "Then you're as English as I am. I come from Sussex too. I don't remember your name there."

"Sussex is a county in the State of Delaware," said Tom. "I'm as English as you are, Major. You know the old English law about pirates. They have fled the law and are beyond it. That man Porton murdered my father and I mean to hang him. Listen to them, will you?"

A fine furor of small-arms firing broke out on the bark as a dozen pistols squibbed and sparked. A rush of men to her quarter-deck was followed by a confused yelling; then a boat dropped from her broken quarter, several men almost threw another into it and she shoved off and limped across to the *Scorpion*. A moment later the ill-omened black flag came down with a run and a white cloth was hoisted. A burst of cheering broke out on the schooner and a voice shouted out, as though it could be heard across a half-mile of water:

"Run alongside and surrender."

"Steady, man!" Tom's voice rose above the cheering. "I take no surrender from mutineers. Not even from pirates. They can go free as I promised if I get Porton." And his eyes devoured the oncoming boat.

The boat limped alongside. Three men were rowing. In the stern-sheets lay another man, tied up like a bundle of old sails, gagged and helpless. Two of the rowers almost hurled him across the *Scorpion's* rail; he scrambled to his feet as Ives snatched the gag from his jaws at a nod from Tom. The man gave one look at Tom and burst into a torrent of profanity. Then his eyes lit on Major Derwent and Ruth and he gasped.

"So," he snarled at Tom: "You're Swayne eh? You damned cur! Man to man I'd tear your heart out! I wish to God I'd knowed who you was that night ashore when the niggers had you."

"When I saved your life, you swine." Tom struggled for self-control. "You murdered my father. You'll pay for that, Porton. The old rule. A life for a life, even if yours is a damned rotten one. I'd hang you if it cost me salvation."

Old Ives nodded stern approval.

"Here are witnesses, Porton . . ." Tom pointed to Ruth and her father . . . "who saw you murder my father while he was saving a girl from your hands. Have you anything to say?"

Porton struggled for speech but none came. His face was dark with fear.

"Two of you men clear away that running rigging," said Tom. "Brace the fore gaff over to port and rig a preventer back-stay with a noose on a whip."

"I—I—look here, Swayne! I mean Cap'n . . !" Porton's voice broke. The sight of that running noose in a man's hands broke through all his reserve. "I'll make your fortune fer you."

"It's already made. Your stolen loot is all under my hatches right now. Your partner Batten is dead, killed by this man whose daughter you sold into Spanish slavery at the Havanas . . ." He thrust Etion forward. "Batten's brig is piled up on the reef in the bay yonder. I did that, Porton. And you'll pay now for all you've done. Ready, men."

A man came forward with the spread noose in his hands and dropped it over Porton's head. The touch of that rope seemed to electrify him. A violent shudder ran through his gigantic frame and with one quick heave he freed his hands. Then, before any of the forty hands outstretched could seize him, he leaped the low rail and plunged into the sea.

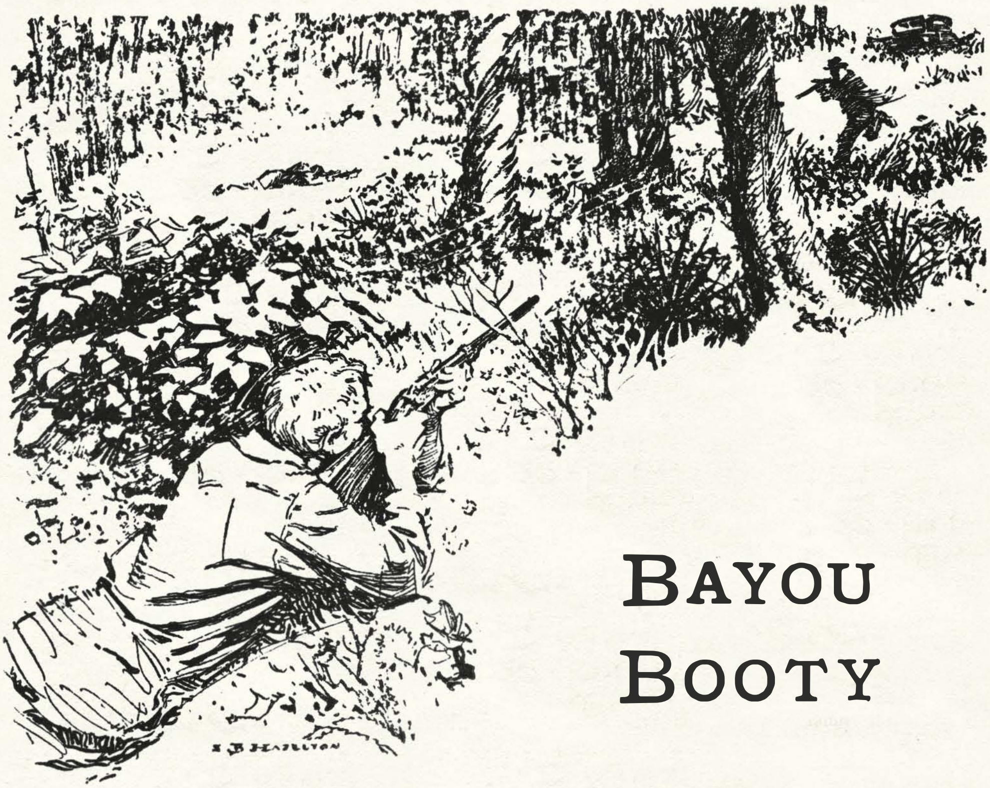
As one man the crew rushed to the rail and looked for the bubbles that would mark his course. But no bubbles came. For a long five minutes Tom leaned over the schooner's side, half-hypnotized by the bright sungleam on the water. Then Etion touched his arm and pointed with a claw-like hand to the translucent depths below them. A few silver bubbles broke the surface at last. Straining his eyes to see, Tom saw, or thought he saw, a dim shape far below him. It was eight-armed, with a vast opaque body. Its center seemed to open and shut spasmodically. Two little protruding black eyes — they seemed alight with all the evil in the world—glanced up at the watching men as long arms slowly stuffed a dark mass into a central mouth. Then a dark object drifted out of the sea and slapped against the *Scorpion's* strake.

"That's the hat that Porton wore," said Tom. "He's drowned. . . ."

"Debbil fish," said Etion curtly. " 'At man accursed. 'E made his hell; 'e go there now. 'E—all men, mus' go w'en Guinea god call. Agane, god of the sea."

Tom turned away inboard. With a voice that shook, he gave the helmsman his new course.

THE END



Bayou Booty

by STEWART ROBERTSON

"YOU'RE crazy as hell," said the sheriff jovially, and the little group around him guffawed. "You won't find a thing but water moccasins in the bayou, and I've a mind to lock you up so's one of them won't puncture you."

Old Pender listened without resentment. His faded brown eyes had long ceased to kindle at derision, for a man grew used to that when he was a looker, and getting mad sort of burned you out when you were crowding sixty.

"Shucks," he said mildly. "All the way up from the Gulf I been hearin' how smart you Frenchman's Rock boys are, but seems like you're as thick-headed as all the rest. Why shouldn't there be treasure in Bayou Bartholomew?"

"You're telling us," said the sheriff, stropping his backbone against a post. "Why should there be?"

The newcomer regarded him critically. "I sure would hate to strain your brains, mister," he drawled. "I just drifted in here and remarked that I was aimin' to put in a few days at the sawmill so's I could get a stake to go on with my explorin', and right away all of you give me the laugh. Too wise to believe nothin', like every country gawk the nation over, and then, when a man turns up somethin' rich, you take another chew and call him lucky. Ten to one none of you knows how Frenchman's Rock got its name."

There was a shuffling of feet as the group turned hopeful eyes upon the sheriff.

"Well," he began feebly, "I reckon some frog-eater—er—"

"Which one?"

"I don't rightly know, but—"

Old Pender chuckled amiably.

"That'll do, mister, you've tipped your hand. The frog-eater was only a nobleman called La Salle, who clumb that rock to get a slant on those ribbon bends in the Mississippi. And he didn't wear no overalls—he wore scarlet with slathers of gold on it, satin britches, and stockin's of silk. A plume in his hat and a sword at his belt. Look up there some night when the moon is low, and maybe you can see him if you've got the gift. And seein' you didn't know that, and I did, maybe you'll admit I might know somethin' about the bayou."

"How'd you know about the rock?" inquired some one.

"Readin'—and listenin'. Take this bayou you look on so casual because she's only a few miles west of you. She's the longest in the world, runs three hundred miles smack out of Pine Bluff clear down to Louisiana, but to you she's just a dry gully that damps up a little come flood-time. Saaay! A hundred years ago she was that heavy with water you could navigate her most all the way, and many's the time Jean Lafitte slid ashore to pull off some devilment. Another frog-eater, sheriff, and the fanciest pirate that ever cached loot and died before he could come back to it. I'm after one of his sink-holes now."

The sheriff spat contemptuously.

"I s'pose you've seen him, too," he hazarded. "Maybe you were talking to him some night when you were as full as the moon, and he up and slipped you a hint on how to get rich. Better hurry up and use it, stranger, before those pants lay down on you. Just what were you figuring on finding—diamonds?"

"Gold," said old Pender softly, and his eyes were dreamier than usual. "Yellow gold. Sleepin' there, safe in the ground, with a dead man, or maybe a brace of 'em, stretched out on top of it. Powdery skeletons they'll be by now, but the gold is as bright and spendable as the day it was cached. 'Tis a tantalizin' thing."

"Dead men in the bayou," said an awed voice. "What for?"

"Guard duty, mister, if you want to believe the writin' fellers. I don't. I know them stiffs are the poor suckers who were picked to dig the hole and then got knocked off and shoveled into it because the head man didn't want any extra tongues blabbin'. An old Spanish custom, that is, goin' back to the days when they started usin' the Southwest as a vault. You must know that much, sheriff."

The sheriff made noncommittal noises and eyed his questioner a little less hazily.

"Sure, sure," he said easily, "but Arkansas ain't exactly the Southwest. Why didn't you stay down there if it's so lousy with treasure?"

"My luck gave out," Old Penner told him, thus accounting for twenty years of profitless foraging about the sand and sun seared stamping ground of the conquistadores, "so I figured it was time for a change. New Mexico and Texas I was in, mostly, and many a time I was right on top of a big takin', only some little thing would have me fooled. Maybe fate, maybe my own dumbness, I don't know, so when a feller in Laredo told me about the bayou, away I went.

"The funny thing is, no sooner was I up here than another feller I saw over in Plaquemine told me of a haunted cache he knew of back down on the Pecos. Seems that a wagon-train of bullion was held up by a gang one moonlight night in the fifties, and they killed the crew and buried the loot somewheres near by until things blew over. They got cooled off themselves before they ever got back to it, and now, every full moon, you can hear that ghostly wagon-train comin' over the trail, right at you, clear as church bells. *Plock* of the hoofs and the trace-chains clinkin', and if you stand in their way they'll swerve out and go around you. All you got to do is find out where they stop, and then—"

A shout from the little drug store across the street detached the group of leaners from its tableau of nonchalance. The monotonous drone of a radio had suddenly stepped up to a blare, and Old Pender sauntered over with the rest to listen to a nasal voice intoning tragedy. After a moment he turned away and commenced printing a path through the chalky dust on his way to the sawmill. Such prosaic news as a bank robbery at McGeehee was no magnet when there was a job on the fire.

JUST another holdup, cut to the pattern that was fast becoming a national stencil. Quick arrival, faster getaway, with a furious interim that left witnesses in a daze. The braying voice followed him down the street. Machine-guns. A wounded teller and a riddled hulk that was once a guard. Twenty-seven thousand in currency whisked up in a jiffy by two youngish, well-dressed men apparently emboldened by dope. The gunmen had got clear.

Gunmen! Old Pender sniffed at these pavement pirates who had to be sitting on your lapels before they could hit their target. What was needed to stop them was some one who could lay a cool cheek against a rifle-stock and a dry finger on the trigger. City men went haywire too easily and were apt to juggle an automatic like a Roman candle. Well, these smart guys had their civilization, and they had to take all that went with it. They were welcome.

Ten minutes at the mill got him the right to report in the morning, and he strolled back up the street, already dreaming over the use of his three days wages. Six bucks. That was enough to last a looker for a couple of weeks or more, and there was always another town and another mill before you commenced getting wrinkles in your belly. Two frenzied citizens, buckling cartridge belts as they ran, caromed into him, and he was jolted back to the present and the sudden boiling activity of Frenchman's Rock.

"Headin' south!" was the cry. "They're headin' south! Maybe we can grab them before they turn off the highway on some side road to the Mississip'. Le's go!"

Men coagulated into little groups and began piling in automobiles, and after several false starts the enthusiastic posse lurched away with the sheriff in the lead. Old Pender waved them a tolerant good-by. He knew the ways of posses—how the first hour's dash and eagerness would yield to doubt and argument, finally petering out in profane disappointment and a desire for supper. The party would return well armored with alibis, and a topic for conversation that would last throughout the winter. Unless, of course, they met the bandits.

To escape the incessant blat of the radio the old man strayed to the edge of town, and almost before he knew it he was brushing through the high grass of the faint trail that led to the bayou. Forty minutes later he stood looking into the greenish-black ditch that wound its tortuous way northward, and the acrid stench of rotting leaves that carpeted the bottom smelled like incense in his nostrils. Here was treasure country.

Yes, even though Bayou Bartholomew lay like some forgotten thing, its crumbling settlements more lifeless than any ghost towns of the west, deserted ever since the Missouri Pacific had come wavering south seventy years before and people had rushed to thread their hideous little towns along its ribbons of steel.

Across the bayou that jumble of hand-squared logs and vines marked all that was left of Witches' Landing. No boom would waken even fitful life amidst its leafy silence. Here was history.

Old Pender drew out a limp oblong of smudgy canvas and unfolded it carefully. Two months before he had acquired it, along with a blessing, from a dropsical blob of humanity waiting for death in the shadows of Burgundy Street in New Orleans. The dropsical one had inherited it from his father, accompanied by a flaming tale of its genesis, but a lifetime of searching the environs of Barataria Bay had kept him from getting around to it, and so he passed it on.

It all seemed perfectly simple. The map-maker had been disappointingly vague as to exactly where to head in on the huge bayou, but aside from that his details were hearteningly clear. You found four cypresses on the west bank that formed a diamond around a fifth, then you took that center one as the middle of a clock face and ran a line of eighty yards at two o'clock, which brought you to the eastern side. Dig fifteen feet, and you'd strike cement made of sand and deer's blood.

Old Pender appreciated that authentic touch. Half the buried gold in the Southwest was protected with a similar mixture, because it thickened as it cooled. Underneath, swathed in deerskins, you'd find it. "Five willow baskets full of golden coin." He squinted a practised eye through the tangled foliage. It was queer how many diamond patterns there were, but cypresses did show up, and they lasted, or at any rate, the stumps had a way of holding on. It would be soon now, with any luck at all.

Nightfall found him back at Frenchman's Rock in time to meet the returning posse as it prepared to bask in the warm glow of publicity. Despite failure, the sheriff and his followers seemed to have grown in stature since their departure, and they wore the patronizing manner of men who had been in touch with great events.

"Killers out of Memphis, that's what they are," the sheriff stated loudly. "It's my theory they ditched the car by the river and snuck back up-stream in a motor boat. I look for them to get grabbed before they reach Helena."

"You find the car?" inquired Old Pender mildly.

The sheriff stuttered with irritation. "A-a-a theory of mine, I said. They must have taken to the river. It stands to reason they couldn't live on the roads."

"Why not, with eye witnesses not agreein' on what they looked like, or even the make of their car? If they hit water they've gone across to Mississippi State, but they ain't, because they've been positively identified by respectable citizens in four different counties. Mr. Loudmouth, on the radio, just said so as you come up. Beats all how crooks get multiplied, don't it?"

"Aw, fold up," said the sheriff sullenly.

"Right away," promised Old Pender, moving off. "I'm goin' to get me some sleep before I take on my job, but there's nothin' to prevent you from doin' night work. You ought to be glad you ain't got the troubles of a looker. Those crooks ain't dead and they ain't buried; they're poppin' around on top of the earth, and all you got to do is put your finger on 'em."

The sheriff swore luridly, but without imagination.

"Sorry you feel that way," said the old man. "I did hear a belittlin' some one say that you couldn't find a bass drum in a telephone booth, but I wouldn't know about that. The trouble is, you ain't ambitious enough. Maybe all you boys better get some sleep so's you can start in tomorrow as usual—whittlin' and spittin' in the lap of history. G'night, sheriff."

Dark looks followed him as he left in search of a lodging, and for the next three days he was avoided by the best minds of Frenchman's Rock as a nuisance who would rather talk than simply lean and look. Then, on the last afternoon, the radio choked off a bleating tenor to announce that the bank at Hudspeth had been robbed of four thousand dollars by the same pair who had operated at McGehee. This time the teller was slaughtered in his cage, and when last seen the bandits were heading south.

THIS second invasion of its peace and quiet was too much for Frenchman's Rock, as Hudspeth was the next town north on the railroad. The sawmill crew knocked off to help the sheriff throw a barricade across the highway, but both there and at an ambush beside a feeder logging road the sentries had a futile vigil. Finally it was agreed that by the time the news had reached the broadcasters the killers must have been fifty miles away. A rumor that they had been sighted in Drew County to the west seemed to settle that conclusion.

Old Pender gave the matter a fillip in his mind as he trudged out to the bayou with a lifting sun at his back, and then forgot about it. By now the city rats would be back in their warrens, blowing their money with abandon, and the main chance of detection lay in the hope that one of their women would acquire a grievance and peddle her story to the police.

Always there had to be a woman—to steal for, to brag to, to turn you in if you so much as quirked an eyebrow at somebody else. Old Pender wondered idly how many of them had waited in vain for buried treasure promised them by men who had never come back. Thousands, probably. And now their charms were reduced to a handful of dust, a few trumpery bangles and a remnant of silk. Well, that was life.

The bayou loomed before him and he descended into it, grateful for the yielding softness of the spongy bottom to his feet. When your feet went, you were through. Yes, life was queer, and you didn't seem to get any sense until you were about ready to step out of it. Women when you were young, and then things cut themselves down to the longing to be free from pain.

You got to know what you wanted, as in his case. One slice of luck, and he'd have him a comfortable shack on the Pacific side of the Sierras, where you could laze in the sun, read a mite more history, and do some amiable lying about your past to those who cared to listen.

Vapor curled around him as he wandered ahead, peopling the wet green vista with the flitting figures of imagination. In and out they weaved, wavy as objects seen through water, pirates, smugglers, highwaymen, the same crew that had skulked ahead of him for thirty years. A water moccasin slithered partly out of a pool and opened its creamy mouth at him, whereupon Old Pender sent its head flying with a shrewdly aimed shot.

"Right under the chin," he applauded himself, "and Lafitte couldn't have done it better."

The crack of the rifle spurred him to a shaky jauntiness, and while his eyes kindled at each new clump of cypress he commenced to recall some anecdotes concerning Jean Lafitte. Old Pender made it a habit to think kindly toward all the scallywags whose improvidence had made a looker out of him, for a man needed something to keep him going. He liked to visualize these men who had been so ready to fight and die for a purse of gold and the press of a scarlet mouth. Lookers required a lure, and at some later date he looked forward to swapping yarns on the subject with some other seekers after truth, such as St. Paul, Galileo and Pasteur.

Morning mellowed into noon and blinding spills of sunshine dappled the bayou, turning the misty greenness to a friendly russet. Heat shimmered up from the bottoms, and the trees and underbrush along the borders grew blurred behind a dazzling curtain of it. Old Pender found no fault with this, but it made inspection a shade the harder, so, clambering up the east bank, he propped himself against a warm boulder and took to thinking. Ten minutes later he was asleep.

QUARRELING voices disturbed him, voices that cut ruthlessly through the woolpack of dreams, somehow warning him to awake with caution. He rolled over guardedly in the lee of the boulder, and listened.

"So what?" said one voice that held an undertone of hysteria. "All we got to do, says you, is to cut across this jungle, but we can't get over no dry canal like that. We'd get mired."

"So we'll get through just the same, master mind," sneered another voice that was a mingled rasp and whine. "Over there, see, where the banks is shallow."

"Over where?"

"There, you punk, where them five big trees are growin'. Cypress, they call 'em."

Five cypresses. Warily Old Pender's head slid sidewise of the boulder, his eyes a-brim with interest. He saw a muddied sedan in a rough clearing, and in front of it were two sleek young men. One of them was pointing to a clump of trees, and the old man felt a tightness across his chest. There they were, not fifty yards away, a diamond enclosing a fifth, and in a few more steps he'd have found them himself if he hadn't stopped for the nap. Well, you ran a line at two o'clock and—

"Call 'em anything you like," said the first speaker, who was undersized and of a fish-belly whiteness, "but what you got in mind? I'm for goin' back. I ain't duckin' for no country cops."

"No?" said the other nastily. "Well, them country cops can shoot eighty-five cents out of a dollar bill and let the change drop right in your lap. The short end, see? That's all you'll cut in for with them or any other law. We can throw enough brush in that shallow spot to hold us when we drive over, and nobody'll figure we came through here, anyhow. It'd take them weeks to comb this jungle, and our trail is cold right now."

"Yeah," came the objection, "but it's lonely as hell in here. There's ain't no houses nor civilization, Joe, and it gets me. I'm goin' back and take chances where I got a strip of concrete under me, like all the other times. We got the power."

"We got a nice streak of yella, too. We're goin' through this ditch, mister, and *pronto,* get me? But we got to hurry. Gimme a hand on the brush."

There was silence for a moment. Then, "Okey," croaked the pallid youth, "wait till I get my coat off."

He walked back to the car, while his partner moved on toward the bayou's edge, and then, before Old Pender could shout a warning, it happened.

Carefully folding his coat the youth placed it through an open window of the sedan, and when he withdrew his arms they were cradling a sub-machine gun. Without a word he commenced firing wildly, bullets rocketing in a crazy arc, clipping bark from pine boles, shredding clusters of giant fern, plunking into the shrinking back of the figure that scuttled crablike in a hopeless try for shelter.

The firing ceased abruptly, the marksman cursed and wrestled with his gun, and in the brief pause Old Pender caught from high overhead the husky whisper of the trees. Then again the gun took up its bungling job, and its target, doomed to death by torture, at last stopped thrashing and lay still.

The murderer sat down on the car's running board and wiped his forehead, while Old Pender watched him grimly. Just as he had estimated, these newfangled crooks needed an arm around your shoulders before they could knock you off in anything approaching a workmanlike style. His victim but a hundred feet away, the pallid youth had sprayed his fire as though washing a pavement with a hose.

Bad men! The old looker's hand

strayed for his rifle, found it, and drew it to him while he watched the fugitive jerk to his feet in sudden panic and whip open the car door. It was then that Old Pender very thoughtfully shot out the near front tire.

Action boiled in the quiet greenwood, rushing to form a picture that Old Pender was to recall on nights when he had nothing else to do. He could see the backdrop of forest with its depths blued by distance, the magic group of cypress, the upturned face of the slaughtered man still tense with the pangs of painful dissolution, and against it all the startled murderer as he wheeled, his eyes glittering in a ghastly mask as they searched for and found the intruder.

A fresh gust of bullets splattered against the rock, and the ping of others made Old Pender grin, for the sound told him they had passed. However, the rock was far too hot a target, and he deliberately rolled out into the clear so as to get better aim. More bullets kicked up the dirt ten feet short of him, and he commiserated with their sender, for a ground mark was tough to hit, especially when you were comin on in a sort of stumbling charge, trying to close the distance to make sure there would be no getaway.

Old Pender flattened to the moss he felt beneath him and laid an attentive eye along the sights. Right there, midway in that narrow, papery forehead, and the rifle froze on the line. One shot should be enough.

A slight recoil against his shoulder gave him the answer.

It was.

For a while he stood looking down at the pallid youth and his weapon, then, with a hasty glance at the sedan, he crossed to the five cypresses and verified their setup. Orienting himself, he paced off eighty yards at two o'clock, came out on the eastern bank, and unlimbered his shovel. Fifteen feet down! He commenced to dig.

"YOU'RE screwy," said the sheriff, as he and most of the males of Frenchman's Rock shuffled up Bayou Bartholomew next morning with Old Pender in their midst. "You're screwy, and I'm somewhat that way myself for listenin' to you."

"I told you I made a strike," countered Old Pender equably, "and I want you boys as witnesses. Slow up, now, sheriff, we're about there." He clambered up the jutting bank and pointed to a patch of trampled earth. "There she is—set the boys at it, and I'll stand the drinks when it's over."

"First sensible thing you've said. Okey, boys, two of you start diggin', and the others spell off every ten minutes."

The hole grew rapidly until at fourteen feet Old Pender dropped into it.

"It goes gentle from here on," he explained, and set to work gingerly while the crowd at the edge struggled for vantage positions. At last he straightened up and hailed the sheriff.

"If you're still lookin'," he queried, "what are you lookin' at?"

The sheriff looked at him with dawning respect, then his fascinated gaze returned to two bodies sprawled across a canvas laundry bag with the graceless unconcern of death.

"Bank robbers?" he hazarded hopefully.

"You certainly catch on quick," approved Old Pender. "Yes, sir, and layin' on some thirty thousand dollars of McGehee and Hudspeth money."

"Then this is why you come back to town late last night with mud all over you, and that tired you could hardly stand. You dug this hole just for the pleasure of buryin' 'em?"

"Not on your life. I was just playin' out a hunch when I dug it, sheriff, but didn't I tell you fellers that I was expectin' to find a mess of treasure with a dead man or two on the top? Well, here she is. It ain't gold and they ain't skeletons, not that Lafitte's stuff ain't sunk somewheres in the bayou, but I was aimin' to keep my word. Anyone got any complaints?"

Apparently no one had.

"But these stiffs," the sheriff was saying. "You must have drilled this one, but the other's a sieve."

"Hoist 'em out and I'll reconstruct things for you on the battleground. It's torn up somethin' terrible, but you can practice a little detective work to get my points, so's you can sound big before the coroner's jury. Uh—you want to pinch me?"

"Sure do," grinned the sheriff, "so's you won't run away before the Bankers' Association can pay you the reward of fifteen per cent. That's a juicy commission. What you goin' to do, pop? Retire?"

Old Pender decided that his legs had suddenly turned to rubber, and he sat down to hide his weakness. A vision was dancing in the glimmering waves of heat, a vision of a long, low, red-tiled shack on the Pacific slope of the Sierras where you could laze. Then all at once it dissolved, and he heard himself chuckling. A fat chance! St. Paul, Galileo and Pasteur would never have willed to rust if they had run into a morsel of luck, and it was a cinch they would never listen to any such flimsy alibi. He looked up to meet the curious eyes of Frenchman's Rock.

"Well, not exactly, sheriff," he said genially, "not exactly. This Lafitte booty, I can always come back for that, but this Arkansas damp ain't so good for my bones, and that reward will finance a heap of searchin'. Retire! Not while that ghost wagon-train's still runnin' down on the Pecos. *Plock* of the hoofs and the trace-chains clinkin', and all you got to do is find out where they stop, and then— Well, maybe I'll let you know."

THE CAMP-FIRE

A meeting place for all

PANCHO and Diego, in "Trigger Trouble," made me laugh. I wrote to that effect to W. C. Tuttle, and out of his next letter I excerpt this part:

Glad you liked Pancho and Diego. And believe me, they are not overdrawn. Only the other day a Mexican was here at my place. I have quite a collection of wild ducks, and among them is a mud-hen. The Mexican studied the mud-hen for a while, and said:

"W'at ees those fonny-looking theeng?"

I told him it was a mud-hen.

"Oh, sure," he said. "My brodder hees keel lots from them theengs on the reever, weeth a twenty-second rifle."

For several years I managed semi-pro baseball teams in this valley. We have a big Mexican population, and some of our best competition was from Mexican teams. There was one Mexican manager, who used to talk baseball with me on the phone, and every time we talked I was limp for an hour.

Those three peaks, and One-Eye Gonzales, are down there. Agua Amarillo is fiction—in name only, as is Kiopo City.

A DOG goes right past a horse in the fine qualities of devotion and intelligent cooperation on a job, says Robert E. Pinkerton. He tells the following anecdote to prove his point:

The public knows the work dog almost solely through fiction and is inclined to consider him a vicious brute, a little less dangerous than the wolf and driven to labor by the lash. A foundation for this impression exists in most native sledge animals. The Indian is inherently cruel, and when snow goes his dogs usually are left to shift for themselves until needed the next winter. They are starved and abused. Often they become vicious. Quite naturally.

A humane white man can take the same dogs, when young, and build a team that is more than loyal, more than faithful. It is not alone that they adore him, which is the natural emotional outlet for the dog's nature, but they take an inordinate pride in work. Your job is theirs. They know what is going on, what is to be done. A horse works *for* you; a dog works *with* you. He is vastly interested in problems of the trail. He reads your moods, often your thoughts. His greatest desire is to finish a task well.

Once, when building an addition to my home in Canada, I had twenty-seven logs on a skidway in the woods. I laid two skids at the house on which to pile the logs and hooked up a team of six with Toby as leader. Toby took his work so seriously I have seen him become ill from worry because he lost the trail in a blizzard.

With a log chain attached to a single tree, I drove the dogs into the woods. At "gee!" Toby turned the team. At "whoa!" he stopped it. When a log had been rolled down and gripped by the chain, he started at "marchon!" When we reached the house he "geed", turning the log, and stopped at "whoa" when the log was beside the skids. I unfastened the chain, said "marchon." Toby took the team back into the woods while I rolled the log onto the skids. When I reached the skidway in the woods, Toby had turned the team and halted it in exactly the right spot so that I could hook the chain to the next log. He watched me, and as soon as I stepped back he started the team.

As an experiment, I did not speak again while skidding the remaining twenty-six logs. Toby did it all, and without an error. I did not give a signal. So far as I know, Toby had never skidded logs before. But it was a simple job in his mind, though one to be done painstakingly and with pride. The other five dogs never questioned his leadership. They never flagged, never lay down.

Tie that, horsemen.

STEWART ROBERTSON, absent from our Writer's Brigade since 1928, returns in this issue. He is a man of many experiences and wide travel, and we hope to see him appear in our pages often.

He was born in Montreal, Canada, and is of Highland Scottish-Ulster Irish ancestry. He was educated at Crichton and other private schools, and after graduating at fifteen entered his father's fire insurance office. Three years in several departments seemed to him, he says, too much like a life sentence, so after constant perusal of his favorite book—a geography—he developed an itching heel and let nature take its course. He rambled through every state in the Union, working in about twenty of them in such capacities as day laborer, bill poster, truck loader, timekeeper, and part owner of a burlesque show when burlesque was the cradle for Broadway.

The Great War interfered here, and after three years in France with the Canadian Expeditionary Force, principally with the Field Artillery, he returned to have a crack at the railroad construction line part of the time, and keep the rest for traveling. Korea, Formosa, South America, Yucatan, with most of Europe thrown in for a trail. In this country he has worked on projects opening up Dismal Swamp, along the Missouri and the Mississippi, laying the sixty-mile feeder line to tap the strip coal fields of southern Montana, where there are six hundred square miles of lignite close to the surface and still holding the imprint of twigs and leaves from the forests that went to the making of it. Other construction jobs in Wisconsin and Illinois were just as interesting in their ways.

He drifted into writing through a visit to Hollywood during the silent days, and, making it an annual pilgrimage, wrote about 350 interviews with the stars, said interviews mostly requiring the fictional touch. He has been writing fairly steadily since then, and gathered the material for "Bayou Booty" when building the Arkansas-Louisiana Highway. The vanished settlements along the larger bayous are a phase of American history that has escaped the historians, but men like Old Pender still exist, he reports, and are roaming the South and West, driven on by that indispensable ingredient for any sort of living—hope.

His favorite sports are hockey and lacrosse, and he still is able to play tennis and billiards. With a wife and four children, his rambling days are over for a while, but he gets a lot of satisfaction out of being able to write about them.

THE president of the Veterans of the French Foreign Legion, M. A. Hamonneau, writes warm praise of the stories of Georges Surdez. (Surdez has just turned in another yarn, which will be scheduled shortly.)

We should like to compliment you on the story "Fools For Glory" by Georges Surdez, which appeared in your April first issue. Many of our members have called and written us in praise of it, and I have sent several copies to friends on active service with the Legion in Algeria and Morocco.

Unlike many other writers, Mr. Surdez builds his stories with careful attention to detail. His work shows a deep and sympathetic knowledge and understanding of the Foreign Legion, its daily life and traditions; and the usual meaningless and unjustifiable brutality, accusations of sadism or corruption on the part of officers and non-commissioned officers, beautiful heiresses, impossible coincidences, etc., etc. are conspicuous by their absence.

The fact that Mr. Surdez' stories are preferred by any one who has ever served in the Legion, or has been in contact with the corps, is proof positive of their essential honesty.

Almost everything published on the subject, both here and abroad, eventually comes to our notice. So much of it is sheer rot and sensationalism that we cannot but help be pleased with Mr. Surdez' work, and we welcome this opportunity to acknowledge it.

SOME time ago we published the famous death sentence pronounced by Judge Benedict of New Mexico. A number of readers sent in their versions, and now Herman J. Love, of McCloud, California, gives us a true copy made by a clerk of the Supreme Court of New Mexico from the court records.

"The sentence," says Mr. Love, "was passed upon a Mexican murderer named Martin (pronounced Marteen) who was convicted in the Court of Taos County of a murder done with great brutality and with no mitigating circumstances. The sentence was later published in every law journal in the United States and England."

And Jose Maria Martin, doomed with such eloquent and poetic finality, "was never hanged. He escaped, and afterward fell from a load of hay and broke his neck."

The Sentence

"Jose Maria Martin, stand up. Jose Maria Martin, you have been indicted, tried and convicted by a jury of your countrymen, of the crime of murder, and the Court is now about to pass upon you the dreaded sentence of the law. As a usual thing, Jose Maria Martin, it is a painful duty for the judge of a court of justice to pronounce upon a human being the sentence of death. There is something horrible about it and the mind of the Court naturally revolts from the performance of such a duty. Happily, however, your case is relieved of all such unpleasant features and the court takes delight in sentencing you to death.

"You are a young man, Jose Maria Martin; apparently of good physical constitution and robust health. Ordinarily you might have looked forward to many years of life and the Court has no doubt you have, and have expected to die at a green old age; but you are about to be cut off in consequence of your act. Jose Maria Martin, it is now the Spring time; in a little while the grass will be springing up in these beautiful valleys, and on these broad mesas and mountain sides flowers will be blooming; birds will be singing their sweet carols, and nature will be putting on her most gorgeous and her most attractive robes, and life will be pleasant and men will want to stay, but none of this for you, Jose Maria Martin, the flowers will not bloom for you, Jose Maria Martin; the birds will not carol for you, Jose Maria Martin; when these things come to gladden the senses of man, you will be occupying a space about six by two beneath the sod, and the green grass and those beautiful flowers will be growing about your lowly head.

"The sentence of the Court is that you be taken from this place to the County jail, that you be there kept safely and securely confined, in the custody of the Sheriff, until the day appointed for your execution. Be very careful, Mr. Sheriff, that he have no opportunity to escape and that you have him at the appointed place at the appointed time. That you be so kept, Jose Maria Martin, until (Mr. Clerk, on what day of the month does Friday about two weeks from this time come? March 22nd, your Honor,) very well, until Friday, the 22nd day of March, when you will be taken by the sheriff from your place of confinement to some safe and convenient spot within the County; (that is your discretion, Mr. Sheriff. You are only confined to the limits of the County) and that you be there hanged by the neck until you are dead and, the Court was about to add, Jose Maria Martin, 'May God have mercy on your soul' but the Court will not assume the responsibility of asking an All Wise Providence to do that which a jury of your peers has refused to do. The Lord couldn't have mercy on your soul. However, if you affect any religious belief, or be connected with any religious organization, it might be well enough for you to send for your priest, or minister and get from him, well, such consolation as you can, but the Court advises you to place no reliance upon anything of that kind.

"Mr. Sheriff, remove the Prisoner."

DUE to the pressure of other activities, Lieut. H. E. Rieseberg retires as *Ask Adventure* expert on Salvaging Sunken Treasure and certain other sea matters.

His place is taken by Commander Edward Ellsberg, U. S. N. R. Commander Ellsberg's personal achievements and expert knowledge are so noteworthy that he makes an outstanding addition to our staff of experts. Follows, in brief, his record:

He grew up in the shadow of the Rocky Mountains but left there, after one year at the University of Colorado, to enter the Naval Academy. In 1914 he graduated as honor man in his class, and with a commission as Ensign, U.S.N., went south to join the *Texas*, then with the fleet occupying Vera Cruz. After several years at sea, he was transferred to the Construction Corps of the Navy. During the World War, his salvage career started with putting a new bottom on Admiral Dewey's old flagship, the *Olympia*, just dragged off a reef, and fitting her out with a new set of guns for transport duty. After that came refitting a number of ex-German liners, which had been sabotaged by their crews, into transports; some work with the mine sweepers off our coasts; and then the job of building the battleship *Tennessee*.

After the war, at the Boston Navy Yard, came an assorted lot of work on hulls and machinery of various naval and merchant ships and a weird collection of experiences with everything seagoing on a vessel from steering gears to evaporators on ships ranging in size from *S.S. Majestic* down to Ford-built Eagle boats.

After this came a tour on *S.S. Leviathan*, when Commander Ellsberg was loaned by the Navy to the Shipping Board to find out why the old *Levi,* just converted to an oil burner, was the hottest ship afloat. That job took six months to cure (the temperature in the upper part of her firerooms was 380° F.) and Ellsberg returned to duty in the Navy in the summer of 1925, only to be ordered out as Salvage Officer in what seemed to be a hopeless attempt to raise the sumbarine *S-51*, sunk in twenty-two fathoms in the open sea off Block Island. Working both on the topside as Salvage Officer and on the bottom as a diver, Ellsberg carried the job through to a successful termination and after one of the most exciting underwater campaigns in history, delivered the *S-51* safely into drydock at the New York Navy Yard. For this exploit, he was awarded the Navy Distinguished Service Medal, the first time that decoration had been presented in time of peace.

Shortly afterward, Ellsberg, then a lieutenant commander, resigned from the Navy to enter private engineering work. While still a civilian in 1927, the submarine *S-4* was rammed and sunk off Provincetown, and Ellsberg was hastily enrolled in the Naval Reserve and sent to Cape Cod to assist in the initial salvage work there. For this, he was officially thanked in the name of the Navy, and shortly thereafter, by Special Act of Congress, he was promoted to the rank of Commander in the Naval Reserve, and returned to his engineering work in civil life.

Soon after, Commander Ellsberg published "On The Bottom", a record of the *S-51* salvage job, which achieved extraordinary attention. It was chosen as the best book of the month by the Literary Guild, and republished abroad in a number of foreign languages. Since then, Commander Ellsberg has written a number of other books and short stories, many of which have appeared in *Adventure.* "Pigboats", which first ran as a serial in this magazine, was, under the title "Hell Below", one of Metro Goldwyn Mayer's outstanding movies.

IN THE mailbag, May tenth—

All the *Ask Adventure* experts received chain-letters. I was not overlooked myself, but got a cheering communication from Norma —, of Denver, Colorado. It began:

Prosperity Club (In God We Trust).

There followed a list of six names, headed by Louise—, of Washington, D. C. I had never heard of any of these people and I suppose they got my name out of the magazine, but it goes to show there are people willing to help an editor along.

The letter went on:

Hope . . . Faith . . . Charity.

It explained that I should send a dime to Louise down in Washington and get in line behind Norma out in Denver, and when my turn came I would get $1,652.50. If a better proposition than that ever came along, I never heard of it. So I want to explain to Louise why I didn't send her a dime, and to Norma why I am not marching along right behind her in that prosperity parade.

I didn't have a dime.

I had a quarter and a nickel, and I studied the situation. If a man could get $1,652.50 for a dime, why then, I concluded, it would be wasting money to pay a quarter for it. That looked like logic to me, though I admit economic thinking is a delicate business, which has become so hard and difficult for me in the last year or two that I have practically given it up. I don't like the way it makes my head spin around. Anyway, I put the quarter back into my pocket.

The nickel was a problem, and I considered sending it along to Louise, but I didn't know what her attitude would be. Suppose she wrote to Norma that I had sent only a nickel, where would I be then? There might be a complaint to the national headquarters of this thing, and an administrator would come around and maybe arrest me and take my blue eagle away.

Honesty is the best policy, I decided, and put the nickel back into my pocket. That is why I'm not getting any of the money circulating in the mails, and why a good lady in Washington only got $1,652.40.

But it looks like the best plan so far to end the depression. I hope big business will get busy on it. Take General Motors, if they want to do something for business in this country—why don't they fix up a deal with Standard Oil so that everybody sends everybody else a gallon of gasoline and gets an automobile?

But the plan I am really lying in wait for is one in which you send somebody a button and you get a new suit.

HERE are some suggestions on our November first issue, the twenty-fifth anniversary of *Adventure.* We'll publish more in the next Camp-Fire—many more are wanted. Undoubtedly these names and titles will recall others to many of you. My thanks to the writers of the following letters:

I have been with *Adventure* for fifteen years and it has nearly always held my foremost enthusiasm. The fine stories in its pages are so numerous that it is extremely hard to pick only a few. Nevertheless, I am going to ask you one favor and sincerely hope you can satisfy me.

Personally I would like to see an entire reprint issue of stories that appeared quite some time back; say at least five years. Please reprint that real story of H. Bedford Jones, entitled "Men Make Mistakes".

Very sincerely,

—SAMUEL J. FREY, York, Pennsylvania.

For your reprint stories in the twenty-fifth anniversary edition of *Adventure;* I have read the magazine from the first. Perhaps the best story in it was the first—"Yellow Men and Gold", by Gouverneur Morris. But J. Allan Dunn's "Barchanded Castaways" ran it close, and was perhaps more distinctive. These may be too long to reprint. I would then suggest Talbot Mundy's "Soul of the Regiment", Dunn's pirate yarns, any of 'em with "Gold Ship" the best. Or else Dunn's "Two Men and a Boat".

—J. GORDON SHIELDS, Minneapolis, Minn.

Suggest that you include in the anniversary number Peter Morgan's "Thumbnail Geography" that appeared in two consecutive Camp-Fires about seven years ago. More power to you and a golden anniversary beside the same fire.

—JOHN S. CONAGHAN, New York City.

As one of the old-timers, who has read *Adventure* since its first issue with the exception of a few I missed while in the army during the war, I nominate as one of the best of the many splendid stories which have graced its pages Leonard Nason's "Stag At Eve" which appeared in an early 1927 issue. I have read the "Stag At Eve" probably a dozen times and get a bigger kick out of it each time.

—J. W. EGELSTON, Elko, Nevada.

Sincerest congratulations on your coming twenty-fifth anniversary. Please make the Anniversary Number from your already printed stories. And (this embarasses me) reprint the story about the fall of the Alamo, that you had some three years ago, by a gentleman who deserves much more than to be forgotten, as I have.

—ROD MERRITT, Colorado, Texas.

Get Tuttle to write a "Hashknife" Hartley story—but ask him to "locate" it as he used to do in the early ones, with a "map" of the country. A story something like the setting and characters in "Lovable Liar", "Tin-God of Twisted River", "The Range Boomer", "Hashknife of the Diamond H", just to give you an idea what I mean.

—GEORGE T. WATKINS, Boston, Mass.

A DIVINING rod, according to Ernest W. Shaw, of the *Ask Adventure* staff, is something that may have no sense or reason to it, but it works. He writes from South Carver, Massachusetts:

In the *Ask Adventure* section of the May 15th issue, I note that Victor Shaw is mighty skeptical about divining rods. I myself doubt the use of same for finding treasure, but as to water!! Wait till I tell you. I can imagine that his unbelief will give rise to many letters in defense of the D- rod, and I want to get in early on it.

We have a local character here that finds water by use of a rod. A forked stick of any kind, but apple or alder preferred. He locates water and has done so many times when others have drilled and dug and given it up. I can cite many, but here are a few.

A saw mill man spent more than $100 in labor sinking well pipe for water near his mill-set. Had to give it up. Henry Blank told him he would find it or no pay. He sunk a pipe not 15 feet from where the saw mill man had tried, and tapped a beautiful flow of water.

A man built a summer home down on the Cape on a knoll overlooking the sea. After building, he tried to locate sweet water. He spend several hundred dollars looking for it. Henry Blank said he would locate water for so much or no pay. He located several veins, but they were brackish. He finally located a clear, cold flow, and collected the money. Both the above with the forked stick.

Henry Blank located five wells for myself, with a forked stick. I saw him and laughed at it. The stick would twist and turn down when he walked over the spot. I told him to let me try it. He said, "It may work for you or it may not, I can't tell." I tried it, solemnly walking back and forth as he did. The stick wouldn't work. I charged him with trickery. He said, "I can lay my hands on you and it will work." I told him to turn his wolf loose, and I grabbed the stick in the approved fashion. As I walked across the spot Henry had his hand on my arm. The fool stick twisted and dipped toward the ground and in spite of all I could do to prevent it. If I held it tight enough it started to twist the bark apart. When held loosely it twisted out of my hands. I had nothing to do with it. I was as skeptical as Victor Shaw, only more so. This man Henry Blank was never on that ground before and knew nothing of water there. He can tell you approximately how deep the water is below the surface, by the energy of the stick. I could name many instances of this man's ability coming under my personal observation.

And at that I still don't believe it myself, but when I want a well located, I send for old Henry Blank. He has several hundreds of wells in this county and never a dry hole yet. He won't put down a pipe except where his stick tells him to. No muscular manifestation could make a stick perform as it did for me when old Henry laid his hands on me. There were five witnesses to that act.

TWO more letters about bears and dogs. The first, from Noel M. MacFarlane, of Wingdam, British Columbia, tells of a bear that escaped and came back, because he didn't like his freedom after all.

I have not missed more than one or two copies of *Adventure* in over five years, but this is my first letter. It is in answer to your article in the May first issue, in which the bear story is told, and asking for verification, if any. Living as I have for some years in the Canadian Northwest, I have seen bears in plenty. Wild, half wild and tame. And I flatter myself I know quite a bit about them.

I have seen two instances of bears in captivity becoming great friends with domestic animals. One, at a place called Hunter Creek, a she bear, three years old and more than half tame, has a cocker spaniel friend and they are often seen curled up together.

The other was in the O'Kanagan and was on friendly terms with the owner's cat. They had great fun together and often ate out of the same dish. But I seriously doubt whether the bear dug a hole for the dog, as alleged. If the bear was unchained he would have dug his way out, possibly (?) in search of his friend. Although he would almost certainly have returned to his cage later, if he was well fed and treated.

A bear at Cache Creek got loose from the chain, which was about thirty feet long and on a large ring at the base of a twenty-five foot tree. He climbed up to the top of the tree, which had been topped, and pulled the ring over. He then disappeared, chain and all, for two days. Apparently he did not enjoy himself (nor did the chickens in the immediate neighborhood), because on the third day he was back at the foot of his tree, curled up by his bowl waiting to be fed as usual, and has since made no attempt to leave.

The "sportsman" story is, I'm afraid, all too possible. I've been a guide and I know. I should be only too glad to pass on any information as to hunting and fishing in this northern B. C. should you require same.

AND this one, from R. L. Eberhard, of Miami, Florida, pinwheels the target, which is rifle range parlance for smacking it dead center.

In the May first issue of *Adventure*, you ask about the bear and pup. So you visited Florida and Tavernier!

Dad's manner would have a tendency to make a fellow think he was pulling your leg, but for the time he was telling the truth.

I have seen the bear and pup play and when the pup tired, he would crawl between the bear's paws and go to sleep. I saw this not once, but several times, so can vouch for it. Key Largo is in my territory and during the winter I spend quite a bit of time about there.

I HAD not mentioned it in our magazine, but it was at tiny Tavernier on the Florida Keys that I saw the bear, heard the story, and had the doubts.

H. B.

ASK ADVENTURE

Information you can't get elsewhere

WHAT'S the history of those monumental carvings on the banks of the Colorado river?

Request:—A couple of years ago a large stone horse, "five stories high," was found in the desert in California—or at least so I have the story—and, worse luck I don't know where I heard it.

Do you know of such an occurrence? If so, can you give me any information as to its location, and how it is reached?

—N. L. LAKE, San Francisco, Calif.

Reply by Mr. Arthur Woodward:—Apparently some one was seeing things when they found a "stone horse five stories high" in the California desert. I suspect the object to which you allude is the huge intaglio ground picture of some sort of an animal, associated with human and reptilian figures cut in the pebbled surface of the old river terraces on the west bank of the Colorado river, eighteen and three-quarters miles north of Blythe.

However, neither of the two animal horse-like figures are five stories in height. The largest of these animal figures is forty-four feet from the top of the back to the bottom of the ball-like feet and the length of the body from the base of the tail to the tip of the nose is fifty feet. The tail is thirty-six feet long, the length of the two front legs thirty and thirty-one feet respectively and the hind legs measure twenty-nine and thirty feet. The width of the body is fourteen feet, six inches.

The smaller animal is only twenty-five feet long from tail base to nose tip and is only about forty feet high.

An aviator friend of mine first located these figures and later at his request I led a party in, aided by a United States Army airplane, and made the first series of measurements of these unusual ground figures. Since then I have uncovered information that leads me to believe they were there as early as 1859.

To reach these figures go to Blythe, California, then turn north on the road that follows the irrigation ditch along the west bank of the river. Follow this road for eighteen and three-quarter miles and turn up to the left onto the mesa top. I imagine the Blythe Chamber of Commerce has posted the route and the figure by this time. We measured and photographed these figures, March 15, 1932.

THE cephanomyia can circle the globe in a day.

Request:—Quite some time ago I read that a certain South American insect had a speed of over seven hundred miles per hour. To settle an argument I should like your opinion. Also, at what rate does the ordinary house fly fly?

—M. F. FITE, San Diego, Calif.

Reply by Dr. S. W. Frost:—You are correct concerning the speed of a certain Central American and South American insect. A fly, by the name of Cephanomyia, is said, on good authority, to fly at the rate of 400 yards per second which is the equivalent of approximately 800 miles an hour. On this basis, Townsend, an authority on flies, wrote an article "Around the World in a Single Daylight Day". We sometimes think we are living in a fast age but streamlining was perfected by fish, birds and other animals long before man conceived of the idea.

I do not know the exact speed of the house fly but it is probably not much more than ten or twenty miles an hour. A grasshopper is known to fly fifteen miles an hour and an Australian dragonfly has a speed of sixty miles an hour. I believe these figures are very conservative.

It is doubtful if any insect could maintain the speed of 800 miles an hour for an extended period of time. Insects excel in power and endurance rather than speed. They often migrate like birds. The cotton moth of the southern United States is known to migrate to the northern United States and Canada. The black witch, a moth native to Mexico and the West Indies, has on occasions been found as far north as Canada and west to Colorado.

To continue with the remarkable flights of insects, mosquitoes and other insects have been taken at elevations of 3,000 feet. A wasp was once impinged on the windshield of an air liner at an elevation of 6,000 feet. Some years ago, a moth was taken on board the steamship "St. George" in the mid Pacific at least 450 miles from the nearest land. Records of insect flights are numerous but these will serve to point out their endurance.

A TROPICAL garden of fern and flower in Northern British Columbia.

Request:—Could you tell me anything about the country on the east slope of the Yukon-Mackenzie Divide about 150 miles southwest of Norman? Is it true that there are steam geysers in this region? How are the prospects for minerals and fur there? Where could I get maps of this territory? What would an aviator charge to carry a man and his outfit to this country from Edmonton (one way)?

—Howard Peddle, Fairfax, Minn.

Reply by Mr. Herbert Patrick Lee:—What I know about the so-called tropical valley in Northern British Columbia, I'll pass on to you:

There were stories regarding this tropical valley for a number of years but the first confirmation that such a spot existed was given by Colonel Williams, who piloted a Vickers-Viking seaplane up into that country in August, 1925, prospecting for gold.

Williams and his companions, Archibald Little, a Detroit mining engineer and a mechanic named Caldwell, landed at a point about 200 miles from Liard post on the Liard river, west of Devil's Canyon, where they found a cabin occupied in 1924 by a prospector named Smith, with his daughter. On a tree was a code sign directing Williams to dig at the foot of the tree. Williams dug and found a bottle containing a description of and directions how to find the tropical valley.

Hostile Indians had driven Smith and his daughter out, and Smith had been drowned, although the girl reached Fort Simpson on the Mackenzie in safety.

Williams and his companions trekked to the valley and found a cabin well furnished and hot springs in which they enjoyed a bath. The undergrowth was thick and traveling difficult. They said giant ferns were growing amid the lush grass and flowers and that the place was covered with frogs. In the neighborhood they saw a white moose, as well as several white bears of the small variety found on the British Columbia coast. Close to the cabin was a small potato patch and onions, planted by Smith the previous year.

Williams did not stay long but brought out a bottle of mineral spring water for analysis. The valley he reported as being forty or fifty miles long and about twenty miles wide. He and his party were away three months, during which they shot moose, bighorn sheep and lesser game for food.

Subsequently other parties made trips to the "tropical valley" which really isn't a tropical valley at all but a valley so undermined with hot mineral springs that vegetation attains abnormal growth for that latitude. I've never heard of any geysers being found, although there are plenty of them over on the Alaskan Islands.

Mineral strikes occur from time to time in Northern British Columbia, the latest, I think, of any consequence was the Dease Lake rush up in the Cassiar country about that time—1925. There have been other finds in B. C. since then.

I'm sorry I can't tell you what it would cost to fly into the tropical valley region from Edmonton, but you couldn't figure on much less than $500. Aviators were getting $1,500 for passage into Great Bear Lake at the time of the rush and the Liard country is almost as isolated.

You can get maps from the Department of Interior, Ottawa, or from the British Columbia government.

SAIL the ocean blue, but there's the mighty question of rigging to decide first.

Request:—Is there any way to treat a sail to prevent mildew? Will it discolor the sail? I have a fifteen foot catboat with a boom and gaff sail of an area of 124 square feet. I have a plan for a Marconi rig for this boat which has an area of 112 square feet. Would it be faster with the Marconi rig?

—J. H. Munson, East Columbia, Texas

Reply by Mr. A. R. Knauer:—I do not know of any satisfactory preparation to treat sails with. There have been several advertised, but to my direct knowledge none have been entirely satisfactory and I would not recommend them. The majority have also discolored the canvas considerably.

On a small boat it seems to me the logical thing to do is to have the canvas on slides which can readily be removed. The majority of the Star class, and also the "R" class always remove their canvas after sailing. A good waterproof sail cover, open underneath, will usually afford sufficient protection.

The Marconi rig is considered to be a fraction faster on the wind than the old-fashioned fore and aft rig. You, however, are cutting down your sail area so I doubt if it would be faster if both sails are of equally good cut and fit.

IT'S the getting going that's the job! How the glider rises from the lowly earth.

Request:—Will you please inform me how a glider rises? I was of the opinion that if it faced the wind it would rise. Is this correct?

—Russell Hardy, North Quincy, Mass.

Reply by Major Falk Harmel:—When a glider is about to take off it invariably faces the wind, the same as is the case when an airplane takes off. The glider is placed on the top of an incline, generally from 250 to 300 feet high, with a clear slope down to the valley for about 800 yards. The launching rope supplied with the glider, which has a hook on one end, is attached to a ring on the front end of the skid of the glider. It will be found that the ring will not stay on the hook until a slight tension is applied to the launching rope.

At the signal to take off, usually four men pulling the rope start down the hill. When the glider attains sufficient momentum the glider pilot gently pulls the control stick backward and the glider takes to the air. The men pulling the rope instantly ease the tension on it and becoming disengaged from the ring it falls to the ground. The glider now being in the air, the pilot is left to his own devices.

Gliding is generally conducted in hilly country where rising air currents prevail.

The early pioneers of gliding usually carried their gliders to the edge of a high cliff and then jumped off into space. The Wright brothers in their gliding experiments laid down a special starting rail on the crest of an elevation, the glider running down the rail pulled by a falling weight until it took the air.

Gliders have been successfully towed by automobiles and speed boats. They have also been towed by airplanes.

A NEW A.A. department waves its banner and blows its trumpet. Quite justly, we think.

Request:—Several of my friends around here have motorcycles of their own, and I want one very much myself. Dad used to ride a motorcycle, but he says now I'm too young, because they aren't safe enough. I'm seventeen years old, big for my age and drive a car. He wants to know why I want a motorcycle instead of a used car which he thinks is safer. I've driven some of the other boy's motorcycles a little when I get the chance, and that makes me want one more than ever. They have mostly Harleys; one Indian and one Henderson. They have a lot of fun, and get places cheap.

I rode on a tandem of a Harley Davidson big twin, and we went on an all day trip with four other fellows on motorcycles. We covered a lot more ground than we could do in any car, and it didn't cost so much money for gas and oil. Dad says a used motorcycle that's any good costs as much as a used car. Can you give me some good points in my favor—or maybe you agree with him?

—Michael Herron, St. Louis, Mo.

Reply by Mr. Charles M. Dodge:—I can understand very well why you want a motorcycle instead of the car—and so will your Dad when he stops to remember the thrill he got out of motorcycling when he rode one. It's all very well to say that the car will carry you over the road just as well; so'll a wheel chair.

But when you get out on the open highway, especially with two or three other young fellows like yourself rolling along on a motorcycle, come to a long, winding hill and go sweeping up past all the high powered cars without bothering to shift gears, changing your speed with just a twist of your wrist—it is a real thrill, and no mistake about it.

Three gallons is about all the gas that a Harley Davidson will hold, and that's good for 160 miles or so. Half a turn of the throttle under his right hand changes his speed from 20 to 70 miles per hour. He can start out on a lot longer trip than he could with any car, because of the saving in fuel, and can get to a lot of places where the car won't go.

You know, as well as I, that motorcycles are just as safe as any other vehicle. The motorcycle should have good tires of course, and a good chain; the drive sprockets should be tight and not badly worn, and wheel bearings well greased. For that matter, so should the car be in good shape, or it will be just as unsafe too. Given a motorcycle in reasonably good repair, it is as safe as the fellow driving it. It is, of course, true that if you go out asking for it on a motorcycle, you'll surely "get it", sooner or later. The fellows who try to show off, who take the curves leaning the machine away down so their footboards scrape the road; who try to ride no hands at high speeds and so on, these boys do often come to grief. But against this type of foolishness there are thousands of good fellows who drive motorcycles for the sport of them year after year, not only without accident but without even a close shave. They use a motorcycle to go to work and back with; they hook up sidecars, and a good sidecar these days is as comfortable a seat as any car can offer you, any time.

Insurance statistics show that there are severe accidents in the home by falling in a bath tub, yet we don't stop taking baths on that account. The boys who ride the highways and byways with respect to the other vehicles have a lot of fun with absolute safety, to say nothing of economy.

Insurance figures also show that for every person hurt or killed by a motorcycle hundreds are killed by automobiles. The motorcyclist is usually an alert, husky young fellow who knows where he is going, how to handle himself and his motorcycle, and what it is all about. They do look spectacular when they "lay it down" on a turn in the road, and often scare the motorist coming the other way. For some reason that motorist gets the impression that the motorcyclist is taking a long chance, when he isn't. There are more autos on the road, of course, than motorcycles. But figures show that the number of accidents, fatal or otherwise, per motorcycle in any given locality is less than the number there per automobile.

One motorcycle is no more safe than another, except that Hendersons have not been made since 1930 and the Indian or Harley Davidson might offer you the benefit of newer developments that make them easier to control, features that make them a little easier and safer in case of a spill. One of the biggest safety devices recently brought out is the new pair of "spill bars". These act like a pair of round arms on either side of the frame so that in case of a spill the motorcycle is lifted off the ground and doesn't lie on the rider's leg; they also take the impact of a side collision. You've probably noticed them on State or local police motorcycles around your town. Almost all police motorcycles are now equipped with them.

Point out to your Dad that if you were crazy enough to take fool chances, you would be killed walking across a busy street or driving your car stupidly in crowded intersections. The motorcycle driver using ordinary care doesn't get hurt. Point out to him that while an ordinary auto collision is pretty common these days, a motorcycle accident is *news.*

I have taught some five hundred, or so, fellows to ride Harleys and Indians in the past ten years. In every case where he knew how to drive a car (the rules of the road and what shifting gears is all about) and had a level head, he learned to operate the motorcycle in less time than he himself would expect. He feels sure of himself on it too, whereas before he started he was a little afraid of it from the wild stories he'd heard.

Your Dad probably remembers motorcycles as big motors, balanced in high frames on hard, high pressure tires; no front wheel brakes; other important parts less sturdily built than today. On the rough roads of that time they were undoubtedly less safe than the better motorcycles now available. The automobiles of that time weren't so hot, either. Even the 74 cubic inch twins which are still popular, the largest twins built, have a riding position so low that you can put your feet flat on the ground; lock proof front wheel brake, independent of the rear wheel; better carburetors with surer throttle control and with balloon tires and better spring suspension they don't shake you all apart as they once did.

Talk it over with him again, with these things in mind. If he still can't see it, tell him to write me, outlining his objections.

Because it's a great sport, enjoyed by thousands of redblooded fellows all over these United States (all over the world, for that matter) and you should have a chance to enjoy it with the rest of them.

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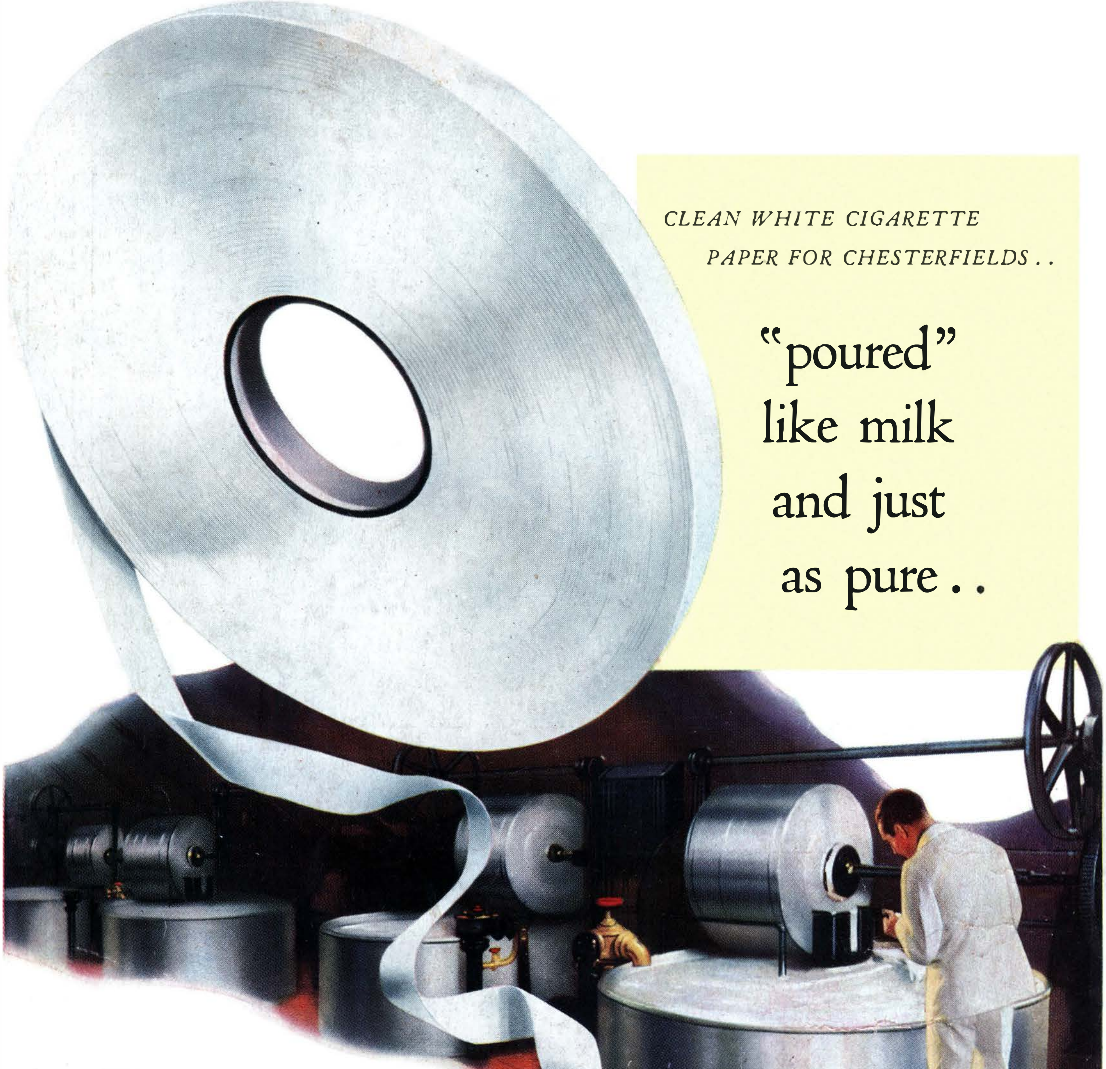

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